

Demonstration farms in historical context

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Abstract: *On-farm demonstration is an important component of contemporary agricultural knowledge systems, but little is known about its origins or drivers. In this paper we trace the history of demonstration, identifying how different forms of on-farm demonstration emerged and became formalised across Europe. We contrast historical perspectives with current thinking about on-farm demonstration. The paper is based on an English-language literature review, which demonstrates that on-farm demonstration of agricultural improvements has been an important part of agriculture in Europe for at least the last two centuries. Several tenets of contemporary thinking about on-farm demonstration are clearly evident in this review. First, the importance of social norms in on-farm innovation and tacit knowledge development is clearly evident pre-1850. Second, the importance of visual appreciation (i.e. farmers looking 'over the fence') to learn informally about new innovations and practices is evident at the same time. Illiteracy and limited travel infrastructure restricted farmers' opportunities to acquire novel information about agricultural practice outside of their locales, or through the media. Third, the limited success of formal incentives to innovate (in the form of 'prizes' given by agricultural societies) – farmers with few resources lack the 'room for manoeuvre' necessary to engage in innovation. Finally, the limited effectiveness of 'benevolent' demonstration by wealthy farmers in inducing change amongst their less privileged neighbours. However, the historical analysis demonstrates that on-farm demonstration formed the foundation for many of Europe's agricultural institutes, and a key form of training for agricultural students.*

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