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Farming in Glendale: 1800 to the present

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Dr Roberts emphasised that throughout history agriculture has responded positively to the challenges that social and political changes have faced it with.

Between 1600 and 1800 a number of things happened in England that changed agriculture permanently. Land was enclosed and became more managed, new crop rotations were introduced and animals began to be selectively bred for desirable characteristics such as wool length and carcass size.

A report published in 1770 was very critical of the state of agriculture in Northumberland and it took an influx of forward looking farmers from Durham and Scotland to begin the process of turning things around.

Foremost among these were the Culley brothers who came from County Durham to Fenton in the late 18th century and began making the land more productive by drainage, liming and the use of manure. These practices are accepted today but were revolutionary at that time. Meanwhile war, the industrial revolution and a rapidly growing urban population meant that meat and corn came into demand as never before. At Fenton Matthew Culley and his sons developed the Cheviot and Border Leicester breeds of sheep – breeds that went all over the Globe with the British Empire.

On the arable side Sir James Caird started a five-crop rotation system growing oats, turnips and grain with two years of grass to feed and refresh the land – a system unique to Northumberland.

Other landowners, seeing how the Culleys - now of Coupland castle – prospered, soon followed. Tankerville, Grey, Northumberland, Delaval and Robson of Belford were all instrumental in adopting new methods and ideas.

The idea of “continuity on the land” became important. Farms were let on longer tenancies than before often passing from father to son and workers’ wages and living conditions gradually improved. The legacy of that is the number of rows, squares and steadings seen in the area today.

The advent of the railway to Glendale in the eighteen eighties brought about big changes. For the first time goods and animals could be moved faster than a man on horseback. This brought an end to droving but it did mean that farm produce could be transported further before final usage.

In the twentieth century demand continued to rise and domestic production could not keep pace with demand. This led to mechanisation on the farm and the establishment of a huge trade in live cattle from Ireland which only ceased in 1971 with Britain’s accession to the Common Market.

At that significant point Dr Roberts brought his narrative to a halt except to mention that modern agri-business can be a lonely and isolating occupation. Here once again it appears that the industry is looking to itself to rise to new challenges and circumstances.