

## FARM LIFE

Hard work was synonymous with village life in the period when it was a self contained community drawing a living from the land. Even children's education was secondary to the needs of the farmer. In fact education was often directed at only equipping the child to follow on in the farm worker class; leaving school able to read and write but with little other academic qualifications. Farmers sons were expected to follow in their father's footsteps, gradually taking over the running of the family farm and daughters saw to the poultry and dairy work. During harvest time the children would be expected to help in the fields and school work suffered as a result.

Kelly's Directory of 1900 describes the soil in the Napton area as...

"loam, sub-soil clay. The crops are wheat and beans,  
but the land is chiefly pasture. The acreage is  
4,140, rateable value £6,249."

Mrs Nora Balsom was born in Napton in 1904 and had three sisters. Her father was a farmer and like most farmers wanted a son but they had only girls and she recalls...

"A farmer needs a boy so they brought me up as a boy. I worked on the farm, I left school when I was thirteen years old to work on the farm, I helped with everything. Dad had got a milk round in the village. In those days we had a cart with taps through holes in the back and we used to fill a bucket with milk and have a quart or a pint measure. My Mother used to sell skimmed milk at the door that had been separated. I separated it very often, I used to turn the handle of the churn. I used to sing 'Onward Christian Soldiers', that was the tempo of the music. My Dad said, 'If you sing Onward Christian Soldiers it'll be alright.' So there I was, we had some laughs. We sold cream, but not a lot because we made it into butter. People used to bring a little jug for their Sunday dinner. I could only milk three of the cows because the others kicked me.

The land round here was mainly pasture in those days. Most farms had cows, pigs and sheep, but they don't now. It's all cereal crops, rape and making silage, whereas we used to make hay, always hay.

It was terrible, I hated haymaking. It was all done more or less by hand, although we did take on extra people at haymaking time. My Father had only got a forty acre farm but that needed a lot of looking after. It made my day once when we were at Long Itchington someone said to my Dad, 'Is that the only mate you've got, Bill?' My Dad said, 'She's as good as any man.' I was right up here, on top! Anyway, I stopped with him till I was nineteen and thought I ought to have a wage. I wasn't being paid although I was having my food and clothes. I didn't even get pocket money. If I wanted to go to a dance I had to sell one of my rabbits and charge the shilling it cost to get into the dance. Nobody had a lot of money, I mean farm labourers. I found a book of my Mother's, when we were up at the farm, a farm worker got thirty shillings for a weeks work. That was for working from 6 o'clock in the morning till 5 or 6 o'clock at night. Sometimes they got paid overtime.

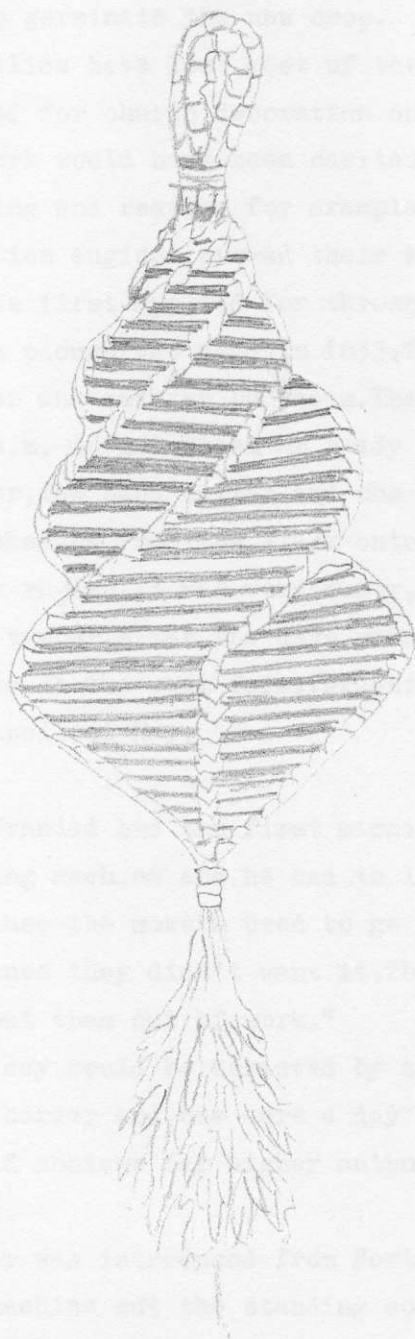
Years ago all the farmland around the village belonged to Shuckburgh Hall. Only the Manor Farm belongs to them now. They used to have fetes at the Hall, where all the tenants were invited and they gave them strawberries and cream.

Eventually I left the farm. If I'd been a boy I would have kept it on but my parents gave the farm up as there was no-one to carry it on."

The taking of the harvest crop was a period of toil, but even in the days when men and women used the scythe and the sickle in the cornfields harvest time was more than just work. It was the highlight of the farming year and a period, more than any other, when tradition truly came into it's own. The best known of these traditions is the making of the corn dollies.

Early man assumed that the forces of nature were controlled by super-human beings, greater and stronger than himself. He regarded them as gods and worshipped them.

Demeter or Ceres was the goddess of corn and harvests and it was to her that corn idols or dollies were offered. The word doll is a corruption of the word idol. Sometimes, a female doll, known as the Earth Mother or the Corn Mother, was made to represent Demeter herself.



### The Teardrop.

This is a very simple  
commodious ideal for a  
beginner.



Demeter was thought to live in the corn dollies. After the last sheaf of the harvest was cut it was made into a dolly which was kept indoors during the winter and then in spring the dollies were cast into the fields to help germinate the new crop.

Today corn dollies have lost most of their religious significance, apart from being used for church decoration during harvest festivals.

Most of the work would have been carried out by horse-drawn equipment, mowing, ploughing and reaping for example, but with the advent of steam machines, traction engines proved their ability at a variety of tasks. Steam power was first applied for threshing and later for ploughing. The earliest steam plough was used in 1833. Threshing was one of the tasks which was made easier and quicker by steam. The 'threshing man' would have to rise about 4 a.m. to get steam up ready for the day's work. Two men worked on the thresher, the band cutter and the feeder. Men with long pitch forks forked sheaves from the stack onto the machine doing so precisely and in regular rhythm. It was very dusty, monotonous work and the cause of many a frayed temper. After the day's work was done the thresher had to move his tackle to the next farm. Threshing continued mainly from September to April or May.

Mrs Taylor...

"My Grandad had the first machine round here. A real mowing machine and he had to lock it up at night, because the mowers used to go and bust it up you see because they didn't want it. They thought it was going to put them out of work."

Three acres a day could be achieved by a good scythesman mowing corn. Grass was far harder and one acre a day was a very high output. Machines of course could achieve far higher outputs and gradually the hand mowing was phased out.

The self binder was introduced from North America in the mid nineteenth century. This machine cut the standing corn, tied it into sheaves and left it all in neat rows. These were stooked in pairs, usually ten sheaves per stook.

When it came to haymaking time everyone was required to lend a hand and Mrs Amy Worrall remembers that she spent her first wedding anniversary on top of a hayrick putting the last shocks on.

Tractors, combine harvesters and vacuum milking began to show their potential in the 1930's although it was a few years before any of these machines were in everyday use. The combine harvester was developed in 1928 but by 1939 there were still only one hundred and fifty in use in the United Kingdom.

The greatest impact of the 40's was from the power of the tractor and all of its attachments and the harvester. Tractors possibly lack the appeal of steam, but their evolution was important as men sought to get the most from the land they worked. Both of these implements transformed fieldwork, later leading to the removal of hedges.

Even with sophisticated machinery a certain amount of man power is still required and Mrs Baynton remembers that during the wars help in any form was gladly received. During the second war it came in the form of German prisoners of war. These men, she recalls, were well educated, mainly doctors and lawyers, who didn't want to fight and most of them were able to speak English. They worked hard and got on well with the villagers who would give them food to supplement their camp rations.

The prisoners were brought, by van, from Birdingbury in the morning, dropped at the farm gate and then collected again in the evening.

Help with farm work also came from the landgirls who were stationed at Shuckburgh. Everyone worked hard because they all wanted the end result to be worthwhile.

Mrs Baynton also remembers that there was much more livestock kept then than there is now. Every farmer had his cows, pigs - 'everything used but the squeal' - and sheep. There is much more arable land today because as she says, 'that's where the money is.'

Mrs Alice Neal's father was a farmer and she recalls...

"My father was always out, he was out on business I suppose. He used to do a lot of haymaking, he was always busy. He was a dealer, a hay and cattle dealer as well. We used to supply Liddingtons at Rugby, Suttons bakery at Coventry, all the bakeries in Coventry. You see, they delivered their bread by horse and cart, well they delivered everything by horse and cart then, and he supplied the hay and the corn for the horses. He used to go from here, I can see the carters now. There used to be two great big cart horses tethered to a truck loaded with hay and off they'd go to Coventry. Then I can remember that changed when motors came in and father had lorries then. Originally they used to go out with the horses and he used to go to Leamington to Burgis and Colbourne, now Rackhams, and opposite was the fishmongers, Colbrookes. He used to supply them with hay and he also supplied the brewery with hay for their horses. Eventually it became mechanised but they still supplied hay in Coventry because they kept the horses. They didn't work them but they kept them for show so they still needed the feed."

Up until recent years there was a village wool sale. This was a very popular event for all the village, it being both a social and a business get together. Mr Joe Fell describes events as he remembers them...

"The wool sale took place once a year. The local farmers all brought their wool to the Crown and a fellow named Mr Sail, he came from Atherstone, bought the wool. They brought the tractors, carts and lorries all up the street and he'd start weighing it up at half past seven in the morning underneath where the garage is now. They used to hang the big wool sack from hooks and as he graded the wool he'd give them a cheque and a drink and away they used to go. It was a real day out for the farmers. Sometimes all the vehicles used to stretch from the Crown as far as the school, sometimes over the back of Butt Hill. Every farmer tried to get here first in the morning so, of course, you'd have a line of tractors and carts all the way down the street and when the children came home from school at dinnertime they'd all jump into the wool. The big sacks of wool were hung from two big hooks in the beams, they're still there as far as I know. They'd push us in it you see, into the piles of wool, and as the fleeces were graded they would be flung on top of us and the children would throw them about and jump on them. The first time I came to a wool sale was in 1937, when we moved into Napton. From here the wool went to Atherstone and from there it went to the mills in Yorkshire. There were different grades and different prices, I can't remember the prices and as far as I know the sales stopped in 1971. It eventually stopped because they began to collect the wool in lorries instead of them messing about all day. It takes away the event though, it used to be a real social event. The sale was worth seeing, it was worth being in the pub at the time when all the farmers were there. They'd have a drink and a sing song and maybe a game of dominoes before they went off home."

Farming today is a high profit business, bearing little resemblance the farming of the early 1900's. The amount of labour employed on farms has steadily declined over the years, partly because increased mechanisation has done away with the need for large numbers of workers, but also because it is not economically viable to employ so many as was once the custom.



As a consequence old skills are dying out and no longer can every farm worker turn his hand to skillfully laying a hedge or building a dry stone wall. These jobs are now left to the few who have spent years perfecting their craft.

The education of the farm worker has also changed. From leaving school barely equipped to read and write, the agricultural worker of the eighties now spends up to three years being educated for his chosen profession after he has left school, at one of the agricultural colleges around the country. Many of them specialise in one branch of agriculture only, perhaps dairy, sheep, arable or pigs.

The loss of hedgerows, to facilitate easier and more efficient working for modern machines, has led to a change in the wildlife of the countryside. Destroying hedges to make fields larger has also meant destroying the habitat of many animals. Many conservation groups have recognised the danger in such actions and are encouraging farmers now to leave and even to replace hedgerow. The increased use of chemicals in farming is also having a disturbing effect on the wildlife as well as on the wildflowers of the countryside. No longer is it common to see the cornfield dotted with the brilliant red of the poppy or the white of the ox-eye daisy.

Esmy Dowling was raised on his parents farm and tells us about his childhood there and also about the wildlife then and now...

"The farm consisted of 44 acres, that was six fields.

A lot of the farm land round here, until virtually the end of the war, was traditional type land, ridge and furrow type, medieval. The idea behind that was land drainage and also you got a greater area of land. It was all worked by horses pre-war. The hedges were all cut by hand. Originally the brash was used for the bread ovens and the rest of it, they'd clean the ditch out and put the brash facing the field side. That was to keep the animals from nibbling the shoots of the hedge for the first two years, then it rotted down and made no difference. Another thing people did at various times of the year was to come round and get dog rose roots for grafting roses. I haven't heard of that for a long time.

A job I used to do years ago as a child was cow minding, grazing the cows along the side of the road. I'd probably take them out for two hours and the cows would graze on the side of the road. The volume of traffic was nothing to what it is today, a few cars, motorbikes and pushbikes but

normally the cows would just graze contentedly on the side of the road till they'd had their fill. In the meantime you'd rabbit about a bit, do a bit of bird nesting and have a look at the different flowers, gain a bit more knowledge and eventually the cows had had enough and get restless and you'd take them home.

At one time there were a lot more birds than there are today. The old stone wall over home we used to have redstarts, two families regularly every year used to make nests in the old barn wall. In the barn itself came swallows and in a heap of stones down the field we had stone chats. I've never seen or heard of them for years. Seagulls were very rare, if they came inland, as a youngster, we used to say it was a sign of rough weather at sea but if it's true I don't know. Now they're here in their thousands, I believe a lot of them roost on Draycote Water. In a morning they come out in ragged formation but at night they go in in beautiful formation. Recently I counted one 'V' formation of at least seventy five. Just before Christmas I saw them go in on a murky day like paper chains on a ceiling.

Blackbirds, thrushes, whitethroats of both varieties, an odd dipper and more herons years ago than there are now. There were various types of woodpecker, all families of tits. Years ago you'd find large numbers of nests of the long tailed tit, the most eggs I've ever seen in one nest was twenty one and the same in a partridge nest. There weren't many wild ducks when I was a youngster, a few mallard that's all and pheasants were very few too.

A thing you used to get a lot of on your shoes years ago was buttercup pollen. It absolutely smothered them at a certain time of the year, your boots were yellow. Another thing that grew in the fields was King Fingers, it was known locally as King Finger. I believe it's the Common Orchid, but I haven't seen any for years. Very deep purple with small flecks in them but they seemed to have vanished with chemical fertilisers, chemical sprays and ploughing. There are one or two varieties of wild orchid still around but where they are people closely guard them because they say the less people that know about them, the more chance they have to survive. Violets, that was another added treat, going violeting. Certain hedgerows, you'd know where the blue ones grew and the white ones and also the Dog Violets, the ones with no scent, that's normally the later Violet.



I can remember a pole cat in the late twenties, that's the only one I've ever heard of in this area. Lots of foxes too. Years ago, poultry on the farm, there were a few kept around the house, but the rest were in pens in the field and it was the children's job to go and feed them, collect the eggs and make sure they were shut up at night so the fox didn't get them.

The modern way of farming you sacrifice quality for quantity, in other words the taste has gone.

Years ago, on a Sunday afternoon, you could see a group of farmers leaning on a five barred gate and gazing wistfully across the fields and they'd say that looking at the view was worth a pound an hour when wages was ninepence an hour, that was how they valued it. The old boys would not only work forty eight hours a week, then go and help anybody to get a bit more money to raise their families but they'd also have a half acre allotment to grow their own food and maybe keep a pig too. There was no National Assistance in them days."