

Memories of a Suffolk farm lad

By Mike Durrant

1. INTRODUCTION

Whilst reminiscing, along with Jack, about Suffolk farm life as a boy he said “sounds great put it in writing and I’ll print it” so here goes. Not a convoluted tale but recollections of individual instances plucked from my deteriorating memory cells.

The farm in question was at Barrow (Bury St Edmunds), the period of time was late Forties into the early Fifties and the farm mixed dairy and produce. My father, true to family tradition, was an ag. lab and general factotum who was involved in herding, milking – including delivery in a pony and cart – and general farm duties. Living on a farm, for us kids, was total freedom giving us access to untold unexplored territories but we too played our part in the overall picture of the running of the farm especially during harvesting and potato picking. These two events invariably matched our school holidays so vacation entertainment presented no problems, no trips abroad then, it was all hands to the task.

We occupied a tied cottage which was one of a terrace of 6 or 8 at the head of a farm lane. The cottages had a large kitchen / diner complete with brick built “copper”, with fire underneath and wooden lid, and an open fire cooking range, with “trifids”, which could be swung over the fire for saucepans. Most of our indoor living time was spent in this room as a family. There was a smaller front room and two bedrooms upstairs. Access to the bedrooms was via a very steep, narrow stairway which went up enclosed in the wall between the two rooms.

Lighting consisted of two oil lamps, which were hung from hooks in the wooden beams, and candles. The only heating was in the kitchen / diner and this was radiated from the cooking range and the copper if it was fired up. During the winter months all undressing / dressing, washing and bathing was carried out in this room. Bathing was in a galvanised portable bath which was normally stored in the communal wash-house and only brought in for this purpose. I can remember waking in the mornings to see “Jack Frost” patterns on the bedroom window, INSIDE, jumping out of bed and running downstairs to get dressed where the heat was, the fire in the kitchen having been livened up for breakfast.

All the cottages shared a single corrugated iron shed which housed a “portaloo”, a bucket with a lid on it, which required emptying each night. This was carried out on a rota system the details of which were no concern of mine but I can recall my fathers moans when his turn, always, came round. Likewise all our water came from a shared well, including newts, and had to be carried 75yds. to the house. No such thing as running water, electricity, gas, flushing toilets or central heating in those days. For entertainment we had card games, family chit-chat, the wireless, child’s play and our parents would sit and read / write with us, the precursor to school homework?

The village shop did a roaring trade as did the daily home delivery services but I remember that as farm employees the hands received a few “perks” such as fresh milk, butter, cheese, eggs and seasonable vegetables.

2. HARVESTING

Harvest time was not only busy for the farmhands but their families as well, wives and children all had their part to play. We kids loved this time of year as it was school holidays and we got to work, and play, in the fields and be paid for it. On the farm where we were the farmer would come round at the end of the week and, providing that you had been of regular assistance, hand you 2/6d as a thank you. Fortunes indeed!!!

The first day of the harvest was eagerly awaited.

The farmer would have tested the crop for fullness and ripeness before allocating the first field to be cut to start the harvest. The weather forecast would have been studied and confirmed as once started it would be flat out to complete the task in front of any bad weather.

Once the farmhands had been told which field was to be the first cut it was up at first light and away to the start. The scythe men would cut the first swathe around the perimeter to allow the tractor and reaper to start cutting. The reaper was attached, and driven, to the side of the tractor and had a four fingered sail to lay and feed the crop into the cutters. The reaper bundled the crop into sheaves, tied them and ejected them to the rear. It was the job of the men, and us lads, to haul the sheaves to one side and stand them in stooks of 4-6 so that the tractor could continue around the field unheeded.

As the cutting progressed all the rabbits would move to the centre of the field to get away from the noise and clatter of the reaper. On occasions a piercing shriek would be heard above all the noise, the tractor would stop and one of the farm hands would check the cutters, invariably he would find an unfortunate rabbit caught up so he would put it out of it's misery as quickly and humanely as possible so that cutting could continue. The cutting circle would get smaller as the reaper made its way around the field so not so many hands were required to move and stack the sheaves, also the rabbits were being pushed into a smaller area. This is where us lads came into our own, the call would go out to prepare, we lads would step back from the sheaves, pick up our sticks and watch for the rabbits to break. When the rabbits made their bid for freedom they were faced with fleet of foot lads determined to catch their dinner. Surprisingly few escaped. All the rabbits caught were pooled and at the end of the day shared out, farmhands and their families would receive one or two for themselves and the remainder would be sold to the local butcher.

As the day came to the close the wives / mothers would join us in the early evening, with their lined baskets or buckets, to glean the field. This was backbreaking work as it entailed stooping to gather any ears of corn, or whichever crop was being harvested, to take home for flour making or chicken feed. When the light was falling and dusk was descending the sound of chatter and laughter could be heard over the lanes and fields as the families wearily headed home to eat, sleep and prepare themselves for dawn the following day. WE LOVED THE LIFE.

3. ROOT CROPS

Root crops, mainly potatoes and sugar beet did not involve us farm lads quite as much as the summer harvest but I can recall what a hard, backbreaking, tedious job it appeared to be for the farmhands. The farm still used horses to do a lot of the work and our farm had a team of Clydesdales, magnificent beasts, to do the harrowing, planting, carting etc.

My most vivid memory of the horses is being hoisted on to the back of a giant Clydesdale stallion and given a ride home from the fields to the farm. It was bareback and all I could hold on to was the horses mane as I literally did the splits across his broad back. When we entered the yard the horse was so keen to get back to his hay rack that he continued to the stable as the handler closed the gates behind us. Fortunately the handler noticed what was happening and shouted to me to duck, I had to lay flat along his back to prevent myself being decapitated on the frame of the stable entrance.

The potato crop was planted using a mechanical dibbler with the farmhands dropping the seed potatoes in the holes and covering them with soil using their feet as they followed the dibbler. When the crop broke surface the farmhands would walk the rows of the field and, using hoes, had to bank up the shoots to protect them from frosts. This task was often carried out by one man working the field on his own, day after day until each field was completed.

When the time arrived to harvest the potatoes a machine, similar to a plough was brought into the field and this would turn the soil and bring the crop to the surface. The potatoes would be spread and left for one or two days to dry, once dry it was the turn of the womenfolk and us lads to return to the scene . We would walk the field and pick the potatoes, by hand, placing them in baskets ready for collection. Back

breaking work indeed but if the weather was fine it would be a fun time for the youngsters with picnics, ploughmans for the men, and games in the field.

The beet crop was planted with a mechanical seed spreader and drill and left to shoot. Once the entire field was seen to have sprung the farmhands had to go in and thin out. This again was a long tedious job having to use hand hoes to remove the seedlings leaving each seventh one to develop. At the time of harvesting a machine would lift the beet and the farmhands had to walk the field topping and tailing each beet, this entailed using a machete to slice off the leaves and the root as they held each beet in their hand. A dangerous action but amazing to watch a skilled man working at speed.

4. PEAS

I cannot recall much about the pea crop as this was a new innovation on our farm and was the first harvest prior to us leaving the farm. The one memory I can recall is seeing, and riding on, a new automatic COMBINE HARVESTER which had been hired in to do the harvesting of the peas.

I was down at the farm when the harvester arrived to receive directions to the field where the crop was to be harvested. I stood in total awe, with mouth agape, at the sight and size of this “monster”, much to the amusement of the operators, when a voice asked “would you like to come up and have a ride?” would I!!

With one foot on the first step I glanced at my father for his approval, he had barely finished nodding when I was on board and ready for a new adventure. The harvester had to pass by our cottage to reach the field and as it was so high I was in line with the upstairs window, my mother, attracted by the noise, came to the window and saw me on the machine. Shouting at the top of her voice she enquired as to where I thought I was going, I shouted back “to the pea field”, “but you’ll get filthy” was the reply. To this the driver responded that all dirt could be removed with soap and water and, with a wave and a smile, I continued my adventure. WHAT A BRILLIANT DAY

5. MILK DELIVERIES

I mentioned previously that the milk was delivered by pony and cart so here follows memories of this. The pony’s name was Tommy and he was very nervous and skittish so much so that should my father take me on the round with him I had to be very careful of my behaviour lest I startle him. Tommy hated the sight of the blue sugar bags so we had to be on constant vigil because if he saw one he would stop in his tracks and refuse to move. Should this occur it was my job to run ahead and hide the bag by putting in my pocket or burying it out of his sight. Having done this my father was able to coax him passed the spot and continue on the round.

There was one memorable occasion when Tommy bolted with me hanging on to the cart and my father chasing down the road after us. This came about because, having found an empty bottle with some water in it, I decided to empty it onto the road. Unfortunately at the time my father was on a house call so that the reins were left unattended. Fortunately Tommy knew the round so proceeded to the next delivery point, came to a halt and waited for his driver, my father, to turn up. Tommy was soothed and calmed, I was berated and spanked for my carelessness.

On another occasion we, the kids, were playing in the lane at the front of the cottages when we heard the sound of galloping hooves. Thinking it was “the lady” out riding we stood on the bank to one side to allow her through. The next thing we saw was Tommy coming round the bend in full flight having escaped from his paddock. I ran in to tell my father who then had to find Tommy and return him to his paddock.

He took me along to assist, and having gathered his bridle, we set out to find Tommy. The other kids had been keeping an eye out for him and eventually we located him in a field still frightened and skittish. My father asked the others to leave and we entered the field to attempt to catch him, following several unsuccessful attempts my father gave me the bridle to hold as we approached Tommy yet again. Now to a small lad bridles can, and do, get heavy so at the precise moment that a successful capture was imminent I dropped it. Tommy reared and bolted, my father fell and I waited!, my father, not a happy chappie, got to

his feet, clipped me round the ear and sent me home, picked up the bridle and continued the chase
ALONE.

I started by saying that this was not a great tome so I will come to a close now as it could possibly turn out that way. I sincerely hope that you have enjoyed reading these recollections as much as I have writing them. The work was very hard for those involved but I hope that I have been able to pass on the fact that farm life for the families and the farmhands was also great fun and that country life in general was a great community existence.

Originally published 2007 in 'Roots and Branches', the magazine of Felixstowe Family History Society