

THE MODEL FARMS OF VICTORIAN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

by *Celia Miller*

The term "model farm" seems to have been coined in the early Victorian era, for it was largely during this period that the building and design of such farms enjoyed a vogue amongst landowners all over Britain. The philosophy behind the model farm was that agriculturally knowledgeable landowners should show their less fortunate neighbours and their tenants the way to increase their income through new farm buildings, new technology and improved farming methods. However, although the terminology is Victorian, model farms are essentially eighteenth-century in origin. For it was during the eighteenth century that many owners of landed estates had become interested in agriculture and the design and building of farmsteads, usually called "improved farms". This development was a logical one, since most landowners depended upon their letting of agricultural land for the bulk of their income. The trend continued through into the Victorian era, when the improved or model farm began to take on a new significance.

During the nineteenth century the whole of the agricultural community was increasingly faced with the problem of a fast-growing population whose demand it could no longer fulfil, and with the consequent competition of imports from Europe, the Americas and Australia. So the need to produce more food at a lower cost became imperative - agriculture had to become more competitive, as well as more efficient. The main answer to this problem was seen at the time to lie in "high farming", a system which worked on the theory that high capital input by both landowners and farmers were essential to achieve the high levels of output necessary to maintain or increase farmers' profit levels and landowners' incomes from agricultural rents. By the 1850s model farms had become the outward symbol of this progressive, technology-orientated farming. The existence of a model farm on even the most modest landowner's estate became an essential status symbol and thus, although the underlying principle was sound, it often went wrong in practice as competition amongst landowners inevitably led to instances of impractical excess.

Victorian model farms have survived to the present day in modest numbers, but they constitute the least appreciated and most threatened category of farm buildings, frequently under the threat of destruction, their decay hastened by years of neglect. For these buildings, which were the pride of the Victorian landowner, were designed and built to serve a farming system which collapsed in the 1880s and 90s, unable to withstand persistently low price levels: first corn, then wool, and finally dairy produce. When British agriculture eventually recovered in the twentieth century, farming systems had changed dramatically and the farm buildings of the mid-nineteenth century, which had been designed to serve a classical mixed farming system based on corn with livestock as a consuming subsidiary, were obsolete. Because their design had been totally geared to a specific system they were difficult, almost impossible to adapt, and these proud symbols of Victorian confidence have declined in the face of twentieth century indifference and neglect.

NEW TECHNOLOGY

Before "improved" farms of the eighteenth century were built, new buildings were simply added to existing farmsteads, or older buildings altered, according to the needs of the age. It was the accelerated pace of enclosure during the eighteenth century and the construction of new farmsteads central to their newly-enclosed lands which highlighted the

need for good and efficient design. The whole purpose of enclosure was to increase landowners' income; good buildings, therefore, were essential if tenant farmers were to increase their profits in line with the rising rents demanded by landowners. This basic fact was reinforced and emphasised by high farming theories during the mid-nineteenth century. High farming decreed that the landlord should provide his tenants with good farm buildings which were designed to save labour, conserve manure and make use of new technology; with fields free of hedgerow timber, for ease of cultivation; with field drainage (especially necessary on clay soils); and with good farm roads. The use of new technology in the form of advances in agricultural engineering, especially forms of motive power, assumed paramount importance. This was first supplied by water and horse power in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but Victorian faith that steam power would effect the same miracle for agriculture as it had for industry meant that Victorian model farms were essentially designed round a fixed high-pressure steam engine.

Such farms were obviously expensive to build and to run and it is comparatively rare to find more than one on an estate, where it would usually be the home farm. Some wealthy landowners with large estates had two or three model farms and took steps to improve the farm buildings of all their tenants. Most landowners were content with their single status symbol and, as estate records often show, were constantly badgered by their tenants to provide even the most basic of improvements on other, less conspicuous farms. ⁽¹⁾

EARLY EXAMPLES

Gloucestershire had several good examples of both "improved" and model farms. The earliest, The Ivy Lodge at Cirencester Park, dates from 1715 and is a fine example of the decorative approach so typical of the eighteenth century, when farm buildings in a park landscape were developed to form the basis of a "picturesque" point of view. The results of this particular enthusiasm tended to be Rococo Gothic and in reality were little more than decorative façades covering the business end of a set of farm buildings. This trend persisted throughout the eighteenth century. The Badminton estate boasts a group of three farmsteads designed by the architect Thomas Wright for the fourth Duke of Beaufort around 1750, of which Castle Barn is the *pièce de résistance*. A long symmetrical design with battlements, flanking turrets and a central gatehouse-type feature which disguises the end of the barn, it is one of the best-preserved buildings of its type surviving to the present day. ⁽²⁾ The most extravagant Gloucestershire example, the Moorish Farm at Sezincote, was designed for Sir Charles Cockerell by S.P. Cockerell around



Castle Barn, Badminton. Photograph by Colin Miller.

1808. On Humphrey Repton's advice the old farm buildings in front of Sezincote House were demolished and a new farm was designed and built in the Indian style, forming a decorative feature in the landscape. Sadly, these remarkable buildings are in a dilapidated state and are unlikely to survive much longer.⁽³⁾

The Victorian model farms of Gloucestershire are typical of their era - less "architectural" and more functional in their appearance than their eighteenth century counterparts, often resembling factories rather than traditional farm buildings. Indeed, this is exactly what they were: the farm as a factory workplace, a processing plant for livestock and crops.

THE TORTWORTH ESTATE

Again, Gloucestershire boasts some fine examples of the *genre*, some of them nationally renowned in their heyday. The earliest and most famous is Whitfield Farm, Falfield, the 250-acre home farm of Earl Ducie's Tortworth estate, which was laid out from scratch between 1839 and 1842 by its architect, John Morton, Earl Ducie's agent. When it was first built it was known as Whitfield Example Farm, and the name illustrates its function perfectly, for it was intended to be an example of high farming in action on the mixed clays and loams of the Gloucestershire Vale. First the existing small farmstead was demolished, all the old hedgerows were cleared, and large rectangular field areas were laid out for ease of cultivation - twenty-six acres of cultivatable land were gained from this clearance and the timber was sold off. Then a complete field drainage system was put in, new roads and bridges were made, new fences and walling were constructed, and finally a new farmstead was built and equipped. The total



Whitfield Example Farm. Photograph by Colin Miller.

expenses of permanently improving the farm were £7,828, and even though £3,307 was recouped from the sale of timber, this still left a capital input balance of £4,500.⁽⁴⁾

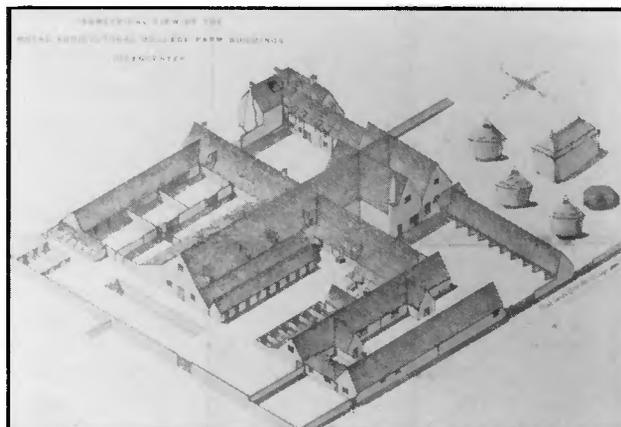
The farm buildings were arranged in a typical E-shaped compact layout which was labour-saving and efficient. They consisted of a north range of barn, granary, steam engine house and storage buildings, with three arms of stock buildings adjoining: in the middle was the feeding house for fattening cattle which consisted of three bays of ten stalls each, with a set of shelter sheds and a yard on each side of it - one for fattening sheep and one for loose cattle. Attached to the end of the north range were stables with eleven stalls for working horses and a piggery on the outside wall, while wagon and implement sheds faced outwards from the sheepyard arm. Manure collection was by means of a cistern in each tarmacadamed yard. There was also a weighbridge - *de rigueur* for the model farm. The buildings were constructed of local stone with slated roofs, and had ornamental latticed windows to the north range - a hangover from the eighteenth century ornamental style.

This once-magnificent set of buildings is now in a sad state. The two yards and the feeding house disappeared under a modern prefabricated building in the 1970s, and only the north range and one arm of the shelter sheds survive. The farm was run as the home farm of the Ducie estate until the 1950s, when it became subject to an ordinary farm tenancy. Whitfield Farm illustrates only too well the problems associated with nineteenth century farm buildings of this type: their layout of well-defined, inter-connecting areas, geared totally to the high farming system, is virtually impossible to adapt to modern farming usage.

CIRENCESTER COLLEGE

Another example which was nationally famous in its day is College Farm, Cirencester. This farm was conceived as part of the first agricultural college to be founded in England - the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester. The project was first broached in 1842 and building operations on both college and farm began in 1845. The fourth Earl Bathurst provided a site for the college and a long farm lease on an adjoining farm, originally known as Port Farm. In 1845 the farm consisted of 410 acres, but by 1850 it had grown to 700 acres.⁽⁵⁾

College Farm was originally intended to serve a triple function: teaching establishment, research establishment, and model farm. The buildings included a farm office and weighbridge, carpenter's shop, smithy, slaughterhouse, stables for the working horses, pigsties and yard, covered sheep pens for fattening sheep, a massive three-storey feeding house, two yards for loose cattle surrounded by open-fronted shelter sheds, a large barn, and a steam engine house, all built of mellow Cotswold stone. What remains of the farm today is a



The Royal Agricultural College Farm Buildings, later 19th century.

hollow shell of the 1845 concept, but the shell is almost intact and the buildings are in relatively good condition. It is still possible to follow the original concept on the ground and to see all the essential elements of its intended function.

THE WESTONBIRT ESTATE

The Westonbirt estate of Robert Stayner Holford, orchid grower and creator of Westonbirt Arboretum, contained five model farms by the mid-1850s. Earliest in date are a group of four farms designed by Lewis Vulliamy, the architect of Westonbirt House: Nesley Farm (1844), Bowdown Farm (1846), Down Farm (1848) and Elmstree Farm (1848).⁽⁶⁾ The farms are more Georgian and decorative than Victorian models and represent an interesting transitional stage between the two concepts. The houses and farm buildings are beautifully designed and executed but, whilst they contain elements of high farming-inspired design, they are otherwise unremarkable.

Home Farm, Westonbirt comes as a total contrast. Built in 1842 as the agricultural hub of the estate, it was designed by E. Rich, Holford's land agent. (7) Here, the emphasis is completely on the functional and efficient and the decorative element is confined to minor establishments. The design was based on an ambitious five-yard layout: a single storey cattle fattening house with a yard for loose cattle on either side; a large barn and steam engine house with a rick yard to one side and a wagon yard to the other, both yards bordered by open-fronted implement and wagon sheds with granaries built over them and enclosed by estate workshops and cottages; a yard for dairy cattle with open-fronted milking sheds lay to one side of the farmhouse, which had a model dairy adjoining it. Ancillary buildings included a weighbridge and office, isolation boxes for sick cattle and a smithy. Built of brick with slate roofs, the buildings exhibit a wealth of prefabricated iron fittings: pillars, trusses, guttering and downpipes - typical features of the model farm. Most of the buildings are still in reasonably good condition, but like all Victorian model farms they are woefully redundant. Restoration would be an unthinkable expensive undertaking for the farmer in today's economic climate.

There are several other model farms in the ancient county of Gloucestershire, but each year they are fewer in number. As agricultural land is swallowed up for industrial or urban development isolated examples suffer total demolition. One important group of buildings to disappear in the 1980s was Walls Court farm at Stoke Gifford, near Bristol, one of the Duke of Beaufort's estate farms, built in 1855. The architect, G.E. Godwin, editor of *The Builder*, designed a Victorian Gothic farmstead comprising five yards, steam engine house and barn, and stables, with a small man-powered railway running around the steading for transporting prepared feed, hay, straw etc. from the preparation areas to the stock in the yards. The design also included a model dairy, dairymaid's and cowman's cottages and a schoolroom for the children of the farmworkers: an apparently unique feature. Unfortunately, Walls Court Farm was almost totally demolished in 1984-5. Court Farm, Down Hatherley, near Gloucester, a model farm with a less distinguished pedigree and more modest in concept and design than Walls Court farm (but nonetheless important) was demolished in 1985. No doubt other demolitions, have occurred.

Demolition is not the only fate of redundant farm buildings. The current vogue for barn conversions has even seen the conversion of a complete model farmstead at Court Farm, Tibberton in 1989. Whilst conversion is altogether more acceptable than demolition, and some conversions show sympathy and imagination, the general standard of conversions often leaves much to be desired. Little or no advice concerning the historical or architectural value of farm buildings seems to be taken. The results are becoming all too evident in the countryside: over-pretentious and over-decorative houses, totally out of sympathy with their original design and use, as well as their surroundings. One can only plead with planning authorities to take informed advice about the significance of individual farm buildings when planning permission for conversion is sought, and to ensure that an adequate photographic record is made prior to the commencement of work. Only then will the worst excesses of the developer be curbed.

Unfortunately, very few Victorian model farm buildings are listed, and it is virtually impossible to get them listed. This situation will continue until official thinking about what is architecturally and historically important changes. These buildings may not be architectural gems but they are historically irreplaceable. If action is not taken soon to halt demolition and to ensure a reasonable standard of conversion, then the farm buildings record in Gloucestershire will have a glaring gap where the nineteenth century should have been.

REFERENCES

- (1) See, for instance, the *Dyrham Park Estate Papers for 1851-56*. After being petitioned by his tenants in 1851 for a reduction in their rents, G.W. Blathwayt agreed to a revaluation of his Lansdown and Dyrham farms by a firm of estate agents. This was carried out in 1852 and the report reveals that the buildings on many of the farm were inadequate and in poor repair. Rents were reduced in accordance with the valuation, but after some repairs and a little field drainage work had been carried out, they crept back up to their old levels in 1856. Gloucestershire County Record Office (Glos. C.R.O.) D1799/C182; D1799/E13; D1799/A5, A6, A7.
- (2) John Martin Robinson, *Georgian Model Farms: A Study of Decorative and Model Farm Buildings in the Age of Improvement* (1983), p.115.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p.137.
- (4) The story of Whitfield Example Farm is told by its architect, John Morton, in his book *The Nature and Property of Soils* (fourth edition, 1843). A summary and commentary can be found in: Celia Miller, "Whitfield Example Farm: A Victorian Model", in *Bristol Industrial Archaeological Society Journal*, vol.16 (1984), pp.20-27.
- (5) *Bathurst Estate Papers*, Glos. C.R.O. D2525, Box 51: James Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850-51* (second edition, 1968), pp.36-9.
- (6) Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp.143-4.
- (7) J.C. Morton, *The Farmer's Calendar*, by Arthur Young (second edition, 1862), p.95.