

A Bunch of Green Sticks:

RECORDING THE FORMBY ASPARAGUS TRADITION FOR THE TRUST'S SOUND ARCHIVE¹

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Summary

Archaeology, with the additional benefit of the spoken word is a resource rarely available to us. On the Formby coast, just such an opportunity offered itself through the willingness of former asparagus farmers to discuss and offer for sound recording the small-scale farming methods formerly used there for this specialist crop.

Introduction

Visitors to the National Trust property at Formby often notice the little irregular, ridged areas of roughly levelled ground amongst the dunes. Some are being lost to the retreating coastline, while others lie overgrown and apparently forgotten. I say apparently because they are not relics of some ancient farming practice, but the fields used by asparagus growers in a completely unique way until only a few years ago. As an archaeologist, one is used to having to make sense of such traces from the physical evidence alone. So the chance to talk to those who fashioned and used these tiny prehistoric-looking corrugated fields is enormously valuable, both for what it tells us about the Formby fields themselves, and also for what may be inferred about genuine ancient field systems surviving on marginal land elsewhere.

Three families grew asparagus on land now owned by the Trust. I have been lucky enough to speak to representatives of all of them: John and Roger Brooks' about Larkhill Farm, John Winterbourne about Aindow's Farm and Marjorie Strong about the Lowe's Pinetree Farm. From them all it has been possible to put together a clear picture of how asparagus was grown - particularly during the middle years of the twentieth century when the practice was at its peak



John Brooks bunching asparagus at Larkhill Farm, c.1940.

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A specialised habitat for asparagus

Asparagus likes the freely drained sands of the Formby coastline, but had to be grown on long rotation for, after 10 to 15 years, the land would be exhausted and could only be used for lucerne or rough grazing. Fresh land had to be claimed first by levelling the dune, literally by carting sand by hand in wheelbarrows or by horse and cart. Then deep trenches were formed in which the top layer of rough turf would be buried, a process known as 'delving'. Presence of a plant known only to the growers as the 'Black Twig' or the 'Black Wicks' was a sure sign that the good yellow sand favoured by asparagus was present. Asparagus was a long-term investment in which anyone new to the game would have to be patient: one would sow seed in the first year, transplant the young crowns to the drills (ridges) for growing in the second and not expect to crop until the third and then only lightly. It was also highly seasonal with a very short period of return, most of the cropping taking place between the end of April and the middle of June by which time the price would have dropped to as little as 1/9d per bundle. No asparagus would be cut after the 21st of that month, a date held in almost sacred veneration. After then the rows were hand-weeded and 'the fern' grew six foot tall, being allowed to go to seed; for the seeds too were carefully harvested and sown for the next generation of young plants.

The harvest, old style

Harvesting was a skilled job which at Aindow's, according to John, who was married to the late Joan Aindow, was done only by members of the family or by trusted employees. Marjorie tells us that her grandfather, Jimmy Lowe, was more relaxed about it and used to employ families from Liverpool or off-duty soldiers from Harington Barracks. A special, flat-bladed knife was used to cut stems below ground level to maximise the length and to prevent the cut stem from 'weeping' or simply providing a drink to the crows. However it was easy to damage the crown and to sever the succession stems which would reduce the crop and shorten the life of the plant.

The few weeks of the asparagus harvest was an incredibly busy time, especially in late May when warmer weather made it grow by several inches a day. Conobus Colossal was the favoured variety and the years of the 1939-45 war were, curiously enough, perhaps the busiest. In Roger Brooks' words:

"the hills used to be alive with people growing asparagus - there was beds here and there like, going across from the Formby's estates to the Blundells. Aye, all the way along here right up to Ainsdale and Cabin Hill."

After cutting, the stems would be taken to the yard for bunching, washing and packing. Pinetree had its own well, and washing took place in a series of old iron baths as at Aindow's; the brackish water had also to make the tea: 'Pinetree tea was terrible' Marjorie recalls, 'and the sand everywhere got in your sandwiches!' Local women tended to be 'bunchers' as they were skilled at selecting the better stems for the outsides of the bunches and hiding the 'seconds' inside. In Marjorie's words:



Jim Lowe, the "Asparagus King", Pine Tree Farm, Formby.

M. STRONG/NT

“they started by boxing the asparagus - the actual box is a flat piece of wood with a ledge underneath - no sides, only two stays. It had a square at the top where you put the heads and you built the asparagus up the sides, then you filled the middle in, then it was given a tap and was turned over to the person who tied. He sat astride a cushion of hay; in a sack stuffed hard. It was tied with raffia and this raffia is put in between the bottom of the bundle and he rolls it side to side to get it round with this raffia and then he ties it. Then it goes to be washed and put in water for two or three hours to make the raffia swell, so the bundle is nice and tight. Then it would be packed in a hamper with straw from the farm, and twice a day it would go to the Freshfield Station to go on the baggage, to go all over the Country. It did get to Buckingham Palace once...”

‘Thirds’ consisted mainly of the ‘sprue’ which were the pencil-thin stems and those bent out of shape by the wind. These would be kept back and eaten by the workers. Marjorie said she preferred the flavour of the sprue.

At that time Larkhill Farm might send two waggons a week to Liverpool’s Queen’s Square market in addition to that which was being packed off to Manchester, Blackpool and Southport. Each waggon carried thirty wicker hampers and each hamper contained eighty bundles, each weighing around 1lb 12oz and containing dozens of stems. Aindow’s would send 12 - 15 hampers to Liverpool daily.

Aindow’s Farm was undiversified. John tells us that, while he had another job as a decorator, it grew only asparagus and this provided a full-time living to his wife’s family. Larkhill, which had been around a hundred acres before the 39-45 war, branched into milking and later pigs albeit in a small way; peas, lucerne and - most unsuccessfully - oats were grown on ex-asparagus land. Pinetree, on the other hand, was just one of several enterprises in which Jimmy Lowe and his four strapping daughters were involved. As Joan Rimmer has already recorded in her book, *Formby Remembered* (1992, p.36), Jimmy was one of Formby’s most versatile farmers with interests in the Liverpool Road Nurseries and the Bull Cop Farm where he kept cows, pigs and blackcurrants. Known as the ‘Asparagus King’, Cllr ‘vote-fer-lo, the man-ner-no’ Lowe was a natural showman, winning a string of prizes at the Evesham show in the 1930s.

Aindow’s was the archetypal frontiersman’s farm and it is stuck out as far west as the old County of Lancashire allows you to go. Until it was sadly destroyed by arsonists a few months ago, this primitive and ephemeral place comprised a collection of timber stables, workshops, packing and store sheds thrown up using the driftwood parts of old trading vessels recovered from the foreshore. Standing on the brick sets which the late Ellis Aindow - who evidently had an eye for recycling from demolition sites - had laid in its yard many years ago, John Winterbourne was able to share his vivid memories of life there over the past fifty years. We wandered into the three stables, still smelling of horse, and learned that they had been occupied by - at various times - Bobby and Prince, who were carthorses. Then there was Blacky who occupied the stable on the right, while Jimmy, who lived almost until the end of the life of the farm, occupied that on the left. Prince must have been a common name for carthorses for Marjorie remembers that the Lowes at Pinetree also had one by that name and another called Duke, besides Dolly who pulled their milk float.

Mechanisation versus tradition

The Lowes moved over to tractors in the 1960s, with John and Roger Brooks following suit when their father died, widening the drills from 56 inches to nearly 70. But the Aindow’s recognised that use of the horse was much kinder to the fragile soil structure and the delicate plants. They continued the practice until their retirement in the early 1990s. In the winter it was common to scarify the dead asparagus stalks and plough between every other drill, manuring it from the farm cart. Jimmy, the plough-horse, was particularly good at sensing when he had met some resistance, such as might be encountered when up against a knot of the fibrous roots of the asparagus. He would pause slightly to allow the plough to be adjusted so as to avoid damaging them, whereas a tractor would go straight through.

John had recently sold the better harness, which the Aindow’s had years ago bought second-hand at local farm sales. It included collars, hames, bridge saddles, breech bands, cruppers, girth, loin and hip straps, reins, bridles and blinkers with a mix of iron and copper alloy fittings. I rescued the harness that was left lying around in the stables and among the old iron-rimmed carts; some with the names of those who had made it. Among them were Adams of Southport, R. Lunt & Son of Liverpool, R. Cook of Crosby (who distinguished his work with a series of Liverbird stamps), T. Watson of Southport, J. Wilson of Halsall, M. Halton of Liverpool, G. Rose of Ormskirk, Hale & Berkley of Ormskirk, Haskayne of Ormskirk, J. Bingham of Rockferry and others who appear in name only; Jackson, Moulshaw and Davies.



Working horse at Aindow’s Asparagus Farm, c.1975.

J. MILLN/NT



Margaret Winterbourne at Aindow’s Asparagus Farm, c.1975.

J. MILLN/NT



Aindow's Asparagus Farm, abandoned. Packing cases and harness in shed.

J. MILLN/NT

1960s decline

Decline in the fortunes of the asparagus growers set in during the 1960s with the loss, presumably thanks to Dr Beeching's cuts, of the small freight facility on the railway. The new supermarkets now demanded an all-green stem, while the native Formby product was green only in the middle, with a purple tip and white base. This encouraged the importation of asparagus from abroad, mainly from Spain. Then there was the arrival of the dreaded beetle whose larvae ate the outside of the stem and of attempts by use of DDT - happily long banned - to control it. Another pest was 'The Bott', a big white worm which ate the asparagus itself. The tax-man became increasingly interested and as if his pound of flesh was not salt enough to the financial wounds of a troubled industry, the National Trust itself demanded higher rents, while imposing greater control than had the Blundell Estate when it was landlord.

When much of the property was declared a site of special scientific interest, the Trust's wardens, with a delicate ecosystem to look after, had to control such practices as the burning of the 'tops' in winter and the collection of starr (marram) grass, traditionally used for protecting the young crowns from blowing sand. When the miles of empty dunes at Formby seemed so limitless, the natural life of the ground with its very long fallow periods for recovery could be accommodated by a semi-nomadic style of farming. However 'by the finish' all the available land had been used with the Trust reluctant to allow more to be claimed. According to John 'there seemed to be a change in the atmosphere which meant that (although one or two younger farmers in the locality are trying their hand using modern hybrid strains) it would never again be possible to grow asparagus at Formby like it used to be'.

¹ The National Trust's Sound Archive, comprising many thousands of recordings, documents the life of many of its properties in the words of those who lived and worked at them. The Archive is an essential resource for archaeologists, historians, teachers and others concerned with the interpretation, conservation and presentation of the Trust's properties. For further information, see *Views* 33 (2000), 48-9 & 34 (2001), 19-21.