

Robert Bakewell (1725–1795) of Dishley: farmer and livestock improver

by David L. Wykes

Abstract

Bakewell's reputation rests on the principle of in-and-in breeding and the establishment of the New Leicester sheep, in which he was assisted by a group of local improvers who were cousins and fellow Presbyterians. Although his high prices were controversial, before 1780 most of his rams were let for under ten guineas. Bakewell's success as a breeder was founded on his ability to meet market demands by producing a better beast for the butcher, but there was a decline in fecundity and meat quality. Doubts about his achievements have recently been expressed, but the Border Leicester remains the most successful modern long-wool cross.

Lord Ernle, in his classic study of English agriculture, identified five individuals – Jethro Tull, Lord Townshend, Robert Bakewell of Dishley, Thomas Coke and Arthur Young – as particularly associated with ‘the farming progress of the period’.¹ Bakewell, unlike the other heroes of the Agricultural Revolution, has only received a partial reassessment by historians, limited mainly to a qualification of his role as a leading breeder and the success of his new livestock breeds. There is no recent study of his life or work. The result has been a rather unbalanced view of his achievements. To a large extent this is understandable considering the paucity of the information available. Although a considerable amount of literature relating to Bakewell was published during his lifetime, or within a few years of his death, much of it was hagiographic, and he remains a shadowy figure for whom few authentic personal details survive, particularly for his early career. Even those who had known him well expressed regret that they knew so little about the most important events of his life. It is unfortunate that George Culley, an early pupil, failed to persuade Bakewell's nearest acquaintances to publish a biography. The only major modern biography of Bakewell, by H. C. Pawson, was published more than 40 years ago. Using new evidence, from local sources and contemporary authorities, together with a reassessment of more familiar accounts, this study seeks to provide a fresh consideration of Bakewell and his contribution to eighteenth-century livestock breeding.²

¹ R. E. Prothero [later Lord Ernle], *English Farming Past and Present* (sixth edn by G. E. Fussell and O. R. McGregor, 1961), p. 149. I am very grateful to Professor John Beckett for his comments on my article and for allowing me to see a copy of his unpublished 2002 New Dishley Society Lecture, ‘Robert Bakewell and Agricultural Productivity: new thoughts on a well-worn theme’.

² J. Hunt, *Agricultural memoirs; or history of the Dishley System. In answer to Sir John Saunders Sebright, Bart., M.P.* (Nottingham, 1812), p. 119; BL, Add. MS 35,131, fo. 21r, George Culley, Eastfield, to Arthur Young, 18 Feb. 1811; H. C. Pawson, *Robert Bakewell: pioneer livestock breeder* (1957).

I

Robert Bakewell was born at Dishley near Loughborough on 23 May 1725. The only surviving son of Robert and Rebecca Bakewell, he belonged to a family of successful improving farmers. Dishley Grange had been acquired in 1683 by Sir Ambrose Phillipps as part of the Garendon Estate. Bakewell's grandfather, also Robert, became tenant in 1709, succeeding Benjamin Clerk, who was one of the most advanced farmers of his day. Bakewell, like his father, was a trustee and subscriber of the Warner's Lane Presbyterian (later Unitarian) Meeting in Loughborough. Bakewell presumably learnt much from his father, who 'had always the reputation of being one of the most ingenious and able farmers of his neighbourhood', but probably Robert senior's greatest contribution was to allow his son to make a series of tours to improve his knowledge of contemporary agriculture. Little is known about these journeys, apparently made throughout much of England, and even to Ireland and Holland, but it is possible to guess at their importance in providing Bakewell with information on regional farming differences and the latest techniques and developments. He was to continue the practice of making tours for the rest of his life. Most accounts accept that Bakewell was managing the Dishley estate before his father's death in 1773. He not only inherited a family tradition of practical improving farming dating from at least his grandfather, but also the tenancy of what was probably already a model farm for the period.³

It is clear as well that the changes in farming which took place in Leicestershire and the Midlands during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as a result of the conversion of arable to grassland, and also early enclosure, were important in encouraging improvements in livestock breeding. Conversion to pasture increased the significance of grazing and therefore encouraged farmers to improve their livestock, while enclosure enabled farmers to control their livestock and to undertake selective breeding and improvements to grassland management and stock feeding. Enclosure also allowed greater opportunities for experiments in livestock breeding. The changes were particularly rapid in Leicestershire and, by the beginning of the seventeenth century, at least a quarter of all parishes in the county were already enclosed, with about another third at least partially enclosed. Dishley was enclosed by the early sixteenth century and the village depopulated.⁴

The Bakewell family farmed about 450 acres of land at Dishley, with the considerable

³ J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (4 vols in eight, London, 1795–1815), III (ii), pp. 757, 801; E. Lisle, *Observations in Husbandry* (London, 1756); Squire De Lisle, 'Robert Bakewell', *JRASE* 136 (1975), pp. 56–7; Leicestershire RO (hereafter LRO), Will 1716C, will and inventory of Robert Bakewell of Dishley, yeo.; Pawson, *Bakewell*, p. xiv; W. H. Burgess, *History of the Loughborough Unitarian Congregation* (1908), pp. 11–12, 24, 32–4. Pawson suggested that Bakewell was educated at the nonconformist academy in Kibworth under Philip Doddridge, but Doddridge did not teach at Kibworth, which, having moved to Hinckley in 1723, closed in 1723 on the death of John Jennings, the

tutor, and Bakewell is not included in the list of Doddridge's students at Northampton, see T. Stedman, 'List of the pupils educated by P. Doddridge, D.D.', *Monthly Repository*, 10 (1815), pp. 686–88; *Gentleman's Mag.* 65 (ii) (1795), p. 969; Hunt, *Agricultural memoirs*, p. 35; W. Pitt, *A General view of the agriculture of the county of Leicester* (1809), p. 216.

⁴ J. Thirsk, 'Agrarian History, 1540–1950' in *VCH Leicestershire*, II (1954), pp. 220–31, 255; W. G. Hoskins (ed.), *Essays in Leicestershire agrarian history* (1948); J. Thirsk (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, V (ii), 1640–1750 (1984), ch. 4. This paragraph has profited from Professor Beckett's comments.

privilege of being able to plough 250 acres without restraint. The estate was extended when the Mill lands were acquired in 1786, mainly to increase the area irrigated.⁵ Although Bakewell had the privilege to plough over half his acreage, according to Young in 1771 he only ploughed about a quarter, including 15 acres of wheat, 25 acres of spring corn and 30 acres of turnips. Since Bakewell brought in neither hay nor straw, much of the arable land had to be laid down to grass to support the substantial amount of livestock he kept. In 1771 he had a total of about 60 horses, 150 cattle of all sorts and 400 large sheep. The principal use of his arable was for the provision of winter feed, particularly cabbages, which Bakewell found more satisfactory than turnips. Bakewell's floating meadows or irrigation scheme were particularly important in providing winter feed. By a series of hatches and channels, areas of meadow were flooded in Autumn to provide an early 'bite' of grass in March in the crucial period between the end of the previous year's hay and before the first grass was generally available in April. The availability of feedstock during this critical period affected the level of livestock any grazier could carry during the winter. During the 1770s Bakewell irrigated between 60 and 80 acres a year, later raised to about 200 acres after the acquisition of the Mill lands. According to Young, the irrigation scheme was first begun by Bakewell's father and afterwards extended in several stages by Bakewell himself, who had studied the technique in the west of England under George Boswell, the acknowledged expert on floating meadows. The cost of construction would have been considerable, though annual maintenance costs were not excessive. Bakewell alleged that floating raised the value of his grass by 20s. per acre (which he claimed was more than the original construction costs of the main carriers and intersections), while annual maintenance, involving the scouring and repairing of the carriers and drains, was about 5s. per acre.⁶

II

Bakewell's reputation, both during his life and subsequently, has rested on his work with livestock breeds, particularly sheep. Before the 1780s, however, he was also much concerned with improving cattle and horses and even pigs. Indeed, the earliest direct evidence of his success in breeding comes from his work with horses. In 1763 he advertised in the *Leicester Journal* two black colts as available for stud at one and five guineas respectively. Two years later he won first prize at the Ashby Horse Show. Just as he did not begin with a farm without

⁵ *Leicester J.*, 3 Feb. 1781; The Editor [Arthur Young], 'A ten days tour to Mr Bakewell's', *Annals of Agriculture*, 6 (1786), pp. 490, 493; A. Young, *The farmer's tour through the east of England* (4 vols, London, 1771), I, pp. 121, 123-4, 128; [A. Young], 'A month's tour to Northamptonshire, Leicestershire, &c.', *Annals of Agriculture*, 16 (1791), p. 579; Northumberland RO [hereafter NRO], ZCU 1, 'Journal of a tour by George Culley from Denton to Leicestershire, Midlands, Cambridgeshire &c in company of William Charge, 20 June-25 July 1771', sv. Wednesday 26 June 1771, now printed in A. Orde (ed.), *Matthew and George Culley travel journals and letters, 1765-1798* (Records of Social and Economic History, new

ser. 35, 2002), p. 67.

⁶ Young, *Farmer's Tour*, I, p. 127; Editor, 'Ten day tour', p. 490; Pitt, *General view*, p. 32; Young, *Farmer's tour*, I, p. 124; W. Marshall, *The rural economy of the Midland counties* (2 vols, London, 1790), I, pp. 284-5; G. Culley, *Observations on livestock, containing hints for choosing and improving the best breeds and the most useful kinds of domestic animals* (London, 1786), p. 143; W. Redhead, R. Laing and W. Marshall jun., *Observations on the different breeds of sheep, and the state of sheep farming in some of the principal counties of England* (Edinburgh, 1792), pp. 33-4.

improvements, nor did he start with unimproved stock for he used animals already partially improved by others. The foundation of Bakewell's improved breed of horses is traditionally said to have originated with Lord Chesterfield, who, when ambassador to The Hague in the late 1720s, sent six Zealand mares to his family estate at Bretby in Derbyshire. Bakewell is said to have been greatly impressed by the progeny he saw 20 or 30 years later, and to have travelled to Holland and part of Flanders with George Salsbury of Heather, returning with six mares to improve his own stock. He also used Mr Hood's 'Old Blind Horse', which, although it played a rather obscure part in the history of the modern Shire Horse, was one of the best known early studs in the Midlands and sired Bakewell's celebrated horse 'G'. Hood was probably John Hood of Bardon Hall, the leading patron of the Bardon Park Meeting, and also, like Bakewell, a Presbyterian.⁷

Bakewell is rather more celebrated for his work with Longhorn Cattle. Marshall's comment that 'Mr Bakewell is well known to have got the lead, as a breeder of cattle, through means of the Canley stock' belonging to John Webster has often been noted, but Bakewell's friend and former pupil, George Culley, told Arthur Young that the existing yellow breed of Dishley cattle were in fact superior in their fattening properties to the Canley stock. The foundation of Webster's herd is said to have come from the purchase of six cows from Sir Thomas Gresley of Drakelow. According to Hunt, in 1766 Bakewell viewed Webster's stock while the owner was away, selecting six cows, which Culley later purchased on his behalf. Bakewell kept four and allowed Robert Fowler of Little Rollright near Chipping Norton to purchase the other two. From this stock Bakewell in-bred his famous bull 'Twopenny'. Fowler was to make repeated use of 'Twopenny', but after 1778 he kept entirely to his own stock. His bull, 'Shakespeare', was considered in 1790 to be 'the best stockgetter the Midland district ever knew'. Bakewell made use of Lancashire and Westmorland as well as Canley stock to improve his cattle, and by 1771 Young claimed 'his breed of cattle is famous throughout the kingdom'. But despite exports to Ireland and Jamaica, later to prove his financial downfall, his longhorns were of regional rather than national importance. By the 1780s Fowler had surpassed him, and it was generally acknowledged that when Fowler died in 1791 he had the finest longhorn herd in the country. His dispersal sale was one of the greatest auctions of improved stock during the eighteenth century. After Fowler's death the lead was gained by Thomas Princep of Croxall on the Derbyshire-Staffordshire border, who had also made considerable use of Bakewell's stock. Russell has argued that Bakewell did little to improve the longhorn, which was already established in the north of England before Bakewell bred his own successful longhorn in the 1760s, and that in any case he applied breeding methods already in use in Lancashire. Russell, however, was unaware of the existing superior qualities of Bakewell's own yellow breed of cattle at

⁷ Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, pp. 306–7, 452–3; *Leicester J.*, 23 Apr. 1763, 23 Nov. 1765, 5 Apr. 1783; NRO, ZCU 1, 'George Culley's tour into Leicestershire', sv. 19 [Nov.] 1765, pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, p. 43; Hunt, *Agricultural memoirs*, pp. 120–5; Pitt, *General view*, p. 283; Culley, *Observations*, pp. 13–14; K. Chivers, *The Shire Horse* (1976), pp. 549–54; D. L. Wykes, 'Bardon Park Meeting House: the registration of Nonconformist places of worship under the Act of Toleration (1689)', *Trans. Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* (hereafter TLAHS), 66 (1990), pp. 33–4; PRO, C54/6185/5, enrolment of trust deeds of Bardon Park meeting house, 1765.

Dishley before he acquired stock from Canley. He also perhaps ignores the use Fowler and Princep made of Bakewell's progeny.⁸

Bakewell achieved his greatest success with sheep, although it was also the part of his work which engendered the most controversy. The origins of his improved stock were obtained from Joseph Allom of Clifton in Nottinghamshire: 'the first', according to Marshall, 'who distinguished himself in the Midland District for a superior breed of sheep'. Allom obtained his ewes from Nathaniel Stone of Goadby Marwood, whose nephew and great-nephews were later leading improvers of sheep associated with Bakewell. Bakewell also purchased rams to improve his stock during his tours through England, particularly from Lincolnshire. He is said to have purchased a ram from Mr Stow of Long Broughton which formed the basis of his own improved breed.⁹

III

The other major figures involved in livestock improvement in the Midlands were identified by contemporary agricultural commentators in their accounts and surveys. There is no doubt that Thomas Paget (1732–1814) of Ibstock was Robert Bakewell's closest friend and breeding associate. George Culley recognised that because Paget was of a similar age to Bakewell and 'had been intimately connected & acquainted with him from his first commencement in business' as well as being related, 'they were always particular friend[s]'. Paget and Bakewell were in fact second cousins and fellow Presbyterians. Both families had undertaken the mutual services of executor and trustee practised by close friends and families. Paget was a considerable improving farmer in his own right as well as a noted livestock breeder, whose farm was visited and described by Marshall and other agricultural writers as an example for husbandry, drainage and other forms of improvement. Indeed in the case of Longhorn cattle Paget may ultimately have exceeded Bakewell. Although he used Dishley bulls extensively, he also greatly used 'the Hampshire Bull' as well as a bull bred by Princep. He bought Fowler's bull Shakespeare and bred his own bull Shakespeare from it, which was sold at his dispersal sale in November 1793 for 400 guineas to a partnership of six farmers, most of whom were his fellow Leicestershire improvers. He also assisted Bakewell in his livestock breeding experiments. In 1776 he took a ram of Bakewell's called 'Dishley P' for 10 or 15 guineas. 'The price at the time was considered high'. Two years later he bred again from the same ram demonstrating that prejudices

⁸ Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, pp. 318–9, 320–6, 322, 325; N. Russell, *Like engend'ring like. Heredity and animal breeding in early modern England* (1986), pp. 146, 198; Warwickshire RO, DR177/2, Parish register of Stoneleigh, John Webster, esq., buried 23 Nov. 1768; [A. Young], *On the husbandry of three celebrated farmers, Messrs Bakewell, Arbuthnot, and Duckett: being a lecture read to the Board of Agriculture, on Thursday, June 6, 1811* (London, 1811), p. 5; Hunt, *Agricultural memoirs*,

pp. 115–7; Oxfordshire RO, Misc Lanc IX/1, R. Parry, *Particulars of the breeding stock, late the property of Mr Robert Fowler, of Little Rollright, in the county of Oxford, deceased* (Shipston on Stour, 1791), Preface; Young, *Farmer's tour*, I, pp. 110–12; Pitt, *General view*, pp. 220–1

⁹ Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, p. 381; Young, *Farmer's tour*, I, p. 117; [Young], *Husbandry of three celebrated farmers*, p. 9.

concerning consanguinity were unfounded. Paget was so successful that after he retired from breeding in 1793 he helped found a bank.¹⁰

Bakewell was closely related to the other leading improvers in Leicestershire. The mother of John Stone of Quorndon was a Sarah Bakewell. Stone himself was the nephew of Nathaniel Stone of Goadby, and like his uncle a leading breeder. His three sons, John Parnham Stone of Quorndon, Thomas Stone of Barrow-upon-Soar and Samuel Stone of Knighton, were also leading breeders. The mother of Robert Burgess of Hugglescote was Katherine Bakewell, and his wife, Catherine, was the daughter of Nathaniel Stubbins of Holme Pierrepont in Nottinghamshire. Both Burgess and Stubbins were prominent breeders. Burgess was an executor of John Stone. John Stone and the Burgess and Paget families were all members of the Bardon Park Presbyterian Meeting near Markfield. Stubbins was a member of High Pavement Presbyterian Meeting in Nottingham. Thomas Stone belonged to Warner's Lane Meeting, Loughborough, like Bakewell, and Samuel and John Parnham Stone to the Presbyterian Great Meeting in Leicester.¹¹

It is clear that Bakewell's closest associates were fellow Presbyterians, and in many cases his cousins. The advantages to Bakewell of their support were considerable. By hiring his tups and bulls they helped to disseminate his progeny. Without their assistance, and the assistance of the many livestock breeders in different parts of the country, the Dishley or new Leicester sheep, for example, would never have been disseminated so widely and so rapidly. They also provided Dishley stock for those farmers unable to afford Bakewell's prices. Perhaps more important for the development of the new Leicester breed, these breeders helped to extend the gene pool with which Bakewell worked, by providing him with further stock bred on his own principles with which to experiment. Accounts by contemporary agricultural commentators provide evidence of the links between Bakewell and his closest supporters, but the pedigrees of the

¹⁰ Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, pp. 192, 195, 233, 261, 287, 325, 384–6; Pitt, *General view*, pp. 44, 250; BL, Add. MS 35,131, fo. 22, George Culley, Eastfield, to Arthur Young, 18 Feb. 1811; LRO, DG47, Paget of Ibstock MSS; Editor, 'A week in Norfolk', *Annals of Agriculture* 19 (1793), pp. 444–5; G. Garrard, *A Description of the different varieties of Oxen* (London, 1800), p. 2; LRO, 109'30/95, 'Mr Paget's estate', 1775; Nottingham University Library, MS 9/4, printed auction catalogue with purchasers and sale prices; *Catalogue of the capital stock of long horned cows, heifers & stirks; bull & bull calves; team of oxen; breeding ewes; and cart mares belonging to Thomas Paget, Esq. of Ibstock, in the county of Leicester; which will be sold by auction, by Mr Boott, (without reserve) on the premises, on Thursday the 14th, Friday the 15th, and Saturday the 16th days of November, 1793* (Loughborough, [1793]); Hunt, *Agricultural memoirs*, pp. 111–12, 118; W. Gardiner, *Music and friends, or pleasant recollections of a dilettante* (2 vols, Leicester, 1838), I, pp. 242–3; D. L. Wykes, 'Banking in

nineteenth-century Leicester', *TLAHS* 70 (1996), pp. 150–1.

¹¹ LRO, Pedigree of Burgess Family; *Leicester J.*, 20 Sept. 1777; PR/T/1769/190, Will of Nathaniel Stone of Goadby Marwood, gent.; PR/T/1783/223, Will of John Stone of Quorndon, gent.; Nichols, *History and Antiquities*, III (i), p. 102, n. 5; PRO, RG4/1173, Bardon Park and Ashby de la Zouch Presbyterian Meetings, Register of births and baptisms, 1756–1837; RG4/1588, 137, High Pavement Presbyterian (later Unitarian) Chapel, Nottingham, Register of Baptisms, 1723–1777, 1760–1828. Sarah Bakewell married Samuel Stone at Swepstone on 7 January 1725, and Katharine Bakewell married Robert Burgess at Hugglescote and Donnington on 18 October 1733, see parish registers. It is not possible to identify the exact relationship to Robert Bakewell in the absence of any baptismal registers for Bardon Park, Loughborough and Mountsorrel for this period. It was usual for marriages involving Presbyterians to take place in the parish church.

animals themselves, cited in contemporary advertisements, demonstrate the extent of the interdependence between the leading Midland livestock breeders.

IV

The attributes sought by Bakewell in his breeds were summarised by his pupil, George Culley, in 1771, as those

that make themselves the soonest fat, were always most esteemed by himself, but are now liked by other people, that they now do not pay so much regard to horns, hydes, legs, &c. &c: but those are accounted best, that pay most money for their keep, that such as are descended from the best kinds generally prove best, but good backs, hips, form of the ribs, shoulder ... &c. &c. are w[ha]t he [Bakewell] calls Essentials.

The main qualities desired were beauty and utility of form, texture of flesh (or quality of meat) and most importantly the capacity to mature quickly: 'that is, a natural propensity to acquire a state of fatness, at an early age, and, when at full keep, in a short space of time'. It was believed by breeders that these attributes could only be obtained by careful breeding. Bakewell founded his reputation on the principle of 'in-and-in breeding', the persistent inbreeding with closely related animals. This is usually taken to mean sire to daughter, or son to dam or brother to sister, although there was some dispute over the exact meaning of the term. The major advantage of inbreeding, especially in experimental breeding, is the speed with which results can be achieved in comparison with cross-breeding. Breeding in-and-in will strengthen the good properties, but also unfortunately the bad, and in the hands of an inexperienced breeder the results could be disastrous. Much of the success of Bakewell and the other Midland livestock breeders stemmed from their ability to identify and fix the attributes they wished to develop. Bakewell was not the originator of in-breeding. Marshall claimed it originated at Newmarket with race-horse breeding, though according to Russell it was not applied originally in the development of the Thoroughbred. Certainly inbreeding was practised in Lincolnshire at an earlier date than Leicestershire, though Hugo Meynell was inbreeding fox hounds during the 1760s for his Quorn Hunt. Bakewell was, however, largely responsible for the more general acceptance of the principle. Despite earning most of his revenue from letting rams for tupping, Bakewell was said, paradoxically, to have been against cross-breeding.¹²

The letting of breeding stock, rather than its sale, was essential if breeds were not only to be improved but also to be disseminated throughout the country. Letting enabled the breeder to retain his best animals to experiment with and to improve his basic stock, and so avoid the

¹² NRO, ZCU 1, 'Journal of a tour by George Culley ... 1771', sv. Friday 12 July 1771, pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, p. 77; Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, pp. 297–9, 300, 301–2; Sir John S. Sebright, *The art of improving the breeds of domestic animals* (London, 1809), pp. 9–10; Russell, *Like engend'ring like*, pp. 103–4, 220; J. A. Perkins, *Sheep farming in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Lincolnshire* (Occasional Papers in Lincolnshire History and Archaeology, 1977) p. 37; C. B. D. Ellis, *Leicestershire and the Quorn Hunt* (1951) pp. 14–15; Redhead *et al.*, *Observations on the different breeds of sheep*, pp. 37–8.

temptation of disposing of the finest animals for high prices. As Bakewell told Jasper Palfrey of Fenton, a leading breeder of the unimproved old Warwickshire sheep, during a dispute,

if you ever had the best in your county, why let them go into any other? – for I think, and am persuaded many others are of the same opinion, that it is of less importance to know where the best came from, than where they now are.

As a result of letting, superior stock became available to other interested breeders instead of being confined to the use of its proprietor alone and, as a result, its progeny circulated widely improving other stock. It also enabled other breeders to experiment far more extensively than would have been possible if they had had to purchase all the animals they used.¹³

Ram letting led to the emergence of specialist breeders or tupmen. '[I]t generally happens that a breeder of male stock . . . is likewise a dairyman, and frequently a grazier; Mr Bakewell being the only man, in this district, who confines his practice solely to breeding and letting.' Unlike the commercial farmer, he was not obliged to keep most of his animals as replacements. If necessary he could drastically cull his breeding stock in a way that no livestock farmer could contemplate. Although letting developed especially as a result of the active tup market it applied to cattle and horses as well. The practice of letting male stock did not originate with Bakewell. It was almost certainly first practised with stallions for stud and appears to have been common in Lincolnshire before it is found in Leicestershire. Bakewell, according to Marshall, did at least popularise the practice of letting tups in the Midlands as well as adopting the practice for cattle. Bakewell let his first ram for 16s. at Leicester Fair to a Mr Wildbore of Illston-on-the-Hill. All the authorities agree on the price, but there is considerable dispute over the date. Arthur Young claimed it occurred as early as 1744, but Hunt, who knew Bakewell more intimately, suggested around 1760. Bakewell also let a further two rams the same day for 17s. 6d. Not all breeders refused to sell. Fowler sold his celebrated longhorn cattle, and even Bakewell sold occasionally if the circumstances were right. In 1771, and again in 1786, he sold some of his bulls to a Jamaican landowner.¹⁴

The high prices at which his stock was let remains one of the most controversial aspects of Bakewell's activities. The most extraordinary prices were paid for hiring his rams. Before 1765 his prices were above average, though still modest. In that year Culley, after some hesitation, agreed to pay 8 Guineas for a ram, but as late as 1780 most were still let for under 10 Guineas. Thereafter prices rose rapidly. In 1784 prices were between 80 and 90 Guineas a ram, though one was let for 100 Guineas. Two year later, in 1786, two principal breeders each hired a third interest for 100 Guineas, Bakewell retaining the other third for his own use, so limiting the number of ewes tupped and helping to value the whole ram at 300 Guineas. In a situation where demand for Bakewell's best tups so completely outstripped all supply, prices not surprisingly jumped dramatically. In 1786 Bakewell only let 20 rams, but made £1000. In 1789 he received 3,000 Guineas, of which 2,000 Guineas was for seven rams, with his three best rams alone accounting for 1,200 Guineas. Although his prices for horses and cattle were less

¹³ *Leicester J.*, 10 Oct. 1789; Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, p. 304.

¹⁴ Marshall, *Rural economy*, pp. 303, 417 & n. †, 334;

BL. Add. MS 34,863, fo. 107r; [Young], *Husbandry of three celebrated farmers*, p. 4; Hunt, *Agricultural memoirs*, pp. 35, 37, 115.

spectacular, Bakewell can have had little reason to complain. His celebrated bull, ‘Twopenny’, was let at 5 Guineas a cow, while other bulls were generally let for the season at half that sum.¹⁵

Naturally such prices aroused considerable controversy, if not animosity. Young was in favour of high prices as he felt they were an incentive to breeders to make improvements and to take greater care in breeding. Bakewell himself believed that the only way to improve the breed of cattle was to keep up the price,

for, if the price is low, people send any kind of cows, and if the product fails, the bull is blamed; but if the price is high, they are particular, and send none but the very best, which is the only method to improve the breed.

Privately, he was against public discussion of high prices as he felt disappointed breeders, if they could not have the best, would ignore the remainder. Other commentators pointed out that the high prices, together with the refusal of the leading breeders to allow ewes as well as rams to be used, were serious obstacles to the spread of the new breeds. Many, though, saw Bakewell and his associate breeders as little more than opportunists, more interested in large profits than encouraging the spread of their new improved stock. Certainly, Bakewell mastered the task of maintaining high prices. After 1788 he no longer fixed prices, but left his customers to bid what they chose, before he decided whether it was acceptable. This system was considered particularly unfair and caused much ill-feeling.¹⁶

Since in the opinion of Bakewell’s contemporaries his own stock was at the pinnacle of the livestock market, he set the standard with his prices. It was essential for his fellow breeders that he maintained or increased his prices as they were in no position to charge the same rates. The amount they received was dependant on the valuation his stock received. As George Culley, always quick to increase his own profits, succinctly expressed the matter to his brother:

The very high prices Mr B. has and may let at staggers all his neighbours and what it will come to I know not, but the higher he lets the better for those that have of the same family, and the higher the sheep will stand in credit.

Though Marshall felt that the breeders who gave the greatest sums ‘were playing a high game’, the prices they paid were not completely ridiculous. ‘The *high* prices are not given by graziers but by ram breeders for the purpose of getting rams to let to graziers. The *highest* only given by the principal breeders’. Most prices were between one and ten guineas, and supposing a grazier ‘paid the top rate of 10 Guineas and that ram served 100 ewes or even gets 100 rams – the cost of getting amounts to no more than 2s. a head’.¹⁷

¹⁵ NRO, ZCU 1, ‘George Culley’s Tour into Leicestershire’, sv. 4 [Oct.] 1765, pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, p. 32; Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, p. 426; N. Scarfe (ed), *A Frenchman’s year in Suffolk. French impressions of Suffolk life in 1784* (Suffolk Record Society, 30, 1988), p. 151; NRO, ZCU 9, George Culley, Dishley, to his brother, Matthew, sv. 3 [Jan. 1785], pr. Orde, *Culley travel journals and letters*, pp. 225–6; Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, p. 427; Young, *Farmers tour*, I, p. 112.

¹⁶ [Young], ‘Month’s tour’, pp. 594–5; J. Monk, *Gen-*

eral View of the agriculture of the county of Leicester with observations on the means of their improvement (London, 1794), p. 29; Robinson Library, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Misc Mss 7, Robert Bakewell to George Culley, 8 Feb. 1787, 18 Nov. 1789, printed in Pawson, *Bakewell*, pp. 108, 146; *Annals of Agriculture* 16 (1791), pp. 589–90.

¹⁷ NRO, ZCU 9, George Culley, Dishley, to his brother, Matthew, 18 Nov. 1784; *ibid.*, [20 Oct. 1784], pr. Orde, *Culley travel journals and letters*, pp. 199, 188; Marshall, *Rural Economy*, I, pp. 431, 428–9.

V

Despite high prices he was receiving, Bakewell's finances proved to be insecure. In 1776 Bakewell suffered a major disaster when a Commission of Bankruptcy was issued against him. According to one source it was caused by the failure of certain customers to pay for the animals hired, in particular a number of Scottish and Irish debtors. Others have suggested his legendary hospitality was to blame, for there was no inn at Dishley for visitors who came to see his farm. Although the bad debts of some of his more distant customers may finally have proved critical, it is clear his finances had been very insecure for five or more years before his bankruptcy. In 1771 a visitor noted that Bakewell had been run very low, to the extent that a number of his detractors in the neighbourhood had given out that he was bankrupt. He had already mortgaged the paternal estate at Sweptstone for £500 in 1770. Though he survived on that occasion, the tremendous overheads arising from his experiments, together with the losses from bad debts and possibly disease, meant that his finances were precarious. Furthermore, he lacked the resources of a major landowner, such as Coke of Holkham, to withstand any serious losses. There is also evidence that he was guilty of extravagance, even mismanagement. George Culley following a conversation with Samuel Huskinson of Croxton during a visit to Dishley in 1765, concluded that 'Mr B[akewell] employs more men than he has any occasion for, he is without doubt at a most consumed expence, I suppose [he] pays more money in wages than rent'. Six years later Culley noted that Bakewell carried on his farming with 'surprising order and regularity', but he thought it 'rather to be admired than imitated'. Bakewell's annual tours, certainly in later years, were also expensive.¹⁸

Although Bakewell's Commission of Bankruptcy was issued in June 1776, the settlement of his affairs was unreasonably protracted. Part of his stock was originally offered for sale in March 1777, but nothing was apparently sold. In April 1778 one of his creditors, John Smellie of Nottingham, complained that although a dividend of 10s. *od.* had been promised in September 1777 and a further 6s. *od.* in May 1778, nothing had in fact been paid. This apparently prompted notice of the auction of part of Bakewell's livestock at Nottingham in July 1778, but it was not actually sold until March 1779 and then at Dishley. A ten-year old stallion was sold for 140 Guineas and a bull for 130, but it was acknowledged that 'notwithstanding the seeming high prices these articles sold for, many capital judges are of opinion they were remarkably cheap'. In August 1779 all his rams, over 100 in total, were offered for sale. This, however, still did not complete the disposal of his assets. Not until nearly two years later was the remainder of the stock and lease of Dishley Grange offered for sale. Again little apparently happened, and in June 1783 the long-suffering Smellie placed a further advertisement in the *Leicester Journal* complaining that the assignees had decided to dispose of all of Bakewell's stock by Lady Day 1780,

¹⁸ Scarfe (ed.), *Frenchman's year in Suffolk*, p. 151; Pawson, *Bakewell*, p. 41; [John Holt of Walton near Liverpool], 'The Dishley farm', *Gentleman's Mag.* 63 (ii) (1793), p. 793; [John Lawrence], *Necrology, being memoirs of the lives of eminent and extraordinary characters* (London, 1805), pp. 202–3; 'Observations made at Mr Bakewell's, in 1771', *Annals of Agriculture* 28 (1797), p. 592; NRO, ZCU 1, 'Journal of a tour by George Culley ... 1771', sv. 23 [Jun. 1771], pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, p. 67; LRO, 1 D 32/136, 'Abstract of Title of an estate at Sweptstone mortgaged by Robt Bakewell to Mrs Elizabeth Aston' (1774); NRO, ZCU 1, 'George Culley's tour into Leicestershire', 29 Sept. 1765, sv. 19 [October], pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, p. 37.

yet in a patient expectation of an equal distribution, the creditors have waited above seven years, since the interest of their money, lent on Mr Bakewell's simple securities, terminated; but to this day they have not received eight shillings in the pound, towards the payment of their principal.¹⁹

After a meeting of creditors at Loughborough it was agreed to replace the existing individuals acting in the Commission. Bakewell was fortunate to have been previously associated with four of the five assignees of his bankrupt estate. John Ashworth of Daventry, son of the celebrated nonconformist tutor, was a former pupil; Samuel Huskinson of Croxton was Bakewell's companion on his early Midland tours; William Bentley, the first regular banker in Leicester, was a fellow Presbyterian and treasurer of the Great Meeting congregation in that town; and Henry Walker of Thurmaston, a breeder and grazier, who was also associated with Bakewell. The fifth figure was William Hodges, another banker of Leicester. An examination of the original assignees suggests some reasons for the inordinate delay. Bentley was too old to travel far from home, while Huskinson was said to be rather infirm and not competent to undertake the administration of the estate on his own. Ashworth kept a large and busy inn on the Chester road at Daventry, nearly 40 miles from Dishley. In addition, both Walker and Hodges were subsequently declared bankrupt. Despite the change of assignees, Bakewell suffered no further disposals of his stock, following the earlier enforced auction of his stallions and bulls in March 1779, and he kept the lease of Dishley Grange. Bakewell appears to have owed the satisfactory outcome of his bankruptcy, which left his estate and experimental breeding stock largely intact, to the support of his friends and admirers in the world of agriculture. Sometime before 1784 Bakewell appealed for financial help to enable him to continue his life-long experiments. Over £1000 was raised and the subscribers included the Dukes of Rutland and Devonshire, the Earls of Hoptoun and Middleton, the leading agricultural patron Lord Sheffield, as well as such intimate associates of Bakewell as Thomas Paget. The final details of Bakewell's bankruptcy were still not resolved as late as August 1789.²⁰

Bakewell's financial difficulties at first sight seem surprising in view of the considerable sums he demanded and received for letting his stock, but he was originally made bankrupt before his prices reached their highest levels. Moreover, the overheads for managing his experimental farm and improved flocks must have been extraordinary. As Culley explained to his brother in 1784,

Some people say Mr B will not be rich still without he makes [£]2,000 per an[um] of the letting scheme, and his stock in feeding etc. and 500 of corn, because they say the riding expenses is 500 at least with sending out tups. Housekeeping 500, labour 500 at least, I suppose more, and rent 500, therefore, without he makes more than 2,000 he can save nothing.

Letting tups or other animals could be a most uncertain business. Although Thomas Paget's

¹⁹ Commission of Bankruptcy issued 3 June 1776, *Gentleman's Mag.*, 46 (1776), p. 531; *Leicester J.*, 1 Mar. 1777, 25 Apr., 12 Sept. 1778, 6 Mar., 3 Apr., 1779, 3 Feb. 1781, 7 Jun. 1783.

²⁰ PRO, B1/74, pp. 202–4, 101–2 (1783); /73, pp. 5–6;

Pawson, *Bakewell*, pp. 181–3, 175; Nottingham University Library, Manuscripts Department, MS24a, printed appeal from Robert Bakewell with subscription list and manuscript additions.

prices for tups let show an overall rise between 1784 and 1794, his actual income fluctuated widely, depending on how many tups he let or ewes were rammed. Like Bakewell, who only managed to let 20 rams in 1786, admittedly for £1000, Paget still had to maintain and feed the animals he failed to let. Other major overheads included the cost of showing, transporting stock to customers, and of buying or hiring tups to improve their own flocks. Furthermore, the flocks or herds of breeders were generally larger than those of most graziers, which led to the problem of additional winter feedstuffs, which could prove critical during periods of drought or poor harvest. Bakewell was himself seriously embarrassed by a major drought in 1771. Disease was also a major threat and could wreak havoc, destroying a life-time's work.²¹

VI

If Bakewell was so successful in satisfying his contemporary customers, which, judging from the high prices he was able to charge, he was, why have his breeds very largely disappeared? To some extent the very success of Bakewell and his fellow breeders in changing and altering the old breeds is to blame for their disappearance. One of the most dramatic losses was the longhorn breed of cattle, which, from a dominant position in late eighteenth-century England, has almost entirely vanished. While Bakewell's work with cattle, unlike his sheep, was never more than of regional importance, he did achieve a number of successes. In his new improved longhorns he succeeded in increasing the rate with which flesh was put on, thinning the hide, reducing the heavy bone structure, changing the colour and the texture of the meat. But in producing a better beast for the butcher he failed to preserve a number of important secondary attributes. The main loss was a marked reduction in the milk yield (as Culley admitted) and a fall in the fecundity of the beast. Quite why in the long-term the shorthorn triumphed so completely over the longhorn is difficult to explain. Certainly the shorthorn was a more robust beast, better able to resist the worst side-effects of improvement, more amenable to change and able to retain the all important balance between the supply of beef and supply of milk. From the 1780s a number of breeders of the shorthorn, of which the work of the Colling Brothers, Charles and Robert, is best known, were able to improve the breed, making it more compact and weighty, without any sacrifice of milking quality, and so did much to promote it as a replacement for the longhorn breed.²²

In contrast to the improved longhorn, the New Leicester or Dishley breed of sheep was known nationally, and later even internationally, as crosses. The New Leicester sheep had a number of important and widely recognised attributes. A major asset of the new breed was its propensity to early maturity, yielding 'at least cost, and in the shortest possible time, the largest weight of meat'. New Leicesters were ready for the butcher after their second shearing (at about 27 months), compared with the unimproved Lincoln which was rarely mature before its third shearing (39 months). The advantages for the grazier was considerable. In the 1830s it was

²¹ NRO, ZCU 9, George Culley to his brother Matthew, 26 Nov. 1784, pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, p. 205; LRO, DE 365/279, Paget of Ibstock MSS, Thomas Paget's account book for 'Rams', 1784–94.

²² 'Observations made at Mr Bakewell's in 1771', p. 589; R. Trow-Smith, *A History of British livestock husbandry, 1700–1900* (1959), pp. 47–9, 52–4, 236–7; E. Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution* (1976), p. 337.

calculated the early maturity of the New Leicester saved 20 per cent in production costs compared with the Cotswold. It must be admitted, though, that some farmers suggested that early slaughter was forced by the breed's deficiencies, particularly of the carcass running to fat, rather than by any considerations of profit. The breeders of the New Leicester also succeeded in reducing the proportion of offal, mainly by reducing the amount of bone, to the total carcass weight. The proportion of mutton to live weight for the New Leicester was about two-thirds compared with only about a half for the unimproved Lincoln. As a result the new breed was preferred by many butchers.²³

Unfortunately, these merits were seriously reduced by a number of major defects in the new breed. To achieve their objectives of a quickly maturing animal, the breeders of the New Leicester sacrificed the quality of meat. It was said to be 'coarse in grain' and 'somewhat insipid to the taste', though opinions varied as to whether it was inferior to the other longwool breeds. The major criticism concerned the excess of fat, indeed the New Leicester had a tendency not merely to fatten quickly, but to run to fat if matured too long. Even Culley admitted that because of the amount of fat 'to weak appetites it is not so inviting as leaner mutton', but he maintained that the main consumers, the miner, the woolcomber and the nailer, showed a marked preference for fatty to lean mutton. In addition there is evidence that prices for tallow rose faster than meat prices until undermined by cheap imports. In reality the poor and the labouring classes could not be particular about quality. One manufacturer considered the amount of fat provided by the New Leicester an advantage for this very reason. Bakewell characteristically replied that 'I do not breed mutton for gentlemen, but for the public'. Furthermore, contrary to Bakewell's stated objectives, the New Leicester carried a greater proportion of mutton on the forequarters, rather than the more valuable hindquarters, and because it was a smaller, more compact animal, a further criticism concerned the size of the joints, which were considered too small to satisfy the growing size of families. The New Leicester also suffered from the hereditary problem of a low fecundity rate, inevitable as a result of the degree of inbreeding. Culley admitted that it was rare for more than a third of the breed's ewes to give birth to twins, and triplets were almost unknown. The situation did improve, but the New Leicesters remained less prolific than other breeds. This was a serious drawback to graziers who depended on rearing lambs for sale. In-breeding also caused other defects. The breed was considered 'delicate and unhealthy', and unable to bear exposure to poor weather conditions. There are even accounts of jackets being provided. The increase in carcass weight also reduced the mobility of the New Leicester. George Culley was rather shocked to be told by one farmer that 'the fattest sheep he saw were at Mr Codd's of Bakewell's kind, but said they were little, waddling toads'.²⁴

²³ Trow-Smith, *History of British livestock husbandry*, p. 59; LRO, DE 2280/1, Bakewell, Dishley, to John Baker Holroyd, East Grinstead, 17 Dec. 1772; Perkins, *Sheep Farming*, pp. 44–5.

²⁴ Pitt, *General View*, p. 253; Kerridge, *Agricultural Revolution*, pp. 324–5; Culley, *Observations*, pp. 125–6; A. K. Copus, 'Changing markets and the development of sheep breeds in Southern England, 1750–1900', *AgHR* 37 (1989), pp. 37–8; Editor, 'Ten day tour', pp. 478–9;

J. A[nstie], *A letter to the Secretary of the Bath Agriculture Society, on the subject of a premium for the improvement of British wool* (London, 1791), p. v; R. M. Hartwell, *The Industrial Revolution and economic growth* (1972), p. 332; Redhead *et al.*, *Observations on the different breeds of sheep*, p. 95; Perkins, *Sheep farming*, p. 47; NRO, ZCU 9, George Culley, Sawton, to his son Matthew, 10 Oct. 1784, pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, pp. 182–3.

The main controversy surrounding the deficiencies of the New Leicesters concerned the quality and quantity of wool. The substantial gains made in the carcass weight were made at the expense of the wool yields. Compared with unimproved breeds, the average fleece weight was noticeably lower. Both Bakewell and Culley, among other breeders, doubted that carcass weight could be increased while maintaining wool yields. Bakewell is alleged to have gone so far as to say that 'it would be desirable to grow sheep without wool, and confine attention to the carcass exclusively'. There has, however, been a tendency to ignore the relative returns available during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from mutton and wool. After the 1780s wool prices fell as cotton became the country's staple export, while the increasing demand from urban and manufacturing populations raised the price of mutton. The demand for various types of woollen textile also changed. Woollen goods, which used short wools, suffered severe competition after the late eighteenth century from fine continental short wools, such as Merino. In contrast the demand for worsteds, using the longwools that the New Leicesters and other Midland sheep produced, increased considerably. At the same time selective breeding and changes in livestock farming, particularly the use of artificial grasses for forage, such as turnips and coleseed, led to alterations in meat and fleece. These changes were fortuitous since 'the carcass of the sheep proved more adaptable in the hands of the scientific breeders than the fleece, and a larger carcass inevitably meant longer, heavier and coarser wool'. This change in the fleece was to prove a boon as longwools were unique to Britain, unlike the fine shortwools which were subject to competition and the prices affected accordingly. In concentrating upon wool, Bakewell was clearly responding to changes in demand. The major defects of the New Leicesters, especially their poor fecundity and inferior meat quality, a weakness shared by the improved Midlands Longhorn cattle, together with the subsidiary but important consideration of low milk or wool yields, helped to ensure that these new breeds failed to survive in their pure form as modern breeds. The Midland longhorn has disappeared, but the remarkable powers of the New Leicester in the 'quality of imparting rapid and early fleshing and a general thriftiness to its progeny' was in crossing with other breeds to prove an enduring success.²⁵

VII

Considering the serious defects of his improved livestock, defects which his critics were not slow to note, how did Bakewell manage to maintain not only his standing with contemporaries, as reflected in the prices he was able to obtain, but also his historical reputation? Individuals such as John Ellman of Glynde in Sussex, whose achievement in refashioning the Southdown shortwool sheep from the 1780s was of great importance, have received nothing like the same recognition. One clear explanation is that Bakewell achieved much of his fame with his stock as a result of his success in publicising his new Leicester breeds. He was above all a pre-eminent publicist. It has been suggested that Bakewell was fortunate to attract the enthusiastic notice of agricultural commentators, such as Arthur Young, who established his reputation. Yet Bakewell already had a national reputation before Young first published an account of his farm

²⁵ John Luccock, *The nature and properties of wool illustrated: with a description of the English fleece* (Leeds, 1805), pp. 187, 199, 205; Culley, *Observations*, p. 174; Hartwell, *Industrial Revolution*, pp. 312, 317, 321, 326, 329.

in 1771, indeed Young stated that he received his first introduction to Bakewell in 1769 from the Marquis of Rockingham. As early as 1764 Bakewell had taken on a pupil from Northumberland, George Culley, who spent a year with him. Even before this date Bakewell's work appears to have been known in Northumberland. The Culleys later recorded that they hired their first tup from Bakewell in 1763. George Culley thought as early as 1765 that 'for value few or none are equal' to Bakewell in the quality of their livestock. An important factor in establishing Bakewell's early reputation appears to have been the extensive tours he undertook, and indeed maintained throughout his life. In 1784, for example, two young Frenchmen, sons of the Duc de Rochfoucauld, met Bakewell in Suffolk at the end of a tour of three or four hundred miles that the latter had made into Lincolnshire and East Anglia with Culley. In 1786 Young recorded meeting Bakewell several times in London.²⁶

Of equal if not greater importance were the visits made to Dishley by writers and aspiring improvers. It is clear that Bakewell ran Dishley like an experimental farm, and not merely for his own satisfaction, but as a showpiece for his methods of farming and to encourage and influence others.

At Dishley, Mr Bakewell has improved a considerable tract of poor cold land, beyond anything I ever saw, or could have conceived, by this same mode of improvement;- and, ever ready to communicate his knowledge to the public, he has left proof pieces in different parts of his meadows, in order to convince people of the great importance and utility of this kind of improvement:- particularly, in one part he has been at pains to divide a rood of ground into twenty equal divisions, *viz.* two perches in each piece. It is so contrived that they can water the first, and leave the second unwatered; or miss the first, and water the second; and so on through all the 20 divisions; by which contrivance, you have the fairest and most unequivocal proofs of the good effects of improving ground by watering. And as Mr Bakewell is so kind as shew this experimental part to any gentleman, the curious, and those that have leisure, to visit this extraordinary place, where they will see many things worthy their attention and inspection besides watering meadows.

Bakewell also stocked other breeds of animal for comparison. Young noted in 1786 that Bakewell kept most British breeds of sheep, mainly to enable comparisons to be made of their feeding abilities, but they included breeds from Iceland and even the Cape. He also had a few shorthorns as 'patches' for comparative purposes or as foils to set off his own breeds. He had a 'museum' of pieces of outstanding animals in pickle, part of a neck of mutton or rump of beef belonging to a celebrated beast. He also experimented with crops, particularly turnips and

²⁶ S. Farrant, 'John Ellman of Glynde in Sussex', *AgHR* 26 (1978), pp. 77–88; [Young], *Husbandry of three celebrated farmers*, p. 4; D. J. Rowe, 'The Culleys, Northumberland farmers, 1767–1813', *AgHR* 19 (1979), p. 156; S. Macdonald, 'The role of the individual in agricultural change: the example of George Culley of Fenton, Northumberland' in H. S. A. Fox and R. A. Butlin (eds), *Change in the countryside: essays on rural England, 1500–1900* (Institute of British Geographers Special Publication, 10, 1979), pp. 8, 12, 14; NRO, ZCU 33, Pedigree of M. & G. Culley's tups, 1797; ZCU 1, 'George Culley's tour into Leicestershire', sv. 4 [Oct. 1765], pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, p. 32; Scarfe (ed.), *Frenchman's year in Suffolk*, p. 149; ZCU 9, George Culley, Bury St Edmunds, to Matthew Culley, 23 Dec. 1784, pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, pp. 221; Young, 'Ten day tour', p. 453; *Annals of Agriculture*, 15 (1790), p. 293.

cabbages, and with farm implements. Bakewell was not above a little gamesmanship. He purchased an ‘outstandingly ugly’ specimen of the Lincoln sheep for exhibition and comparison with his own stock at Dishley.²⁷ As a consequence, Dishley became a place to visit for the curious traveller interested in the modern developments of the age.

Bakewell also took positive steps to ensure that he would have an audience which would appreciate his beasts. He organised tup open days, with the viewing of carefully prepared displays of beasts. His reputation was also greatly served by newspaper controversies like Bakewell’s well-publicised dispute with Charles Chaplin of Tathwell, a leading breeder of the Lincoln sheep. Bakewell was a skilled controversialist and not above casting aspersions on other breeders or their stock. He referred to the Lincoln breed of sheep as ‘a barrowful of garbage’. Moreover, the publicity of high prices helped to fuel the ‘Dishley craze’ in the newspapers and periodicals. As Culley noted, ‘people here are all infected with that kind of enthusiasm which [it] is perhaps lucky we were *innoculated* with long ago’. On the other hand his behaviour and personal idiosyncrasies at times helped to defeat his objectives. Many commentators were particularly critical of his secrecy, though they were not realistic if they expected Bakewell to reveal his ideas and methods. His manner of showing beasts individually rather than together, thereby preventing proper comparison, caused much offence. He also restricted his ram-showing days, particularly in later years, refusing to show his stock to casual visitors. The latter was supposedly due to the malign influence of the Dishley Ram Society.²⁸

The role of the Dishley Society remains controversial, and the details about the setting up of the Society are unclear. It has been seen by historians as a device used by Bakewell to ramp or maintain the prices at which his rams were let. Although it is generally claimed that the Society was established in 1783, evidence from the earliest surviving minutes and Bakewell’s correspondence with Culley suggests a later date, probably 1789. In June Bakewell told Culley that he was thinking of

a plan in which some ten more or less of my friends may concerned as a company and give me such a sum as shall be agreed upon for the use of all my rams they taking what they chuse for their own use and having what I can let all the others for.

The Society in fact took on a different form from that originally proposed by Bakewell, and in November 1789 he told Culley that progress in setting up the Society had been slow. ‘For more than 12 months past meetings have been held at different places and very little done for want of unanimity’, but the meeting on 13 November, the earliest recorded in the minute book,

achieved more than I expected would have been done considering the great variety of

²⁷ Editor, ‘Ten days tour’, pp. 482–3, 490–1, 478. Throsby, the county antiquarian, provided a similar description following a visit, John Throsby, *The supplementary volume to the Leicestershire Views: containing a series of excursions in the year 1790* (London, 1790), pp. 410–13; Culley, *Observations*, p. 143. Redhead *et al.*, *Observations on the different breeds of sheep*, pp. 34–5; ‘Observations made at Mr Bakewell’s in 1771’, p. 591; Thomas Boys, ‘Agricultural minutes’, *Annals of*

Agriculture, 19 (1793), pp. 129–30, 132–3; [Holt], ‘Dishley Farm’, p. 793; A. Young, ‘Sheep controversy between Messrs Chaplin and Bakewell’, *Annals of Agriculture*, 10 (1788), p. 560.

²⁸ Perkins, *Sheep farming*, p. 48; *Cambridge Intelligencer*, 19 Oct. 1793, 12 Sep. 1795; NRO, ZCU 9, George Culley, Dishley, to his brother Matthew, 24 Oct. 1784, pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, pp. 188–90.

opinions that have hitherto prevailed and want of confidence in each other being suspicious that each wanted to promote his own private interest without so much regard as ought to be paid to public good.

The earliest surviving minutes are dominated by the recording of new rules for the Society, which suggests it had only recently been founded. It is therefore difficult to see the Society as having a major role in helping to establish Bakewell's high fees, since he had already achieved his greatest prices by that date. It also is clear from the rules, which regulated the showing and letting of Bakewell's rams in favour of the Society's members, that they were more for maintaining prices for the benefit of Bakewell's fellow breeders rather than for Bakewell himself. Hence William Marshall comment in 1790, that the breeders who gave the greatest sums 'were playing a high game – running a hard race – for the pride and profit of being leader, when Mr Bakewell is not'.²⁹

VIII

Any final assessment of Bakewell's achievements is necessarily mixed. The most recent study of heredity and animal breeding by Nicholas Russell concluded that the most dramatic breed improvements took place during the eighteenth century, but cast doubt on Bakewell's achievements in selective breeding. Despite Bakewell's emphasis upon selecting stock for growth and food conversion rates, Russell pointed out that Bakewell lacked the means to measure conversion efficiency or the genetic understanding to select for it, though Russell believed that it was the realisation of the importance of this character and the desirability of its control which was the major part of Bakewell's contribution to improved animal husbandry. Unfortunately, Bakewell and his fellow animal improvers lacked an effective means of progeny testing; the hiring of tups was only a very imperfect method. Russell concluded that it seems likely Bakewell's selection policy was based entirely on appearance, 'choosing his stock by the traditional "feel" of the Midland grazier', and that the difference between the Dishley and rival breeds was in appearance and perhaps its superior growth rate. Russell is ready to acknowledge Bakewell's achievements 'for publicising the idea of selecting stock for economic performance', but questions 'whether his actual achievements in this field were of any great significance'. Arthur Young also considered the particular merits of the Dishley stock to be of small consequence compared with the principles that Bakewell disseminated.³⁰ Bakewell's achievements in livestock breeding are therefore questioned. His longhorn cattle have disappeared and his Dishley or New Leicester sheep no longer survive as a pure breed. Nevertheless his failures can be exaggerated. The New Leicester had a number of important attributes, in particular its propensity to early maturity. They have therefore become known internationally as a highly successful cross, particularly in Australia, where the Border Leicester is the most popular longwool breed,

²⁹ Pawson, *Bakewell*, p. 73; Robinson Library, Misc Mss 7, Robert Bakewell, Spilsby, to George Culley, 23 Jun. 1789; Bakewell to Culley, 18 Nov. 1789, printed in Pawson, *Bakewell*, pp. 145, 147; Hunt, *Agricultural memoirs*, pp. 51–4. For the records of the Society, see Notting-

ham University Library, Manuscripts Department, MS 9/1, 'Papers of the Dishley Sheep Society, Leicester 1790–98'; Marshall, *Rural economy*, I, p. 431

³⁰ Russell, *Like engend'ring like*, pp. 204, 213, 215, 219, 200; Young, *Observations*, p. 6.

but the New Leicesters are also the origin of the modern longwool in Britain.

The early details of Bakewell's career are still unclear, particularly the dating of his work, and little more is likely to be uncovered. Yet enough is known to suggest the importance for Bakewell of belonging to a family of successful improving farmers working with an already improved farm. Historians recognise the importance of family and religious networks in manufacturing and trade in this period, ascribing particular importance to those involving religious dissenters. It is clear this needs to be extended to Bakewell and his cousins and fellow Presbyterians, who together formed the main group of Midland livestock breeders. Although Bakewell still tends to dominate accounts of eighteenth-century animal improvement, the contribution of the other breeders who were closely associated with him should also be acknowledged. The high prices demanded by Bakewell were prohibitive for any but the largest breeders, and so 'none but tupmen can come to Dishley'. The rest had to be content with the more diluted Dishley blood provided by the rams of Paget, Culley and the other breeders associated with Bakewell. Bakewell was responsible for the development of the New Leicester, and for the publicity associated with it, but he depended upon other breeders for stock to work with, and upon improvers like Culley, the Bishop of Llandaff and Benjamin Codd to introduce his sheep into their localities. Bakewell was undoubtedly a highly successful publicist, but he was no charlatan, and his willingness to show his model farm to visitors and to encourage the adoption of new breeds greatly helped to publicise better farming techniques and the need for farmers to pay more attention to the principles of selective breeding. As George Culley observed to his brother in 1784:

Is it not amazing that this extraordinary genius should be able to electrify so many people with the same or nearly the same degree of enthusiasm, and as it were to draw them all to one locus or point, for in fact he has convinced the unbelievers of the truth of his sheepish doctrine. I was shown some letters from Lincolnshire where they candidly confess their *errors* and mistaken opinions.³¹

³¹ NRO, ZCU 9, George Culley to his brother Matthew, 24 Oct. 1784, 4 Nov 1784, pr. Orde (ed.), *Culley travel journals and letters*, pp. 188–90, 192–5.