



# Farming around Weston

The history of farming in our area is a wide subject, so this information sheet is only intended as an introduction.

What can be grown in an area depends on many factors. These include geology, climate, who owns the land and the availability of people to work it.

## Geology and weather

The Carboniferous Limestone of the Mendip Hills has been home to many industries over the years. Lime burning, mining and quarrying stone for building have all provided a living for local people.

Farming also has a long history on these uplands. The lower slopes of hills such as Worlebury were used to grow crops, while the hilltops provided grazing for livestock.



*Weston seen from Cadbury Congresbury hillfort © NotFromUtrecht*

The flat Somerset Levels are mainly formed from sediment deposited by rivers over a long period of time (known as alluvial deposits), as well as deposits of clay along the coast.

This area is prone to flooding and its usefulness for farming has varied over the years due to both human action and natural events. Much of this land is only usable today because of huge engineering projects carried out at great expense over many years.

This part of the world is officially described as "Oceanic". That means cool winters, warmer summers and precipitation (rain!) all year. It also gets quite windy, as you may have noticed.

## Land and labour

From the evidence of grain pits in the Iron Age Hillfort on Worlebury we know that the Dobunni tribe, who lived in this area at the time, grew grain. They were apparently successful enough as farmers to have enough left over to store for food, seed or both.



*One of the many storage pits at Worlebury © Tom Simpson*

Later, the Romans had vineyards around Loxton, and used the Levels for salt production. Britain overall was used to provide grain for the Roman Army in Europe, and fleeces were also exported. It is probable that both were farmed in our area.

The Norman invasion of 1066 and the Domesday Book completed in 1086 give us a list of land usage. Land was mainly allocated to the Church and a few wealthy knights. They determined what was produced.

**Here is the entry for Banwell in the Domesday Book:**

***Owned by the Bishop of Wells, formerly by Earl Harold;  
40 ploughs, 5 Slaves, 100 acres of meadow, pasture of 1 league, woodland 2.5 leagues, 2 Mills, 15 cattle, 15 Pigs, 30 Sheep, and 20 Goats.***

As can be seen, the agricultural mix was of a small sustenance-led variety. Sustenance farming (also known as subsistence farming) is where only enough food is produced to feed the farmer and their family. There is none left over to sell.

Many of the farms in North Somerset are still small and family-run today, although they are now commercial operations. Agriculture is an important part of the local economy.

Cattle have been grazing on the levels since Domesday and probably before. Cheddar cheese, named for Cheddar village where it was first produced, was made with their milk.



*Cattle grazing on the levels ©IDS photos*

Large-scale drainage of the Somerset Levels has taken place since the 1200s, possibly earlier. Drainage ditches, known in the West Country as rhynes (pronounced reens), were used as field boundaries.

Maintenance of the sea defences and the clearance of rhynes was allocated to landowners and monitored by the Commissioner of Sewers. The whole community relied on these defences and fines were imposed on those not keeping them built up and their rhynes clear.



*A rhyn near Mark on the levels ©Duncan Pepper*

Draining the Levels provided very good fertile soil for crops. These were mainly wheat, barley and rape seed, but also silage for winter animal feed. Church lands produced honey and had fishponds. However, the drainage systems and landscape of North Somerset kept fields to a small size. There are no huge fields, such as those that can be seen in Wiltshire or East Anglia.

The Black Death started in the South West in 1348, with Bristol being the first major city affected. The aftermath of this was a reduction in cereal crops being grown, and an increase in livestock. Less labour was available for harvesting, wages increased and eventually it led to the end of a system known as Serfdom.

Serfs were the lowest social class (after slaves) in medieval society. They had to stay in one area and spend some of their time working for the local landowner. They received justice and protection in return (or at least they were supposed to), and the right to farm their own small patch of land.

### Scrumpy

We cannot talk about agriculture without discussing that great Somerset product, cider!

Farmers would have planted their orchards with the varieties that suited their own tastes. Very little cider would have left the farm or village, as townspeople generally drank beer. From the early 1800s cider began to travel and, in response to this, commercial orchards and producers developed.



*A Thatchers cider orchard near Sandford ©Jonathan Billinger*

Today, producers plant their own orchards and apple varieties but will also collect the excess from small traditional ancient orchards, as this can balance the flavour. Somerset is still a major cider producer and our local brand, Thatchers of Sandford, is well-known throughout Britain.

