

THE AGRICULTURE OF CRAIL, 1550-1600

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The general picture of agriculture in Scotland, until the widespread improvements in the eighteenth century, is familiar enough. However, there were bound to be regional variations in crops and productivity, as there are to-day. I have tried to form a picture of agriculture in the neighbourhood of Crail, in the period 1550-1600, for which there are fairly full burgh records (unpublished). These are supplemented by such national source material as refers to Crail. In what follows, the references by date alone are to the burgh court books.

Because of trading contacts with relatively advanced countries, this area might be expected to be early in introducing certain improvements. Crail merchants traded with England, France, the Low Countries, the Baltic area and Norway. Fishing provided the main exports, but agriculture played an important part in the economy of the burgh. In an incomplete "census" of 1556-7, there are 29 occupiers of land (and 14 fishermen), out of 65 men for whom details are given. The holdings range from 2 to 10 acres, the total being 156 acres. Many of the 29 were at the same time active as merchants, as is clear from court cases. Some of the merchants were closely connected with land-owning families, by birth or marriage, so that the purchase of land would be a natural investment to them, when they prospered. Thus in the "census" we find "Maister George Meldrum ane merchant & seruand to his fader Mayster Thomas Meldrum of Sagey and lyfis sua only", the last phrase showing that he held no land then. By 9 March, 1569-70, when he obtained four acres of the burgh muir in feu, he held the lands of Trostrie, which bounded these acres on the south.

The medieval custom of a periodic redistribution of arable land had evidently not survived here, and a fair amount of consolidation of holdings had taken place before this time, as indeed is apparent in the descriptions of properties acquired

by Sir William Myrtoun around 1500 for his foundation of the Collegiate Kirk of Crail (Rogers 1877). A reasonably typical holding is one which was inherited in 1566, held in feu from one of the prebends, consisting of six acres which lay in parcels of two acres, one acre, one acre and the other two acres as five contiguous butts, four butts and four butts. Some lands in Pottergate, feued in 1561-2, lay in runrig (R.M.S. 1578-9, ch. 2839), but this can be explained by the fact that they pertained to the service of St. Katherine's altar, which was founded before 1457. Similar circumstances seem to account for all the cases of arable land in runrig within the burgh roods. A large part of the burgh land did in fact belong to various ecclesiastical foundations—the Collegiate Kirk and older chaplainries in Crail, the Abbey of Haddington, and others.

The inconvenience of scattered holdings is obvious. There is a contract preserved in Crail, dated 22 August, 1577, between various proprietors of the lands of Boarhills, "bearing that the said lands then lay in runrig, and on that account they sustained great loss and inconvenience, therefore agreeing that the same should be divided into three parcels or shares, according to their respective interests" (Conolly 1869:153).

Of the 156 acres mentioned in the "census" of 1556-7, only three are specified as held in feu, but there was soon a great increase in this form of tenure, (which was encouraged by Acts of Parliament, from 1457-8). Shortly after the Reformation, most of the lands in Crail belonging to the prebendaries were set in feu. In 1565-6 (R.M.S., ch. 1700), Cunningham of Barns was given special licence to feu to the occupiers thereof his lands of West Barns and Gallowside, just west of Crail. Parts of the burgh muir were also set to burgesses in this way. The occupier gained the advantage of security of tenure, which might encourage him to improve the land; the landlord could obtain an augmented rent, as well as a capital sum, the *grassum*.

The standard rent was two bolls of bere per acre, but fixed money rents were not unknown, and rents expressed in kind were sometimes paid in money, according to the current prices. Here are some examples of rents.

1556/7 "census"—Jhone Costrophyne eyster lawberer and occupiar of x akaris of ferme land payand thairfor yeyrly xx bollis beyr wyth the cherite . . .

The cherity was a small additional amount, often one peck per boll, originally given as a good-will gift.

29 Nov. 1568—It is appoyntit concordit and finallye agret betuix honorabill personis that is to say Allexander Gray seruitour to our souerane lord the Kyngis maistye one that ane part the portionaris of the Kyngis Barnis addettit to pay to the said Allexander thair yeirly fermis and kaponis . . . one the wthir part ar contentit of thair avin fre moty vill that thair be yeirly payit foir ilk ane of the kaponis aboue wretin yeirly xxxij d. alennerlye nother eikand nor deminisent indurand the said Allexander Gray and his wyf vptakin of the samyn . . .

7 Sep. 1571—Ninian Hammylton induellar in Preston Pannis be the tenour heiroff settis and for the sowme of tuolf powndis money of this realme yeirlye lattis To ane honest man Robert Arnote burgess of the brugh of Craile . . . All and haile thre akaris of arable landis callit the Smythislandis lyand within the burrow ruidis of the said brugh.

The land of Crail's muir was set in feu at a much lower rent; presumably a lot of clearing was needed before it could be ploughed. When part of it was set in 1566 "for vj s. viij d. yerly for ilk aker of few maill", several of the consenting burgesses "in this mane tyme" refused "thair part thairoff sayand thay vald noht haif it one that price nor na part thairoff". There is no mention of a grassum here.

The feudal services which many tenants owed to their lord as well as rent would not arise with burgh land, but the inhabitants were of course astricted to the town's mills, and had the duties of "walk and ward, scot and lot", i.e. watch and guard duty as required, and payment of their assessed share of local or national expenses.

As regards security of tenure and consolidation of holdings, it does appear that Crail was in advance of much of the country. This is likely to be true of the burghs in general, where there was a money economy in contrast to the subsistence farming of much of the countryside.

Let us now consider the evidence about crops, stock, methods of cultivation, etc. We are particularly well-informed about David Fermour's half-quarter of Kingsbarns.

Protocol Book, 17 Apr. 1569—Comperit in presens of me notar publik vnderwrytin honorable men [4 names] jugis arbytratouris amicable chosin betuix honorable men Maister Thomas Ramsay and Daid Fermour portionaris of the quarter parte landis of Kyngisbarnis for the diuisioun methyng and marchyne of the

landis of Kyngisbarnis occupiit be thame instantlie, The foirsaidis landis beyng wescit seine considderit and merchit this day be the foirsaidis jugis, The jugis present with expres consent and assent of the saidis parteis pronunsis decernis and ordanis the merchis of the heid of the Sefeild land to abyd stand and remane perpetually in all tyme cummyng in the samin places as thay ar at this present and neuer to be remowit, . . . and the said parteis to haif free passage be the see syd to the twa wellis aboun the boit hewin that is to say the said Daid to watter alenarly and the said Maister Thomas bayth to watter and pasture, And siclyk decernis and ordanis ilk ane of the saidis parteis in all tyme cummyng to weynd [turn the plough] vpoun all the landis occupiit be thame except vpoun ane breid daile with twa rygis nixte adiacent lyand be sowth the samin in the nether Langlands aboun the well heidis At the quhilk parte the said Daid Fermour sall full ane fowsa cassin be hym to the effect the said Maister Thomas may mak ane heidryg thair . . . And the foirsaidis jugis decernis and ordanis the saidis parteis to haif fre passage throw the sowth lone the wall heidis and throw the sowth dame to the lones reseruit to thame vpoun the nyxt quarter passand to the Kyngis mwir with carte or wayne with sax kattell or hors and na ma, And the said Daid Fermour of his awin fre motive will bindis and oblesis hym yeirlie to reserue to the said Maister Thomas ane sufficient fre passage to his land throw his land callit the nether Rasche Cruik sa lang as the samin is one telit or sawin, and quhan it is telit or sawin to reserue and keip to the said Maister Thomas ane sufficient passage to pass to his land with ane tedderit kow & hors throw, And the said Maister Thomas . . . licences the foirsaid Daid to haif ane passage to Newhall burne with his cattell for watteryng of thame Quhansaeuer that parte of the said Maister Thomas land salhappin to ly ley.

There is also a testament giving the crops and stock of the farm, in 1597. This was after a series of bad harvests. 1594-7 were years of great dearth in Scotland, and the accounts of the customer for Crail, Pittenweem and Anstruther (Exch. Rolls *passim*) make it clear that this area was affected. They show exports of grain for four years up to July 1593, and then none for five years, while there was a considerable import of English victual in the year to July 1596.

31 Oct. 1597—Elspot Fouller spous to the said Daid Fermour maid hir testament as followis

Inventar

Inprimis the said Elspot hes the guidis geir & vtheris quhilkis perteinis to hir & hir said spous in commone betuix thame as thair awin proper guidis viz. inprimis thrie hors price of thame all lx lib.

Ane meir price x lib. nyne oxin by the airschip price of thame all ourheid j^clxij lib. Item tua ky price of thame bayth xxxvj lib. Item xxiiij yowis price of thame all ourheid xlvij lib. xx lambis price of thame all ourheid xiiij lib. vj s. viij d. xvj gymmer & dillmount price of thame all ourheid xxiiij lib. Item in the barne ane half chalder quheit price of the boll x lib. summa lxxx lib. In the Barneyaird ane stak of quheit estimat to xl thraiffis & to x bollis quheit price of the boll corne & fodder x lib. x s. Summa j^cv lib. Item four stakis baer estimat to lxxx bollis baer price of the boll corne & fodder vij lib. Summa v^clx lib. Item In the Barneyaird xiiij rwikis of pis & beinis estimat to lxxx bollis beinis price of the boll corne & fodder vj lib. Summa iij^clxxx lib. Item fiwe stakis aetis estimat to v^{xx} bollis aetis price of the boll corne & fodder v lib. x s. Summa v^cl lib. vtenceillis & domicileillis of the hous by the airschip estimat to l lib.

Summa of the inventar is ij^mj^clxxviiij lib. vj s. viij d. Na dettis awand in

Dettis awand to vtheris

Inprimis to his maiesties baxter Patrik Rannald for my fewferme landis of the lxxxvj yeiris crope for the price of xvij bollis quheit at xvj lib. the boll ij^clxxxiiij lib. Item to the said Patrik of the lxxxvj yeiris crope j^c lib. Item for my fewferme of the lxxxvij yeiris crope to the said Patrik xvij bollis quheit price of the boll xij lib. Summa ij^cxvj lib. Item to William Craig his maiesties brouster for my fewferme baer of the lxxxvj yeiris crope ij^clxiiij lib. Item mair to the said William for this yeiris ferme xxij bollis baer price of the boll viij lib. Summa j^clxxvj lib. Item to Maister Daud Lindsay maister in Leith for the teindis of the lxxxvj yeiris crope lx lib. Item mair to him of the lxxxvij yeiris crope xvj bollis half baer half meill price of the boll ourheid aucht lib. Summa j^cxxviiij lib. Item to Maister James Meldrum . . . for the teind of the lxxxvij yeiris crope ij bollis quheit price of the boll xij lib. summa xxiiij lib. Item to his maiesties factouris & chamberlanis for his maiesties ken kapones xj of the lxxxvj yeiris crope price of the peice xvj s. Summa viij lib. xvj s. Item for his maiesties ken of the lxxxvij yeiris crope xv capones price of the peice xiiij s. iij d. Summa x lib. Item for his maiesties few maill of the lxxxvij yeiris v lib. . . . [The total debt is £3070 18s., against assets of £2173 6s. 8d.].

Two further testaments are interesting because they give the estimated yield of the sown crops. Here are the inventories, omitting the prices.

27 Apr. 1597—Jhone Mitchill in the north quarter of Kippo maid his testament as followis

Inprimis he hes pertaining to him the guidis geir cornis cattell insycht plenesching & vtheris vnderwritin as his awin proper

guidis viz. ane hors ane staig & twa meiris . . . foure oxin . . . twa ky and ane stirk . . . sax yowis with thair lambis & twa hogis. . . . Item sawin in the ground thrie firloittis twa pekis quheit estimat to the thrid turne. . . . Item sawin xxviiij bollis aitis estimat to the thrid turne. . . . Item in the barne twa bollis baer. . . . Item sawin ane halff boll peis estimat to ane boll . . . vtenceillis & domicieillis of the hous. . . .

3 Sep. 1597—Agnes Gibsone spous to Daid Alexander in his presens maid hir testament as followis

Inprimis scho hes perteing to hir & hir said spous thrie hors. . . . Item ane staig. . . . Item foure ky . . . twa yeirling calffis. . . . Item fiwe scheip . . . item in the malt barne ten bollis malt. . . . Item sawin in the ground ten bollis baer estimat to the ferd turne Inde xl bollis. . . . Item sawin nyne bollis bennis estimat to the ferd turne Inde xxxvj bollis. . . . Item sawin sewin bollis aetis Inde xxviiij bollis. . . . Item vtenceillis & domicieillis in the hous. . . . [Debts include "for the Ferme of nyne aker of the landis of Westbarnes . . . xviiij bollis cheretie baer". This couple seems to have lived in the burgh.]

A yield of three times the seed sown was considered normal for the country. The better yield of four times for the West Barns land was probably attributable to manuring with seaweed, although there may also have been an inherent difference in the quality of the land. Kippo is about two miles inland, on higher ground. It seems likely that, by the use of seaweed, nearly all the land cultivated by the inhabitants of the burgh was treated as infield, i.e. cropped every year. There is, however, a reference which appears to distinguish between infield and outfield.

25 Nov. 1567—Wilyeam Curstrophyne grantis & confessis the tua ackaris of land [in Kingsbarns] . . . was mensionat & continit in the frist decryt but rememberit nocht of the bundin of it but rememberis vill ane of the saidis ackaris to be of mukit land ane vthir ackar of feild land but rememberis na boundin thairof. . . .

There was also mention of land lying fallow, in the agreement, already quoted, about David Fermour's land in Kingsbarns.

The recurring burgh statutes about the ware show how highly it was valued. The regulations were designed to ensure fair shares.

3 Nov. 1590—Item It is dewy seit statut and ordaneit that na persone nor personis nychtbour or inhabitant off this burgh be

thame selfis or thair bairnis or serwandis in thair nameis gadder ony wair at ony tyme heirefter befor sewin houris in the morneing nor that thei pas or waide within the vater For gadding thairoff, forther nor thei mey stand vpon the dry land and draw the samyn to land with thair cleik, And that na wair be keipit togidder or putt in middingis within this burgh or owtwith the samyn narrer the sey nor the eist grene or wind mylne wnder the pane off aucht s. vnlaw. . . .

The rights to the sea ware of the inhabitants of the burgh were strenuously defended.

6 Oct. 1572—Item it is statute and ordinate . . . siclyk that na vther persoun duelland owtwith the burrow ruidis off the said brugh collecte gadder transporte or cary away ony wair or fuilyie fra the sea cost within the limitis libertie and priuelege off the said brugh . . . withowt licence & tollerance of the bailyeis & cownsall for the tyme. . . .

14 Nov. 1570—. . . the said Jhone Bowsy & remanent persones beyng inhibited be Cunner Hwnyman officiar at the bailyeis command to . . . suffer the saidis persones with the rest of the inhabitantis of this brugh transporte & laid away quhatsumeuer wair & fuilyie inbrocht vpoun the sea cost within the bowndis and limitis of this brugh be violence of the sea accordyng to thair awld priuelege vse and possessioun obseruit & vsit past memoir of man, . . . the said Johne Bowsy confessit . . . And the jugis present . . . decernis thame . . . to desist and ceis fra ony stoping or berewyng of ony persoun in the collectyng gadderyng of quhatsumeuer wair or fuilyie . . . in all tyme cummyng vnder the pane of tynsall of thair fredome. . . .

There are property descriptions mentioning the mire pool in Nakedfield and latches in Pottergate and Kingsbarns, which remind us of the undrained condition of the land. That nearest the sea, however, is very light and dries quickly; it is tempting but probably unsafe to assume from the two following references that it could be ploughed with a single yoke of oxen. In the New Statistical Account for this parish the writer refers to “two or four oxen with a couple of horses and two men to conduct the slow motion of each cumbrous plough”, fifty or sixty years earlier.

Protocol Book, 27 Mar. 1567—Jhone Mortoun eldest sone and air to umquhile William Mortoun in Pittowy Grantit . . . him . . . to haif ressavit . . . his airschip gair Thay ar to say ane yokit plewche with twa oxen . . . ane harrow . . . ane wayne . . . [the rest being clothes, furniture, etc.]

On the death of William Bowsy, a leading merchant in Crail, the following are among the heirship goods:—

10 Mar. 1583/4—Tua pleuche oxin . . . ane pleuche with sewin sok coulter of irone . . . ane pair of quheillis tred with irone with cart and *craicit*(?) gair belonging to hir . . . ane harrow tyndete with irone . . . ane graipe . . . ane pair moukcreillis laidsaddill ane shuill ane muk hake ane barrow. . . .

The main crops have already been mentioned. Bere and oats were universal; no wheat was grown by the smallholder David Alexander, but it was included in both rent and teinds of Kingsbarns, and the price of white bread was regularly fixed by the burgh. It is perhaps worth observing that David Fermour's wheat crop in 1597 was 18 bolls, while his rent and teinds came to 20 bolls, suggesting that he sowed no more of this than he had to. Peas and beans were also an important crop, and they were dried and milled like cereals. Rye was grown, as is proved by a statute of 6 Oct. 1590, quoted later. We have found one reference to barley malt, but the barley was not necessarily grown locally.

17 Jan. 1569/70—. . . iiij lib. iij s. iiij d. as for the price of five firloittis barley malt. [This is at the rate of 3s. 4d. per firloft more than for ordinary malt, as quoted the same day.]

Apart from the food crops, lint and hemp were grown, probably only on a small scale. "Reis hemp" [Russian] is mentioned in a court case, and the customer's accounts show considerable imports of flax and hemp in 1589-99 (Exch. Rolls *passim*).

25 July 1573—[The "tack and assedatioun" of certain tenements on the south side of Nethergate changes hands]. . . . thay and ilk ane of thame ar contentit that athir off thame sall peceable bruik and joise the cornis lynt and hempe sawin and growand vpoun the croftis and yardis off the said tenementis and at thair plesur to scheir and transporte the samin away. . . .

7 Aug. 1566—My letter vyll is . . . that Gelis Cowstoun my spows may jois and bruyk the sammyne bayk howse with the thrid of the yerd and als meykill of the croyft to schaw ane pecce of linyget [sow a peck of flax seed].

The beasts which were kept in the burgh would be pastured mainly on "the proper muyr of Crail". The small East Green, just outside the town, was presumably also common pasture, but the West Green, within the gates, was gradually used as

building plots, before and during this period. There is a mention of "Todis Gren", but it seems to be the same as "Toddis Croft" or "Toddis Aker", privately owned and probably cultivated. There are parts of the east and west braes, too steep or rocky to be cultivated, which were probably grazed, just as Maister Thomas Ramsay in Kingsbarns had pasture by the sea. After the harvest, the arable fields were used for grazing, but of course, it was most important that the beasts should be kept off the crops in these open fields.

22 Mar. 1556/7—Johne Youll is chosyne commoun hird wyll Wythsunday nixt to cum for vj d. ilk best iij d. thairoff to be payt in hand and that ilk nyhtbowr that hes ony bestis wythin the toun put them to the sammyne hrid [*sic*] vnder the pane of viij s. ilk persoun vn forgevyne.

6 Oct. 1590—Item the saidis bailleis and counsell considdering the grit hurt and skayth sustenit be the nychtbouris and inhabitantis off this burgh throw the eiting destroying and doun stramping off thair corneis be hors nolt and scheip fra tyme the samin be first sawin in the ground wnto the scheiring and leiding thairoff, Hes for that caus concludeit statut and ordaneit that fra the first day off Januar in tyme cuming wnto the tyme the haill corneis growing and to be sawin about this burgh be schorne and led na hors nolt nor scheip be sufferit to go lows vpon the feildis vpon quhatsumewer cullour or pretence withowt ane hird to attend and await vpon the saidis bestiall that the samin enter nocht vpon ony manis corneis sic as quheit beanis eatis ry or beir to eit destroy or stramp doun the samin, And iff ony hors nolt or scheip beis fund going lows withowt ane hird vpon the feildis vpon ony manis corneis fra the said first day of Januar . . . [a scale of fines is laid down].

Pigs were kept—in 1572, for example, swine must not be "haldin be ony inhabitant . . . outwith thair awin hows", and might be slain without recompence, if found straying. Geese are mentioned more than once, and the same fine was imposed for geese found in the kirkyard as for horses, sheep and swine. Other poultry were presumably kept in yards of houses, and no regulations about them were necessary.

23 Jan. 1581/2—In the actioun and caus dependyng mowit be the said Thomas aganes [Andro Moreis] for the skayth sustenit be hym in the said Andro default throw the wyrreing of certane geis pertenyng to hym . . . the judges . . . referris the persewaris clame . . . to his probatioun to wit that the said Androis dowgis befor the wyrreinge of his geis vyrreit vtheris fowllis geis or scheipe quhilk was notoriouslie knawin to the said Androw and that sen syn the foirsaidis dowgis hes vyrreit his geis lybellit. . . .

There is also evidence of townsmen owning sheep and cattle which were kept elsewhere.

17 June 1572—. . . the actioun and caus mowit be Andro Geordy aganis Alexander Curstorphen for the sowme of lv s. for the gyrs maile of lv schipe

31 July 1571—The quhilk day in the actioun and caus mowit be Andro Fermour in Kippo . . . for the price of vij firlottis atis comprisit atyne be the said Thomas cattell at the fest of mydsomer last bypassit the said Thomas . . . alegit that his cattell ait onlie quarterlie in his fald and confessit that thair was sevin firlottis atis atin to the said Andro & comprisit & that his cattell ait the half thairof. . . .

It is interesting to find that some cattle got better feeding than the rough grazing of the muir, straw, and the weeds of the arable fields.

Some agricultural products were exported from this area. The customer's accounts for Crail, Pittenweem and Anstruther (Exch. Rolls *passim*) for this period show occasional exports of hides, woolfells and woollen cloth. Exports of wheat, bere and rye are also occasionally specified, and some more may have gone as "Norroway stuling" i.e. the cargo of ships sailing to Norway for timber. Grain also left the area in payment of rent and teinds, e.g. in 1559, "iij yeris sensyne owr boyt crarit the Quhynis grate ferme of Kyngis Barnis to Lyht". The customer's accounts would not record shipments to other parts of Scotland, but it is unlikely that any regular trade of this sort would fail to be reflected in the Crail court books, since written agreements on any subject were frequently entered in the court books. From a lengthy court case in 1565, we do know about a Crail merchant's speculation in victual; this was purchased in Buchan and Aberdeen, and could not be sold at a profit in Leith. A local surplus of grain must have been rare; it was sometimes imported, and the frequent mentions of dearth in connection with the burgh's assyse of bread and ale must be set against the good years when exports were possible.

Certain of the worst agricultural practices which are on record for Scotland, as late as the beginning of the eighteenth century, are contradicted in our evidence. Thus the burgh statute that beasts must not be allowed to go loose in the fields from the first of January shows that they were not here kept indoors all winter, and that ploughing might begin as early as that, instead of "no farmer would yoke a plough till

Candlemas" or later (Graham 1950:158). Our "harrow tyndete with irone" is noteworthy, instead of "its being thought impossible for iron teeth to produce a good crop" (Graham 1950:156). The fact that the iron is mentioned here, and in "ane pair of quheillis tred with irone" may indicate that its use for these purposes was exceptional in Crail at the time.

The windmill, which stood in the sea field of West Barns, just west of Crail, is first mentioned in a charter of 1560. This is the earliest known record of a windmill in Scotland, except for a Windmillhill at Aberdeen.¹ It may have been built as a result of direct contact with the Continent.

In spite of those favourable features which I have noted, the only possible conclusion from the low yields and frequent dearths is that the general state of agriculture was bad here, and in agreement with Scotland as a whole.

NOTE

- ¹ A. J. Aitken (Editor, Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue), in a private communication.

REFERENCES

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(b) *Printed Sources:*

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