

Guernsey Museum project – animal husbandry

It is sometimes difficult to realise just how great an advance there has been in the size and ability to produce milk and meat of animals like cows and goats, for example. We are used to seeing large well-covered animals, in the case of a Guernsey cow producing large amounts of rich milk which we drink, and from which we also make butter, cheese and yoghurt.

But this was not always so. The improvements in the size and productivity of animals are largely due to selective breeding in the 19th century, brought about by the large increase in populations in the towns, and the greater need for more food. The use of milk as a drink is also fairly recent. In previous centuries the udder was much smaller, the animals did not produce so much milk, and it was usually made into butter or curds, or a curd-like cheese.

The Guernsey Cow

This breed came originally from the adjacent coast of France, from what is now known as Lower Normandy. Animals from this part of France were taken to Canada by Jacques Cartier at the end of the 15th century and are still bred in Canada, and known as 'Canadian cattle'. But the resemblance to Channel Islands cattle is unmistakable.

In the 19th century the Guernsey Bailiff, Daniel de Lisle Brock, and the Jersey Aide-de-Camp to the Governor, Sir John Le Couteur, decided that each island should have its own breed, and in Guernsey the cows were interbred with Devon Reds and Herefordshire cattle. The Jersey cows, which originally were almost identical, were interbred with different English breeds to produce a smaller animal with distinctive facial features.

In the 16th century the cows were very much smaller. Perhaps the nearest one can come to them nowadays is to look at a 'Rare Breed' cow. This will be smaller than the present day cows, probably only half their size, with its udder carried much higher up against the body. They are also sturdier and hardier, with usually thicker coats.

Feeding the animals

Cows ate more grass, had no supplements of any kind like the present day cattle cake, and because grass does not usually grow in the winter many of them were killed off by Christmas as there was not the grass around to feed them. After a hard winter it has been known for farmers to feed their cattle on the tips of gorse bushes, a perennial evergreen plant.

Pigs

This was the farmer's staple as far as meat was concerned. Every part of a pig can be eaten or used in some way. They will eat almost anything and were housed close to the house in a fairly small building. The meat could be eaten fresh as pork, or smoked or salted as bacon. The head made brawn,

the ears were full of gelatine for setting the occasional sweet pudding. The trotters went into the bean jar, the gut was used as sausage skin, and eaten as tripe, etc. etc. Everything was used. A pig was a very useful animal and most households had at least one. Because of their mixed diet pigs did not have to be killed for Christmas.

Sheep and goats

Some sheep were kept in Guernsey. They have been described as small, with four horns, like a present-day Jacob's sheep. However there were never enough sheep kept to make any contribution to the wool used for knitting stockings at this time. They were kept for their meat, and the skin was cured to produce vellum which was used for local documents.

Goats also were not kept in any quantity, and their skin also was cured to produce vellum which was used for local documents.

Chickens

Most country women kept chickens, and during the summer when the hens were in lay would sell their surplus eggs in the market in Town, and with the money buy items that they could not make or grow at home, like tea, sugar, ribbons for their hats, etc. Chickens, like pigs, do not need a great deal of looking after especially if they are free range, as they were in the 16th century. A handful of corn once or twice a day was probably all that they were given, and they would have roosted in the barn beside the house.

Crops

People had to grow comparatively quite a lot of wheat, with which to pay their rentes. Other crops included peas, beans [suitable for bean jar], carrots, onions, garlic, and grass for the cows and horses. Again, the growing of root crops like turnips, swedes, manglewurzels and parsnips and the feeding of them to animals is largely a 19th century phenomenon in Guernsey, which happened along with the improvement in the breeds.

Stray animals

Animals often strayed into the wrong places, and if found by someone else were impounded, and the owner had to pay a fine to get the animal back.

There are still small areas in English country towns known as the animal pound, for example in Painswick, Gloucestershire.