

# OLD FARMING DAYS

## REPRINT

Robin Stanes

Robin Stanes is an acknowledged expert on the traditions of farming and farm life in the West Country. It is more than two decades since the publication of his classic book *Old Farm*, which current work the author has revised the original text of his earlier book and enhanced it with the inclusion of 150 historic photographs, many of which have been taken from Halsgrove's Community History Series archive. The text and photographs together create a truly fascinating study of a way of life on the land that has now almost completely disappeared. Horse power and traditions that are centuries old are here recalled and described in detail. All who have had any connection with farming, or who have an interest in our agricultural past, cannot fail to be absorbed by this evocative book. *Old Farming Days* is one of the few books to cover every aspect of the farming tradition from livestock and dairying through to harvest and the farmhouse itself.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

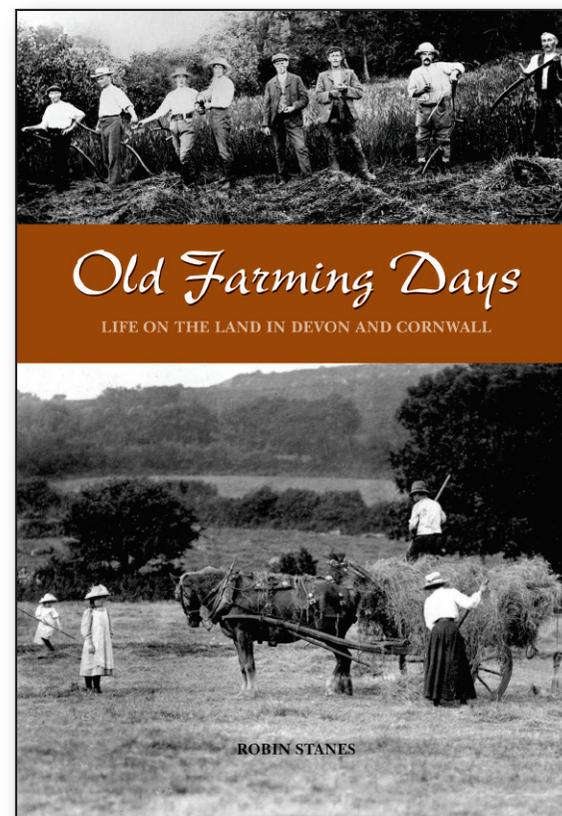
**Robin Stanes**, once a farmer himself, has devoted much of his life to the study of farming in the West Country, publishing many academic and learned papers on the subject. His work is held in high regard both by fellow historians and by those who themselves have been farmers. He now lives in Exeter.

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OLD F A R M I N G D A Y S



A hearth with fire dogs and fittings and a high-backed settle.



Lifting mangolds.



A milkmaid, 1907. Milking clothes had to be spotless and the hair covered.



A group of Buckfastleigh farmhands in the 1930s, waistcoats and breeches still the common garb.



Right: A horse-drawn mower, c.1910.

CHAPTER I  
*A Good Farm*

**I**n the past, farmhouses and yards were both first and foremost where there was a good spring of water or a sweet talking well. Apart from his own needs, a man had to have water for his animals and to the point no farm was without cisterns or barns to put the plough. A good stream or spring was one that ran or trickled up its bankside all the year round, even in September and October, when levels were at their lowest, just before the winter rains broke. In the South West, water is seldom very far from the surface, with its small shallow, but on the farmstead, as at Bonython, some fine cisterns arranged in the form of a management object, had to be made to put up water from great depths. A good water-supply made for a good farm, but without water had to be used for the crops or for sheep, which drink little, except in very dry weather.

Waters had other uses. From quite early days techniques were developed to irrigate valley houses and even dry hillside by a network of narrow furrows.

*of the River*

This extended the grazing season and provided abundant lush early grass in the spring, to feed ewes and lambs. Water also provided power for water wheels in both mills and farms that could do a number of useful jobs. In Devonshire in 1810, 'Mr Stone had a wheel that threshed, winnowed, ground corn, crushed apples and dished clover seed.'

With good water available, the next consideration for siting a farm might be the availability of building materials. Old farmhouses were often built from the soil or earth on which they stood. Stone and clay are the most common materials and these could often be dug on site. Clay is particularly valued mixed with sand and water. Almost all houses which can be used to make good clay, and out of this the foundations of the farm buildings were constructed later by hand, using the labour of the farmer and his men. Where both the soil and the water were not so abundant, it was necessary to connect the water course of the farm and with working channels, were it was considered expedient to transport a distance from a bearing water-course, both having naturally the same shade, and from both of which water was taken.

Some, particularly the prepared ones, which was much more expensive. It could sometimes be pulled up from the bank or on a farmstead, or over a quarry, or even dug gradually where the house was to stand. Many farm houses can be seen to stand on a shelf or in a dip from where earth is dug, with which to build it in a dip. The roof could be grass on the farm. In the country, which was made from soil or what was needed to make what was known as 'roof'. Farmers or their men all stacked racks and most could manage a set on a steep house roof as well. Timber for the roof came from hedgehog trees, or from yew, walden, and the grass for thatching came from the right corner of the hedge. The ridge pole could shape the frame, the blacksmith could fashion the ironwork, and the carpenter could make the doors and windows. Once the right site had been chosen a man could, with the help of his neighbours, build his own house and roof it from materials grown on the farm.

In the South West it was normal for a man's land to surround his farm, within a ring fence. Elsewhere, for example in the Midlands, a farmer's land lay dispersed in strips in the open fields, but the system was largely given in the South West by the seventeenth century. Up until the nineteenth century there were some big village churches, Broadchurch, Lifford, for example, where the farmhouses lay in the village street and the land was a single line, a sort of open field with scattered enclosures, but the man had to care. Instead a landscape of small, budget fields of stone or lime were laid out around each farm, very much as can be seen today. The land, sometimes growing crops, sometimes under grass, needed to be well drained, not too steep or stony, working well with perhaps a bit of land below that is facing north to see grass in a drought. At best, land was, moreover, to be seen, so that from near his farmstead a man might see or a glance all his fields, crops and stock.

The most valuable land was meadow. This by the banks of streams and would be damp in the drier seasons. It would grow the silage which he cut for the cows that ploughed the open fields which fed the village folk. Even in the case of the Devonshire Breck meadow land was for or on the value of arable. It was rarely ploughed, within the ring of the land, but could

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Example of a double-page spread.