SPEED THE PLOUGH:

"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way
And leaves the world to darkness and to me"

The English rural scene as Thomas Gray saw it from Stoke Poges village churchyard was little different to a frequent occurrence 170 years later in the 1920s on the meadows at Albion Park, N.S.W., when the writer trudged heavy-footed home on wintry evenings after a day spent between the handles of a single furrow plough drawn by a pair of draught horses.

The dairy herd, milking completed, would be headed, bellowing, in single file for the warmth of its sheltered night paddock and for miles around the nightly tolling of the Angelus sounded from the bell tower of the local Catholic church.

Cultivation of various crops has always been part of the Illawarra farming scene. In the early days of settlement on small holdings, and with large families the rule, subsistence cropping was the way of life; potatoes, pumpkins and greens for the family table and green fodder and grain crops to feed the livestock which produced the necessary beef and pork, poultry and eggs for home consumption and sale.

An Illawarra coat of arms during the 1800s should have had as its central theme a miner's pick and a single furrow plough; on these two basic implements depended the output of coal and farm produce which became the life-stream of the district. Coal is now won by mechanical monsters, and the plough, after several phases of usage and construction, has been phased out to a large degree as green fodder crops and grain production have been supplanted by improved pastures for milking herds.

In the first years of settlement around Sydney any cropping must of necessity been by hand tillage of the soil. Cultivation by plough had to await the growth of cattle herds before oxen became available, and then the early ploughs came either direct from English farms, or else the ironwrok was imported and local tradesmen assembled them after fashioning the beam and plough tails from local hardwood. On many farms one hundred years later the decaying remnants of these composite ploughs were a common sight tucked away in sheds or hidden by weeds.

These were followed by an all-iron model made by blacksmiths in many country towns along the coast. These were long-handled,
long-mouldboard, single-furrow walking ploughs drawn either by bullocks or a pair of horses and became the standard implement in the wheat growing era in Illawarra between 1850 and 1870, when rust fungus invaded the crops and caused the closing down of flour mills at centres such as Shellharbour, Jamberoo and Brownsville.

However cultivation of maize, potatoes, oats and barley continued to increase as cash crops for direct shipment to Sydney and for feeding pigs bred for the salt pork and bacon trade. Handling one of these ploughs involved a skill which had to be learned, and like riding a bike, swimming, or milking a cow, once acquired was never forgotten.

So it is not surprising that ploughing matches became popular in the 1870s; in fact from these sprang many of the South Coast Show Societies of later years. One of the Albion Park champions was Adam Denniss, grandfather of journalist David L. Denniss, so well known in the district until his death in recent times.

In Adam’s hands a plough drawn by four bullocks produced a work of art for which the judges took into consideration such features as “strike-out,” which is the initial furrow up the centre of the field and had to be gun-barrel straight. Then followed the “back-up,” which is the return furrow laid on top of the “strike-out.” Ploughing outwards, backwards and forwards, from the “back-up” produced an ever widening “land” where points were awarded for straightness, regularity of furrow width and evenness of “comb” or top edge of sod.

In a field divided into three “lands” the outer two are turned over first, followed by the centre strip which is ploughed inwards in ever decreasing width until there remains the aim of every champion ploughman, an arrow-straight strip of sod about twenty inches wide which is split up the middle on the second last traverse and finally the all important finish threw the remainder in the opposite direction leaving a “V” trench which became the “back-up” when next the field was ploughed. Ploughing the “headlands” at either end of the field ended the match.

The drawback to these blacksmiths’ ploughs lay in the long gradual overturning action of the long mouldboard on the sod. There was no breaking up effect, the very perfection of the finished job tended to run broadcast seed into crowded rows, and the “comb” did not readily break down and cover the seed when raked over with a tyned harrow.

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(To be continued)

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It had a number of adjustments which cut down the manual effort needed to control the "blacksmiths" implement including a clevis which provided for vertical and lateral adjustment of traction, a depth wheel to regulate deepness of cultivation and a revolving circular coulter replaced the fixed knife coulter which, protruding downwards made a preliminary cut ahead of the ploughshare but in trashy conditions had to be frequently cleared of accumulated rubbish. The sharp revolving coulter sliced through such litter and lessened the work of the horses, it could be adjusted and offset in four directions.

A well "set" plough of this type would run true with practically no guidance from the ploughman and would turn over an acre a day in average going. It was a satisfying occupation on a warm Spring day with the smell of fresh turned earth, the company of two willing farm horses and of swarms of gulls, kookaburras, magpies and assorted birdlife chasing behind picking up grubs and worms.

Spring ploughing also had its hazards in the frequent unearthinging of black snakes which had hibernated for the winter in cavities under the sods of previous cultivation. I had many a fright when a "neck-tie"—mad as a hornet—shot between my feet down the furrow; at that time of year most farmers carried a long stick on the plough tail.

The first quarter of this century saw the golden age of ploughing and cultivation of green fodder crops for the supplementary feeding of the ever increasing dairy herds in Illawarra. Ample family farm labour made it possible to cut green crops and feed cattle by either spreading it about in the paddock or by chaffing it, adding bran and pollard and feeding the stock in stalls.

Growing of lucerne and oats for hay and saccaline and maize for conversion to silage in pits and overground concrete silos was a labour intensive operation handled by communal and co-operative neighbourly effort which no longer exists.

Another type of single furrow plough deserves mention and this was the reversible or hillside plough. On moderately steep hillsides
it was impossible to turn a furrow uphill and this meant that a start was made at the lower edge of the area to be ploughed, the double faced mould-board was flipped over and the team retraced its foot-steps back along the starting furrow, again turning the sod downhill. This lefthand righthand method meant that each successive season's ploughing moved the entire field one furrow's width downhill.

I claim credit for first introducing power farming to the South Coast. In 1923, together with a former schoolmate and neighbour, Jim Musgrave, brother of well known Misses Musgrave of Mangerton, I attended a Winter Farmers' School at Hawkesbury Agricultural College during which trials of the new fangled farm tractors was staged.

Makes such as the Hart-Parr, Jelbart, Moline, Peterborough, Case and Fordson were put through their paces at hauling multi-furrow ploughs, pumping, chaffcutting and wood sawing by belt drive.

The Fordson impressed me, I discussed it with Bert Harrigan, the Wollongong Ford agent, and before the year was out I bought one at the ruling price of £199 together with a three furrow mouldboard International plough costing £65. This was lowered into or lifted out of the ground by a trip gear triggered by a rope controlled from the tractor seat.

The advent of the tractor in the main street of Albion Park en route from railway to farm and with steel cleated wheels clattering on the metalled roadway resulted in a hasty exodus of horse drawn milk carts in a cloud of dust and shouted curses.

No time was lost in attacking the first job, an eight acre paddock, and it was marvellous to watch three furrows turning over simultaneously while sitting comfortably, high above the snakes, in control of a mechanical slave which in one day did a job which previously would have extended a pair of plough horses to perform in eight days.

Interested farmers came from far and near, up and down the coast, to see "Lizzie" going through her paces and while admitting that she was fast and efficient the concensus of opinion was that "You couldn't beat a team of horses, they didn't eat kerosene and oil."

However, within months the late Lindsay Evans of Yallah had invested in an identical tractor and plough and later when the Ferguson tractor with its variety of attached implements came on the market the single furrow horse drawn walking plough became a museum piece; no farmer wanted to stumble along with clods inches thick on his boots behind a bucking implement and hoarse from yelling to the team all day when he could do it all from a seat.

The flywheel magneto on the Fordson generated six volt direct current which, through high tension coils, was stepped up to power the spark plugs. The same low voltage would light up half a dozen car headlight bulbs and my tractor had the distinction of providing electric lighting for the first time in an Albion Park residence when one night it droned away for hours outside the farmhouse of Mr. Theo. Grey and illuminated the verandah-long dinner table on the occasion of his daughter Muriel's twenty-first birthday party. Does
Mrs. Clinton Martin of Avondale remember that?

The one initial drawback lay in the total absence of any source of power kerosene on the South Coast and the machine was perforce run on petrol until enterprising local storekeeper Bill Buchanan discovered that Scott Fell’s shale refinery at Newnes near Lithgow produced a light distillate which was the ideal fuel. This came in ton lots, two by four gallon tins to a wooden case.

One aspect a ploughing by ox power remained after that mode of traction was phased out towards the end of last century; Major Weston’s full-time ploughman was Jim Markham, some of whose descendants live in Wollongong, and his frequent companion was the family cockatoo who would accompany him to the paddocks perched on the rump of one of the bullocks and spend the day on the plough handles drinking in the fruity language which was part of the art of an ox-herd.

When the Major and family moved to Sydney in 1900, cocky went too and it was his delight to be perched on the front lawn on Sunday mornings from where he would send the worthyburghers of Mosman scurrying past with hands over ears to shut out his fluent bullockese followed by peals of maniacal laughter and, for good measure, a perfect imitation of an Albion Park cat fight.

Little did Gray’s lonely ploughman as seen from an English country village churchyard dream that he would stir up reminiscences, dealing with his particular skill, almost two centuries later in a then unknown country halfway round the world.

(Concluded)

—Bert Weston (1-9-77).