

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - January 2010

### My Life as a Countryman

A very snowy Hannen Room and Mill Green greeted members for the January meeting, when Ted Fox gave a most enjoyable talk on My Life as a Countryman.

Ted was born in Llandough, south Wales - a village with 2 streets, 2 shops, 2 churches, - but only one pub. By the age of 12, he was helping with the hand milking on a local farm, and took a job there when it was offered to him aged 15. (Somewhat against his parent's wishes, as his father hoped he would train as a dentist!). As a boy he had learnt how to catch pheasants and rabbits. One way was to sweep across the field with a net weighted on the bottom. This they would do silently (as it was poaching!) - when one night they heard 'What's that?' 'It's a net'. They quickly dropped the net, and retrieved the following day, but never found out who the courting couple were!!

Ted worked for several farmers, gaining experience. One 'liked a drink', and would ask Ted to throw gravel at his window to wake him -- sometimes not rising till 10.30, by which time Ted would have milked the 28 cows, cleaned up and so on. Things got worse, so Ted moved on - to an 'old time nasty farmer'. This one had laid off 6 men in 1 day in the 1930s - 1 he had told to go, and told 5 others to move the family possessions out of the cottage and cover with a rick sheet - when they refused, they too were out of work and home. Working for this farmer, the milk from each cow would be collected in a 3 or 4 gallon stainless steel bucket, and then weighed on the dairy scales. Sometimes they bucket would be very full, and if any was spilt, the farmer would compare the weight with the previous day's measure, and the cost of the 2 pints was knocked off his wages at the end of the week.

After 3 months, Ted moved on to another farm down the road. The 73 year old farmer taught Ted all his farming knowledge, and they got on famously. They had 26 cows, and would grow mangles - as large as footballs - for cattle feed. The seeds would be thickly sown, and later hoes would be used to single them. However, the ground was heavy clay, and he thought this would ruin the crop. The farmer showed him that with sacks on their knees they could complete the task - it took 3 weeks for the acre of mangles.

By the time he was 18, Ted started a 'farmer's help service' - looking after the stock for a farmer who had, maybe, gone on a 3 day trip to market. One farmer asked him to help move some pigs for a butcher. The 30 weaner pigs were loaded into the van - but no matter how much hay was put down, the pigs stayed standing, moving from side to side as the van turned corners. As the farmer changed gear on a hill, the back doors opened, and there were pigs everywhere - in a barn, the churchyard etc, and it too 4 hours to catch them all - for which he was paid £5! On another occasion, a lady who knew nothing about the 250 pigs they had asked Ted to help, as her husband was in hospital. She lived 2 miles in the opposite direction from his home than the farm where he still worked (3 miles away). He fed and looked after the pigs for 13 days - for which he was paid £20 - a lot of money 40 or so years ago.

In due course, on the way to market one Friday, he heard of a small farm becoming available near him, and so was at the agent's office early on the Monday morning - by 9.30 am, at the age of 19½ he had the tenancy of a 20 acre farm. He spent £60 on a horse, waggon and harness, and also bought 200 chicks to produce eggs, and 2 beef cows in calf. One day whilst having his horse shod at the blacksmith's, a gypsy called by - asked who's horse was outside, and offered his 16 year old daughter, plus £300 - one deal he decided not to accept!! He prepared some of the ground to grow peas - or any other market garden crops that he could sell.

A few years later, he found that the gatepost by the road was rotten. He had to dig it out to a depth of 4' 6" or so. The bus from Cardiff passed hourly. Most of the passengers were regulars - and he noticed that one girl sat in the same seat every day. After 4 days, he waved at her - she waved back, and he thought 'hello' !! He made sure he was at his gatepost each day the bus went by. He wanted to get on the bus - but what to do with his bike ? By borrowing his sister's bike, he worked out how to do this - and so hailed the bus one day. There was a fellow sitting near to the girl - who moved as soon as Ted got on board - he later found out that the other passengers had been taking bets on how long it would be before he would get on the bus. 18 months later, they were married.

After 8 years, Ted (now 26) moved and took on a 100 acre Welsh hill farm near Pontypridd. He wanted to try some Jersey cattle, and saw some he liked. His offer was turned down, but they failed to sell at auction, so he haggled with the dealer, and even got them delivered without charge. As he had several heifer calves in a row, he soon was milking 30 cows. His Jersey bull, however, was 'the wickedest thing in the world'. Trying to move this one day, he heard it groan, as it had injured itself, but then went for him - twice - and injured Ted. The vet advised him that it would always be a liability, and so it had to go.

Although we were suffering from the snow, Ted said that a 'normal winter was like this one' - but the 1962-3 winter was quite exceptional. Manure froze as hard as concrete in a very short time. He had kept a kitchen tap running, and so was able to help 4 nearby farmers who had no water. He had dug out 8ft snow drifts - by 10.30 the next day it had filled in again.

Ted recounted many other incidents that gave a flavour of farming life in the mid 20th century. He also brought along his hand made, highly detailed models of a farm waggon and farm tools, and also his very first cheque for milk he supplied to the Milk Marketing Board, in July 1957.

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The next meeting is on Tuesday February 9th, when the speaker will be Dick Bush, Chairman of the Parish Council and on Tuesday March 9th the Society will hold its AGM (when the programme for the 2010-11 will be announced), whilst on Tuesday April 13th Maureen Fennemore and Judi Rowlands (Wardrobe mistresses for the Wargrave Theatre Workshop) will tell us How to source and prepare costumes for a Festival production.

Please note that the meetings for February and March will be held in St Mary's Church, Mill Green, Wargrave, and not the Hannen Room, - where we are able to return for our April meeting.