The Future of British Agriculture.

MANY people to-day are searching for remedies for the depression that hangs so heavily over agriculture, particularly in Great Britain. In a recent paper before the Surveyors' Institution, Mr. T. Wibberley makes his contribution to the problem, and envisages a future for British agriculture when it will rest, even more than to-day, on livestock. This will be achieved, in his opinion, not by the further extension of grassland, but rather by using arable land, to a much greater extent than at present, for the production of food for livestock, by the growth of forage crops, either for grazing, or for cutting for hay or silage, or for harvesting as mixed grain, and by keeping the land more continuously cropped.

Livestock certainly holds out more promise than most other branches of farming. Sir William Haldane has forecast a reasonably bright future for beef-production at home, provided it be of good quality and that there are no great developments elsewhere, as yet unforeseen. The stock population of Great Britain has lately decreased all round, and, if our beef has to face competition from chilled imports of high quality, our mutton is free from similar competition because of transport costs; our pork is at present protected by the import embargo, and there is abundant room for greater bacon production if we could but compete successfully with the Danish article. In addition, we still have a sheltered market for milk, a market capable of considerable expansion by educating the public to the value of milk for children: the poultry industry also is developing.

As against this, grain can be produced so much more cheaply in other parts of the world that it can be transported for thousands of miles and still compete successfully with the home-grown product. It would appear unsound to base the future of our agriculture on the production of uneconomic crops. At the same time, it is difficult to picture a farming system without grain, and even where it is uneconomical to sell, the farmer can feed more of his own grain to stock. In successful farming systems in Great Britain or in Denmark at the present time, nearly half the arable area is still devoted to grain; indeed, Denmark recovered from the depression at the end of last century without appreciably altering the proportion of arable area devoted to grain. Since the period 1889-93 this proportion has been consistently 2 or 3 per cent below that of England, but about 14 per cent greater than that of Scotland, where more use is made of temporary leys. Grain crops are needed for the production of straw, required by the animals on the farm. Arable land cannot yet be farmed successfully without farmyard manure, whether it be made naturally or by chemical means.

The proportions of arable land devoted to different crops in the various periods from 1889 to 1927 is as follows:

	1889-93.			1899-1903.			1909-13.			1923-27.		
	England.	Scotland.	Denmark.	England.	Scotland.	Denmark.	England.	Scotland.	Denmark.	England.	Scotland.	Denmark.
Corn crops	52	36	49	50	36	49	52	36	46	51	35	49
Roots	17	17	5	17	17	9	18	18	14	17	17	18
Green crops	27	46	39	30	47	36	27	46	35	28	48	31
Fallow	4	..	7	3	..	6	3	..	5	4	..	2

* Roots * includes potatoes.

* Green crops * includes temporary grass, lucerne, mustard, etc.

Denmark emerged from her agricultural crisis by

No. 3158, Vol. 125]

increasing the root break and the livestock population, although, even now, the proportion of arable area under roots is only slightly greater than in Great Britain, and much below what it is in particular districts, such as East Lothian and the Holland division of Lincolnshire. Mr. Wibberley suggests a similar change now for British agriculture, except that the increased production of stock food should be in the form of various forage crops rather than roots.

There seems little doubt that forage crops are cheaper to produce than roots, and this economic problem reacts on the agricultural situation in a way that is frequently overlooked. The labour situation, at least in the southern parts of Great Britain, is neither sound nor stable, and no farming system can be sound if it rests on an unsound foundation. The farmer, under present conditions, cannot face a higher total wage bill; but it is equally impossible to retain the best men amongst the agricultural labourers at present wages, despite all efforts at rural education, particularly if and when an industrial revival occurs. The future will probably see fewer workers, and, unless agriculture is content to struggle along with inferior labour, these will be more highly paid and will produce more, many aspiring, possibly, to eventual independence. Labour considerations alone indicate developments of agriculture in three directions:

- (1) A more extensive mechanised farming, demanding, of course, large fields and open country.
- (2) More stock-keeping, affording scope for good well-paid men.
- (3) Smaller holdings worked by families setting a high value on independence, and recruited from the rising generation of keen young men, such as those sons of rural workers turned out in increasing numbers by farm institutes.

Mr. Wibberley is not hopeful of intensive grassland management. However, if only the existing grassland in Great Britain were better managed, our stock-carrying capacity would be greatly increased; but this would accentuate the problem of providing sufficient food to last the winter.

The extent to which arable land should be further utilised for animal food production is difficult to decide. Each district or even farm must be considered separately. The weather is liable to upset a complex forage-cropping system; soils in drier districts may dry out; weeds may get out of control, specially if the next crop is sown on the unploughed stubble of the old; particular farms—or farmers—may not be suited to tractor work, and certain soils would prove unsuitable for continuous cropping. The crops grown would also differ: in those parts where high yields are obtainable, and labour is efficient, roots can hold their own. At very least, better advantage could be taken of the full growing season, and an end should be made of such practices as leaving a winter oat stubble untouched until the winter, and bare of crop from August to March or April.

The future of British agriculture seems to demand a closer relationship between the grassland, well managed, and the arable; a better demand for the produce, particularly that raised under sheltered conditions; a better marketing organisation, more education, and the reduction of losses which may at present be preventible or non-preventible. One feels on safe ground in believing that the future of agriculture in any district will continue to be largely influenced by local conditions, economic, geographic, and climatic, and in accepting the Prime Minister's phrase, "the inevitability of gradualness".

H. G. MILLER.