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Working Oxen at Cirencester

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WORKING OXEN AT CIRENCESTER

by E. M. CLIFFORD

WORKING oxen have been used on the Cirencester Park Estate for some 200 years and the existing team is believed to be the last remaining one in England. Horses have long been more usual for draught-work in many parts of England but in Cotswold there were several working teams of oxen within living memory, and a team survived in Sussex until a few years ago.

It is recorded that in England, in 1760, the number of bullocks almost equalled the horses used in agriculture. Then horse-breeding was improved and a lighter plough capable of being drawn by two horses was introduced.

Lord Bathurst writes that 'oxen were largely reduced when farmers became more prosperous. It was thought that ploughing with oxen was a sign of less prosperity. Then came the steam-plough, which further reduced the use of oxen, just as the tractor is reducing the use of the horse-plough. I remember sixty years ago three or four teams of oxen ploughing in the same field as well as horse teams'. He adds that now there are five or six young oxen on the farm which he hopes to see broken in this winter (1942).

In Cotswold, oxen have a long history. Their teeth have been found in the late Pleistocene gravels at Barnwood, which skirt the foot of the escarpment. In Neolithic days their teeth and bones were placed in the great chambered cairns (used as collective burial places), for which this area is so famous. During the Bronze Age



Working Oxen on the Bathurst Estate, Cirencester
Ph. H. Walwin



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they continued to exist and in Early Iron Age times were numerous. We may perhaps recall that Caesar mentions that oxen formed a large part of the wealth of the Britons at the time of the Roman invasion.

The plates show four of the working oxen on the Cirencester estate, but a team normally numbers six. The name of the nearside leader is 'Darling', while the offside leader is 'Bowler'. 'Captain' is the nearside back and 'Blossom' the offside back.

The Cirencester oxen are nearly always Herefords and so are red and white in colour. 'Captain,' however, is a cross between a Hereford and a Shorthorn. They usually come from the Hereford district and are not especially bred for work. Those with longer legs than the average are chosen because they become better workers, and those that are inclined to be wild are preferred to the more docile ones as the former have more stamina and therefore a longer working life.

The breaking-in process, which is somewhat lengthy, begins at about 18 months, and it is not until the ox is 2½ years old that it is capable of a full day's work. During the year of breaking-in, the work is definitely on the light side.

A team of six (a boy with the two front bullocks) can plough an acre of land per day with an ordinary double furrow-plough. When not engaged on ploughing they are used for any of the 'odd jobs' which are necessary on a large hill-farm, such as carting hay, fodder, manure, etc. For these purposes ordinary farm-carts and farm-wagons are used (such as the one shown in plate II).

The harness used by the oxen for shaft-work, with the exception of the pad, is ordinary converted horse-harness. This is made locally from a pattern supplied; it is smaller than that used by horses. The collar is a large-sized horse-collar and is split at the top (it cannot, of course, be put over the head of an ox as in the case of a horse) and is fastened at the top with a strap. The wearing of

collars by oxen is a Rhodesian practice. Elsewhere,¹ yokes across the neck were used instead of a collar, but collars are better as they enable the oxen to pull with their whole weight. It is due to this fact that they are superior to horses when the load to be moved is a 'dead' weight. They almost stand still and pull, while horses 'snatch'. The bridle has no bit, and a chain passes from the nose-band under the jaw and is fastened with a link. A short chain-rein is used, on the nearside only, and to turn to the right a verbal command is given. The plough-harness and the trace-harness is similar to that used for horses.

Oxen will work to a great age if they remain in good condition; often to 13 or 15 years. Today the useful life of a milking cow is 7 to 8 years. After finishing work the oxen are fattened up for slaughter and since the War two have been used for human consumption. There is no reason, of course, why this should not be done except that the meat is perhaps not so tender as it might be.

The oxen stand 16.2 hands in height and weigh from 15 cwts. to a ton, one having turned the scales at 22 cwts. They are cheaper to maintain than horses as they are fed on the roughest food and their cost in this direction is extremely small. They work unshod, no doubt due to the fact that they are not used on macadam roads. They are very docile and unperturbed in any circumstances; they never turn a hair whatever the occasion. Those in the illustrations were seen to advantage in the 'King Solomon's Mines' and 'White Ensign' films, and were taken to Liverpool for the railway centenary. They spent a fortnight at Olympia on the occasion of the

¹ In *Country Life*, 1 May 1942, is a reproduction of a drawing by R. Hills in the possession of Lord Northbrook, Woodlands Farm, Bramdean, Hampshire, showing oxen in Gloucestershire wearing yokes. He says, 'the yokes in the engraving are absolutely the same as those used by working oxen in the Lewes district of Sussex right up to 1913-14, and one of these yokes is in my possession'.

Rodeo and have appeared at innumerable local fêtes. Mr W. Smith, their constant attendant (see plate 1), accompanies them on all such expeditions.

My thanks are due to Earl Bathurst for his kind permission in allowing these notes to be made ; to Mr Warner and Mr Smith for their co-operation for making arrangements for the photographs to be taken ; Mr T. C. Lethbridge of Cambridge, who has filmed the oxen at work (the films are preserved in the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge) ; and to Mr H. Walwin for the photographs.