

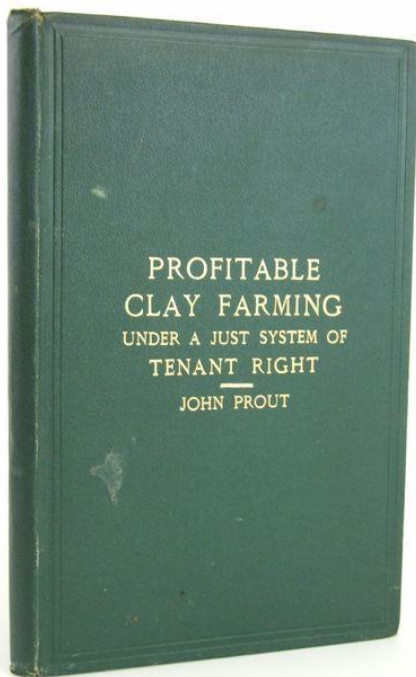
## High Wych History – 41 – John Prout

It is high time we turn to farming as a subject. After all, until 75 years ago the majority of the population of High Wych was employed either in agriculture or in gardening. However, any discussion on agriculture here has to start with its most famous local exponent: John Prout.

John Prout was born in 1810, at South Petherwin, Launceston, Cornwall, and was brought up in a farming environment; he came from a family of tenant farmers. In 1832, wanting to make his mark and frustrated with the antiquated restrictions of land tenure, he emigrated to Canada and for ten years farmed successfully at Pickering, Ontario. In 1839, whilst there, he married his wife Sophia. Family affairs then brought him back to England where for 20 years he engaged in mercantile pursuits, managing a business in the Strand in London together with his uncle. In 1861 he bought Blount's Farm, Allens Green which he transformed into not just a successful enterprise but one of national repute.

Locally, Prout was a trailblazer for the many West Country farmers that came to our region in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Families that followed were the Kempthornes, the Couches, the Moffatts, the Cleaves, the Georges and the Lukies family.

John Prout most probably bought Blounts, or Blunts as it was also referred to, from Rowland Alston, a prominent landowner and from 1835 to 1841 the Hertfordshire MP. The 1839 Tithe Index mentions Goldsmith Orger as the Occupier, i.e. the actual farmer.



John Prout's book



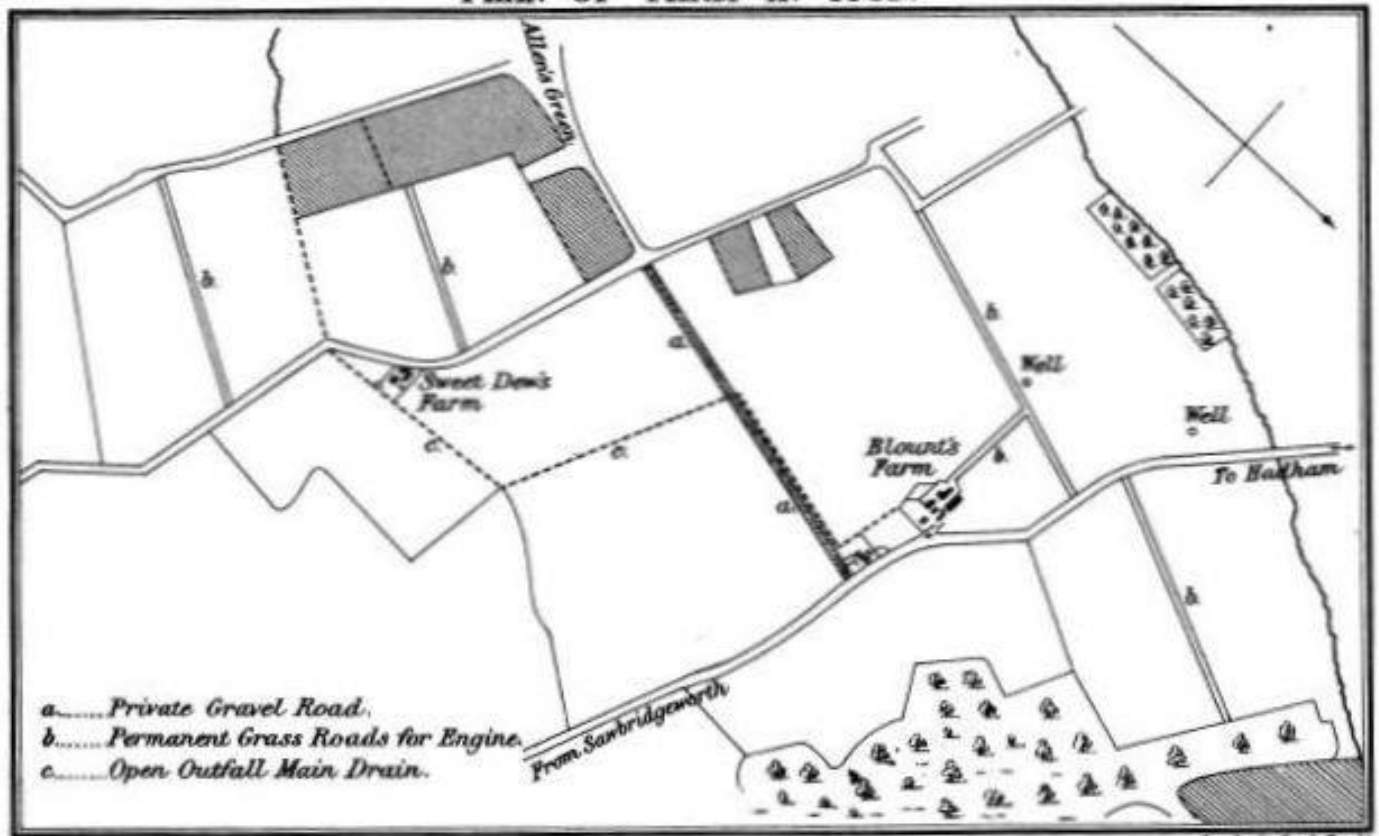
MR. JOHN PROUT.

John Prout portrayed one year before his death

Prout's reputation cannot be underestimated. In between 1850 and 1900, more than 100 articles on the British Library database of newspaper articles refer to him. Even today, "googling" his name in combination with the book he wrote: "Profitable clay farming under a just system of tenant right" throws up 3500 results. That book revolutionised British agriculture, went through several reprints and was translated into German and French.

Prout was a follower of Augustus Voelcker, professor of Chemistry in Cirencester and consulting chemist to the Royal Agricultural Society. Converting arable land to pasture, in other words letting land lay fallow between crops, worked out a lot more expensive than using artificial fertilisers he claimed. Positive results at Blounts Farm seemed to bear this out. An article in the North Devon Journal of August 1874 reported that: “Mr. Prout has succeeded, by means of steam cultivation and artificial manures in producing crops which are probably about the finest and most profitable in England”. In 1883 Prout testified before of a government commission on U.K. Farming.

PLAN OF FARM IN 1865.



A map of Blounts – illustration copied from “Profitable clay farming under a just system of tenant right”

The Victorian County History wrote that Blount’s farm “was laid out for the production of a continuous series of corn crops, and for this purpose was divided into fields of about 50 acres, each of which was dressed with chemical manures and cultivated by steam ploughs.” Previously farmers often had let their land lay fallow in between crops.” John Prout’s methods made quite a difference.

In 1893, whilst resident at Roselands, Sawbridgeworth, Prout was interviewed by Cable, the journal of the National Agricultural Union. He proudly told how he bought Blounts and Sweet Dews Farm when they were in a “worn out condition, almost the worst land in the parish” and incorporated them into one big farm. Fifty one enclosures were reduced to 9 principal fields. Prout then listed his recipe for successful farming: 1. effective drainage, 2. fields of considerable dimensions, 3. straight and neat fences, 4. sound headland roads and 5. convenient field water supply. We are also told of “clearing of hedges and trees”, necessary to accommodate the big steam ploughs, a practice which nowadays might be frowned upon as many claim that clearing hedges also got rid of a lot of wildlife.

Below: John Prout's obituary in the Herts Mercury of 15<sup>th</sup> December 1894.

John Prout's passing in December 1894 was marked with a number of obituaries, most notably in the Times. A Mr. F.S. Hutchason wrote to the Herts Mercury suggesting Prout's methods be the inspiration of an agricultural college in our county. Probate records meanwhile described John Prout as a patent medicine vendor. He was certainly a man of many talents! John's grandson Edward lived in London and was said to be manager of a patent medicine manufacturer. So the business John Sr. managed with his uncle continued way beyond his death. The value of Prout's estate was mentioned as £10,040 17s and 4d.

Prout's oldest son, William Andrew, born 1847 trained as a lawyer, but still followed in his father's footsteps farmed at Blounts and resided at Hillfields, Knight Street, Sawbridgeworth. William even co-authored an article in an agricultural journal with John Voelcker, son of the above mentioned Augustus. William was a sporty type, a founder member of Sawbridgeworth cricket club and an avid fossil collector.

Blounts was sold in 1913 by public auction. According to an article in the Times William Prout was retiring. It fetched £ 9,000. Today that would translate into £ 918,000. The buyers might have been the Lukies family who operated from Shingle Hall at the time. Blounts was sold again, in 1946. It was sold by the Lukies brothers to Captain Edward Morris who many local people will remember.

## SAWBRIDGEWORTH.

### DEATH OF MR. J. PROUT.

We regret to announce that Mr. John Prout, the well-known agriculturist, of Blount's Farm, Sawbridgeworth, and for 33 years the exponent of "Profitable Clay Farming," died on Friday, 7th inst., in his 85th year. He was born on October 1st, 1810, at South Petherwin, Launceston, Cornwall, and was brought up to farming, but, dissatisfied with the position of a tenant-farmer on the small holdings of his native county, and with the antiquated restrictions of land tenure, he emigrated when 22 to Canada, and for ten years farmed successfully at Pickering, Ontario. Family affairs then brought him back to England, and for 20 years he engaged in mercantile pursuits. In 1861 he bought Blount's Farm, Sawbridgeworth, comprising 150 acres of rather heavy clay, in small fields, undrained, in poor condition, and very foul. Drains were laid, useless hedgerows grubbed up, ditches and pools filled in, and deep stirring and thorough cultivation effected. On such heavy land Mr. Prout believed that the growing of green crops and the raising of live stock were undesirable. The phosphates, nitrates, potash, and lime essential for plant growth, he urged, would be assimilated if presented in a fairly soluble form, whatever might be the source from which they were obtained. The whole of the cereals and hay were accordingly sold off every year. No farm-yard dung was either made or applied, and no live stock were kept excepting ten working horses. Mr. Prout published in 1881 a report of his system entitled "Profitable Clay Farming under a just system of tenant right," of which several editions were sold, and translations made into French and German. The fertility of Blount's Farm has steadily advanced, and during the last 14 years it has produced an average yield of 35 bushels of wheat and 40 bushels of barley per acre. Mr. Prout contended that his system affords the only profitable method yet propounded for raising grain crops on heavy lands in this country. No other method, he was wont to add, promises success in meeting the present low range of prices. It is understood that his son, Mr. W. A. Prout, purposes following at Blount's Farm the system which his father initiated. Mr. Prout was an early advocate of the abolition of the Corn Laws and a believer in the economic value of free trade until within the last few years, when he somewhat modified his opinion. He took a lively interest in the housing of the poor and in other schemes for improving the condition of the masses. Mr. Prout was for some time an Alderman of the Herts County Council.

John Prout Jr., William's son, was the third of his family to live at Blounts. He sat on the first ever High Wych Parish Council. He shared a love of sports with his father and grandfather and like them was a leading light in Sawbridgeworth and High Wych Cricket Clubs. John and his brother Edward also played for Hertfordshire. John's wife Millicent, better known as Millicent Fisher Prout was a painter. Millicent was the daughter of the American Impressionist painter Mark Fisher. Some of her paintings ended up being sold at Christies and in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. John Prout Jr. lived until 1957, his wife until 1963. The couple did not have any children.



A painting by Millicent Fisher Prout



Blounts Farm as it looks today

Sources for this article were: David Morris, The North Devon Journal, The British Library, The NAU Cable, The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, the Times, Victoria County History of Hertfordshire, the Herts Mercury, Wikipedia, Ancestry.co.uk and as always county archives aka HALS. Do not forget: the High Wych History Project needs your personal contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism, be it positive or negative. Get in touch!! Contact me at: [theo@vandebilt.co.uk](mailto:theo@vandebilt.co.uk) or phone me at 01279 725468. You can also check my blog at <http://vandebilt.co.uk/history/>