

A Farming childhood

RECOLLECTIONS OF A FARMING CHILDHOOD.

My earliest recollections were of the smells of the countryside; new ploughed earth, haymaking and the smell of the threshing machine when the driver was getting up steam in the early morning, the fields of buttercups, moonaisies, cowslips rattles and cornflowers and the like. The cornfields would be full of poppies and charlotte, and scarlet pimpernel, which opens in the sun, grew around the paths in the fields. The rickyards were full of corn and hayricks and the cattle yard came to a few feet from the house. The few pigs we had would have been TAMWORTH or GLOUCESTER SPOTS, now classed as rare breeds. The cattle were SHORTHORNS and these are now rarely seen nowadays. We had one tractor an INTERNATIONAL 1020 chain drive with iron wheels, now only seen in museums, seven work horses and six men: CARTER, FLOUGHMAN, SHEPHERD CATTLE AND PIGMAN and a CASUAL man for hurdlemaking, sheep shearing, pig killing, butchering and thatching, all of which was done by the same man. At least one pig a year was killed for home consumption and all the pig was used except for its squeal! Everything seemed to taste better from our own pig. Free range hens roamed around scratching at the manure heaps, eating maggots and insects - all giving the colour and flavour of lovely free range eggs.

Machines - The main machines at that time were the BINDER for corn cutting, the MOWER for cutting hay, some HAY TURNERS and an ELEVATOR for putting the hay and sheaves onto the ricks. As a boy I was always out in the fields if at all possible and used to love to help, as I thought with the haymaking. The elevator was powered by a slow moving pony walking around and around turning a gear that was connected by universal joint to the elevator. I was about 9 years old and was keeping the pony moving and clearing the hay from the gearing joints when my clothes got caught in the joints and I got slowly wound up into the gear and got rather bruised before the pony was stopped. There were no guards on anything in those days.

Private Enterprise - I was always keen on a bit of private enterprise and as a boy when there was a plague of mole, my father supplied me with traps and I caught and skinned 100 and sent them to London for about 6s (old) each. There seemed to be more mushrooms about and I used to pick them in the season before cycling to school and sold them to parents or my schoolfriends in Thame. Later I was able to keep some poultry and was selling eggs at 3 shillings (or 15 new pence) for 20 in 1933. At that time I started shearing sheep and went on to shear sheep for many of our neighbours.

Horses - Although we had a tractor, there were few machines, except a plough, that had been made to be used with it, so the horses did a lot of hard work. Although they looked picturesque they were having a hard time pulling heavy loads for long hours particularly at harvest and haymaking time. Three horses pulled the binder round the cornfield for long hours which was very tiring. Shocking and stooking corn all day, day after day, gave the men sore and aching arms and I for one am glad that those days are gone.

The Farm Worker - In the late 1920's the married workers lived in cottages in the village or in Sydenham. They had large gardens or allotments and usually had 2 pigs in a sty - one for home consumption and one for selling, possibly a few hens and a rabbit in a cage for food. A large amount of vegetables were grown and some surplus sold. The HEAD CARTER'S basic wage would be about £1.10s a week plus milk and

firewood free. He would get the horses in from the field at 6 am in summer but in winter when they were inside he would clean them out, feed them and give them water. He would then go home for breakfast and would be back at work at 7 am when the other men would arrive. If it were ploughing time they would harness the horses and set off to the fields with 2 or 3 teams of 3 horses. By the time the teams were hitched to the plough it would be after 8 am. The plough would take a 9 inch furrow and each team would plough about half to three quarters of an acre a day. The horses were very intelligent and would follow the furrow without guidance and turn to the left or the right on command. At about 11 am the lunch break was taken for about half an hour - a top of a cottage loaf with fat bacon was washed down with cold tea. Ploughing would go on until 2.30 when the teams would wend their way home and the horses would be given water and feed. One hour for dinner and then he would return to clean up the stable. (The carter's grandson is now herdsman earning £100.)

Hedging - Hedging was a major job in the winter, a skilled job but as a rule a lonely one. I sometimes helped with this and one day on one hedge near our boundary with Chinnor and Henton there were a lot of wild plants in the hedge, something like wild rhubarb, only to be seen in that hedge. The hedger told me this was DANEWEEED. He said it only grew where the blood of Danes had been spilt after the battle of KETCHAM FIELD. This was some 90 acres on the Henton side. How he got to know about this I don't know (because if it did ever happen, it must have happened about 1,000 years ago.) It is recorded that Danish soldiers were camping in Thame in the year 921 AD so who knows.

Hoeing - There were no chemical weed killers in those days and one job was hoeing weeds and thistles in the corn fields. One day I said to my father that the man seemed to be working very slowly; so next day he gave me a hoe and told me to help them. Four of us worked in a line and after a day of this back-aching work I never complained about the rate of work again.

Thame Market - All the fatstock was sold in Thame Market. The cattle were driven there and the lambs and the pigs were taken by horse and wagon and sold in the Upper High Street every Tuesday. The market was a meeting place for all farmers, dealers, butchers and cornmerchants from a large area around including London. The pavement was chained off along the street by the Swan Hotel. All the fat cattle were held up beside it by drovers while waiting their turn to be sold. The sheep, pigs and calves were penned in hurdles in the centre and the other side of the street.

Cornmerchants - The cornmerchants stood outside the Spread Eagle in the Cornmarket. The bolts that held their shelves can still be seen under the windows of the hotel. Farmers brought their samples of corn after they had been thrashed and sold them or tried to sell them to the dealers.

Thame Station - After the market all the fatstock that had been bought by butchers from any distance away was driven up the town along Park Street and put on rail at the station. There would be some hope of getting them up there today!

Poultry - At the market there was a weekly poultry and egg sale and in 1938 at the Christmas Fatstock Show of Poultry I took the first prize for a pen of fat cockerels. The first prize was 10 shillings and the cockerels were sold for 6/8d. each.

The market moved from its street location in 1954 to a site in North Street.

Threshing - Before the thrasher arrived a load of coal had to be brought and a load of water put in place for the Steam-Engine. There was no water laid on, and it was carted from a near-by pond. The day the thrasher arrived was exciting for us children. The engine came pulling the thrasher and elevator with much puffing of steam and smoke into the rickyard. To set up the tackle in line and level so that the driving belts ran straight was a very tricky job. There was no concrete road but just a very uneven farmyard floor. For thrashing 8 or 9 men were required. The sheaves of corn were fed into the machine, with the straw coming out to the elevator to make a rick which would be used for Thatching, Bedding or Feeding. The grain came out of the other end graded and it was collected in sacks containing 4 bushels each - just over two and a quarter hundredweight each. These were carried into the barn on a man's back. Today this would be illegal as it is not allowed to carry more than 1 cwt. Indeed, the safety officer of today would have had a fit to see all the fly wheels and belts whizzing around without guards. The steam engine would puff away all day, eating coal and drinking water that had to be carted to it. With 9 men to pay this was a very expensive operation.

Vermin - There were usually plenty of vermin about when the rick was nearly finished and the dogs and boys would have great fun in killing them.

Modernisation - In 1930 the farm was sold to Magdalen College and a big modernisation programme was started. The late owner, Philip Wykham, had let the farm get in a very bad state. An engine was installed to pump water from the well into new storage tanks put under the roof of the house, a bathroom was built in the house, and water piped to the new cowshed and dairy holding 16 cows. The yard had no hard surface and was filled with old elm tree trunks and clinkers, a steam roller was used to consolidate this. A new dutch barn was erected at the cost of £100 plus £20 for 2 covered sides. This was charged at 2s a year on the rent.

Milking - At this time I left school and we started milking 16 Shorthorn cows. This milk was sold to Nestles of Aylesbury for 6d. (old) per gallon. Soon after this the Milk Marketing Board was started which was a great help as they sold all the milk and collected all the money. At this time there were 13 farmers producing milk for sale in the Parish - now there is one.

Depression - As with all businesses, agriculture was very depressed in the early 1930's but, with the threat of war, the government began to give some support to farm prices and grants were paid to farmers who ploughed up pastures. Later, compulsory orders were made to plough up more pastures. This was when many of the old meadows with wild flowers were lost.

First Milking Machine - In 1945 a milking machine was installed but it still took 2 men to milk 30 cows, but this was the start of a great change, in fact the greatest change yet, leading to one man being able to milk 200 cows.

T.T. - In 1948 a scheme to eradicate Tuberculosis in cattle was started and we were soon free of this disease and were able to sell tuberculosis tested cattle to other breeders. This was a great benefit to the cattle

and of course to all the people of the country. The breed of cattle was changing to Friesian and I started to buy a few pedigree calves to start a pedigree herd. In about 1950 I bought my first Combine Harvester - another great step forward. Gone was the shocking, carting, rick building, thatching, thrashing which was all now done in one operation. Soon after the war an artificial insemination service was started by the Milk Marketing Board. This was a great benefit to the farmer who could have the use of the best bulls in the country. All the time the herd and yield were expanding slowly.

In 1963 the Landlord offered to sell the farm to me. After much thought and professional advice I arranged to borrow what seemed to be a large amount of money for the mortgage and if I live until the year 2003 and keep up the payments this will be paid off. This sparked off more expansion. 60 cows were milked in a parlour and a refrigerated milk tank was installed. One man could milk these on his own.

In 1972 my son David came home having been to agricultural college and abroad for about 10 years. Now with an extra household to support and new management the farm really took off.

Today the herd has 180 milking cows giving a yield of up to 1,000 gallons a day at peak periods, with 100 young stock and 1,000 acres of grain. Silage has taken the place of hay. With modern machinery this is a very easy operation.

Looking back - As I look back, I feel I had a very happy childhood but times were hard for all those who worked on the farm at that time. The great steps forward in farming, I think, have been the coming of the MILKING MACHINE, the COMBINE HARVESTER and the AI service and then the MILKING PARLOUR.