Farming after the Black Death

In the period known as the Medieval Warming the population in Britain exploded, from around 1.5 million to 5 million. Agriculture during this period saw a resurgence. Then in 1348-1349 the disease commonly known as the Black Death appeared on the shore of Britain. This saw a death toll of nearly 1/3 of the population, approximately 1.75 million people of all ages and backgrounds.

“Not only was the demand for food drastically reduced, so was the labour available to cultivate the land.” Alternative Agriculture, Oxford 1999

Lesser outbreak occurred in the aftermath of the initial disease, and by 1400 the population was only somewhere around 2.5-3 million. The plague didn’t die away quickly, it didn’t hit and disappear, as quickly as it arrived, it didn’t vanish completely until around 1480’s. The population during this period were demoralised and whittled down over a number of years, leaving villages deserted right across the country.

It was during this period that farmers changed the way they used the land. Arable farming prior to this disaster was the mainstay, but with the reduced manpower and customers, there was no longer any profit in cultivating crops. So many farmers turned their land over to grazing, sheep farming was now expanding, due to the increase in the wool trade, and it was also less labour intensive.

Rabbit farming after the Black Death increased, They were farmed before the epidemic, but were raised and eaten as a luxury meat.

“After the Black Death, when landowners find themselves with idle grassland or wished to put arable land to grass and make the best profit by the change, the idea of rabbit warrens lay to hand as an ideal solution.” Alternative Agriculture, Oxford 1999

Rabbit farming became a lucrative form of agriculture, they represented 21 per cent of all manorial receipts between 1350-1399 and 40 per cent between 1386-1387. Methwold warren supplied 9,450 rabbits in 1390. Rabbit meat was now no longer a luxury item, the price had fallen due to the explosion of farming them. The building of warrens lodges needed to due to poaching, and it wasn’t only the meat that was valuable, the skins became a profitable commodity as well.
Another change was to dovecotes, prior to the disease outbreak, a dovecote was only allowed to owned on manorial land. Yet after the Black Death there was a growth in dovecotes across the country, this was partly because less grain was needed by a medieval human population, whose numbers had been reduced by the epidemic. Therefore there was more grain that could be used for animal feed.

A dovecote at Blackmere in Shropshire yielded 1,222 pigeons to Lady Talbot in 1410, we can readily understand how she was induced to pay for a new expensive building for them in 1431-1432. Alternative Agriculture.

It is during this period that we see the fish Carp first appear in Britain, possibly brought here via the Netherlands. They were brought over here for the purpose of developing a fresh water fish market, Carp are hardier and faster growing than native species. Which makes them ideal for commercial fish farming.

During the medieval warm period, the cultivation of grapes in parts of England had been successful and highly profitable, but with a change in climate, the ability to grow a reliable crop was impossible.

Land redistribution became common place after the epidemic, large estates were broken up, and fell into the hands of the yeomen and herdsmen. One of the most important lessons gained after the Black Death by farmers was the leaving of arable strips, which were not needed, to rest for several years.