

UTILITY OF THE EARTH-WORM.

[From the 'Penny Cyclopædia.']

THE worm-casts, which so much annoy the gardener by deforming his smooth-shaven lawns, are of no small importance to the agriculturist; and this despised creature is not only of great service in loosening the earth and rendering it permeable by air and water, but is also a most active and powerful agent in adding to the depth of the soil, and in covering comparatively barren tracts with a superficial layer of wholesome mould. In a paper 'On the Formation of Mould,' read before the Geological Society of London, by Charles Darwin, Esq., F.G.S., now one of the secretaries, the author commenced by remarking on two of the most striking characters by which the superficial layer of earth, or, as it is commonly called, vegetable mould, is distinguished. These are, its nearly homogeneous nature, although overlying different kinds of subsoil, and the uniform fineness of its particles. The latter fact may be well observed in any gravelly country, where, although in a ploughed field, a large proportion of the soil consists of small stones, yet in old pasture-land not a single pebble will be found within some inches of the surface. The author's attention was called to this subject by Mr. Wedgwood, of Maer Hall in Staffordshire, who showed him several fields, some of which, a few years before, had been covered with lime, and others with burnt marl and cinders. These substances, in every case, are now buried to the depth of some inches beneath the turf. Three fields were examined with care: the first consisted of good pasture-land, which had been limed, without having been ploughed, about twelve years and a half before; the turf was about half an inch thick; and two inches and a half beneath it was a layer or row of small aggregated lumps of the lime, forming, at an equal depth, a well-marked white line. The soil beneath this was of a gravelly nature, and differed very considerably from the mould nearer the surface. About three years since cinders were likewise spread on this field: these are now buried at the depth of one inch, forming a line of black spots parallel to and above the white layer of lime. Some other cinders, which had been scattered in another part of the same field, were either still lying on the surface or entangled in the roots of the grass. The second field examined was remarkable only from the cinders being now buried in a layer, nearly an inch thick, three inches beneath the surface. This layer was in parts so continuous, that the superficial mould was only attached to the subsoil of red clay by the longer roots of the grass.

The history of the third field is more complete. Previously to fifteen years since it was waste land; but at that time it was drained, harrowed, ploughed, and well covered with burnt marl and cinders. It has not since been disturbed, and now supports a tolerably good pasture. The section here was—turf half an inch, mould two inches and a half; a layer one and a half inch thick, composed of fragments of burnt marl (conspicuous from their bright red colour, and some of considerable size, namely, one inch by half an inch broad, and a quarter thick), of cinders, and a few quartz pebbles mingled with earth; lastly, about four inches and a half beneath the surface was the original black peaty soil. Thus beneath a layer (nearly four inches thick) of fine particles of earth, mixed with some vegetable matter, those substances now occurred, which, fifteen years before, had been spread on the surface. Mr. Darwin stated that the appearance in all cases was as if the fragments had, as the farmers believe, worked themselves down. It does not however appear at all possible that either the powdered lime or the fragments of burnt marl and the pebbles could sink through compact earth to some inches beneath the surface, and still remain in a continuous layer; nor is it probable that the decay of the grass, although adding to the surface some of the constituent parts of the

mould, should separate in so short a time the fine from the coarse earth, and accumulate the former on those objects which so lately were strewn on the surface. Mr. Darwin also remarked that near towns, in fields which did not appear to have been ploughed, he had often been surprised by finding pieces of pottery and bones some inches below the turf. On the mountains of Chile he had been perplexed by noticing elevated marine shells, covered by earth, in situations where rain could not have washed it on them.

The explanation of these circumstances, which occurred to Mr. Wedgwood, although it may at first appear trivial, the author does not doubt is the correct one, namely, that the whole is due to the digestive process by which the common Earth-worm is supported. On carefully examining between the blades of grass in the fields above described, the author found that there was scarcely a space of two inches square without a little heap of the cylindrical castings of worms. It is well known that worms swallow earthy matter, and that, having separated the serviceable portion, they eject at the mouth of their burrows the remainder in little intestine-shaped heaps. The worm is unable to swallow coarse particles; and as it would naturally avoid pure lime, the fine earth lying beneath either the cinders and burnt marl, or the powdered lime, would, by a slow process, be removed and thrown up to the surface. This supposition is not imaginary, for in the field in which cinders had been spread out only half a year before, Mr. Darwin actually saw the castings of the worms heaped on the smaller fragments. Nor is the agency so trivial as it at first might be thought, the great number of Earth-worms (as every one must be aware who has ever dug in a grass-field) making up for the insignificant quantity of work which each performs.

On the above hypothesis, the great advantage of old pasture land, which farmers are always particularly averse from breaking up, is explained; for the worms must require a considerable length of time to prepare a thick stratum of mould, by thoroughly mingling the original constituent parts of the soil, as well as the manures added by man. In the peaty field, in fifteen years, about three inches and a

half had been well digested. It is probable however that the process is continued, though at a slow rate, to a much greater depth; for as often as a worm is compelled by dry weather or any other cause to descend deep, it must bring to the surface, when it empties the contents of its body, a few particles of earth. The author concluded by remarking, that it is probable that every particle of earth in old pasture-land has passed through the intestines of worms, and hence that in some senses the term "animal mould" would be more appropriate than "vegetable mould." The agriculturist, in ploughing the ground, follows a method strictly natural; and he only imitates in a rude manner, without being able either to bury the pebbles or to sift the fine from the coarse soil, the work which nature is daily performing by the agency of the Earth-worm.

Since this paper was read Mr. Darwin has received from Staffordshire the two following statements:—1. In the spring of 1835 a boggy field was so thickly covered with sand that the surface appeared of a red colour, but the sand is now overlaid by three-quarters of an inch of soil. 2. About eighty years ago a field was manured with marl, and it has been since ploughed, but it is not known at what exact period. An imperfect layer of the marl now exists at a depth, very carefully measured from the surface, of twelve inches in some places and fourteen in others, the difference corresponding to the top and hollows of the ridges or butts. It is certain that the marl was buried before the field was ploughed, because the fragments are not scattered through the soil, but constitute a layer which is horizontal, and therefore not parallel to the undulations of the ploughed surface. No plough, moreover, could reach the marl in its present position, as the furrows in this neighbourhood are never more than eight inches in depth. In the above paper it is shown that three inches and a half of mould had been accumulated in fifteen years; and in this case, within eighty years (that is, on the supposition, rendered probable from the agricultural state of this part of the country, that the field had never before been marled) the Earth-worms have covered the marl with a bed of earth averaging the ten inches in thickness.