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Chapter 1

Introduction

William Ellis, a farmer who, for many years, lived and farmed at Little Gaddesden in Hertfordshire, is an important figure in the history of English agriculture. He wrote many books and periodicals in the 1730s, 1740s and 1750s (he claimed nineteen books in all) and was, at this time, the most prolific writer on agriculture in England. He was read not only in the British Isles but also in the American colonies and in continental Europe; some of his works were translated into German. Most were on general farming, but he also wrote on timber trees and published the first book in English devoted entirely to sheep. His book to instruct rural housewives on their duties contains much on the food and medicine of the ordinary farming community of his day. In addition, he penned what was considered at the time to be the best book on brewing.

Ellis was essentially an agricultural journalist, a relatively new occupation in his time. The agricultural journalism of Ellis's day was characterised by both articles drawn from personal observations or communications from readers and publication in the form of weekly or monthly periodicals. Ellis's *Modern Husbandman* appeared in twelve monthly parts, later being collected as a multi-volume work; two other books, *Agriculture Improv'd* and *New Experiments in Husbandry*, began life as monthly periodicals but both ran for only two months. There were other writers in Ellis's time producing agricultural periodicals, most notably Richard Bradley and Stephen Switzer. Ellis stands out from his rivals by the immediacy of his writing and the content of his works. He wrote about his own farm, that of his neighbours, those in his county of Hertfordshire and the way agriculture was carried on in many other parts of England. He brought into his books his subsidiary business as a supplier of agricultural instruments, seeds, plants, trees and fowls, peppering the text with subtle advertisements for his wares. Ellis got most of his copy directly from farmers, their wives and others living in the countryside, by interviewing them. Ellis's contemporary and rival Richard Bradley also produced periodicals in monthly parts and reported on current agricultural topics, but his works relied more on correspondence than farm visits. Switzer – seedsman, nurseryman and garden designer – did travel

extensively on business and met with many farmers, but his and Bradley's works were aimed squarely at the gentry and aristocracy.

The content of a late work by Ellis – the *Country Housewife's Family Companion* of 1750, a new edition of which was produced in 2000 – exemplifies his discursive style of writing.¹ Ostensibly a manual of country living for farmers' wives, the book is full of material for the social historian: accounts of the doings of labourers and farmers, beggars and travellers, wives and maids, as well as the gentry and aristocracy. Ellis found it hard to stick to the topic about which he was supposed to be writing, going off at tangents to relay a piece of gossip, to tell of a notable success or disaster of a neighbour in farming, household management, cookery or medicine. In this and his other books he was opinionated and moralistic, condemning rural vice, theft and the sharp practices of shopkeepers. Ellis, in all his publications, was clearly writing about his own life as well as that of the ordinary people of his village of Little Gaddesden and his county of Hertfordshire. Moreover, he travelled extensively on business in southern England, the West Country, the Midlands and East Anglia half a century before that other great agricultural commentator and traveller Arthur Young. His books contain the fruits of these travels. In short, he absorbed information from whoever he encountered who could provide it and he poured it out in his books: both information relevant to his subject and 'all those random ridiculous details which have so much disgraced his page', which were the despair of the editor who produced a two-volume synopsis of his agricultural writings some years after his death.²

In contrast to other agricultural writers of his time, journalists included, he broke free of the need to allude to, or begin a topic with, reference to classical authors. A book written by a contemporary, Edward Lisle, has a long quotation from Columella on its title page and the first line of the text on arable land begins: 'Palladius has laid down the following rule'.³ Richard Bradley invokes Xenophon on the second page of his dedication of the *Country Housewife and Lady's Director* to 'The Ladies of Great Britain', and by page nine he summarises the opinions of a number of classical authors on the lifespan of pigeons!⁴ The only mentions of such authors in Ellis's books are reproduced from John Evelyn's *Sylva*, the text of which he plunders for the second part of his *Timber Tree Improved*. Indeed, Ellis specifically condemns 'meer Scholars, who, because Virgil does not mention it, by no Means will

1 William Ellis, *The Country Housewife's Family Companion*, 1750 (Totnes, 2000); references in this work refer to page numbers in the 2000 edition of this book.

2 [William Ellis], *Ellis's Husbandry, Abridged and Methodized* (London, 1772), vol. I, pp. iv–v.

3 Edward Lisle, *Observations on Husbandry* (London, 1757), pp. i, 23.

4 Richard Bradley, *The Country Housewife and Lady's Director* (London, 1736), pp. A4v, 9.

allow a Thing to be valuable, tho' there be a Thousand Improvements at this Day in Practice, that he never had the Knowledge of'.⁵

The wealth of information, especially his own, that can be extracted from Ellis's books on farming is augmented by the report of a visit to Ellis in Little Gaddesden by the Swedish botanist Pehr Kalm. Kalm, who was born in 1716, was a graduate who studied under the botanist Carl Linnaeus and joined the estate of a wealthy Swede, Baron Sten Carl Bielke, under whose patronage he continued his academic research. Kalm obtained funds to go to America and he came to England en route, arriving in the winter of 1748 and spending some months here. Living in London, he made excursions to the countryside and recorded both the native flora and what he saw of farming practices. Crucially for us, between 25 March and 15 April 1748 he stayed at Little Gaddesden.⁶

Kalm kept a voluminous diary and on 25 March records:

This morning, I set out on a journey at the request and expense of Vice President Baron Bielke to Mr. Ellis who lives at Little Gaddesden in Hertfordshire. Mr. Ellis is a man who for his practical understanding of rural economy and even more for his writings in the same science merits attention.

The main reason for the journey was to see the various farm implements Ellis advertised in his books and to obtain 'models of the most useful of them'.⁷ In this objective Kalm was largely disappointed, seeing very few of the new implements in action and finding that Ellis had them made on demand rather than ready and waiting. Kalm did, however, have several long conversations with Ellis and also talked at length with other farmers at Little Gaddesden. These farmers told him that, despite the emphasis in Ellis's books on new farming methods, he did not, on the whole, farm differently from his neighbours and they did not consider him to be a particularly good farmer. It is clear from Kalm's diary that he did not warm to Ellis and that Ellis was in turn irritated by Kalm. This must be borne in mind when reading Kalm's account of his visit. Nonetheless, this independent observation of Ellis and his farming activities is an extremely valuable addition to the information we have about Ellis at Little Gaddesden, which otherwise comes solely from the pen of Ellis himself.⁸

5 See below, p. 141; William Ellis, *New Experiments in Husbandry, for the Month of April* (London, 1736), Preface. Vigil's *Georgics* was still regarded as a valuable agricultural textbook by many in the eighteenth century.

6 W.R. Mead, *Pehr Kalm in The Chilterns* (Aston Clinton, 2003), pp. 7–15.

7 Mead, *Pehr Kalm*, p. 34.

8 Vicars Bell, *To Meet Mr. Ellis* (London, 1956), pp. 147–53.

Ellis has been dismissed by many writers as a minor figure both in English agricultural literature and as a commentator on rural life in mid-eighteenth-century England, but on both counts he has much to offer historians. This book begins with a review of his life, or as much of it as can be discovered, for we have virtually no details of his boyhood and adolescence, and only sketchy information on his adult life before he arrived in Little Gaddesden and started farming. Some false assumptions, however, about these early years have been corrected. The farming section will concentrate on his own farming and that of his neighbours, based on what he tells us in his books, augmented by the diary entries of Pehr Kalm. It will also cover some of the agriculture he found on his travels around England. Some may ask – why devote so much of the book to obsolete farming practices? As well as answering that history is inherently interesting, we may observe that farming is at present undergoing major changes as it comes to terms with such challenges as global warming and carbon capture, food security, biodiversity and soil exhaustion. We may smile at Ellis's attempts to build a reliable seed drill and his advocacy of other horse-drawn machines, but he was thinking along the right lines: where would English farming be today without row cultivation and mechanised weed control, fertiliser spreading and harvesting? And what of his numerous comments on such farming activities as maintaining soil quality by crop rotations, marling, fertilising and the like? At the time this book was written, the British government was preparing to announce a complete overhaul of government subsidies to farmers to replace those removed following Britain's withdrawal from the EU. The old emphasis on maximising output will be swept away and new support for farmers will be conditional on improving the environment. We could well find that some of the farming improvements observed, implemented or recommended by Ellis will again be applicable to British farming.

As well as agriculture he was involved in various non-farming enterprises, which will be reviewed along with his writings on country food, medicine and veterinary matters. An attempt will be made to discern his character and religious opinions and to assess his contribution to the local government of his parish. We will consider how he viewed the changes in English agriculture and economy during his years as a farmer and writer. His fluctuating posthumous reputation will be discussed. Finally, a bibliography of his books is appended, providing a brief synopsis of each.⁹

9 Mead, *Pehr Kalm*, pp. 34–139; Bell, *Mr. Ellis*, pp. 14–33, 55–64, 88–98, 138–56. In discussing his own farming, I have tried to use instances in Ellis's books where he specifically states that *he* has carried out a farming operation, or Kalm has observed him doing it.