

Borders' thistle cutters

By Bob Powell

This note was inspired by a photograph of a thistle cutter (Fig. 1) at the Scottish National Museum of Rural Life, Wester Kitchochside, East Kilbride that was sent to the editor with the thought that it may once have been horse-drawn.

The principle of mechanical thistle cutters appears to have begun in about 1900 with three of the main makers being on either side of the eastern Scotland-England border. A feature in the Selkirk-published *Southern Reporter* of 1 August, 1907 advised: "Where pastures are extensive and badly infested, it would be worthwhile to invest in one of the thistle cutters now on the market. These take about six feet wide at a time, so that a boy and old horse could get over say 15 acres daily. The knives can be set any height, and cut only the thistles and strong weeds, leaving the grass mostly untouched."

The first maker appears to have been Joseph Symm from Stocksfield, Northumberland. It is possible that Symm himself did not have his machine in production for very long as an advertisement (Fig. 2) from a 1907 *North British Agriculturalist* indicates that it was in the production of his executors. As can be seen, the cutter comprised a set of cylinder-style revolving blades.

By 1909, as reported in the *Berwickshire News and General Advertiser*, the Symm machine was being made by machinery and implement makers Messrs William Elder of Berwick on Tweed: "Their Symm's thistle cutter is also an appliance which does useful work." Fig 3, from the *Standard Cyclopedia of Agriculture*, 1911, shows probably Symm's machine as manufactured by William Elder. The machine was probably reasonably successful as Elders attended the 76th Royal Agricultural Society Show (RASE) held at Nottingham in July 1915: "Thistle Cutter, patent, mfd. by exors of late Joseph Symm, Stocksfield. For grass land with steel revolving blades which cut the thistle with very little injury to the grass £13 10s."

The thistle cutter in Fig. 1 was made by George Henderson at his Kelso Foundry, Kelso, Scotland. There had been a Kelso Foundry producing prize ploughs and plough parts, owned by Simon Romanes, from the 1840s to at



least 1870, but George Henderson appears to have been there producing a variety of agricultural machines from the start of the 1900s.

In 1925, Henderson exhibited at the 84th RASE Show at Chester and his exhibits included his 'Eclipse' thistle cutter. Nine years later in 1934 he attended the RASE Show at Ipswich and exhibited: "Thistle Cutters 'New Imperial' to cut 5 ft. and 5½ ft. wide." Next, three years later in 1937 at the 96th RASE Show at Wolverhampton his exhibits included not only, as Fig. 1, the 'Jubilee' Thistle Cutter but also the 'Positive' Bracken Cutter and 'Dictator'

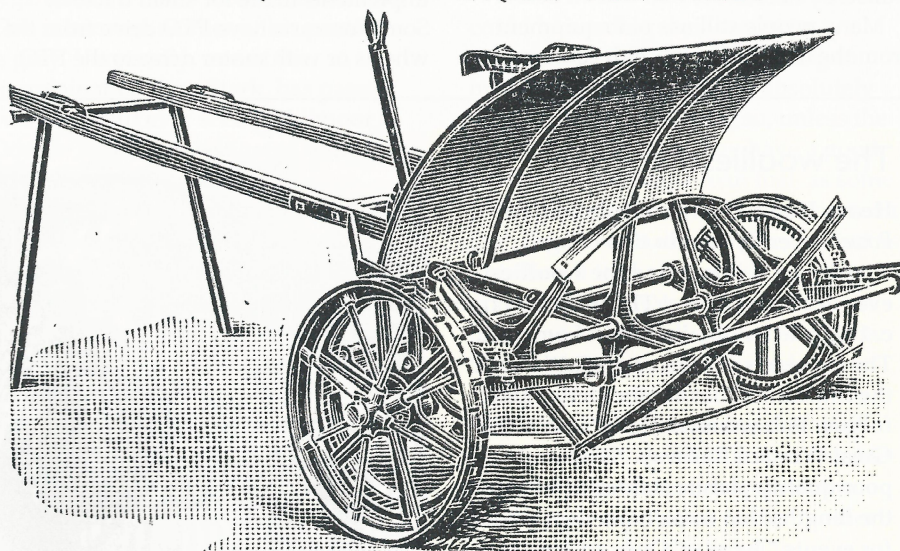
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Tractor Cultivator. This latter exhibit provides a 1937 date for the 'Jubilee' thistle cutter with its triple rotary blades.

Although currently intended to be drawn by a tractor, the 'Jubilee' in Fig. 1 appears to be capable of being fitted with a two-horse pole: the central bracket to the front of the seat is accordingly drilled. Whether the tractor

SYMM'S PATENT THISTLE CUTTER.

For Cutting Thistle and Brakens on Grass Land, this Machine has no Equal.
AWARDED SEVERAL MEDALS.



EXORS. JOSEPH SYMM,
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