During his reign, George III acquired the nickname ‘Farmer George’, in part due to his agricultural interests and in part as a playful pun – a nod toward nominative determinism given that his name, George, derived from the Greek georgos, meaning ‘farmer’ or ‘earth worker’. However, the extent to which this popular name arose from his reputation as an agriculturalist has been debated. The anecdotes and caricatures from the 1780s and 1790s tended to depict a friendly, homespun country gentleman, rather than a progressive, experimenting improver. The ‘farmer’ characterisation captured both his reportedly simple domestic life and his traditional paternalistic role as the nation’s father, as much as his zeal for the theory and practice of agriculture. Furthermore, it is difficult to reconstruct an accurate portrait of his engagements with farming from the accounts of contemporaries, whose compliments and stories are partly attributable to the honour owed to a patron and a king.1

The survival of private papers, therefore, offers one of the best opportunities to assess the true character and extent of George III’s agricultural interests. Here we will focus on a set of notes made on seven agricultural books published between 1762 and 1775 (part of the series GEO/ADD/32/5). These are mostly copied extracts from texts that George was reading, rather than notes of his own ideas, although the selection and choices taken in summarising or paraphrasing can be revealing.

In 1760, at the beginning of George’s reign, agriculture was still the dominant sector in the British economy.2 The years of George’s kingship (1760–1820) coincided with a period of apparent agricultural revolution and, what has been identified by some scholars as an ‘agricultural enlightenment’, leading to unprecedented growth in output stimulated by increased knowledge.3

2 Estimate proportion of male population working in agriculture in 1755 is 44 per cent. S.N. Broadberry et al., British Economic Growth 1270–1870 (Cambridge, 2015).
3 Regarding the idea of an ‘agricultural enlightenment’ there is a lack of consensus among scholars and a tendency to favour a view of longer-term, uneven series of developments that slowly transformed agriculture. See P. Jones, Agricultural Enlightenment: Knowledge, Technology, and Nature, 1750–1840 (Oxford, 2016).
From the mid-seventeenth century, English (and later Scottish) gentlemen developed a new enthusiasm for agriculture as part of a culture of improvement, driven by the belief that farming methods could be advanced to increase private and public wealth. The desire for improvement helped spawn a growth in agricultural manuals and treatises that aimed to publicise the best theories and practices in this area. The number of books on agriculture rose gradually from the early eighteenth century, but the 1760s saw a remarkable doubling of new publications from the previous decade. The start of George III’s reign coincided with a new surge in agricultural publishing, such that by 1776 Lord Kames was moved to open his own treatise with a joke about the flood of texts: ‘Behold another volume on husbandry!’

It is, therefore, not entirely surprising that in the 1760s and 1770s a monarch concerned with the wealth of his kingdom and curious about the arts and sciences would collect and read books on agriculture. Indeed, George’s intellectual interest can be considered typical of many British gentlemen landowners at the time. Moreover, the surviving papers on agriculture form only a small proportion of the total number in the collection of George’s essays (around one to two per cent). We should therefore resist the temptation offered by his nickname to over-interpret the significance of such notes.

The first point to make about George’s notes is that they are mostly taken from books published over a relatively short period, 1762–71. This may only be an effect of what survives, but it suggests that George was concerned with the latest ideas and debates, and it is not unreasonable to assume that his notes were made within a relatively short number of years following the publication of a new book or treatise. The exceptions are a short note on a book of 1775 and notes from volumes of the periodicals Annals of Agriculture and Transactions of the Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce from the 1780s.

We can roughly divide the surviving notes made by George into three general themes: the political economy of agriculture, the merits of old versus new husbandry methods and the cultivation of specific crops.

a) Political Economy

George made a long series of extended notes on Arthur Young’s The Farmer’s Letters to the People of England (1767) concerning the wealth of the nation. The notes contain selected extracts from Letters I, II and III of Young’s first book. The notes on Letter I asserted the priority of agriculture over manufacture and argued for the conversion of ‘sheep walks’ or ‘wastes’ to arable land, partly on the
basis that it employed a ‘greater number of hands’. Each folio shows an alternative attempt at summarising the argument, indicating George was compiling his notes for a purpose beyond a simple record – whether to get the argument clear in his head, prepare for a speech, or develop into an independent essay. Letter II defended the bounty on exported corn against the objection that it raised the price of wheat, while Letter III argued that large farmers were far more useful to the state than small farmers, from which George copied tables estimating numbers of horses and hands for different acreage of farms. These notes show George getting to grips with the relatively new way of conceptualising an abstract economy and ideas of how Britain could best exploit natural resources to extract wealth.

The notes on Arthur Young’s *The Rural Economy* (1770) are taken from Essays I, II and III and concerned the management of a farm, including the proportion of arable to grass land, the rotation of crops, detailed allocation of acres for certain crops and calculations of the required labour. While the notes largely attend to the management of individual farms they can be seen in the larger framework of political economy, given that the profitability of individual farmers was viewed as the concern of the state, since the wealth of the nation ultimately depended on their success. The notes (in French) on the 1763 French work *Le Socrates Rustique* (or the ‘Rural Socrates’) can be seen in similar terms. This publication told the story of an idealised Swiss peasant praised as a model for rural subjects, as well as extolling the virtues of industriousness and thrift in a simple, wholesome and natural country life.

b) Old vs New Husbandry

Two further sets of notes can be united under a concern with one of the central debates in agricultural literature of the time: the advantages and disadvantages of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ husbandry. The ‘old’ husbandry referred to traditional methods established in Britain by the eighteenth century and the ‘new’ husbandry stood for those methods advocated by Jethro Tull in his book *The Horse-Hoing Husbandry* (1733). Tullian husbandry rejected the need for manure and falling (both central to ‘old’ husbandry), and advocated sowing seeds in rows using the seed-drill followed by repeated hoeing to eliminate weeds. George showed a great interest in the competing merits, by copying a passage and table estimating the expenses and profits of the two systems from the editors’ preface to the 1762 edition of Tull’s book. Further, he copied passages from a chapter on ‘The advantages of the old and new Husbandry’ from David Henry’s *The Complete English Farmer* (1771), carefully selecting from pages 163–170 of a 471-page treatise. In these notes, George freely re-phrased the arguments of Henry on a few occasions, although without deviating from the author’s meaning. This suggests he shared Henry’s sympathetic judgement that Tull’s basic ideas contained an element of truth, even if many of his conclusions did not follow.

c) New Crops

The final theme of the notes concerns specific crops, namely sainfoin and cabbage, part of a collection of many ‘forage’ (or ‘fodder’) crops (along with clover, lucerne and turnips) that provided abundant food for cattle and could be planted on arable land to replenish soil in the place of falling. Many of them only began to be introduced into English agriculture and written about from the mid-seventeenth century, but Tull notably used sainfoin extensively in the early eighteenth. Writings on these crops were part of an increasing application of botanical knowledge to agriculture during the eighteenth century and a key aspect of improvement.

6 RA GEO/ADD/32/2031.
7 RA GEO/ADD/32/2033, 2034, 2035, 2036.
George copied detailed passages from a long entry on sainfoin (or ‘saint foin’, initially referred to as ‘French grass’) from a huge dictionary called The Complete Farmer (1766). He also made some fragmentary notes on sainfoin from a later text entitled The improved culture of three principal grasses, lucerne, sainfoin, and burnet (1775).

Similarly, George’s notes on cabbage reveal a precise effort to gather information. He used the second edition of Arthur Young’s A six months tour through the North of England (1771), which contained all kinds of observations on agriculture, specifically for reports about the cultivation of cabbage varieties on farms that Young visited or heard about, and carefully marking the specific page numbers from which he made notes. Later notes from the periodical Transactions of the Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce around 1783–84 also concerned the turnip-rooted cabbage.

The notes George decided to extract from the agricultural books he read, probably in the late 1760s and early 1770s, show a king interested in the role of agriculture in the wealth of the nation, the opportunities for employment, the profitability of new methods of farming and specifically the use of forage crops to increase produce. While we cannot know what notes have been lost, it is worth considering some of the absent themes that were common in the wider literature: for example, celebratory accounts of the ancient Greeks and Romans; new instruments or new designs of traditional tools; or debates about the theory of plant nutrition and the application of principles from chemistry.

Although an interest in books on agriculture was not unusual for the aristocracy of this period, the fact that George took notes on select themes from different texts, perhaps over many years, suggests a reader with a clear sense of their own particular interests. Moreover, George’s tendency to heavily re-phrase and re-order passages from books indicates an attentive and purposeful reader. However, there is equally a noticeable absence of George’s own commentary upon the texts he is reading: he makes no independent remarks or assessments of the text and never seems to deviate from the argument in front of him. To get a deeper sense of his own thoughts requires a close reading of selections and an analysis of the essays he wrote under the pseudonym of ‘Ralph Robinson’ for the Annals of Agriculture in the late 1780s.