

An agricultural revolution?

One of the drivers of growth and prosperity in eighteenth century England was agricultural advance. Farmers threw capital and technology at the problem of farming. Larger farms were created. Threshing, hoeing and seed drilling were done by newly developed machines. Crop rotations and selective breeding led to big advances in agricultural output.

Today we stand on the threshold of another possible agrarian revolution. The coming of the intelligent tractor with wide arms for spraying, and capabilities for ploughing, preparing, seeding and tending the crop is transforming quality of output as well as changing the demand for labour. Drones offer less intrusive ways of watering and spraying selectively as problems and shortages are detected in parts of a field or crop. Raising animals is becoming more science based, with better information about their health and well being informing choices for their care.

The UK has a great opportunity to grow its agriculture as we come out of the CAP. The main parties are all ready to continue with subsidy. The government has promised to carry on with the subsidies farmers were expecting from Brussels this decade.

Some argue the main aim of subsidy should be to remunerate farmers for their role as landscape gardeners on a grand scale. Much of the EU system now is designed to reward environmental work, giving subsidy for keeping land fallow or for nurturing certain types of landscape or nature reserve on or near farmland. The Swiss system out of the EU is about keeping the unique Swiss mountain landscapes, as an adjunct to tourism and hospitality which feed off the views.

Some argue the main aim should be about food production. Farmers could be rewarded for cutting imports and producing more of the types of food we need and can grow at home. The EU system used to be more completely based on such an approach. The policy was born of post war angst in memory of the dreadful shortages of food that occurred during and in the aftermath of the 2nd world war. Later the EU system evolved to take environmental considerations much more into account.

Do we think current EU policy is well judged? How do farmers want the UK government to develop its own agriculture policy, safe in the knowledge that there is no present threat to the subsidies farmers receive? There is a big opportunity to grow more at home for the home market, and to invest more in the new husbandry that will raise productivity.