

Farming - 70 years on,

Most farms employed men to work outside and women in the house and dairy. On the bigger farms they had cowman, horseman, shepherds. On the smaller farms they did most of the work with family labour and help at busy times. Milk was a major part of income, in the mornings all the men milked the cows as the milk had to be in Exmouth by 7 p.m. or it would be sent back and fed to pigs. On Saturday nights the farmer had to go to the dairymen and try to get some money. In a few cases dairymen who were near the villages or in the villages would actually fetch the milk from the nearby farms. The cattle were cross-bred, mainly with a Devon bull, and cattle were taken to markets at Lympstone, Littleham, Exmouth, East Budleigh, or Exeter, which, of course, was much bigger. Lympstone market was where the Saddlers Arms Car park is now, Littleham was held in the Station Yard, where Morgan Close is now, East Budleigh was at the back of the Otterton Mill.

Most farms entered stock in the Christmas Fatstock Shows and Sales, and the men on the farm used to go sometime during the day, and all stock had to be led or driven. The farmers who won the prizes usually gave the staff some money to have drinks, and very often the cattle came home on their own and somebody would have to fetch the staff home in a pony and trap. The Buyers would sometimes ask the farmer to keep the cattle till they wanted them for slaughter. If a butcher at Exmouth, Lympstone, Woodbury or Topsham bought cattle or sheep at Exeter Market the drovers herded the cattle together and walked them back, dropping them at the places on the way, trying the farm cellars cider on the way.

Mr. England of Cannonwalls used to get up at 3 a.m. to milk his cows and feed them and his other animals and have his milk in Exmouth by 6.30 a.m. Jobber Jennings was a very short man, and used to bite his nails as you talked to him - he dealt in pigs, buying and selling, and he lived in Cannonwalls Cottage.

Kale, turnips, swedes and mangolds were grown for feeding in winter. Turnips were mostly for sheep fenced in a turnip field. Hay was made in the early days, cut with a scythe, but a horse drawn mower soon came on the scene. The hay was turned by hand with forks, then it was swept in with a sweep which was made of wood with about six large wooden spikes and pulled by a horse. A horse rake pulled by a horse used to make it into rows, it had a tipping mechanism so rows would be even. After this the sweep was pushed by a car, then a tractor. This was swept to the rick and loaded by hand. Then the elevator came worked by a horse which conveyed it to the top of the rick. The next was a mechanical turner of hay, then the Baler came as we know it today. All the early ricks of hay were thatched with reed made from wheat grown on the farm and most of the older men could thatch a rick.

Most farms had orchards, cider apples were grown and they were crushed with a machine which was driven around by a horse walking around the shed, the liquid was then put into casks to ferment, then siphoned off into other casks and left until ready to drink. The cider was generally sold to the pubs. Then beer came on the scene and the pub trade almost came to an end. After this the apples were usually sold to Whiteways of Whimble, they were taken to Woodbury Rd. Station and loaded on to railway trucks and taken to Whimble by train. The apples were usually picked by men on the farm and if the farm was near a village some of the wives and children would pick them up also at so much a bag. Whiteways used to offer cider apple trees in the early years either free of charge or at a low price to people who supplied them with apples.

Corn was grown mostly for feeding, Barley for grinding for cattle and pigs, oats for bruising for horses and sheep. Wheat was mainly for a cash crop. The straw was used for bedding, some wheat straw was made into reed for thatching. In early days the corn was cut with a scythe in swathes and others came along and bundled it into sheaves and a common sight was stooks of 8 sheaves which was left to ripen for about 3 weeks. It was then loaded into wagons by men with pitchforks and stacked into ricks to await the thresher. The threshers were drawn and driven by steam engines which threshed out the corn which was collected in sacks and the straw was collected in bundles by a trusser. Some oat straw was used for horses, and most farms had a chaff cutter which would chop straw into small pieces. This was worked by a wheel and belts operated by a horse working in the building made for this purpose. Following this method came the binder which used to be drawn by two or three horses, which would cut the corn, bundle and tie it into sheaves and drop the latter ready to be stacked and left to ripen for about three weeks. Today we have the combine harvester which does it all and is very sophisticated, and corn is taken in bulk to central stores, straw is baled mechanically, and even loaded by machine onto trailers, so often the whole job can be done by one man, as against teams of men and their families which were the basis of a thriving communal village life.

In the early years the corn was sown by hand from a bucket and was harrowed in with harrows made by the village blacksmith. Then the corn was sown by a horse drawn drill which was very simple, and then we had the corn drill drawn by a tractor as today. The grass seed, kale and turnip all sown by hand, with machines developed as before. In early days the men on the farm pulled the weeds from the corn fields and cut weeds in grass with scythes. Then came a mowing machine, first drawn by horses then by tractor, then in more recent years the weeds were sprayed with chemicals from tractor sprayers, mainly because there were fewer workmen on farms and this was quicker and more accurate.

Nowadays the yields from corn are much heavier and there is much research into new varieties of corn for heavier yields and disease resistance.

Milking was first by hand with buckets and stools by both men and women, then came the first milking machine, with buckets worked by air pump, then gradually improvements to milking parlours, bulk tanks and tankers and direct line milking which delivers the milk through a large bore pipeline by machine direct from cow to tank.

Farmyard manure was used mostly for root crops, taken out of the yard by cart and made into heaps to be spread by hand held fork.

Lime was carted from Odams Wharf at Ebford, or from Topsham to the fields and spread with shovels from the cart, fertilisers also or by train to Woodbury Rd. Station, then of course manure distributors were developed, first drawn by horses and then tractors. Then steam wagons came and a firm called German Bros, in Exeter and Exmouth delivered fertilizers and feedstuffs to farms, mostly from Bristol and Plymouth. Then came petrol lorries and most of the farm supplies were delivered by these.

In very early days many things were shipped to and from Topsham as this was the main port, and there was a thriving trade with Holland, the Dutch influence being clearly seen in the town, and many features seen in local farmhouses. Then the canal was built and timber and petrol went up to Exeter to tanks by the side of the canal in the Exeter Basin.

Exmouth was a thriving port with timber and coal and grain trades until very recent years. The coal came from the English and Welsh quarries by boat to Exmouth, up to this time wood was the main fuel and most farmhouses had hearth fires with large openings burning long lengths of wood. There was usually one or more boilers fuelled by wood for washing and baths, the farming families had a bath night and the children took their baths first in a large hip bath in front of the large hearth fire, followed by the adults.

Before the railway came small boats brought everyday supplies up to a building where the Puffing Billy is now. When the railway was constructed the shed was converted to a pub and called the Railway Inn, afterwards the Puffing Billy. There was a mill at Exton run by a Mr. Nichols, he turned the water from the main stream to the river, diverting it from where the bridge is in Mill Lane around to the Mill and then back into the stream again. This diverted ditch is no longer working as it has silted up. He was the first person to own a tractor in the district, a Titan tractor which he kept in a shed in Mill Lane.

Of the staff on farms the horsemen spent most of the winter ploughing and carting dung etc. The other men cut hedges with hooks, laid overgrown hedges, and cleaned out the ditches, also looking after stock of dairy cattle, sheep, beef cattle, and pigs. There were blacksmiths, one at Woodbury, one at Woodbury Salterton, one at Clyst St. George and one at Lypstone - they used to shoe the horses and make and repair implements. Woodbury also had a Wheelwright, Mr. Vickery who repaired and made wheels and carts and wagons and later tractor trailers. Then Berry's garage started to sell implements and repair binders and mowing machines, getting parts from the manufacturer or agents. Then came the larger implement agents, such as Norringtons, Medlands and Flews, most were agents of the bigger farm machinery manufacturers. We also had fertiliser and feeding agents, of which Woodbury Mill run by the Ware family was our local one. Long's of Withycombe was the mill at Withycombe run by waterwheel, also Fishers Mill at Topsham run by waterwheel, and still is. Otterton Mill was another, now run as a craft centre.

The farming tenants on the Nutwell and Clinton estates could dig gravel from quarries which they owned and were allowed to cut timber in the covers and copses for building and fencing stakes, usually larch. During and after the 2nd World War farmers started to look for dairy breeds for extra milk and Friesian, Ayrshires, Guernseys and Jerseys became very popular. There were some Shorthorns at first, but these were gradually discontinued except by a few specialist breeders. Heifers were kept for herd replacements and bulls were fattened for beef. Tenants of farms on the Nutwell Estate paid their rent half yearly, the whole family went the tenant paying rent to the agent and discussing any improvements he wished to make, Lady Seaton would talk to the wife and children, giving them refreshments and always a small present. The children would have a day off school. The Nutwell keeper lived at the top lodge, the last one was Keeper Reeves, he looked after and reared pheasants, and kept vermin down to a minimum, any diseased foxes would be destroyed, and he would look out for poachers and deal with them. They would use a long net 50 ft. long and catch rabbits. The estates would have a day shooting crows and rooks and there were pheasant shoots, with the estate selling the birds to local butchers. Nowadays we have far more foxes and badgers and rabbits, rooks, crows and magpies are a menace to small lambs etc. as we have no keepers. The Clinton Estate keeper was Keeper Pavey who lived at Woodmanton Cottage. The farmworkers all lived in cottages on the farms and estates within walking distance of their work, and were allowed rabbits, pigeons, turnips, swedes, kale and apples from the farms for themselves, some kept pigs at their cottages, most hens for eggs etc.

When the Milk Marketing Board was introduced in the early 30's it was one of, if not, the biggest thing to happen in agriculture

for centuries, as it meant you sold your milk to them and got a cheque regularly each month. The farming community in the 20's & 30's lived from day to day with very little money and most of the things they wanted came from the farm, living rent free, but they were a lot more contented with their lot in their communities than they are today. The 2nd World War brought a complete change in agriculture, farmers had to plough extra land, grow more crops of corn, swedes, potatoes, surplus straw was used by the paper mills for paper making. Tractors came in their thousands with all the implements to work the land, many coming on the American Lease Lend scheme before the Americans entered the war, especially more sophisticated machines like Combine Harvesters from Massey Harris, balers from International in order to speed up the work, double Summertime was used to lengthen working days and many of us remember working until almost midnight to harvest crops, women and children included.

Many of the men were called up for war duty so the Land Army came into being of all women, many of them from the cities. After the war machines still continued to take over the work and the agricultural workforce declined in numbers and has continued to do so ever since.

Gordon Hallett c.1980

(Retyped for clarity by Roger Stokes 2016)