

Agriculture and Rural Crafts in the 19th Century – Early 20th Century

When rural estates were established in the 16th century, they began agricultural production for the market, while the peasant farmsteads provided mainly for their own needs and for dues paid in kind to the noblemen. Farming was the mainstay of the economy in the territory of Latvia. In the late 18th century and early 19th century land belonged to noblemen, the peasants tilling and maintaining the land. They subsisted from the land they were allotted, and performed labour duties in the fields of the manor, using their own tools and equipment. The development of farming implements and the introduction of new farming practices was a slow process. On the peasant farmsteads, conditions began to change more rapidly in the 19th century, after the abolition of serfdom in the various regions of Latvia in the years 1817–1861 [1.]*.

Since clearance farming was practiced, the most common form of plough was the forked wooden plough [2:2]. The soil was loosened with a harrow [2:1].

Grain was sown from a special sowing-basket [3:13,14]. Used for reaping cereals in different areas was the long-handled scythe, the short-handled scythe [3:8] or the sickle [3:1–3]. Clubs [3:4] or flails [3:15] were used for threshing.

Bread and products from cereals were of great importance in the diet. Six to ten loaves of rye bread were baked once a week [4].

Important sources of income were beekeeping [5] and flax-growing [7]. Fishing was also a major occupation [8].

Pottery was a highly developed craft [10–11]. Each region had its favourite vessel forms, decorative techniques and glazes. Pottery has been maintained as a folk art up to the present day in eastern Latvia.

The peasants themselves made many of the tools and everyday utensils they needed. Objects which manufacture required special tools and skills were ordered from craftsmen: blacksmiths, carpenters, etc. [12]. Objects and tools used in everyday life were sometimes adorned with carved-made ornament [13].

* *The numbers in square brackets indicate the relevant showcases.*