

## Robert Bakewell of Dishley Grange (1725 - 1795)

Mrs Pat Stanley, author of *Robert Bakewell and the Longhorn Breed of Cattle*, provided the Local History Group with a fascinating talk on the life and work of this important pioneer of animal breeding techniques. She and her husband John are famous for their own herd, the Blackbrook Longhorns.

The Bakewell family moved to Dishley Grange in 1709 when Robert's grandfather took on the tenancy of around 450 acres, which would have been a very large farm at that time. Robert was immersed in farming all his life and although he only finally took over the tenancy on his father's death in 1773, he was probably managing it for many years before that. His father had allowed him to go on several tours throughout England and also to Ireland and Holland, and this enabled him to acquire knowledge of the latest techniques and developments.



He is probably best known for the work that he did improving the old English breed of Longhorn cattle by breeding "in-and-in" to get the characteristics he wanted. The Longhorn had been used in the midlands for centuries as a draught animal, for ploughing and drawing carts, as well as for milk and cheese. It had a kind temperament, and is a good dual-purpose animal. When its working days were over, it provided meat but as Pat pointed out, it was probably pretty tough. Bakewell's breeding changed the nature of the animal from being an animal that could pull a cart to one that provided milk and better quality meat.



Paintings of farm animals from the 18th and 19th Centuries portray them as having shapes and form that differ significantly from modern day animals. This is the consequence of the Bakewell's breeding strategy where the emphasis was very much on meat production. Pat and her husband John are keen to keep the memory of these animals alive and this picture by John Bell of a Shorthorn Heifer is one of many that they have in their Blackbrook gallery.

Bakewell did not restrict himself to cattle and developed new breeds of horses and sheep. He improved the local breed of black working horse by crossing it with Continental stock from Holland and Germany: the eventual result was what we now know as the Shire horse.

The Leicester Longwool breed of sheep was developed by Bakewell and although that breed is itself now a rare breed, they were exported around the world and can be found in the USA and Australia.

Bakewell's pioneering spirit and enthusiasm was applied to other aspects of farming. At his farm at Dishley, he installed a series of hatches and channels to enable him to irrigate his land at will. This enabled him to improve grass production and hence feed more animals.

Pat was an enthusiastic speaker and ably supported by various interjections from husband John. They are both clearly passionate about the Longhorn breed.

Richard Mollart