

THE GLENDALE GATEWAY TRUST

# Matthew & George Culley



*Little has been written about the farming brothers Matthew and George Culley, but their names have left a lasting impression on the history of agriculture in north Northumberland and far beyond.*

**T**he eighteenth century 'agricultural revolution' so prominent a feature of our national history was in many ways an evolution – the cumulative effect of slow, gradual progress over decades of experiment on the land. In the second half of the century the movement accelerated and rural life was visibly transformed by the innovations of the new dynamic industry of agriculture. Few innovators were as dynamic or industrious as the Culleys, whose personal farming careers happened to fall within this vital period of change for agriculture generally.

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## PERSONAL HISTORY

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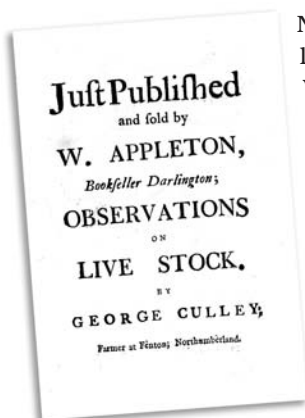
They were born into a farming family. Their father owned and worked a 200 acre estate at Denton, near Darlington, County Durham. Their younger brother, James (the last of eleven children) shared Matthew and George's interest in agriculture. He worked with them in adult life to achieve their farming success but appears not to have joined in the family business with quite the same relish as the other two.

Matthew and George were passionate about farming. A pact in boyhood set the course of their future working lives: they would farm together some day, in an enterprise of their own choosing. Their practical skills were gained at home but their father was progressive enough to send them away to be educated in the latest farming methods. They first went to study under leading stockbreeder, Robert Bakewell of Dishley, Leicestershire when Matthew was in his early thirties, George in his late-twenties and their father nearing the end of his life. There seems to have been no possibility of the brothers being given, or bequeathed, any family land but there was enough money to fund a search for a farm to lease, where they could work together as planned, away from the controlling influences of home and under their own self-management.

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## THE CULLEYS AND GLENDALE

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Northumberland attracted their attention, as a county of large farms and long leases. After looking first at the Tyne Valley, they finally decided, in 1767, that Fenton in Glendale was the place to begin their enterprise.

The land was good but the standard of farming variable. The brothers set-to with a vigour that awed their neighbours. John Grey of Milfield (later of Dilston) believed they '*carried with them into Glendale superior knowledge and intelligence which they at once brought to bear in their extensive undertakings with unremitting application and perseverance*'.

Eventually, the brothers managed over 1,100 acres at Fenton. By the mid-1790s they were working a further eight farms in the area – Crookham Westfield, and Eastfield, (between 300-350 acres each), Barmoor Red House, Wark, (over 900 acres), Grindon, (1400 acres) Thornington, (over 800 acres) Longknowe and Shotton. The total acreage of their farming activities fluctuated with the surrender and take-up of old and new leases, but at the height of their success they were working between 3000-4000 acres on behalf of landlords like Lord Tankerville, John Orde and the Askews of Pallinsburn.

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## IMPROVED FARMING METHODS

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For their first ten years in Glendale 'application and perserverance' meant living simply and working hard. Like other agricultural improvers of the time the Culleys aimed at increased productivity. The single, fastest, route to success was to bring more land into cultivation and manage it better. Enclosure of open fields and commons (often bitterly opposed) was an ongoing national process not completed until the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1760 and 1799 at least 2 million acres of waste was brought into cultivation. At Fenton the Culleys spent little money on themselves and anything they could afford on enclosing and improving the land. Soil enrichment, systematic drainage, the introduction of new crops (grasses, legumes, clover) and a rotation system which did not exhaust the soil but abolished bare fallow were all part of the process.

The Norfolk four-crop rotation system, famously highlighted in the annals as a vital agricultural reform, was deployed with a difference by the Culleys whose rotation of oats, turnips, wheat or barley and two years of grass covered a five-year cycle and provided more food for stock so that greater numbers were sustained from the same acreage. In turn heavier manuring raised crop yields. Better fed livestock were better breeders, and so the cycle of improvement became self-sustaining.

The starring role assigned to the humble turnip in the eighteenth century crop-rotational system is not easy for modern minds to grasp, but the part it plays is as vital now as it was then, to sheep farmers. *'It was found that a rotation of this kind provided the best kind of balanced farming for the soil and it created the sheep*

### **Sheep breeding:**

*The Culleys measured their overall success in terms of mixed arable and livestock husbandry in selected areas, but it was chiefly for improved methods of livestock breeding that they gained their reputation, in particular for the introduction into the north of the 'Dishley' breed of sheep, or 'New Leicester'. From it they bred the hugely successful Border Leicester, eventually **'known even to the farthest Thule, by the popular name of the Culley breed.'***

(Contemporary agricultural writer, William Marshall) *and a basis for flocks in north-Northumberland, southern Scotland, and eventually worldwide.*

*and turnip husbandry for which the Culleys and north Northumberland became famous.*' (D.J. Rowe: The Agricultural History Review: Vol. 19, 1971, Pt.II: The Culleys, Northumberland Farmers, 1767-1813, pp.157-8).

The brothers made a business of selling turnip seed and George claimed to be one of the first farmers in Glendale to drill the seed rather than sow it broadcast. Drilling for corn crops was slower to catch on and remained quite a rare practice until as late as the mid-nineteenth century, possibly because there was little real evidence that it produced a higher yield than broadcast sowing. The Culleys' experiment with water meadows was a heroic failure but emblematic of their zeal never to miss out on any kind of farming innovation.

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## SELECTIVE BREEDING

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Up to the mid-eighteenth century there was no such thing as a specific 'breed' of sheep or cattle as defined by known and recorded descents, or methods of selective breeding. Bakewell pioneered the practice for both longhorned cattle and sheep.

Before him, there were different-looking sheep in different areas and members of flocks in any one place were obviously related, but in no recorded way. Among the breeds in Northumberland were Cheviots in the north and Blackface in the south. On the Bamburgh coast a distinctive, long-wooled breed existed – the Bamburgh Lincoln. In the lowland areas of Northumberland a local breed known as 'Mugs' was common, named for the wool which covered their eyes but was in miserably short supply elsewhere on their bodies.

The Culleys took Bakewell's long-wooled Dishley and crossed it initially with the large Teeswater sheep of south Durham and north Yorkshire and, probably, other local breeds. This was the beginning of the Border Leicester. They followed Bakewell's practice of taking from existing breeds individual animals with desired characteristics (mostly compact bodies and short legs) and mating like to like until an animal was produced with wanted qualities. Having fixed the characteristics of a new breed, the usual practice was to keep flocks closed and control the spread of blood lines by hiring out tups for the season, often at inflated prices.

The Culleys' claim to be the first farmers to bring the Dishley into north Northumberland is contestable, but what is certain is that the brothers learned

### **Markets:**

*An unusual (and unpopular) practice of the Culleys was to fatten their own sheep and supervise their slaughter. They were also able to access the relatively distant, but prosperous marts of Durham and north Yorkshire because of Denton's availability for grazing and wintering. They would drive their livestock the distance involved (more than 100 miles from Wark and Crookham Eastfield) to take advantage of the highest regional fatstock prices.*

from Bakewell at first-hand and had hired their first tup from him as far back as 1764. They claimed, twenty years on, never to have lost the purity of that blood connection.

Other farmers grew resentful of the pre-eminence of 'Culley sheep' and what they came to see as the brothers' restrictive practices. In 1792 an attempt by Matthew and George, and their friends, to form a Northumberland Tup Association was opposed and failed. By then, however, according to George (who was given to exaggeration) there was scarcely a Northumberland flock unrelated to the Dishley blood. The lambs matured quickly so farmers received an early return on their outlay and were able to re-stock and sell again at a faster pace.

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### THE 'CULLEY SHEEP' – WHY WAS IT A SUCCESS?

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They were bred for a high proportion of flesh to bone. As late as 1803 George Culley was reflecting in Farmer's Magazine on former unsatisfactory breeds of lowland sheep, to his mind more like deer than sheep, big and lanky and presumably, unsuited to the meat market. A growing population (from about 6 million in 1700 to 10.5 million by 1801) needed to be fed and its concentration into the newly forming industrial communities of the towns and cities was creating for the first time a market for cheap, mass-produced food, of which mutton, ultimately, became a staple.

The meat was fatty which was no great disadvantage at the time of its greatest popularity. Cheap mutton was a useful contribution to feeding a growing, working-class population. The Culleys' interest in farming was business-based and commercial success was the desired outcome of a sheep breeding enterprise which concentrated on developing a product and marketing it successfully. Fine breeding was an art they excelled at but they were also suppliers to the newly emerging concept of a mass market.

#### **How they managed the farms:**

*Each farm had a manager but it was a combined operation, with the brothers as active, over-all, consultants. After leaving Fenton, Matthew lived at Wark, George at Crookham Eastfield and James at Grindon. Transfers of stock from one farm to another were arranged according to feed supply and availability of grazing. Wark and Eastfield provided bases for all the tups. There was one man in charge of all the grain-selling from all the farms.*

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### SUCCESS – FROM TENANT FARMERS TO LANDLORDS

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Despite paying rents in some years of over £4000 - a vast outlay at the time - the Culleys were able to show a profit of over £9000 in 1801. (It has to be said that grain prices were artificially high at this time because of the war with France.)

Wealth allowed the Culleys to become landlords. They bought Akeld estate in 1795, and Easington Grange, near Belford six years later. In 1807, Fowberry passed into Culley ownership, bought probably with George's money but intended for his son, Matthew's, occupation.

Their farming connections had been good from the start but they were neither privileged nor wealthy by birth. Their great prosperity was earned in the hard school of practical experience and like the new breed of businessmen that they were they had little time for aristocratic, book-learned, dabblers in the art of agriculture. Farmers have ever been suspicious of imparted knowledge not based on the evidence of their own practical experience and the Culleys were no exception. They travelled extensively in England and Scotland, importing back to Glendale all they could glean that was new and useful to their work. Their travel journals offer excellent source material to students of late eighteenth century agriculture (edited by Dr. Anne Orde and published by the British Academy in 2002). In turn, they transmitted their knowledge to student-farmers sent to Glendale to study the latest and best techniques in farming.

A single-minded approach to work kept the brothers single and not minded to marry until their work was sufficiently profitable to afford them time and leisure for private, and family, life. Matthew seems to have been the luckiest in love although George was the first to marry. He married Jane Atkinson in 1777. Three years later, he was left a widower with two young children, Matthew and Eleanor. He re-married but his second wife died within a year of the marriage. He married for a third time but had no more children. Matthew married Elizabeth Bates in 1783, and through that connection, their son (another Matthew) eventually inherited Coupland Castle. There were four, surviving children from the marriage (one died in infancy).

Matthew and George's younger brother, James, married a Margaret Pickering in 1781 and had a daughter (another Eleanor: the Culleys were apparently exemplary in following the fashion of their time for sharing family names).

Sadly we know little of the emotional impact on the brothers of their personal triumphs and tragedies outside the business arena. Their letters to each other are about farming. George was a prolific writer on agricultural subjects and although considered something of a self-promoter, his Board of Agriculture reports and contributions to the Annals of Agriculture and other journals were important contributions to farming literature. His book 'Observations on Live Stock' published in 1786 was a groundbreaking attempt to systematise what had never been formally attempted before. In the opinion of one contemporary observer, however, Matthew was the thinker and George the publicist. *'Geo. Culley was the most windy, but Matt was more profound – Geo's principals were only skin deep but Matthew's belonged to his backbone – Geo was a man that regarded the world's opinion – Matt was a person that wished to do what was right – and cared for no man.'*

(Pencil comment on a letter from George Culley to John Welch: NCRO/ZCU/6)

When James died, in 1793, a valuation was made of the farming business and a new partnership agreement drawn up between Matthew and George, which, in turn, was dissolved in 1804 shortly before Matthew's death.

George died in 1813, after a brief stay at Fowberry, having commented delightedly that his son was living in *'...a palace! Altho' his father in less than 50 years since worked harder than any servant we now have, and even drew a coal cart.'*

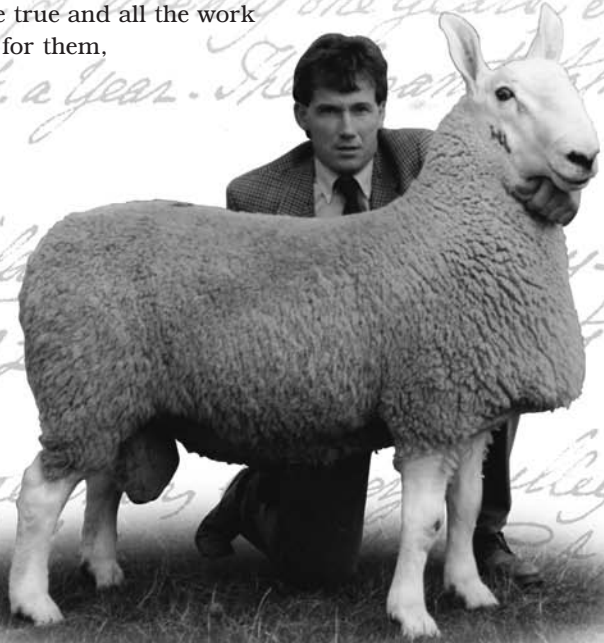
He was buried at Ford and later memorialised in a church window, humbly depicted as a shepherd, with the inscription, *'I am not worthy of the least of all / The mercies and of all the / Truth which thou hast / Shewed unto thy servant... (George Culley)'*. There is a memorial tablet to Matthew and his wife Elizabeth, in Kirknewton church.

At no time in their lives could the Culleys have foreseen the popularity of the Border Leicester in places as far afield as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and South America. When personal prosperity allowed them to buy into the ranks of the local landowning elite they achieved an upward social mobility which was rare in their day, and rarely more deserved. They were hard working farmers who made a distinctive contribution to agriculture as well as a name for themselves.

They were driven by the need to make money but not given over entirely to the profit motive. Matthew and George had a vocation for farming. Their boyhood dream came true and all the work that went into it was, often for them, a pure labour of love.

**Prize-winning  
Border Leicester  
in the year 2000**

**Photo courtesy  
of Neil Howie**



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*Sources:*

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## GLENDALE GATEWAY TRUST

The Cheviot Centre, Wooler, Northumberland NE71 6BL

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