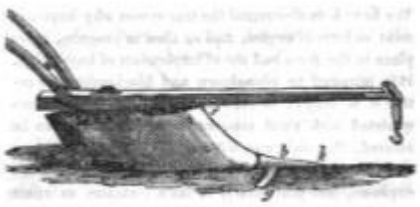
DORNEY LAND

In 1794, the state of agriculture in Buckinghamshire was reviewed, as part of a series of county surveys. The surveys were commissioned by the newly formed Board of Agriculture, not a Government department but a private society set up to encourage improvements in farming. They sought to spread ideas about best practice so that food production could be increased to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population.

The report on Buckinghamshire noted how much of the cultivated land - over 90,000 acres in total - throughout the county was contained in common fields. This was true for Dorney,



with 600 acres of arable land – threequarters of all its farmland - in these open fields, along with the other parishes with land on the *"flat rich loams"* along the Thames. These fields were fertilised with manure from urban areas, including Eton and Burnham, and as a result the crops were *"for the most part abundant".* Nevertheless, the Board of Agriculture considered that common fields would become much more productive if they were enclosed, enabling adoption of modern techniques and individual decision making instead of old-fashioned traditional practices. Their ideas for improvement covered a range of topics from the type of plough used to the greater profitability of growing malting barley rather than wheat. It's hard to know how much these generalisations were applicable to farming in Dorney. We do know that the Trumper family, who were significant farmers in Dorney and the surrounding area for much of the 19th century, did take an active part in local agricultural organisations and shared suggestions about different varieties of wheat they had developed and experiments with techniques.

In the 20th century, two world wars focused attention on the need to maximise home grown food production, in the face of rationing. Dorney Common was requisitioned by the authorities during the Second World War. This involved fencing it which could have been perceived as enclosing the land and was of concern to Dorney Manorial Court in 1949, when the common had still not been derequisitioned. In the early 1940s, there were official national surveys covering every farm. This process was designed firstly to bring uncultivated land under the plough and to improve poor farms, and secondly to aid post-war planning for the future of farming. The mid-century Land Utilisation Survey displayed graphically the uses to which land was put and shows clearly the predominance of arable land in Dorney and the surrounding area.

Since then, the cropped land in Dorney has shrunk, most notably when Thames Field was swallowed up by the rowing lake and by Thames Water. The arable land that remains is

still broadly regarded, for strategic planning purposes, as highly likely to be among the best and most versatile land for farming, Grades 1 and 2 under the Agricultural Land Classification.

Another important use of the land in and around Dorney has been as a natural flood plain for the river Thames. Historically, the fields were flooded on a regular basis. The last serious flooding in Dorney occurred in 1947, caused by a combination of frozen ground, melting snow and heavy rain, which inundated much of the country. Aerial photos taken in March 1947 show Dorney Reach surrounded by water. The whole of the common was flooded, Village Road was under two to three feet of water and Dorney was effectively cut off.

Dorney is now protected from Thames floodwaters by the Jubilee River flood relief channel. This also brought environmental benefits, incorporating different habitats which attracted a range of bird species. Even though the Environment Agency has not continued maintenance to the level originally envisaged – for example by keeping vegetation on the islands at a height suitable for nesting birds – this man-made river remains a positive asset to our local natural environment, with plenty of birds, butterflies and wild flowers to enjoy. The rowing lake has similarly made efforts to enhance the natural benefits of its extensive grounds.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the use of land to improve the environment has been of growing importance. As long ago as 1949, Dorney manor court approved the Common being registered as a bird sanctuary and it is still a Local Wildlife Site. More recently, Thames Water designated the area of land behind the houses on the south side of Harcourt Road to be “rewilded”. Apparently ignoring the way in which this land had already rewilded itself, the water company paid for hundreds of trees and shrubs to be planted, the vast majority of which have subsequently died. The same fate befell the planting by Highways England along the motorway works, replacing the scrub they had previously removed.

Meanwhile, underneath the soil lies a mineral resource. Within Dorney, gravel extraction has been limited to the site now occupied by the rowing lake. In years gone by, much of the land each side of the line at Taplow was dug out to provide construction materials for the railway, the sites now built over or used for recreation.

Currently, the Government is carrying out a consultation, intended to inform development of a new land use framework. This won’t be prescriptive but will then be used in making strategic decisions on farming and food as well as supporting planning. The competing demands on land are spelled out – producing food, protecting and enhancing the natural environment, building houses and infrastructure, expanding renewable energy – the list is endless. The classification of agricultural land for growing crops is still regarded as important but it is envisaged that as much as 9% could cease to be used for farming. This would mainly be in order to achieve environmental benefits; the amount of land required for building is comparatively quite small.

How might all of this affect future land use in Dorney? Will we continue to see crops grown on our doorstep or will the area shrink until it becomes unviable? Will our remaining farmland disappear under the mooted Taplow New Town? Will there be a more sustained effort to improve our natural environment? At some point in the future, will we need to extract the reserves of sand and gravel lying under the fields? Only time will tell….

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