

From Clydesdale horse to tractor:

How did this change affect farming life on Bute?

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This change happened on Bute within the living memory of the older farmers. It brought changes in the way of life on the farms, and reduced the numbers of those working on the land. In 1998 I interviewed three old farmers, well known for their horsemanship, Mr Charles Simpson, Mr James Johnston and Mr John McMillan, and the retired vet, Mr T Hunter Duncan. Sadly, Mr Simpson and Mr McMillan have since died. I also looked at the records of Bute Agricultural Society and at old copies of *The Buteman*.

Mr Johnston told me he rose at 6am and finished work at 5pm. Mr Simpson and Mr McMillan agreed that work usually started at 5.30 in the morning, when they would groom their pair of horses, milk four or five cows and muck out the byre, before breakfasting at 8am. Mr Duncan said: 'The stable was a warm place where you could meet people. The stable was the man's domain.' All the farmers found working with the horses warm and comfortable, as they were on the move. It was fairly pleasant, but very hard work with long hours.

Farmers bred and broke (trained) their own horses for work. Most of the horses were over 17.2 hands high, which is to say very large. Mr Duncan made the point that if a horse had to retire, the farmer could breed another one, without too much expense - something that cannot be done with tractors.

A stallion visited Bute every year in May. In 1938 it cost two pounds to have him serve a mare and if the mare 'took' it was another three pounds. A really good stallion to visit Bute was Regal Monarch, who was still visiting after 1946. After him came horses with the nick-names of 'Johnnie the Jumper', 'The Monkey' and 'Black Jock.'

Mr Duncan pointed out that there were sometimes casualties, especially during harvest, when horses would take snippets out of the corn. This quite often led to laminitis (a disorder caused by eating food too rich in energy, which results in lameness, and means the horse cannot work). Mr Duncan said: 'Some of my greatest successes were curing them by bleeding them until they staggered.'

Because tractors could work the land quicker, some people think that they saved the public from starving during the war. But when war broke out, production of tractors was much reduced, because the factories were needed to make aeroplanes and ammunition. Tractors were not used on Bute during the war. In fact, the war brought very little change to farming methods on Bute. The *Statistical Returns* showed 490 working horses on Bute in 1946 and a further 110 under a year old. At the ploughing match in 1938 eleven teams of horses competed. Mr Simpson recalled: 'I ploughed a match in '52. There was one tractor and twelve pairs of horses.'

In 1938, the Wages Board (which fixed agricultural wages at a legal minimum) doubled farm workers' wages. According to James Johnston, this forced some farmers to cut down on the number of their employees. In 1945 farm workers on Bute totalled 326, in 1954 there were 291 workers and in 1955, only 195. Since tractors used less manpower per acre, they would seem increasingly attractive as wages rose.

The highest paid ploughman on Bute worked on Mr Simpson's farm. He received £16 per half year. The ploughing took from October to April. Mr Johnston reckoned it was a week's work to plough seven acres with a horse. Mr McMillan recalled there were three pairs of Clydesdales and a single on his 280 acres at that time.

Until 1948, heavy horse breeding was subsidised by the government. In 1948 the grant was withdrawn. Fuel for one tractor was cheap when compared with horse feed. Five of the big Clydesdale horses ate what twenty cows would eat. Gradually, machinery which could be used by horses ceased to be manufactured. This meant farmers had to buy tractors to work the machinery.

Two tractors had come to Bute in 1919. They were owned by Bute Estate, but were little used. Mr D. Shaw had four Fordsons which he used for contract work, charging £5 per hour in 1938, which was considered rather expensive.

In 1946 Fergusson held a demonstration of their tractors at Ardnahoe. These were petrol/paraffin machines, started on petrol and running on paraffin. Paraffin is too dense to start an engine. The Fordson tractor also worked in this way. None of these tractors had a cab, though by this time they did have tyres. They were started with a starting handle. Since tractors were introduced, the garages were always able to cope with their repairs. In fact, they very rarely broke down. In 1956, the first diesel-engined tractors arrived. They were thirty horse power. Some of these are still working on the island.

The day was shorter working with tractors. You did not need to start till eight and you finished at five. There was no grooming or feeding when you finished work. But it was much colder working the land this way because you were not moving, and in these days there was no cab and no heating.

The change from horse to tractor was gradual through the 1950s. In the 1940s there were 6 farriers on Bute. Some of these re-trained to work with machinery. There is now no full time farrier on the island. Many people went to work in the town, where the tourist industry was booming. The farming community became smaller. Horses ceased to be used for work in the early sixties, though more riding ponies were owned by that time.

Conclusion

The main effect of the change from horse to tractor was to reduce the number of farm workers on Bute, and to shorten the working day for those who remained. Economics made the change happen quicker than it might otherwise have done. Farm workers' jobs decreased, and this made farm work a more solitary and lonesome job. Due to the rising demand for workers in the town, individuals did not feel they were losing work, but moving to different posts. It was not necessarily more pleasant to work with tractors, even if it was less hard work. But most farmers did not regret the change.