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P. J. Fowler

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THE FARMING OF  
PREHISTORIC BRITAIN

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# The Farming of Prehistoric Britain

P. J. FOWLER

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## FOREWORD

It is quite a new idea that Britain was properly farmed before the arrival of the Emperor Claudius and, even earlier, of Julius Caesar in 55 BC, one of the only two ‘memorable’ dates in British history. As late as 1913, for example, Robert Munro’s reputable study, *Prehistoric Britain*, contained nothing about farming, perhaps in unconscious obeisance to the dictat of one of the pioneer writers on agrarian history, Loudon, nearly a century earlier: “Very few facts are recorded previously to the time of the Romans” (*Encyclopaedia of Agriculture*, 1825). That this applied to farming is made explicit in John Donaldson’s *British Agriculture* (1860), a history and manual in which the author, though recognizing that agriculture was practised before documented history, lamented that “Nations are very considerably advanced in civilization before they made written records . . . and . . . have progressed much further before any mention is made of agriculture”. While his observation at least allows the concept of prehistoric, *sensu* pre-documentary, farming it does not conceive that the study of material culture would allow pre-literate – not just undocumented – prehistoric farming to become known again after two millennia.

Yet, a decade after Munro’s book, a decade in which war had been both blockage and catalyst in these matters, the farming of prehistoric Britain, conceptually, methodologically and physically, was displayed to the Royal Geographical Society on 12 March 1923. O. G. S. Crawford delivered a lecture entitled “Air survey and archaeology”. It began: “Those who have walked over the chalk downs of Southern England cannot fail to have observed certain low grass banks and narrow shelves of soil . . . arranged in a chess-board pattern of squares and rectangles . . . lest you should think these lynchets a mere byeway of archaeology of no great significance, let me explain what they reveal. The diagrams I have made are nothing less than accurate plans of fields of a group of communities which ceased to exist about 1,500 years ago.” This book follows from Crawford’s vision; everything in it is but an elaboration of that last sentence, updated by 60 years.

The book itself is mainly about the evidence on and in the ground from which we can not only infer the existence of farming in Britain before Caesar but also study some aspects of it in considerable detail. The farming of prehistoric Britain was clearly an extensive, sophisticated and successful undertaking which has demonstrably left its mark on our contemporary



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## FOREWORD

landscapes and which has now afforded a body of knowledge to a generation privileged to rediscover it. That knowledge, and its physically surviving evidence, certainly cannot be dismissed now as “a mere byeway . . . of no great significance”. In Britain at least, two generations on from Crawford’s claim, agrarian prehistory is involved in much academic research, various forms of landscape study, planning control, rural conservation and heritage management and in educational and recreational concerns.

The genesis of the present book lies in my contribution, ‘Later Prehistory’, to *The Agrarian History of England and Wales I.I* (1981). Since then the subject and its study have developed at a breathtaking rate, and in this paperback reissue I have been able to make some revisions of my original work. Where space has allowed, I have added substantial new passages, and the bibliography and site index have been fully revised to take account of developments up to mid-1982. If the result attracts the attention of but a few new students, of any age, my unusual task of converting an essay sandwiched in a prestigious tome into a readily available paperback will be well-rewarded.

I would thank the numerous reviewers of *The Agrarian History I.I*; many of their points are here taken. Collin Bowen and Geoffrey Dimbleby kindly gave me detailed and constructive help well beyond, and after, the call of their reviewing duties. The Index, and a longer-term co-operation, are acknowledged in the dedication.

The sequel to this study should take the story of the farming of Britain up to the second ‘memorable’ date in British history.

5 November 1982

St. Albans, Hertfordshire