

## Bickton and Europe Past and Present

The way in which our relationship to Europe is being endlessly discussed prompts us to review some historical aspects, especially those concerning rural life and a common agricultural policy.

Back in the Middle Ages successful states north of the Alps, including Anglo Saxon England, organised their food production around villages made up of small family farms working together. To achieve this the land of each farm would be scattered around the village territory as intermixed parcels, while damper valleys were used for hay meadows and any really poor land was left as common grazing. We call this the 'Open Field System', which also once existed at Bickton.

Thanks to such good organisation and the added fortune of a prolonged warm period, population steadily rose during the early years of the Middle Ages, so that some villages used up all the arable land available in their territories in order to feed extra mouths. In this context, the bad weather and plagues of the fourteenth century may have been a blessing in disguise, thinning out the population. This, in turn, prompted some social economic changes: a labour shortage weakened the oppressive control by feudal lords and introduced an economy based more on competitive rents and wages rather than old 'labour services'. More land also fell into the hands of surviving families who then employed others.

In short, 'capitalism' was replacing 'feudalism'. In these circumstances, commercially minded landowners discovered the advantages of more stock farming, supplying the well established wool trade and increasing demand for meat in towns. Some even became the new 'aristocracy' thanks to the profits made (e.g. the Spencers).

Amongst the small hamlets in Bickton Parish, such as Onslow, Woodcote and Rossall, the breakdown of communal farming led to the pattern of farms we still recognise today. Only Bickton itself hung on to a 'village' structure, not 'inclosing' its old Open Fields until about 1700.

Meanwhile in the English Midlands many retained such fields until the late eighteenth century when the national spirit of improvement led to organised 'inclosure' which created the familiar landscape of hedges and stone walls. Irish and Scottish landowners soon followed suit.

Today in Bickton the large farmhouses and their yards are reminders of this commercial approach over recent centuries, which is still continuing. How many of them still work as farms? Surplus rural population has for a long time filled the towns and found employment in trade and industry in this Country.

While similar events were taking place in Denmark, elsewhere in central Europe feudal customs continued much longer, maintaining villages of small family farms. During minor revolutions, however, such 'peasant' proprietors secured more rights in which holdings were more likely to be split for family reasons, rather than amalgamated for commercial advance.

Although original communal practices declined, the pattern of intermixed plots in an unfenced landscape generally remained. If livestock were reared, the small herd of cows would be permanently housed, while fresh grass or hay was delivered to them, i.e. 'zero grazing' system.

The open landscape had for centuries been a factor in the movement of armies, from marching ranks to tanks, so that the compact nature of the villages offered some sense of security to individuals. Also, after the trauma of recent wars, many families hung on to ancestral farms as some insurance against food supply shortages, even though city and factory work now supported them.

Sketches in a student notebook, illustrated this in 1958, just when ideas for the Common Market and its agricultural policies were being worked out. A 'common' policy already had to cope with local climates and relief, but clearly the bureaucrats would have to make allowance for differences in cultural history!

Since then, such areas of Germany, for instance, are being modernised by reorganising those intermixed plots and creating new farmsteads within their own ring fences. Units have also been amalgamated to help mechanisation. In other words, Germany is catching up with 18<sup>th</sup> century England!

Within villages, redundant farmhouses make desirable homes for city workers with cash to modernise them just as in England.

Within the farming community, a new generation is less keen to follow the same way of life as their forbears and some marginal land unfit for mechanisation has been abandoned to scrub in several places in central Europe.

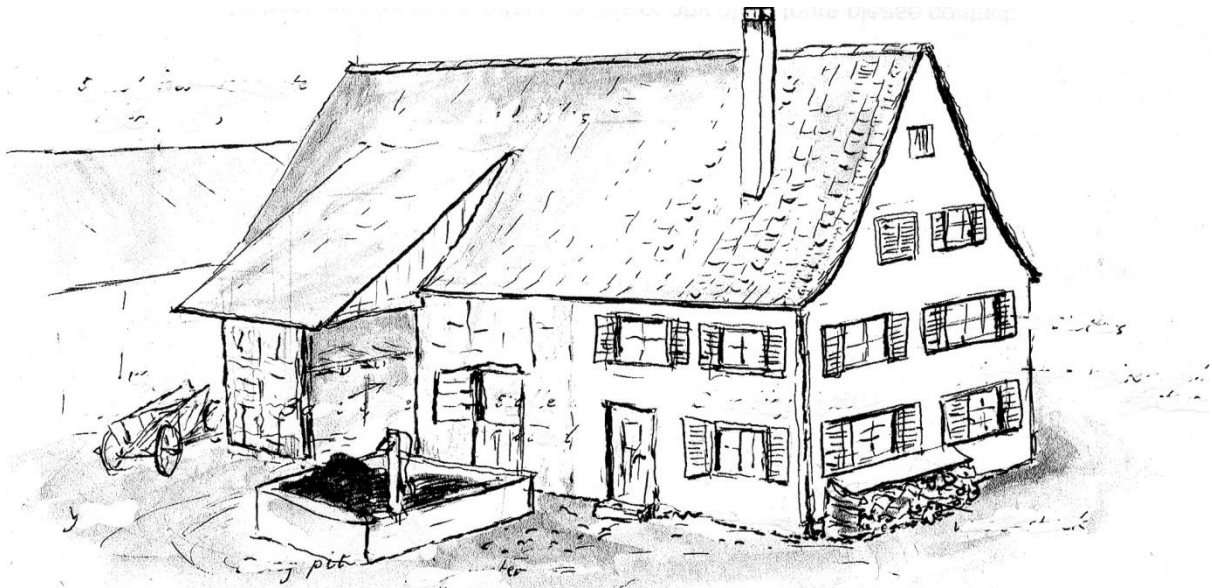
With such modernisation going on in Germany one must explore Transylvania to see how Europe used to be. This countryside is now under threat from the effect of 'Market Forces', so Prince Charles is doing 'his bit' towards conservation of its heritage while tour companies are offering visits – well recommended.

Extracts from a student sketchbook 1958

some features of farming on the Swabian  
Alb and adjacent areas of South Germany



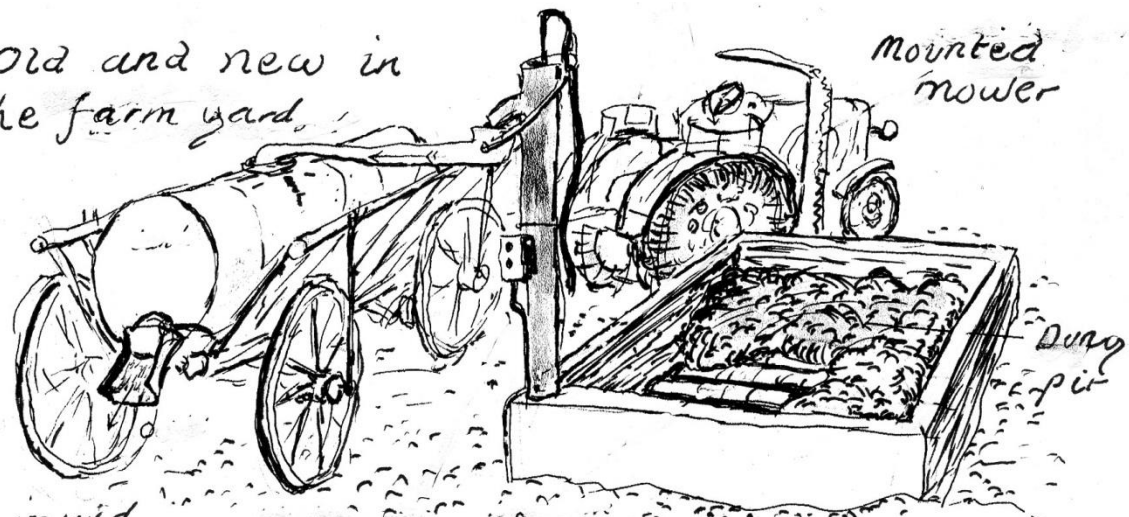
Harvesting by hand on small plots



A typical Swabian peasant farmhouse

Old and new in  
the farm yard.

Mounted  
mower



Dung  
pit

Liquid  
taken to fields