

Now that considerations of site suitability are more important than nearness to a market, the Newent area of Gloucestershire is emerging as one with considerable horticultural potential

*Lifting leeks grown by the
L.S.A. at Newent*



Newent and the L.S.A.

A developing horticultural area

W. J. Wright

THE NEWENT area, which extends to about 20 sq. miles, is shaped like an inverted triangle, with its base roughly along the line Dymock—Bromsberrow and its apex at Huntley. The A.L.S. Research Group in its Survey of Potential Horticultural Areas in the South-West, carried out by Dr. J. O'Connor, reported favourably and in considerable detail on the area. The bulk of the soils are sandy loams and, given suitable treatment, are ideal for intensive vegetable growing or the culture of top and soft fruit crops. The area is crossed by a number of valleys, particularly that of the River Leadon, and parts of the area rise to more than 300 feet above sea level so that, except for a few situations, the risk from spring frosts is not severe.

Compared with say Devon or Cornwall, Gloucestershire is not an early county, but the 6 deg. C difference in average temperature in January between Cheltenham and Penzance steadily reduces as the year advances; by early summer the mean figures are higher at Cheltenham. Although on average there are about four hours bright sunshine a day over much of the county, the Newent area is not so well favoured as Worthing or Penzance, and thus the production of very early tomatoes is not attempted.

The average rainfall is around 28–30 inches, and for shallow rooted crops grown to a soil moisture deficit of one inch the average irrigation need is at least 4 inches. Ample supplies of water are available from local stations.

Newent has a great reputation for cider and perry, dating back to before the Norman Conquest. The trees are mainly in mixed farm orchards but have not contributed markedly to farm incomes since the war. The demand for mixed fruit by the factories at Much Marcle and Hereford has fallen off sharply in favour of fruit from trees of true cider varieties. At one time Newent had the largest acreage of perry pears in the country, but now there are less than 1,000 acres. With no recent plantings to carry on the tradition, the acreage will decline still further.

Plums continue to be an important crop; hundreds of tons of a local culinary variety, Blaisdon Red, leave the southern part of the Newent area in most seasons.

L.S.A. move in

Vegetables for home consumption were being grown on enclosed common land at Gorsley, west of Newent, in the middle of the last century, but since there was no nearby market, few were grown on a commercial scale around Newent itself until just before the first world war. The real turning point came in 1935, when the Land Settlement Association obtained some 400 acres of land on the north side of Newent to establish an estate. Time has proved the wisdom of the choice of a south-facing slope on freely draining sandy loam, often of considerable depth.

This estate was one of eighteen established by the L.S.A. in various parts of the country between 1935 and 1939 as an experiment to see whether, and on what lines, industrial unemployed could be settled on the land on smallholdings. In the case of the Newent Estate the tenants came mainly from the north-east.

The recruitment of unemployed families ended with the outbreak of the second world war, and after the war the holdings were designated under the Agriculture Act 1947 as statutory smallholdings. Thus future applicants were required to have a minimum of five years' full-time agricultural or horticultural experience. However, the unique system of contractual co-operation that has always been a feature of the L.S.A. scheme was continued. Under this scheme a variety of services is provided for the smallholding tenants and the tenants are required, as part of their contract of tenancy, to use them. They include cultivation services from pool machinery on each estate, bulk purchase of farming requisites, propagation of plants and the marketing of all produce.

Development at Newent since the war has been truly remarkable, particularly considering that two-thirds of the holdings used almost exclusively for intensive horticulture are only about 3 acres in size and the average of

all the holdings is no more than 5 acres. A good deal of credit for this success must go to Arthur Piper, who was transferred from another estate to be manager there in 1947 and remained until his retirement in 1963. He saw the potential of the land, set about building up organic matter by buying local farmyard manure, and began developing markets for the steadily increasing volume of produce. In those earlier days tenants grew a wide range of crops, including early potatoes, lettuce, runner beans, cabbage and tomatoes. All were carefully packed and began to set a new standard for presentation on the South Wales markets.

Under glass

Since then, to meet increasing costs, the Estate cropping has gradually changed to focus on the high output crops. Individual tenants, relieved of marketing worries, can specialize in the production of fewer crops. Thus, on many holdings the outdoor crops are restricted to self-blanching celery, glass-raised and transplanted lettuce and runner beans all capable of producing a net output of over £500 per acre. To the original 1,750 sq. ft of heated landlord's glass, tenants have added an average of around 10,000 sq. ft of Dutch light (static or mobile) structures, often heated by warm air stoves. These are producing up to £160 per 1,000 sq. ft from a rotation comprising chrysanthemums, lettuce and tomatoes.

The greater part of most tenants' income is derived from glasshouse crops; fewer and fewer are keeping livestock. In spite of the slope of the land, mobile glasshouses are popular. A favourite rotation covers five crops. Lettuce is planted under the house in January and uncovered in late February. This is then planted up with a second lettuce crop which is matured without moving the house. A fortnight to three weeks before lettuce cutting is due to be completed, tomato plants from the central propagating unit (supplying over 250,000 tomato plants to tenants each season) are planted into bituminized cardboard pots. These are stood 'pot thick' in the heated glasshouse in a compost prepared *in situ* from the loam in the house. Subsequently the tomatoes are moved into the mobile (or static Dutch light structure) to give an earlier tomato crop than would otherwise be possible.



Planting out early summer cauliflower



A winter lettuce crop growing under a Dutch light structure

The other two sites are planted up with October and December flowering chrysanthemums. These succeed only if the first severe frost is delayed until the end of October.

Outdoors

Similar intensive methods are applied to outside crops. Economic pressure has forced tenants to forego rotation—so far without serious consequences, so long as organic matter is returned to the soil and crops are protected against pests and diseases.

The acreage of early potatoes has fallen abruptly in recent years. Although first diggings were competitive with early areas elsewhere, other crops, such as self-blanching celery and early summer lettuce, have been found more profitable. For the same reason early summer cabbage and cauliflower are not grown as much as formerly.

The Association itself farms 65 acres, not used for holdings, and produces vegetables to even out the supply to the markets, plus black currants and other soft fruit. Strawberries, mainly Cambridge Favourite, are grown as a two-year crop, with good yield in the maiden year if the runners are planted in August or early September.

Cropping on the L.S.A. Estate has been given in some detail because this sets the pattern for cropping on similar holdings in the area, a number of which have been started by ex-tenants. Fewer tenants now are finding it possible to obtain holdings of their own compared with the immediate post-war period, and new tenants are also having to find rather more than the £500 originally required as their equity in the holding. Because more glass is being erected as tenants' fixtures, the initial capital needed to enter a holding is often nearer £3,000 than £2,000, of which the tenant is required to provide a minimum of a quarter. The balance can then be borrowed on a medium-term Government loan.

Fruit north of Newent

Developments in vegetable growing here have been matched by progress in fruit growing in the surrounding area, especially north of Newent. A

considerable area of apples has been planted since the war, mainly Cox and Worcester on M II. The majority of the 500-odd acres of black currants in the county are also grown in the vicinity of Newent, often on farms: some of the first contracts for fruit for black currant juice production were awarded to local growers by a firm which moved its factory to Coleford in 1947. Some very high yields have been obtained from the two commonest varieties, Baldwin and Wellington, the latter doing especially well in recent years. One or two growers in the area specialize in strawberry growing, and some are interested in annual cropping. On the other hand, one grower averages 10 tons of fruit per acre from established plants and sees no need for change. Peas for vining and French beans for processing on the spot have also been grown on farms around Dymock.

The Newent area has been slow to develop horticulturally only because of the distance from markets. But now that transport is no longer a problem, the early soils and favoured situation mark it out as one with a bright future.

W. J. Wright, B.Sc. (Hort.), N.D.H. (Hons.), son of a Leicestershire farmer, graduated at Nottingham University and joined the staff of the Ministry's Luddington Experimental Horticulture Station, Stratford-on-Avon, in 1952. He moved to Gloucestershire in 1955 as Horticultural Officer for the Newent district, and remained there until 1964, when he was transferred to N.A.A.S. Headquarters in London to become Horticultural Management Officer.