

Farming in Tudor Amersham

Even if they had trades, the people of Amersham would have grown crops in their own gardens or burgage plots as well as helping each other out on the strips of land that they had in the 9 or 10 fields to the south of the town. Some farm labourers would be paid to work on the church demesne on the north side, behind the church. In August and September, they would have been involved in:

- Arable farming on their strips
- Livestock farming in their burgage plots, pasture by the river and on the common up on the hill
- Vegetable and fruit growing in their gardens and burgage plots
- Bee keeping

Arable Farming

Four grains were widely cultivated during the Middle Ages: wheat, barley, rye, and oats. Of these, wheat was most valued because it had the gluten content necessary to make good bread. Barley was roasted to make malt which was used to make ale (everyone drank ale).

Harvest began in early August for the winter sown crop and in September for the spring sown crop. Ripened grain is delicate and falls easily off the stalk, so they harvested it carefully with a hand sickle, bound it into sheaves, and carefully arranged the sheaves into stacks. The stacks didn't stay out too long, but were brought indoors for winter storage. Grain was frequently stored just like that, still on the stalk, partly so it would draw up the last moisture from the stalk and become heavier, but mainly because threshing and winnowing are good indoor activities for bad weather, and would keep people warm and occupied throughout the winter.



Notice the use of the sickle for harvesting grain. A sickle is more delicate than a scythe which was used for haymaking where seed falling off was not a problem..

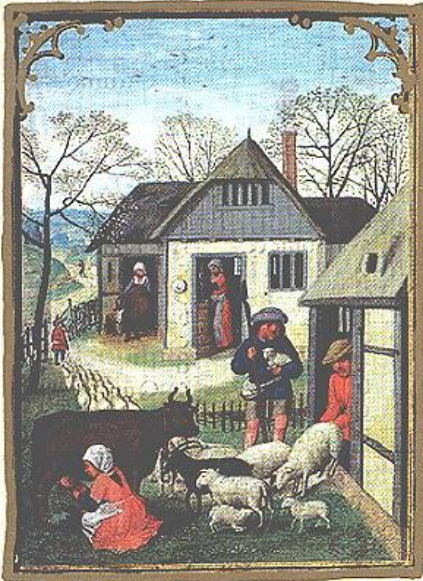
Heavy rain was feared in the summer as the crop had nearly grown and a heavy rain storm could flatten the crop and make harvesting it all but impossible.

Threshing took place in an open area of the barn where a special wooden floor was set up. Flails were used to beat the stalks, thereby causing them to shed their grain. The straw was then removed, and the grain scooped up with a wide, shallow winnowing basket. By tossing the grain into the air and fanning it, the lighter chaff (inedible husks) blew away until only the heavier grain remained. The heaviest grain fell closest to the winnower and was saved to plant next season. Grain that was to be eaten was dried in a kiln and taken in sacks to the mill.



Livestock farming

Medieval people raised cattle for milk, meat, and for use as draft animals. Cows were brought to bull in the autumn. Cows were milked twice a day, morning and evening, from April through September, when they began to run dry and were bred again.



COWS: No scientific breeding – a bull in the Middle Ages was about the size of a calf today. Grazing on common land and verges and also on meadows which were the grasslands close to streams and therefore liable to flood and no use for arable. Also occasional grazing on stubble left from crops. There was no winter feeding, so most livestock were killed and salted down in the autumn. There were no seeded pastures and no fertilizers except animal and vegetable waste and sometimes marl (lime rich clay dug out of marl pits) spread on the fallow areas. This last would probably not be available in Hamersham where we are on chalk. Available grazing was always a limiting factor in the number of cattle and sheep kept

Cows (and sheep) could also graze on stubble after harvest. They would help to fertilise the field for next year.

SHEEP: also bred in the autumn, a little later than cattle, and started dropping their lambs as early as January. Ewes were milked for human consumption as well, but the milk was not as valuable as cow's milk (and it took a lot more ewes to fill a bucket!). The sheep were sent out to pasture as soon as there was enough greenery to accommodate them, and it was important that they be marked, with notches on the ear and/or a splotch of dye on the back, since grazing land for sheep was often used in common.

OXEN: Kept for ploughing. Often villagers would join together to buy a shared team. Horses began to replace oxen as they were more versatile and cheaper.

PIGS/CHICKENS: were kept in back yards and gardens. Sows were bred in December or January and would deliver their piglets in March or April. Piglets stayed in the farmyard with their mothers until about August, when they were considered strong enough to be driven out to forage. Throughout the fall, swineherds drove the pigs out to feed upon acorns and beechnuts and to become good and plump. November 11th, Martinmas, was the traditional day to begin slaughtering hogs, although in reality most pig-killing was probably done in December. Even very poor families could usually afford to raise a pig themselves, since pigs forage so well and cost very little to feed, and the meat from that December butchering would have to last them the whole winter long.



Back of the axe for stunning animal



Pre-Black Death aristocracy ate a higher proportion of poultry and reared flocks of chickens on the demesne but after 1350 there was a tendency to eat more red meat and chicken husbandry moved to peasantry. For peasants, eggs and chicken meat was a major source of protein. **PIGEONS;** kept for food and for the droppings as manure

Growing food on the Burgage Plot or Garden



The burgage was land held by the King or Lord of the town, maintained for yearly rent. It was behind the houses.

Most peasants owned a cow, goat, pig or sheep. Most could not afford an ox which was used as a beast of burden and for ploughing. Livestock could be grazed on common land.

Cows and goats gave milk which was not usually drunk, except for the young and old, but made into butter, for cooking, and a hard cheese which kept better in the winter, when the milk was not available.

Chickens were kept for eggs.

You are likely to have fruit trees:-

- Apples called Pippins, the cooking variety called Costard- where the term costermonger derives.
- Cherry – brought to England by the Romans.
- Pear- popular variety called Warden or Warden, so pears were often called wardens.
- Plum and Damson.
- Quince- popular for pies and quince paste or jelly, if you are rich enough to have sugar.
- Medlar
- Figs were also grown.

Vegetables grown in the burgage plot will have included: Cabbage, peas, spinach, leeks, lettuce, turnips, parsnips, radishes, asparagus, Kale, Carrots – black, yellow or purple and beetroot leaves (not the root).



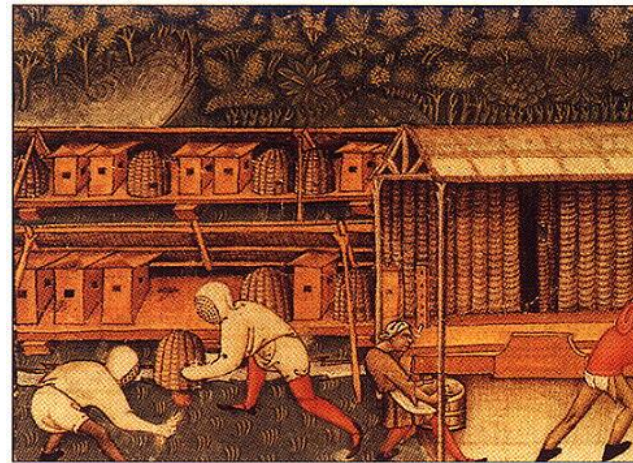
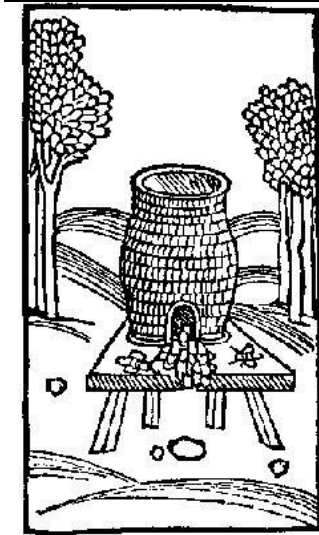
Harvesting leeks

Pulses (peas and beans) were sown as field crops in late spring. The seeds were allowed to dry completely on the plant, like our split peas, and were harvested in autumn for food. The rest of the plant could be harvested and stored for winter fodder or could be ploughed back under to enrich the soil. Other spring vegetable crops included cabbages, onions, leeks, parsnips, beets, and carrots, all of which would be ready to harvest throughout the late summer. Turnips were usually planted in August after an earlier crop had been harvested, and would be left in the soil when mature and harvested as needed into early winter

A medieval rural household would have had a smaller garden plot during the summer for herbs and salad greens. Parsley, mint, dill, fennel, chives, sage, basil, thyme, and rosemary were all in cultivation along with other plants we don't commonly eat as herbs any more, such as daisy, dandelion, nettle, and wormwood. Salad plants included lettuce, spinach, cress, borage, rocket, and primrose buds.

Beekeeping

Bees were widely kept, honey and wax being valuable commodities. Bees swarm in May, and wild swarms would be sought out and collected and transferred to homemade skeps (hives made from coiled and woven straw). The medieval beekeeper **collected the honey and wax in September**, often very clumsily and destructively killing all the bees in the process. Larger operations, such as one might find on a manor, would be better about keeping at least some of the hives alive through the winter in special apiaries built to house them.



Riddle

*I am valued by men, fetched from afar, Gleaned on the hill-slopes, gathered in groves,
In dale and on down. All day through the air, Wings bore me aloft, and brought me with cunning
Safe under roof. Men steeped me in vats. Now I have power to pummel and bind,
To cast to the earth, old man and young. Soon he shall find who reaches to seize me,
Pits force against force, that he's flat on the ground, Stripped of his strength if he cease not his folly,
Loud in his speech, but of power despoiled To manage his mind, his hands or his feet.
Now ask me my name, who can bind men on earth, And lay fools low in the light of day.*

Honey-Mead

Farm tools

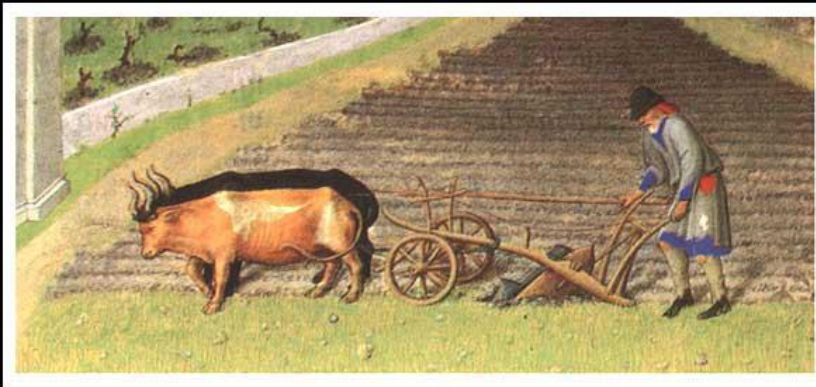
Here is the list of farm tools. (From : www.Spartacus-educational.com)

Axe, flail, harrow, haymaking fork, mouldboard plough, rake, metal tip plough, hoe, scythe, shears, sickle, spade, wheeled plough, winnowing basket, digging stick, clod breaker, and thrift.

A thrift was for making grooves in mill stones and one can be seen in the Amersham museum.



Horses beginning to replace oxen – more versatile ie to ride, carry goods to market as well as to plough; also cheaper to buy.



*My beak is bent downward, I burrow below;
I grub in the ground and go as he guides,
My gray, old master, foe of the forest. Stoop-
shouldered my warder walks at my back,
Fares through the field, urges and drives me,
Sows in my track as I sniff along.
Fetched from the wood, cunningly fitted,
Brought in a wagon, I have wondrous skill.
As I go my way on one side is green; On the
other side plain is my dark path.
Set through my back hangs a cunning spike;
Another fixed forward is fast to my head.
What I tear with my teeth falls to one side, If
he handles me right, the one who is my ruler.*

A: Plough



Harrowing = a spiked farming tool used to cover up seeds after they have been planted. Like a giant garden rake.

Haymaking using scythes

