

## Accidents

### Background

The areas of accident prevention and mitigation were concentrated in industry within the scope of the factory acts such as the *Factory and Workshop Act 1901*.<sup>1</sup> No mention was made of agriculture, nor was it listed under dangerous trades which, in the act, covered trades which were: dangerous and injurious to health or dangerous to life and limb and covered machinery, plant, process or description of manual labour deemed to be dangerous. Little changed under the *Employment of Women, Young Persons and Children Act 1920* and no subsequent legislation covered agricultural employment until 1956 when the *Agriculture (Safety, Health and Welfare) Provision Act* provided safeguards for agricultural workers and had 'the power to prohibit children from driving or riding on agricultural machinery and vehicles or implements'. The Act also required the notification and investigation of all accidents with inspectors able to enter premises to enforce the act. With no prior government provision or system for inspection or the reporting of agricultural accidents it is impossible to ascertain the morbidity of agricultural employment and only if the accident resulted in death and the coroner notified was any record available.

People who worked in agriculture were at great risk of being killed or permanently disabled by accidents. In addition to the primary injuries, was the added risk of infection from contaminated soil, tetanus, pseudomonas, (prolonged contact with contaminated water, clostridium perfringens (gas gangrene) could be a complication of the smallest injury. According to her death certificate and the Chinnor parish register of 1903 for example, Emily Croxford aged 37, who was employed as a domestic and gardener, died in Aylesbury hospital from septicaemia following an injury to her hand which had become infected, leading to pyaemia (general blood poisoning).

Even before farm mechanisation (early tractors appearing in 1900 and combine harvesters in 1938) there was the risk from more mundane, but still disabling, injuries such as ruptures, sprains, fractures and cuts. This was illustrated by Jim Rose when he described an accident to his girlfriend who was cycling with a dead rabbit hanging from the handle bars. The rabbit became caught in the front wheel of the bike, she fell off and broke her leg which then had to be amputated. This occurred circa 1930. The agrarian historian, Mingay described a dramatic list of possible misfortunes which could be visited upon agricultural workers including: being kicked by horses, falling under carriage wheels, trapping fingers in turnip slicers, and being crushed by overturning carts, falling trees and collapsing buildings. They not infrequently fell into ponds, rivers and down wells.<sup>2</sup> The total number of accidents which occurred in Chinnor is not recorded although an analysis of the admissions to Watlington hospital from Chinnor 1919 to 1945 included 24 accidents of which nine were fractures, but of those that have been documented the following appear to be

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representative as they relate to minor incidents, animal accidents and incidents resulting from poor domestic environments.

Among the most common causes of accidents and death, was the result of being injured by an animal. This was illustrated in Chinnor in 1895 when the death certificate for 13 year old Ernest Cooper showed his cause of death recorded in Watlington hospital, as 'shock' following an accident when a team of shire horses bolted.<sup>3</sup> The horses were pulling a cart of manure in which the carter sat holding a plough, increasing the weight of the load substantially. Ernest was leading the team, riding on the first of three horses in tandem. Initially, it was not known what caused the horses to bolt but it seems that Ernest lost his hold and was thrown to the ground, the wheel of the cart passing over his hip and stomach and he also sustained serious head injuries. The accident inquest, which was reported in the *Thame Gazette* of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 1895, stated that the coroner returned a verdict of 'Accidental death' although from the *Gazette's* report some jurors wanted to add a rider to the verdict (the nature of this is not recorded) but were disallowed by the Coroner. A second account of the accident reported in the *Reading Mercury* April 6<sup>th</sup> 1895 said he had been ploughing with James Eustace who was employed by Mr. White and on returning home, a high wind and a slight descent combined to force the cart forward and the shafts touched the middle horse causing it to start off. All three horses subsequently bolted. It transpired that the carter had no reins and no britching (strap round the haunches of a draft horse which engages on a downward slope and enables the horse to slow down, and acts as a brake) on the thiller horse (the last horse on the team and the one between the shafts) to bring them under control. The jury condemned the driving of a team in this manner. Further examples indicate the lax approach to safety in relation to animals.

This mode of transport, riding on shire horses, seems to have been common. In an interview conducted by two Parish Councillors in the 1980s Mr Jimmy Eustace, born 1906, recalled that he started work as a plough boy at aged 13 when he and his father worked for the same farming family involved in the previously cited accident. When he went to work ploughing, he 'rode the horse in front.'<sup>4</sup> Bearing in mind that as children of the labouring classes in the countryside, Ernest and Jimmy who were both 13 at the time and would have only stood at about 4' 8" in height and were working with shire horses standing 17.5 hands, A second fatal accident was reported in the *Thame Gazette* on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1895 which involved a seven, year old boy on his way home from school. The reported narrative is a little difficult to follow but it would seem that he was riding on a shaft which linked a traction engine to a threshing machine and he slipped off, under the wheels of the elevator and was immediately crushed to death.<sup>5</sup> Jim Rose recalls a near accident, as a nine, year old boy when, during the harvest, he nearly got crushed by an elevator when his clothes got caught in the gearing joints and he was slowly wound up into the gears. He was very crushed and bruised before the pony, powering the elevator, could be stopped

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by his father.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say that in the 1920s farms were fairly safe, and certainly the next incident does demonstrate an acute awareness of potential dangers on the farms. It concerns the pitching of hay onto the hay cart and the precautions the men took with their forks which were discarded handle first. On this occasion the fork did not land flat on the ground but leaned against the hay wagon with the points upward. The farm worker slid down the hay rick straight onto the points with fatal results. Derek Nixey, however, claimed his farm had a very good accident record due, he felt, to the fact that they did not have much heavy machinery, but when questioned further in respect of animal injuries he dismissed them as 'par for the course'. 'Yes, of course people got kicked by cows but we didn't take any notice, it was what happened.'<sup>7</sup> An eye injury to his father in the early 1940s caused by a piece of straw needed an overnight stay in the Radcliffe Infirmary.

Two, non- agricultural, domestic accidents were reported. In 1907 Amy Witney died in the Radcliffe Infirmary from 'absorbing the poisons of dead skin following accidental burns'. A report in the *Thame Gazette* 17<sup>th</sup> December 1907 indicates that Amy was left alone by her parents for a short time with another child and Amy began to play with the fire. Her dress ignited and the flames were fanned by her rushing out of the door. Flames were extinguished by a passer-by and she was attended by Doctor Bruce of Thame and removed to the Infirmary at Oxford. In the *Thame Gazette* dated the 24<sup>th</sup> December the coroner's verdict was accidental death after evidence was given by the parents and Mrs Gibbs who put out the flames. Daphne White reported suffering a very bad scald when she was a child which her mother treated with olive oil and Mrs Seymour of St. Johns Ambulance Brigade was consulted but advised her mother to obtain help from the doctor who covered the scald area with tannex (tannic acid). No charge was made for this.

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