



MR. JOHN PROUT

AT ROSELANDS, SAWBRIDGEWORTH.

It is twelve years since a remarkable work on "Profitable Clay Farming" was first published, and at once attracted a great deal of attention in the agricultural world. The author, Mr. John Prout, explained in his introduction that he farmed four hundred and fifty acres of heavy land, all under the plough, and almost entirely devoted to corn. He said that he was satisfied with his cultivation of clay, and did not wish that it were grass; and that the object of his book was to show by example how hundreds of farms in perhaps a majority of the English counties might be tilled as successfully as his own. Taking up this book (which is now out of print) a little time ago, and reading it with much interest in the light of recent events, I came to the conclusion to seek an interview with Mr. Prout, and ascertain how far he adheres to the views which he expresses in his carefully considered and clearly reasoned pages.

Sawbridgeworth is a large and flourishing village in Hertfordshire, situated on the summit of a hill overlooking the vale of the Stort. The acreage of the parish is about 6666 acres. Besides having a station of its own on the Great Eastern Railway, it is only four miles from the market town of Bishop's Stortford. The chief industry of the village is malt. It is built on gravel, but in the neighbourhood of clay. The rainfall is 26in. per annum. Sawbridgeworth includes among its residents Messrs. Rivers and Sons, the well-known horticulturists, who have about 150 acres of fruit trees, and an enormous number of glass houses; Mr. Joseph Flinn who is the owner of a noted stud of Hackney and Shire horses; Mr. Duerdin Dutton, whose kennel of St. Bernards is one of the best in England; and Mr. T. J. Mann, of Hyde Hall, who is the great authority on Hawking, and owns several of the finest hawks in the country.

Then there is Mr. W. A. Prout, who is following in the footsteps of his father in agricultural pursuits, and has a thorough knowledge of chemistry. He is also the possessor of a very valuable collection of geological specimens, numbering several thousands, containing fossils in every formation, but particularly strong in the chalk. This collection was made several years ago by the late Augustus Bergh, of Brighton, and at the time was considered the best in Sussex. It is open for the inspection of any one who cares to see it. But I soon discovered that one of the most celebrated personages in Sawbridgeworth is "John Prout," as every one calls the now venerable owner of Blount's Farm; and the interest excited by a perusal of his book was intensified by all the accounts I heard of him. Said one of the natives who directed me to Roselands, Mr. Prout's residence, which lies two and a-half miles from the farm, "You will find he is a large-hearted, genial, and generous man."

I was not disappointed with my reception, and on assuring Mr. Prout that anything he could tell me would afford pleasure to the readers of THE CABLE, he kindly said he would give me any information about himself and his work which I thought might be useful.

"Well, then," I said, "I should like, first of all, to know something about yourself, Mr. Prout. May I ask your age, and the name of your native county?"

"I was born on the 1st of October, 1810, at South Petherwin, Launceston, and was brought up to farming by father who held land for many years in Cornwall under the late Earl of St. Germain's."

"How long did you remain in Cornwall?"

"When I was twenty-two I became dissatisfied with the tenure of land in the county, and determined to go to Canada, in order that I might have some land of my own. Accordingly in 1832 I started for the

Dominion, and bought land in the township of Pickering, Ontario. I farmed this for ten years, and was often very successful at the local show in taking prizes for fat stock."

"When did you return to England, Mr. Prout?"

"About the year 1842. I then engaged in business in London until 1861, when I determined to resume farming, and purchased



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Blount's Farm. It was at that time in a very worn-out condition, in fact almost the worst land in the parish of Sawbridgeworth."

Here it may be mentioned that when Mr. Prout entered upon possession of the property in 1861 there were two farms, Blount's and Sweet Dew's Farm, which are now thrown into one. Mr. Prout began at once with permanent improvements, and overhauled and repaired the old barns, stables, and out-buildings, the dwelling-houses, and two cottages. Subsequently he erected a granary and a third good cottage. Next, attaching much importance to the work of draining well, he drained the land. This took him four years, at a cost of £6 per acre, and the outlay was £2700. For rapid and effectual discharge of the drainage water he

soil drainage, and (2) fields of considerable dimensions; to which may be added, (3) straight and neat fences; (4) sound head-land roads, and (5) convenient field water-supply. The late Dr. Voelcker, who reported on the rationale of Mr. Prout's system and its permanency, observed in an exhaustive statement, that the system of growing wheat after wheat, or wheat and barley on the same fields for a number of years in succession, had been practised with remarkable success by Mr. Prout. Dealing with the question, "Can the fertility of the land be permanently maintained by such an exhaustive course of cropping, or is it likely in the long run to be seriously injured thereby?" Dr. Voelcker came to the following conclusion:—"No fear whatever need be entertained that under this system of cultivation and manuring the land will be impoverished, for after twelve or fourteen years during which I have watched Mr. Prout's farming operations, I can perceive no indications of incipient exhaustion, but on the contrary, clear evidence of the great improvement which has been effected in once unproductive clay land; nor can I recognise any theoretical grounds for doubting that the wonderful improvement which Mr. Prout has achieved in his land at Sawbridgeworth will be less a success in years to come than it has been in the past. . . . I can see no reason why, with this system of manuring and an occasional dead summer fallow in order to give a thorough cleaning to the land, Mr. Prout should not be able to grow wheat or barley profitably for an indefinite number of years without injury to his land." It is very refreshing to learn that the farming of Mr. Prout has on the whole been remunerative.

These, and many other facts that deserve to be pondered over, are gathered from Mr. Prout's book, which, he told me, has not only reached three editions in England, but has been translated by ten different writers into French, and by ten others into German, many thousand copies having been sold in these countries.

"Now," I observed to Mr. Prout, "Profitable Clay Farming" relates to the farm from 1861 to 1880. Have you continued the system?"

"It has been continued up to the present time, with the exception that the annual sales of standing corn have not been held

tice over an extended area the teachings of that eminent man. When you consider that the average yields as stated by the Times a few years ago, were taken as follows—wheat 3 quarters per acre, barley 4, oats 5, and that the average for Blount's Farm has been for the last twelve years, wheat 4½ quarters per acre, and barley 5 quarters 2 bushels per acre, I think you will admit that the system of farming practised here is one which might be considerably extended on heavy clay soils with profit to the cultivator, if only some Government, Liberal or Conservative, will learn wisely before it is too late, and realise that the cheer for Protection, which lasted some five minutes at the memorable Agricultural Conference in St. James's Hall, indicated the feelings, wishes, and only cure that the representatives of all the Farmers' Clubs and Chambers of Agriculture throughout England and Scotland could suggest for the deplorable depression which is only too manifest."

"Then," I asked, with some surprise, "are you, too, in favour of Protection?"

"I have been almost all my life a Free Trader, but during the last few years have become strongly convinced that the only remedy of use to the farmers at present is the imposition of a duty of ten shillings on all imported wheat. In other words, the price of wheat should be kept at the price of about 40s. per quarter. This would only mean an additional ½d. on the price of the loaf, which any labourer in employment would readily pay. Those who are discharged, as many will have to be if the depression goes on, will have no money to buy bread at all. If this is shown clearly to the agricultural labourer, he will willingly join the National Agricultural Union, instead of listening to the rural agitators and pestilent fire-brands, who travel up and down the country trying to set the labourers against their employers."

"Speaking of the N. A. U., I may regard you as a supporter, Mr. Prout?"

"Certainly; and I wish Lord Winchelsea every success in his very laudable efforts to combine the three classes. I am of opinion that the thing can be done if farmers will only talk over the matter carefully with their labourers and show them that they are their best friends and anxious for their welfare."

"I see that in spite of the long-continued drought your crops look wonderfully well?"

"The wheat, barley, and oats are all right. Of course, the clover is poor; and mangels, of which only five acres are grown, are a failure."

"To what cause do you attribute the superior quality of the cereals?"

"This goodness of the cereals is owing no doubt to the steam ploughing and thorough cultivation of the land, which enable the roots to penetrate deeply in search of moisture and food."

"You still get about the farm, Mr. Prout?"

"Yes, although nearly eighty-three, I drive up several times a week, and give instructions to the foremen in all the details of the farm."

Mr. Prout confesses to this modestly and as nothing at all extraordinary. And, looking at him as he sat before me, jovial and hearty, and with every indication of many years of usefulness still before him, I should have found no difficulty in believing him had he confessed to even a more remarkable achievement.

"You have, I believe, had experience on the County Council?"

"I was an alderman of the Herts County Council, but resigned after three years' service. I am still on the Council of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution."

"And I hope will remain on it for some years to come," I said, as I parted with this typical veteran agriculturist, who knows his own mind, and has the courage of his convictions. A. W.



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cut nearly one and a-half mile of straight, deep, open outfall main drains, in lieu of wandering and weedy ditches which were filled up. He threw the whole area of the two farms, which he found subdivided into fifty-one enclosures, into nine principal fields of nearly fifty acres each, arranged generally in quadrilateral figure. In fact, in addition to the amount expended on the drainage, he spent £1800—making £10 per acre in all—on the straightening of boundary fences, clearing of hedges and trees, levelling, reclaiming, and remodelling the plan of the farm to adapt it for steam cultivation. This was in addition to the £16,000 purchase money and legal expenses. But the profitability of the estate improvements is demonstrated by the valuation of the late Mr. Thomas C. Scott in 1875, who fixed the net rent to the landlord at 45s. per acre, as against 35s. given by Mr. Blount, and the fee-simple at £31,000. This result also supplies convincing proof of the success of clay farming if carried on in the proper manner.

Mr. Prout affirms that the indispensable preparatory requisites are: (1) Effectual sub-

since 1879. The corn has been harvested and sold in the usual way, and consequently, an accurate yield has been obtained, which was not possible when the crops were sold by auction. I ought to add, that since the annual auction sales ceased there has been an annual sale of hay and straw. It is generally in the first week of May. If this were not stated some might say, "What do you do with your straw?" as no stock is kept. It is sold and goes to London by road, a distance of twenty-six miles."

"I believe your system is quite unique?"

"As far as I know there is no record in the annals of agriculture but mine of 450 acres in England where corn has been grown continuously for thirty-two years, with the exception of a crop of clover every eight years, and a bare fallow every seven years, by the aid of artificial manures alone."

"But have not Sir John Lawes and the Royal and other agricultural societies done a similar thing on various plots?"

"Yes, but it remained for me, under the direction of the late Dr. Augustus Voelcker, to exemplify and carry into prac-