

BATH & THE 'BATH AND WEST OF ENGLAND SOCIETY', 1777-1851

Helena L.H. Lim

In the autumn of 1777, twenty-two gentlemen met in the city of Bath to form a society 'for the encouragement of Agriculture, Manufactures, Commerce and the Fine Arts' in the counties of Somerset, Wiltshire, Gloucester, Dorset, and the City and County of Bristol. It was known simply as 'The Society' or the 'Bath Society' since their meetings were held in Bath. In 1790, the title of the Society was altered to 'The Bath and West of England Society', on account of its well-established character and the widely-extended residences of its subscribers. A Royal Charter was granted in 1976.

From its inception, the Society operated from the city of Bath. Its meetings, activities and headquarters were based in Bath, and a significant proportion of its members were drawn from the city. This tie was to remain unbroken until the early 1850s when the Society began to hold its annual meeting, combined with an agricultural show, on a peripatetic basis throughout south-western England. The first seventy-four years of the Society's existence seem naturally to divide into three distinct periods. The first, from the late 1770s to the beginning of the nineteenth century, was one of great enthusiasm and drive. The second, from the 1820s to the 1840s, was a period of fluctuating success. The third, from the 1850s onwards, saw a change in the Society's direction in accordance with changed circumstances. All the while, the principal aim of improving agriculture remained in sight.

This paper will concentrate on the general development and activities of the Society during the first two periods, that is, the years between 1777 and 1851, when it was based in Bath. It will highlight the close ties between the Society and the city and inhabitants of Bath.

Background

The foundation of the Bath and West in 1777 can be understood with reference to more general trends and developments leading up to that date.

By the 1750s, England had enjoyed her years of peace and prosperity under Sir Robert Walpole, despite the uncertainty aroused by the 'South Sea Bubble', yet retaining her zeal for commercial enterprise.¹ The more far-sighted and public-spirited endeavoured to raise the productive powers of the nation, and societies for the promotion of agriculture in England and Wales began to emerge during the second half of the eighteenth century. Although the Royal Society, founded in 1660, had given attention to agriculture in its early years, its interest in practical subjects waned after its reorganization in 1690 so that it became essentially an academic body.² But positive steps were already being taken in Ireland and Scotland to encourage agricultural innovation and improvement. 'The Honourable Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland' was established in 1723, with its headquarters in Edinburgh. The Royal Dublin Society, founded under the title of the 'Dublin Society for Improving Husbandry, Manufactures and other Useful Arts', soon followed in 1731. 'The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce', generally known as the Society of Arts, was founded in London in 1754. The improvement of agriculture was one of its prime objectives well into the nineteenth century. Its *modus operandi* was the premium system, a novel way of stimulating innovation and invention by offering prizes and awards for new ideas, methods, or machinery. The premium system was seen as a plausible means of exciting a spirit of enquiry and innovation, as well as a way of encouraging adoption of the new techniques and technologies.

The foundation of the Society of Arts gave rise to many local imitators, one of the earliest being the Brecknockshire Society, founded in 1755 by Charles Powell, a Welsh philanthropist who took direct advice from the national society on its formation.³ Similar local societies established during the second half of the eighteenth century took their inspiration from the Society of Arts but were independent of it. Much of their time was taken up with local affairs, but there were also discussions of new methods and ideas in agriculture. At this time, when knowledge of agricultural science and technique was growing rapidly, the foremost duty of the landlord was the care and improvement of his estate and the encouragement of better farming by his tenants. Thus, the problem of educating the ordinary farmer occupied the minds of the improving landlords. These agricultural societies provided a means by which to break down the resistance to innovation always to be found in the countryside.

The eighteenth-century agricultural societies typically consisted of gatherings of landowners and farmers to discuss new methods of

husbandry and livestock improvement, new systems of farming and new crops. Coke of Holkham was prominent in this kind of activity and his 'Coke's Clippings' became large gatherings, attracting farmers and landowners from far and wide. There were also the famous sheep shearings of the Duke of Bedford at Woburn. Lord Somerville, a West Country nobleman, began holding a little annual show in London where he offered prizes for sheep, cattle and some improved implements, and demonstrated his own innovations in ploughs and carts. However, this group was not typical of the landed interest. It was with obvious justification that leading agricultural writers constantly complained of the indifference of the large landowners to the new husbandry. The majority of estates were cultivated conventionally and landowners tended to be more interested in securing efficient tenants than in experimenting with innovative techniques. This is where the agricultural societies stepped in and tried to arouse interest in the possibility of combining efficient tenants with both profit and increased rent. Their blueprint for success was the premium system. Premiums were sometimes offered for innovations but were more typically offered for excellence of stock or crops. It was also customary to offer premiums to agricultural workers for skill in agricultural operations such as ploughing, and to those who had successfully brought up large families without recourse to charity or poor relief.⁴

'The Bath and West' in Bath

The idea of an agricultural society based in Bath was the brain-child of Edmund Rack. The city of Bath in the late eighteenth century seems a most unlikely birthplace for an agricultural society. It was the Bath of Beau Nash, Ralph Allen and Jane Austen. In other words, the rank and fashion seemed more interested in dress and pleasure than in ploughs and turnips. Rack was born in 1735, in Attleborough, Norfolk, to Quaker parents. A draper by trade, he had also cultivated a taste for literature. During his earlier life in Norfolk, he had become very interested in agriculture and, in particular, the application of modern methods to farming. A knowledge of arithmetic appears to have been Rack's highest educational attainment, and for a while he was apprenticed to a general shopkeeper in Wymondham. At the close of his apprenticeship he moved to Essex, became a shopkeeper at Bardfield and married a Miss Agnes Smith. His business ambitions appear to have been limited to making

enough money to allow him a pleasant life and an early retirement. He eventually retired in 1775, at the age of 40, and moved from Bardfield to Bath where he could pursue his literary ambitions.

At Bath, Rack was welcomed into the local literary circle which included Lady Miller's poetical revels in Batheaston and Mrs Catherine Macaulay's coterie at Alfred House.⁵ Richard Cruttwell, the printer and publisher, also enlisted Rack's services for the *Farmer's Journal* and the *Bath Chronicle*. Rack was struck by the poor standard of farming practice in the west

country and wrote a series of articles on the agriculture of the district. He recognized that the superiority of Norfolk agriculture was due to the fostering care of an agricultural society. Knowing the important part played by the Norfolk Agricultural Society in arousing interest in better farming and ensuring that it led to actual improvement, Rack came to the conclusion that a similar institution would be beneficial for the western counties. He wrote to the local press pointing out that it was in the interest of the farmer, the landowner and the nation in general that the agricultural resources of the country should be increased. He reported that it was the practice of the agricultural societies in London, Norwich and York, to give pecuniary and honorary rewards to the 'diligent and ingenious who have excelled in the various departments of husbandry, in useful manufactures, and in the most curious specimens of art',⁶ and declared his intention to set up such a society, based in Bath, for the dissemination of the latest ideas in agriculture. Rack envisaged a society of broadly cultured people who would share his wish to advance the welfare of mankind, an admirable and thoroughly eighteenth-century ambition. The press proved considerably sympathetic and the following advertisement soon appeared in several local newspapers, including the *Bath Chronicle*:



1. Portrait of Edmund Rack from *The Agricultural Gazette*, June 1877

AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY

To the Nobility and Gentry in the Counties of Somerset, Gloucester, Wilts and Dorset in general, and the Cities of Bath and Bristol in particular.

Bath; Aug. 26, 1777

A proposition having been made for the institution of a Society in this City for the encouragement of Agriculture, Planting, Manufactures, Commerce and the Fine Arts, the Nobility and Gentry are hereby respectfully informed that a Meeting will be held at York House, on Monday, the 8th of September, at Eleven o'clock in the forenoon, to take the affair under consideration. And that the plans on which Societies of this kind in London, Norwich, Manchester, &c., are founded, with some other necessary particulars, will then and there be produced; in order that a general plan may be formed for establishing a Society here on a proper foundation, and a subscription opened for carrying it on with a spirit becoming the dignity of so honourable an institution, and its great importance to the community.

As this institution is intended for the benefit for all the above-named counties, it is humbly requested that the public-spirited gentlemen residing therein will generally honour it with their countenance and protection.⁷

Several gentlemen responded to this invitation and met at York House where the Society was formed. In the minutes of the inaugural meeting are the names of those present that day. They included:

John Ford Esqr in the Chair	Phillip Stephens, Esq
Revd Dr Wilson	Paul Newman, Esq
Revd Mr Ford	Mr John Newman
Dr Wm Falconer	Willm Street, Esq
Dr Patrick Henley	Mr Symons, Surgeon
Wm Brereton, Esq	Mr Crutwell, Surgeon
Mr Saml Virgin	Mr Arden
Mr Richard Crutwell	Mr Wm Matthews
Mr Foster, Apothecary	Mr Parsons
Mr Cam Gyde	Mr Edm Rack
Mr Benj Axford	Mr Bull ⁸

The founder-members were chiefly local professional men and included amongst them two clergymen, four doctors, an apothecary, a printer and publisher, but no farmer. Dr Falconer, being a Fellow of the Royal Society, was certainly the most distinguished of the founder-members.⁹ He was the author of numerous books on medicine, science, religion, politics and classics. He settled in Bath after retiring from practice in London, and became Physician to the General Hospital. He lived in the Circus and remained an active member of the Society till his death in 1824. Despite the diverse professions of the founder-members of the Bath and West, they were held together by their patriotic fervour and their belief that they could improve the condition of agriculture in the western counties. This belief is reiterated in the following paragraph from George Winter's book of 1787, *A New and Compendious System of Husbandry*:

Farmers may be possessed of great natural abilities and knowledge in the common mode of their ancestors; but every farmer is not a scholar, mechanic, chemist, or philosopher. Their knowledge, and the methods they pursue in general, extend no further than that of their predecessors, or the custom of the country where they reside. Any discoveries made by them are reserved to themselves, and themselves only benefit by it; but men of ingenuous and liberal dispositions, no sooner make discoveries, than they are communicated to the public.¹⁰

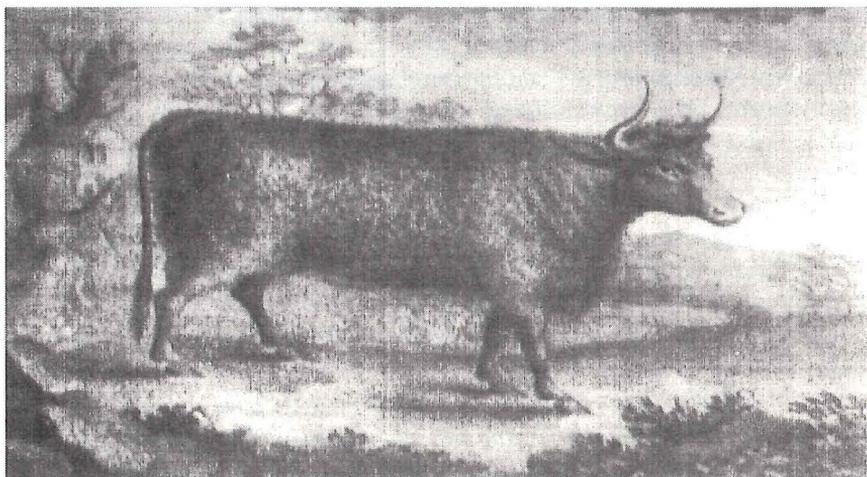
The first general meeting was held on 13 November 1777. It was attended by thirty-four people, and the Earl of Ilchester was elected President. In addition twelve vice-presidents were also elected. At this meeting, the aims, rules and orders of the Society were set out. The principal objectives were: to encourage what was broadly termed as 'industry'; to provide a channel for the exchange and dissemination of information; to carry out and publicize experiments in those areas most needing it; and to improve all aspects of husbandry through the award of premiums. These premiums were to be funded by the subscriptions and donations of public-spirited people. The annual subscription was fixed at 'not less than One Guinea' and the charge for life membership was 12 guineas.¹¹ It was also decided that Rack was to be paid 50 guineas a year as Secretary of the Society 'till the Society shall be better able to increase that sum'. The amount was increased to £70 in 1786. They also allowed him £30 a year for the use of rooms in his house at 5 St James's Parade.¹²

By the end of 1778, the Bath and West had 300 ordinary members and 54 honorary and consulting members. Among this latter group were such

distinguished names as Arthur Young the agriculturalist, Joseph Priestley the chemist, and Thomas Curtis the botanist. Young was a frequent correspondent and contributor to the Society's journal. Curtis was later to become a vice-president of the Society till his death in 1784. Priestley was also to become a vice-president of the Society in 1778, and sat on the Committee of Correspondence and Enquiry in 1780.¹³ Later, the honorary members of the Society were to include Sir Humphrey Davy, the man who first isolated sodium and potassium, and more surprisingly, Teyoninhok Arawen, a Mohawk chief who was very well disposed towards the Society.¹⁴ There appears to be a wide overlap between the Society's early membership lists and the subscribers to the volume of poems, essay and letters which Rack published in 1781.¹⁵ Among the 483 subscribers to the poems were Thomas Coke of Holkham, Arthur Young, William Herschel and the Duke of Marlborough. Many of the same people, distinguished or undistinguished, were persuaded to support the new Bath Society. Richard Cruttwell, the local printer who was present at the Society's inaugural meeting, printed and published both Rack's literary works and the Society's journal. A further link between Rack's agricultural and literary careers was that the chairman of the Society's first general meeting was Sir John Miller, the husband of Lady Miller.¹⁶

The Society immediately set to work on the basis established at its first general meeting – the plan being to use premiums as a means of encouragement and to raise a public fund to finance them. By the end of 1777, some £350 had been subscribed. The first premium list, agreed that December, was divided into three separate classes and seventy-six premiums were offered altogether. The subjects covered were very broad and varied from cultivating turnips and beans to studying epilepsy in pigs, from planting apple trees to introducing the manufacture of black silk lace and the invention of a machine for sowing carrot seed.¹⁷ The Secretary was ordered to have 1,000 copies of the premium list printed. Every member was entitled to one and the rest were to go on sale. Fifty copies were to be sent to booksellers in each of the four counties.

New premiums were offered and duly announced at the beginning of every year in the Society's premium books. The premium lists were remarkably elaborate and they were most thoroughly organized. For example, the 1801 premium list occupied 45 pages of text and a total of 198 premiums were offered. The supervision of these activities was left to three specialist committees. These committees dealt with agriculture and planting, manufactures and commerce, and mechanics and useful arts. Their main tasks were to decide on the premiums which should be



2. 'The Prize Ox of the Bath and West of England Society, 1803. Weight Ten H[undred ?], Rough Fat eight score and upwards, Fed on Grass and Hay only, Bred and grazed by Mr Hall of Leigh Court, Somersetshire.' (*Reproduced by courtesy of Bath Reference Library, Hunt Collection*)

offered and awarded. These decisions were then presented to the annual meeting for final approval. It is interesting to note that the premiums offered in any one class serve as a general indicator of what the Society considered to be of immediate relevance to the region at any given time. For example, ploughs and trials of ploughs took up a lot of the Society's attention in the early days. However, drainage was the Society's main campaign by the 1840s. It was hoped that premiums would give a tremendous stimulus to agricultural advance. In the first twenty-five years of the Society's existence, some £2,070 was expended on them.

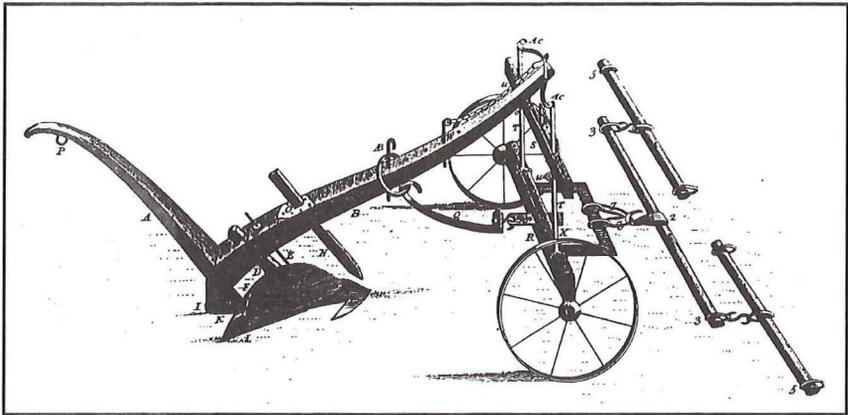
In June 1778, the Committee of Correspondence and Enquiry decided that a general knowledge of the best modes of practice in all the different parts of the country was essential to the success of their scheme. This is because they knew that farmers preferred practical examples to theoretical principles. Accordingly, they drew up a list of questions on which they wanted information and sent these off to the high sheriff of each county, requesting that suitably qualified persons be asked to answer the queries and return them to the Secretary. As a consequence they received a curious assortment of useful practical knowledge and superstitious notions.¹⁸

In 1779, the Society decided to acquire some land for the purpose of conducting experiments in agriculture.¹⁹ By the spring of 1780, a site had

been found and approved by Edmund Rack. Ten acres were taken over at Weston, on the outskirts of Bath, on the farm of one of the Society's members, Mr Bettel.²⁰ At this experimental farm, trials of various kinds were carried out by Mr Bettel on behalf of the Society, under the supervision of an Experimental Committee. This scheme eventually petered out after about ten years due to defective management and disagreement among the parties involved. Nevertheless, the farm which the Society operated at Weston was the very first experimental farm in Britain, and a worthy predecessor to Woburn and Rothamstead.

The first volume of *Letters and Papers* appeared in 1780. This included the selected reports, essays and letters which the Society had received from its correspondents and from competitors for premiums. Every subscribing member was entitled to a copy of this journal and the rest were sold at bookshops in London and the four counties for a small price. This was one of the earliest publications of its kind in the country. However, it appeared irregularly and terminated with Volume 15 in 1829. A second series was launched in 1853, and there were six series altogether.

Implements and machines, or models and drawings of them, were left at the Society's Rooms for the inspection of gentlemen and farmers. These were sent by the members, competitors for premiums, or purchased. As early as 1780, the exhibition of Mr Blancher's drill plough at the Society's



3. Mr Boswell's Norfolk Plough. One of the early illustrations of agricultural implements featured in the Society's *Letters and Papers* (Vol. 2, 1782, facing p.356). These often included elaborate descriptions of how the implements worked. A model of George Boswell's plough was left in the Society's Model Room for inspection .

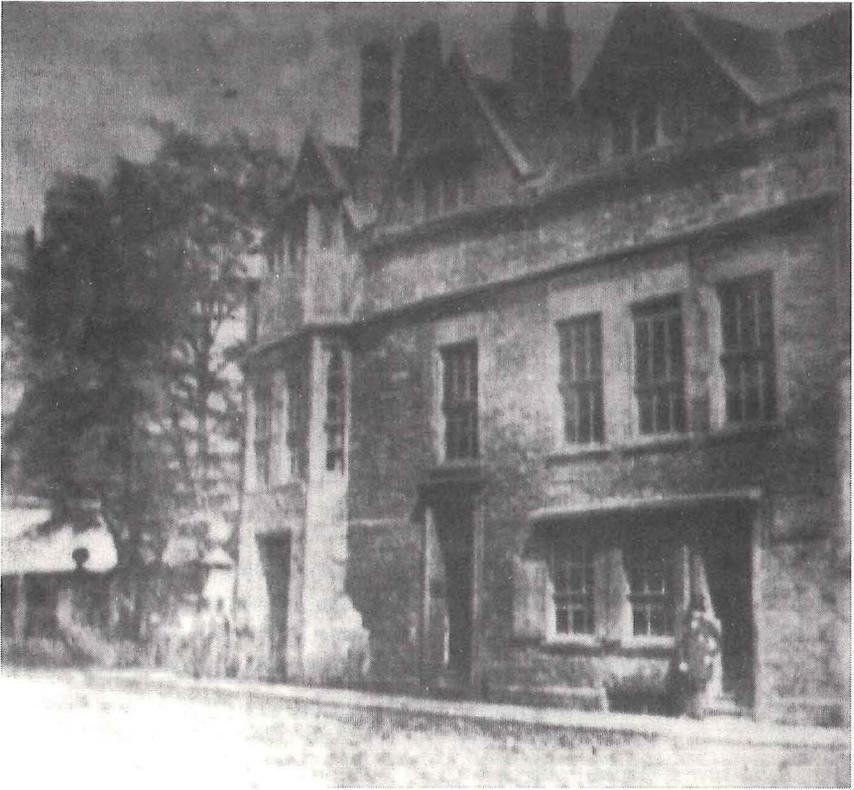
Rooms was announced in the journal. Furthermore, it had been 'tried by our Agricultural Committee, in a field, and found to deliver the grain with great exactness and regularity, quite to the satisfaction of the Gentlemen Farmers who attended the experiment'.²¹ It was hoped that this collection would provide for the diffusion of new inventions in the west country.

At the annual meeting of 1786, it was decided that a public trial of ploughs should be conducted:

It being universally acknowledged that in the whole circle of agricultural practice there is nothing so interesting to the Farmer than to plow cheap & well, It is directed that fair Comparative Tryals shall be made in March next both on light & Heavy soils near Bath, with the various Ploughs generally used in the Western Counties against the Double share Norfolk, Essex, and other improved ploughs introduced by the Society.²²

In order to induce farmers to participate, three premiums amounting to 12 guineas in total were offered for the three ploughs which performed the best. There were also rewards for ploughmen. Notice of this match was advertized in the local papers and the date set for 29 March 1787. Competitors were to be allowed to use whichever plough they chose. A Committee of Farmers was chosen to determine the comparative merits of the several ploughs used. However, the match did not take place as planned because of the death of Edmund Rack that February. At an extra general meeting, William Matthews was elected the new Secretary. Matthews, like Rack, was a Quaker, the son of an Oxfordshire shoemaker. He had settled in Bath in 1777, first setting up a brewery, then a coal yard, and then a seed and agricultural implement business which he ran from the Society's Rooms in Hetling House, now Abbey Church House (fig. 4).²³

The first ploughing match finally took place in March 1788 on Barrack's Farm, Wells Road, Bath. There were six competitors and John Billingsley won the first prize with a double coulter plough, drawn by six oxen.²⁴ This is considered to be one of the first competitions of its kind in this or any other county. Subsequent matches were held at least once, and sometimes up to four times, a year. Different types of ploughs were tested, such as the double-furrow and the single-furrow ploughs, because although ploughs were meant to perform essentially the same task, they possessed regional differences in construction and design which made them particularly suited to the area from which they originated. Even the



4. Hetling House, 1847. This is the earliest surviving photograph of Hetling House. It was the Society's first headquarters and it is just possible to make out the 'Agricultural Society' sign above the first-floor windows. (*Bath Reference Library, E7/300*)

same 'type' of plough could have many variants in mouldboards and shares. For example, the double-furrow plough was very suitable for working light lands. The utility of these ploughing matches was that they demonstrated the most suitable ploughs for the west country.

In 1787, the Society had 266 ordinary members and 55 honorary and corresponding members. Forty-six of the ordinary members had a Bath address and the rest came from all over the country. The occupations of members were not always given but from the information, certain trends are noticeable. There were many doctors, a fair number of clergymen, and a sprinkling of other professional men. Nevertheless, most were active farmers, active supervisors of their farming tenants, or at least had some

vested interest in the land. Those who took a regular part in the activities of the Bath and West (that is, attended meetings, contributed essays, conducted experiments, and competed for premiums) numbered about fifty. Among the Society's warmest supporters and regular attendants at meetings were Dr Charles Parry, Dr Falconer, John Billingsley and Sir Benjamin Hobhouse. There was a very high proportion of passive members who were content to pay their subscriptions and to admire the work from a distance. For example, the 1778 Annual Meeting was attended by only twelve people. After an appeal from the Secretary, attendance rose to thirteen at the next meeting in 1779. After that it hovered around thirty-five for some years. Attendance improved in the 1790s. The annual meeting of 1796 saw a large turnout of 138 which included the Marquis of Lansdowne, the Earls of Stafford, Peterborough and Galloway, and Lord Somerville.

It is quite remarkable how much the Society managed to achieve in its early years on a very small income. The earliest statement of accounts to survive is for the year ending December 1783. It showed total funds in hand to be £477 1s 6d, of which £277 1s 6d were at the bank and the remainder in cash elsewhere. The biggest expense was always the payment of premiums, which absorbed half the annual income. Subscriptions so far received totalled £449 6s 5½d, but many members were in arrears (fig. 5).²⁵ This was a nagging problem for the Society which persisted well into the new century.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the operations of the Society each year included general meetings in the months of February, April, June, September and November, a ploughing match in the summer and, in December, the annual meeting at Hetling House and an exhibition of stock and implements in the Society's yard in James Street West. The December proceedings lasted for three days and included a public dinner. The new century also saw the resignation of William Matthews and the election of Nehemiah Bartley as the new Secretary, by ballot. Bartley was a nurseryman of Lawrence Hill, Bristol.

The Duke of Bedford, who became the President of the Society in 1800, died on 2 March 1802. He was an ardent promoter of agricultural improvement and took an active interest in the Society's affairs, apparently to an extent that was unprecedented among the Society's Presidents. During the general meeting on 22 March, it was decided that a gold medal, equivalent to the value of 20 guineas, should be offered annually as a premium for the greatest improvement in any agriculture-related subject. A premium of 20 guineas was offered for the selected design. A special Bedfordean Committee was appointed for this purpose,

State of the Societies Accounts for the last,
Year, and of their Fund this day Dec^r 8 1783

By Fund in hand at the Settlement made	£	221.11.2½
Do at last Annual Meeting		50-8-0
Subscriptions brought in at March Meeting		43-1-
Do at June Meeting		23-2-
Do at Sept Meeting		111-4-3
Do at Dec Meeting this day		£449-6-5½

By disbursements not in March Meeting	£	70-3-10
Do June Meeting		54-12-11½
Do Sept Meeting		31-2-10
Do Dec Meeting		16-5-3½
		£172-4-11

To Remaining Fund now in hand	£	277-1-6
Of this Fund there is in Bank		168-1-6
In Secretarys hands		109
To which add subscriptions due for the present year & arrears deemed good		260-0-0
		£537-1-6

which is 56£ more than the Estimated
Fund was at last Annual Meeting

To deduct for Advertising Bills Rent &c 60
Not yet brought in - about

Total Fund as Estimated this day £477-1-6

Examined signed Geo^r John Miller

and eventually a design submitted by a Miss Fanshawe was chosen. Mr John Milton of London was commissioned to engrave the die but the committee was unsatisfied with the first impressions taken from it. Matters proceeded slowly, and the committee finally approved the much-corrected die in August 1804. Mr Milton was paid 100 guineas for the die and 20 guineas to cast a gold medal from it (fig. 6).



6. The Bedfordean Medal. (*Letters and Papers*, Vol. 10, 1805)

The first of these gold medals was awarded to Arthur Young for his essay on the nature and properties of manure.²⁶ The honour of receiving a Bedfordean medal was for several years a much-coveted distinction. It was regarded as the 'blue-ribbon' of the Society and proved a great stimulus to achievement. However, it was later observed that 'considerable latitude seems to have been taken in the bestowal [of the medal]'.²⁷ For example, it was also awarded to Captain Parry for his Arctic discoveries; to Sir Francis Chantrey, the sculptor, for his bust of Sir Benjamin Hobhouse, President of the Society (1805-1817); and to Mr Clark, the inventor of a life-preserver throwing stick. The connection of these to agriculture is not easily ascertainable.

A recurring theme in the Society's early publications was the application of chemistry to agriculture, especially the chemical analysis of soils and fertilizers. At this time, Lavoisier in Paris was revolutionizing chemistry and applying it to the solution of agricultural problems. It may well have been that his work set English scientists thinking on the same lines. In

1805, a proposal was made by Sir John Coxe Hippisley to establish a chemical laboratory at the Society's house. This was approved and a Committee of Chemical Research was set up. The sum of 130 guineas was raised for establishing and operating a laboratory in the vaults of Hetling House. Two members stepped forward and generously extended their assistance: Dr Parry offered to present his chemical apparatus to the Society, and Dr Clement Archer offered to deliver a course of popular lectures *gratis* on the principles and application of chemistry to agriculture. Dr Archer, a Bath physician, also offered his services in superintending the operation of the laboratory – an offer which was promptly accepted. Dr Archer was appointed Chemical Professor to the Society and Dr Cadwallader Boyd his assistant. Farmers were invited to send in samples of soil for analysis and the results were reported and published by the Society in its journals.²⁸ The following spring, Dr Archer gave a course of lectures which 'was attended as well by many Ladies and Gentlemen who had a taste for science, as by most of the Members who remained in town'.²⁹ Unfortunately he died a few months later, before completing the course of lectures. This was finished by his assistant, Dr Boyd, who also took over the running of the laboratory.

The Society was also very interested in promoting the improvement of British wool and the establishment of a cloth-mart in Bath. From medieval times Bath had itself been a clothing town – the ancient monastery had a shuttle for its coat-of-arms, and special civic privileges were granted to those who carried on the trade. Although the character of the city changed when the Hot Springs became fashionable, the old industry, part of that extending from Frome to Stroud, continued to flourish. Sir Benjamin Hobhouse was a clothier before he became a banker; Dr Parry wrote and published frequently on the breed of sheep, and samples of cloth sent by Lord Somerville and others were discussed at Committee meetings. In 1806, the Secretary reported that he had contracted for a piece of ground near Kingsmead Square, suitable for an annual exhibition of cattle and the erection of a cloth-hall. Within six months, this building was finished. According to Jerom Murch, 'Within my own recollection ... the winter shows brought a large number of visitors to the city'.³⁰

In June 1809, the Prince of Wales became the Patron of the Society and it was announced that His Royal Highness would pay an annual subscription of 50 guineas. In December that year the Society approached the Lords Lieutenant of Somerset, Wiltshire, Gloucester, Hampshire and Devon, inviting them to become vice-presidents. Apparently what was good enough for the Prince proved good enough for them and they all

accepted. One would have expected that the Prince's generous subscription would have improved the finances of the Society. However, it was subsequently offered as a premium for growing hemp, a subject about which the Prince felt strongly. The Society obviously did not want to incur the displeasure of the Prince or lose His Royal patronage.

1811 saw the deaths of two of the Society's most active members, Sir John Coxe Hippisley and John Billingsley. Hippisley, as we recall, had proposed the institution of a chemical laboratory at the Society's rooms, and his services to the Society were suitably acknowledged. However, Billingsley was given a hero's treatment and a portrait of him was placed in a conspicuous part of the Society's Great Room, with the following inscription:

JOHN BILLINGSLEY, Esq.

One of the original Founders, one of the greater Ornaments, and for 32 Years, a most able and active VICE-PRESIDENT, of this INSTITUTION, whose Ardour in acquiring Knowledge was only equalled by his Delight in imparting it; and whose Zeal in promoting Objects of public Utility was as conspicuous as his Judgment in discerning, and his Ability in carrying them into Effect.

The BATH and WEST of ENGLAND SOCIETY

In grateful Remembrance of his transcendent Merits, have caused this Tablet to be inscribed.

Meanwhile, the problem of members in arrears persisted and became so serious that in 1813 the Secretary, Robert Ricards, was driven to printing a black list of the defaulters in the hope of shaming them into payment. In 1818 the Secretary gave notice of his intention to resign due to his failing health. Benjamin Leigh Lye, a former Army Captain, was elected to that office.

Between the 1820s and the 1840s, the Society slipped into a period of decline. By this time the original impetus of the Society had faded and signs of decay began to manifest themselves. It had lost some of its most able members and was beset by financial problems. The existing members also began to lose interest in the activities of the Society for several reasons. Firstly, the improvements made in agriculture in the last few decades were so great that many entertained the idea that the objectives of the

Society had been accomplished. Secondly, as a result of the agricultural depression due to the Napoleonic Wars, the farming community was very unpopular and held responsible for the scarcity and costliness of food. Therefore, they were the last persons to be supported. Lastly, there was the competition of other societies, such as those at Bruton and Frome. For example, in 1849 one of the Society's vice-presidents, Sir Alex Hood, Bart, resigned, explaining that he had 'so much occupation in attending agricultural meetings in the western division that he cannot attend at Bath also'.³¹ Under such adverse forces, the Society's finances suffered a severe blow. In 1820, the income from subscriptions had fallen from £591 in the previous year to £288. In 1821, the Secretary, Leigh Lye, voluntarily took a 50% pay cut. In 1822, the Committee of Superintendence reported:

While this meeting did realize with regret that there has been a considerable reduction in the receipts of the Society, it did not fail also to notice that the expences have been so diminished as to leave but a small balance against the Society. It is hoped that by care and attention in offering and lessening Premiums and by the strictest economy in managing the affairs of the Society the disbursements will be kept at the lowest possible point and that it may surely be left to the zeal, spirit and perseverance of the members and friends of the Institution to prevent its receipts from suffering a further decrease.³²

The gold Bedfordean Medal became a silver medal due to the faltering finances of the Society. After two or three interregnums, it disappeared altogether from the Society's premiums around the early 1830s. The premium list itself was thoroughly revised and severely limited. Furthermore, the loss of some of the Society's leading members added to its misfortunes. In 1829, Volume 15 of *Letters and Papers* was published.³³ This was thirteen years after the publication of Volume 14 and the Society commented:

In the interval which is specified, the Society has been deprived of many of its most distinguished Members, [and the] loss of so much energy and talent would naturally paralyze, to a certain extent, the proceedings of the remaining body.

Between 1833 and 1840, there were four resignations and eight deaths in the ranks of the vice-presidents. Furthermore, members lacked the enthusiasm and efficiency of those of the earlier period and interest in

the Society's activities was continually decreasing. For example, in 1834 one member withdrew his subscription, stating that the Society was not conducted as it used to be. Nevertheless, the Society continued to conduct its business as normally and as best it could. In 1836, the Committee of Superintendence reported a larger than usual turnout at the annual ploughing match, and came to the conclusion that this 'may be taken as a gratifying evidence, that, notwithstanding the numerous Agricultural Societies which are every where springing up around us, the leading objects of this most ancient Society are not becoming less useful or less attractive'.³⁴

The situation did not improve, and in 1840 the Society was forced to sell £300 of its investments. The bad fortune continued when its bankers, Hobhouse, Phillott and Lowder, proprietors of the old Bath Bank in Milsom Street, failed, owing the Society £411 2s 9d. In the event, the Society managed to retrieve about £267 in dividends, which amounted to the loss of about a year's income. Tugwell, Mackenzie and Clutterbuck were appointed as the new bankers, but the main problem seemed to be finding the money to pay into this new account.

In 1847, the Secretary was directed to give the landlord notice unless a reduction in rent was made because the Society felt that the rent for their rooms at Hetling House was too high. The rent was subsequently reduced from £40 to £30 per annum. However, by December 1848, in view of diminishing income, the Society gave up their rooms. The reason they gave was that the reduced rent was still too high and the premises were 'in such a bad state of repair as to render the occupation at times extremely inconvenient'.³⁵ As a result the books and various articles belonging to the Society were moved from Hetling House and placed under the care of the Bath Commercial and Literary Institution, without any payment for rent.³⁶ By arrangement with the latter organization, the Society's annual meetings were also held at their rooms without charge.

In 1849, Leigh Lye, the Secretary, was too ill to carry on his duties and handed in his resignation. His 'regularity and ability in all matters relating to the business of the Society' was acknowledged. His successor was Henry St John Maule, and it was recognized that 'having a regard to the pecuniary circumstances of the Society, the office should be an honorary one'.³⁷ In general, the 1840s were marked by the Society's attempts to economize further, and to find ways of increasing its funds. They were largely unsuccessful and in 1850 the Society's cash in hand amounted to a mere £310 5s 6d.³⁸

Despite the gloomy outlook in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s, the few who soldiered on did so in the hope that in the Society's middle age, 'the members

who are already enrolled in its list will exert themselves to maintain its ancient prosperity and their own celebrity, and that, by a new accession of strength, the Bath and West of England may spring up, like a giant refreshed, and preserve the vigour and usefulness which have distinguished the earlier periods of its existence'.³⁹ Fortunately, their efforts paid off and the Society was given a new lease of life by the enthusiasm and resourcefulness of a few members like Sir Thomas Dyke Acland and William Miles, MP. Acland of Killerton was a west country squire who retired from Parliament in 1847 in order to devote himself to the management of his estates. In 1850, he presented to the Society a scheme for its reorganization. He suggested that it should move its annual meeting away from Bath and hold it each year in a different town within the Society's area, combined with a show of machinery and livestock. He cited the Royal Agricultural Society show at Exeter in 1850 as a fine example, and was determined to bring all the advantages of such an exhibition within the reach of the western counties. Acland's proposal was strongly supported by Miles and the Society's President, Lord Portman. Meetings were held in Bath, Bridgwater, Taunton, Exeter and elsewhere to ascertain the willingness of gentlemen holding land in the western counties to support the scheme for meeting in different parts of the region. The response was positive. In addition, a negotiation was opened between the Bath and West and the Devon Agricultural Society with a view to uniting the two. The result was a merger on 11 February 1851 and a new constitution.

The first annual meeting and show under the new constitution was held in Taunton in 1852. It generated a lot of local and national interest and support and stockbreeders and trade exhibitors came from all over the country. This set the Society on the road to recovery. By the end of the 1850s, the regenerated Society began to feel reasonably secure when it became apparent that its new policies were working successfully. As a sign of its renewed vitality, a second series of journals was launched in 1853 under the editorship of Acland. The Society was set to face the world once more.

Conclusion

The Society had come about at a time when the western counties needed it most. As set out in 1777, the Society's aim was to 'excite by premiums a spirit of emulation and improvement in such parts of husbandry as seem most to require it'.⁴⁰ At the time of the Society's inception, farming in the western counties was in a backward state. The farmer was guided in his

work by custom, or such modifications as observation and experience might permit. Crops were small and the quantity of grain inferior. The implements employed were very limited in number and simple in construction.

In assessing the extent of the Society's success, one can safely say that it had gone a long way towards fulfilling the objectives of the founder-members. It had spent a great deal of money on premiums to encourage experiment, innovation and invention. It had built up an extensive correspondence with agriculturalists both at home and abroad. It had published the kind of articles and letters which it believed would help to raise the general level of efficiency in the west country. It had collected useful information, drawings and models from all parts of the country. It had put on an annual show that attracted both exhibitors and visitors from all over the country.

In analyzing the operations of the Bath and West, one is struck by the diversity of subjects to which it had directed its attention and, at times, its success.⁴¹ It was instrumental in the introduction of improved turnip-husbandry into the western counties. Great pains were also taken to introduce new seeds, and much attention given to new varieties of vegetables. It must be recognized that the Society was essentially operating at a time when England was shut out from the Continent, and the necessity of fostering home industries of every description was a matter of vital importance. Further, the fact that it attempted to stimulate improvement and invention by the novelty of the premium system must not go unrecognized.⁴²

The Society's early history is inextricably bound up with the history of the city of Bath. For seventy-four years from 1777-1851, the Society held its meetings in Bath; its business was carried out at Hetling House; livestock was exhibited in the yard at Walcot; and its leading members were drawn from the city. After 1851, the close links with the city grew weaker when the Society decided to hold its annual meeting and show at different towns in the western region.⁴³ It returned to Bath for its annual show in 1854, and once more in 1877, rather significantly, for its centenary show. Nevertheless during this time the Society retained a Bath address, first at 16 Pulteney Street, in the residence of its Secretary, Henry St John Maule, and later at 4 Terrace Walk towards the end of the century. In 1905 it established itself at 3 Pierrepoint Street where it remained until 1974. In 1964, after many years of holding peripatetic shows around the region, it acquired a 212-acre area of grass farmland near Shepton Mallet, Somerset. Since 1965, the Society's show and activities have been held on this permanent site. But to this day, the Society retains its Bath connections. Its archives are housed at the city's Record Office and its collection of printed books is in the care of the University of Bath.

Appendix 1

AIMS OF THE SOCIETY, 1777 ⁴⁴

The principal object of this society's attention will be,

To excite by premiums a spirit of emulation and improvement in such parts of husbandry as seem most to require it:

To endeavour to increase the annual produce of corn, by bringing into cultivation, in the least expensive and most effectual manner, such lands as are at present barren or badly cultivated, particularly by draining and manuring; and by the introduction of various sorts of vegetable food for cattle:

To promote the knowledge of agriculture by encouraging and directing regular experiments on those subjects which are of the most importance to it, by distributing rewards to such persons as shall raise the largest and best crops both of natural and artificial grasses, and the several species of grain, on any given quantity of ground:

To encourage planting on waste lands, raising of quick hedges, cultivating turnips, Scotch cabbages, &c, &c:

To promote all improvements in the various implements belonging to the farmer, and introducing such *new* ones as the experience of other counties has proved more valuable than those generally in use:

This society's attention will also be directed to all improvements of the machines used in our different manufactories, as well as the manufactures themselves; and to encourage ingenuity, diligence, and honesty, in servants and labourers:

And to sum up the whole, everything that is conducive to the prosperity of the counties of Somerset, Wilts, Gloucester, and Dorset, and the good of the community at large, will be diligently attended by this society.

Appendix 2

SECRETARIES & PRESIDENTS OF THE SOCIETY, 1777-1852

<i>Secretaries</i>		<i>Presidents</i>	
1777-1787	Edmund Rack	1777-1780	Earl of Ilchester
1787-1800	William Matthews	1780-1798	Marquis of Ailesbury
1800-1805	Nehemiah Bartley	1798-1800	Lord Somerville
1805-1818	Robert Ricards	1800-1802	1st Duke of Bedford
1818-1849	Benjamin Leigh Lye	1802-1805	2nd Duke of Bedford
1849-1865	Henry St John Maule	1805-1817	Sir Benjamin Hobhouse
		1817-1847	Marquis of Lansdowne
		1847-1852	Lord Portman

Notes

- 1 D.G.C. Allan, *William Shipley: Founder of the Royal Society of Arts* (1979), p.12.
- 2 For the agricultural activities of the Royal Society, see R.V. Lennard, 'English Agriculture under Charles II', *Economic History Review*, Vol. 3 (1932), pp.23-45.
- 3 H. Edmund, 'History of the Brecknockshire Agricultural Society, 1755-1955', *Brycheiniog*, Vol. 2 (1956), pp.22-65.
- 4 The use of the premium system was not restricted to agriculture alone. At the time, it was also used to stimulate invention in industry, manufactures and engineering.
- 5 It appears that Rack, who was asthmatic and had suffered a serious bout of jaundice, became one of the earliest dupes of the notorious quack, Dr Graham, who was patronized by Mrs Macaulay.
- 6 W. Lewis, *A Century of Agricultural Progress* (Bath, 1879), pp.29-30.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.30.
- 8 Bath Record Office (BRO), Bath and West Archives, Vol. 2, 8 September 1777.
- 9 Fellowship of the Royal Society was for life and represented the highest attainment in British science.
- 10 G. Winters, *A New and Compendious System of Husbandry* (Bristol, 1787), p.12.
- 11 *Rules and Orders of the Society, instituted at Bath, for the encouragement of agriculture, arts, manufactures, commerce, mechanics and the fine arts* (Bath, 1777).
- 12 BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 2, 13 November 1777.
- 13 At this time, Priestley was Librarian to the Earl of Shelburne at Bowood.
- 14 Both Davy and Arawen were elected at the Annual Meeting of 1804. BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 7, 11 December 1804.
- 15 E. Rack, *Essays, Letters and Poems* (Bath, 1781).
- 16 BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 2, 13 November 1777.

- 17 BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 2, 13 December 1777.
- 18 The Royal Society had tried to use this method to collect similar information in the 1660s. They received only eleven reports. The Bath Society was more successful and the results were published in their journal, *Letters and Papers*, Vol.1 (1780).
- 19 BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 2, 14 December 1779.
- 20 Sometimes spelt 'Bethell' or 'Bethel'.
- 21 *Letters and Papers*, Vol. 1 (1780), p.5.
- 22 BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 2, 14 November 1786, 12 December 1786.
- 23 Hetling House appears to have been built c.1570 by Edward Clarke on Norman foundations and leased soon afterwards to Sir Walter Hungerford of Farleigh (d.1585). It is believed that the poet Alexander Pope lived there. It subsequently became Abbey Church House and was restored in the 1950s after air-raid damage during World War II. Bath Public Library, E7/298; K. Hudson, *The Bath and West: A Bicentenary History* (Bradford-on-Avon, 1976), p.236, fn.5.
- 24 BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 2, 8 April 1788.
- 25 BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 2, page facing 8 December 1783.
- 26 200 copies of this essay were printed for distribution in pamphlet form and subsequently reprinted in *Letters and Papers*, Vol. 9 (1802), pp.97-198.
- 27 Lewis, *op. cit.*, p.45.
- 28 The first of these results were published in *Letter and Papers*, Vol. 11(1807), pp.275-313. According to Russell, these were the earliest of its kind that he had seen. E.J. Russell, *A History of Agricultural Science in Great Britain* (1966).
- 29 W.J. Williams and D.M. Stoddart, *Bath – Some Encounters with Science* (Bath, 1978).
- 30 J. Murch, 'The History and Literature of the Bath and West of England and Southern Counties Society', *Journal of the Bath and West of England Society* (1890-1), pp.144-5.
- 31 *Rules and Orders*, 'Report of the Committee of Superintendence' (1849), p.19. Robert Blagdon Hale, MP, Vice-President, also resigned in the same year, giving the same reason as Hood.
- 32 BRO, Bath and West Archives, Vol. 8, 7 December 1822.
- 33 This was to be the last volume of *Letters and Papers*.
- 34 *Rules and Orders*, 'Report of the Committee of Superintendence' (1836), p.47.
- 35 *Rules and Orders*, 'Report of the Committee of Superintendence' (1849), p.19.
- 36 The Bath Commercial and Literary Institution (BCLI) must not be confused with the Bath Literary and Scientific Institution (BLSI). They were two separate organizations. The Bath and West had first approached the BLSI about this matter. However, the BLSI would only retain the Bath and West's possessions if an annual rent was charged. This caused the latter to look elsewhere in the hope of finding an institution of 'more kindred public character' that would not make a charge. At this point they were approached by the BCLI. *Rules and Orders*, 'Report of the Committee of Superintendence' (1851), p.19.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p.20.
- 38 *Rules and Orders*, (1851), p.16.
- 39 *Rules and Orders*, 'Report of the Committee of Superintendence' (1839), p.42.
- 40 *Rules and Orders*, (1777), p.vii.

- 41 The Society's journals provide an invaluable source of information on the startlingly wide range of activities carried on within the Society. It concerned itself with issues from descriptions of ploughs and mills to the utility of Friendly Societies and Rev Malthus's population theory. Some may appear trivial, but show the liberal stance adopted by the Society.
- 42 It has been written that the Society 'preferred taking a hopeful view of every suggested improvement and new invention rather than that genius should be neglected or merit go unrewarded'. Lewis, *op.cit.*, p.84.
- 43 The 'nomad' existence of the Society in those years may help to explain the lack of documents to have survived from this period. It was not uncommon for the Society to hold its meetings at hotels in whichever town it happened to be holding its show that year.
- 44 *Rules and Orders*, (1777), pp.v-vii.

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