

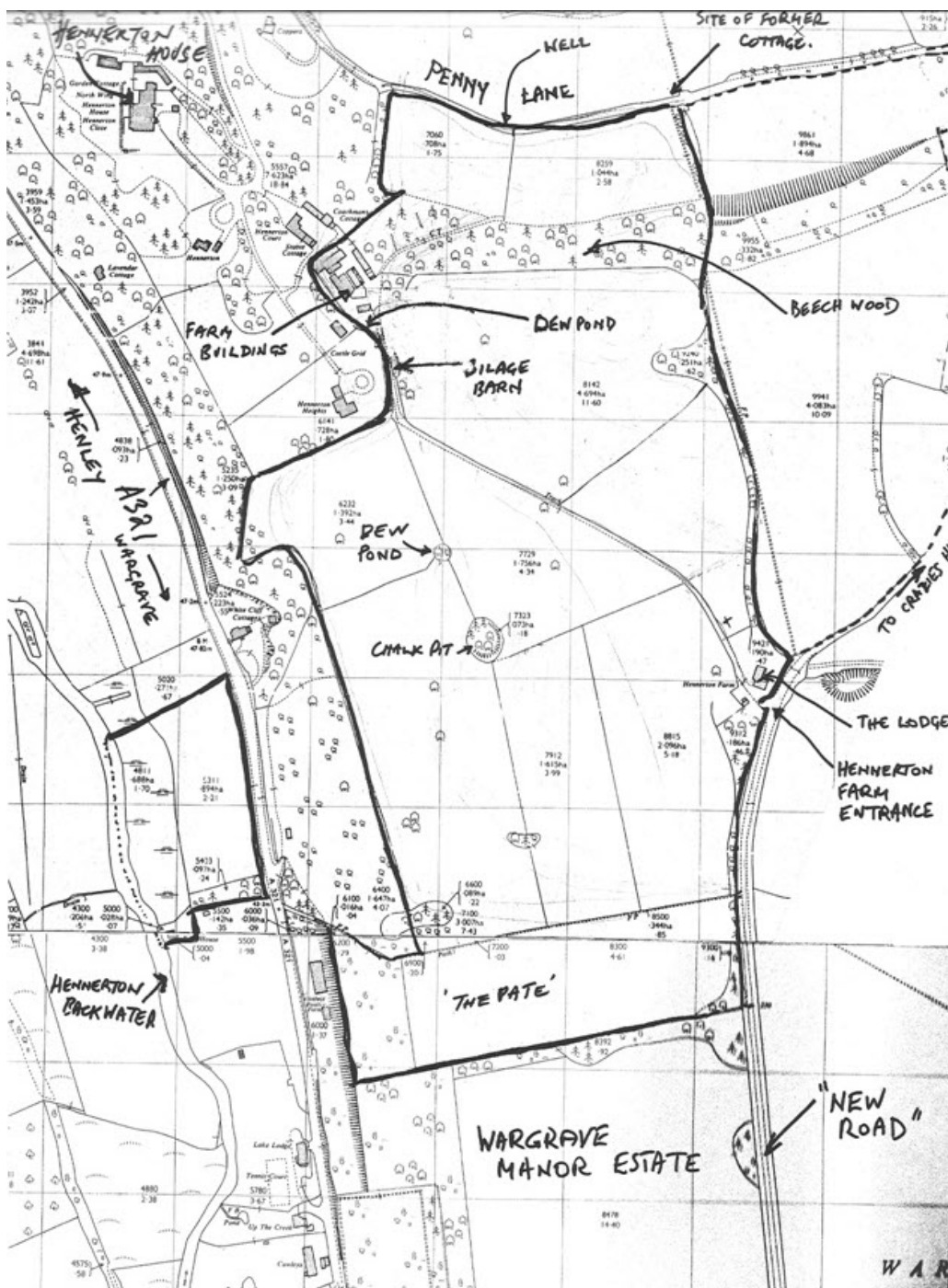
Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2015

Hennerton - From Eggs to Golfballs

The February meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was a fascinating and entertaining talk by Peter Hearn about how their family business diversified from farming to golfing.

Peter's family had lived at Hennerton since 1950 - he explained that the family had come into farming as a result of war-time conditions. His father was not eligible for army service during the war, so he had gone to work on a local farm. Here Peter's parents had met - his mother being a farmer's daughter. Although not from a farming background (Peter's grandfather had owned a furniture factory in Wycombe that had been commandeered 'for other purposes' during the war), Peter's father learnt the trade on local farms.



Farming on the Hennerton site had been attempted during the war, but not seriously. The 50 acres of parkland was eventually bought by Peter's father, with help of an uncle. The latter was in the timber trade – he may have been influenced by many trees that would have to be removed from the site. They were felled ‘the old fashioned way, using a cross cut saw having cut wedges with axes – a long and tedious job.

The farm occupied one of the most beautiful pieces of countryside in the area, although the stunning views could only be enjoyed by walking the local footpaths. The boundary to the north is Penny Lane, which was the original road leading to Crazies Hill. It was lined with hazel clumps – useful for the hurdle-makers there. It maybe that a toll of a penny was charged to use the lane, which gave rise to its name. There was a beech wood on the escarpment, with yew trees below. Many of the beech were felled in the late 1970s, as droughts had caused them to die off. Other features of the land are a chalk pit – which would have provided flints for building and chalk for the roads or for lime on the fields, and two dew ponds. These were formed by puddling a depression in the ground, so as to collect water, and from the 1700s onwards might be concrete lined, as at Hennerton. Once the Enclosure Acts took effect, when people took ownership of land, and so could not move across other people's land, these ponds became important as a water source. One on their farm was about 65 feet across and 7 or 8 feet deep in the middle. There were so many rabbits, who would eat anything, on the field furthest to the south that it was called the pate”.

In the early days, the Hearn's lived in the Lodge, close to the Crazies Hill road. There was no electricity, heating was by log fire, and lighting by paraffin lamps – but there were difficulties like this for many people in the post-war era. That included food supply, so the government was encouraging farmers to get going, and many pamphlets were produced to advise inexperienced farmers, such as them. In the first couple of years, they could only grow corn, but Mr Hearn's aim was to have 10 milking cows. The cereals were tall varieties, with a meagre yield. Peter's task as a young boy was to check that the sheaves had been tied properly – as soon as his feet could reach the pedals, he would drive the tractor! Mechanisation in farming had not taken off at this stage, and as they were a small farm, they would be one of the last where the thresher would call. By that time, the rats had eaten quite a lot, so they might get just a ton of grain per acre.

In the 1950s it was mixed farming ‘a bit of everything’. They had obtained some Southdown sheep from nearby farmer, Bob Sparrow – but as the land was not well fenced, the animals were held in pens made of hurdles. The sheep were moved daily, so making the pens was a continuous job. They had a sheepdog ‘of sorts’ – particularly good at getting out moles. Peter thought it might be a good idea to use mole-skin to make some gloves for his mother – but needed to know how to cure the skins. His father suggested that he write to ‘Farmer's Weekly’. The reply, 40 pages of instructions, rather put him off the idea!

Peter's father also kept pigs – initially 1 or 2 sows, but no boar. To produce a herd of piglets, they either had to take the sow to the boar at Winnersh, or vice versa. Chickens were also kept, and the chicks would be brought by train – the Wargrave station master telephoning to let them know they had arrived and needed fetching. To begin with the chickens were kept outside, but were vulnerable to foxes. A 20 foot fold was built to house the birds inside, with nest boxes at one end. When the first egg was laid, it was in the food trough at the other end – when thrown to the other end, it missed the bucket and broke!

The first of the Jersey cattle herd came from the Hambleton estate. It would be tethered under a tree for milking, and what the family did not use themselves was made into butter – which was hard work. Eventually a cow shed was built, although the builders probably made more money from catching rabbits than from building! Once the herd got going, milk was sent to the village dairies, the churns being put at the gate by 8.30 for collection. The pedigree Jerseys were ‘part of the family, with names like Valley, Nonchalant, Daisy, Redbreast etc In due course, they got a milking machine, but Nonchalant would not accept it, so had to still be milked by hand.

The great advances in farming in the 1950s included mechanisation, improved plant breeding, spray chemicals and fertilisers, all of which helped increase the production of food. One particular advance was the tractor developed by Harry Ferguson during war time. Early tractors had been easy to turn over, but the ‘Fergie’ had a 3 point linkage developed by Harry which became the basis of all modern tractors. When the Ford company took the idea and made a lot of tractors in the USA, they had to make an out of court settlement with Ferguson for having used his patented idea. In the 1950s, 5% of the population worked in agriculture, but by the 1960s this figure was already declining.

When Peter finished at school, he went to the Berkshire College of Agriculture to learn more. In those days, the 30 students' day began at 5.30am working on the farm, before having breakfast, then lectures, and then milking etc again in the afternoon. He was then encouraged to go on to Seale-Hayne College. He then worked in the industry, for a seed merchant at Calne and as a crop inspector, but came back to farming in 1971 when his brother, who had been working at Hennerton with his father, got a farm of his own.

By this time, the number of cows on the farm had risen to about 40, and an abreast milking parlour had been built. New regulations had led to the closure of many small dairies, and milk was collected by bulk tanker, so they could keep more cattle. The crops had become shorter strawed, and so better able to withstand storms, whilst the combine harvesters gave a better yield with less waste. Arable farmers were able to get grants to buy machinery – although livestock farmers felt 'hard done by', they also gained in the costs of animal feed.

When they decided to add another house on the site, it was decided to do the work themselves, with sub-contracted labour. However, disaster struck when the plumber set fire to the roof. Subsequently local builder Clifford Maidment took on the work. His employees also dealt with the undertaker side of the business – and if there was a fire, the fire brigade was crewed by the same workforce. But that was typical of how villages were – everything was here in the village, from butcher, baker and greengrocer to banks builders and a W H Smiths.

By 1975, the number of cattle had increased to about 70, and so there was a need for extra irrigation. There was difficulty in getting an electricity supply to the borehole, which delayed the process. 1976 was a bad drought year, and so the crops suffered. The kale survived, but they had no hay that summer, and had to feed the cattle on straw. Using an old second hand baler, they collected about 6,000 bales from Nettlebed – taking many 14 mile trips by tractor (with no indicators on the trailer) to complete. In the event, the 300 ft borehole only showed its worth after farming at Hennerton had come to an end.

By the late 1970s, there was a butter mountain, a cheese mountain and so on. Peter's father wanted to retire, and so the dairy herd was sold. The farm turned principally to pork production, with some beef, and the egg trade was also built up. However, the market was changing, with supermarkets replacing small local shops. It was one of the reasons why the difficult decision was made to change how the farm land was used.

Peter had been inspired by watching the 'Masters' golf tournament on television. He was not a golfer, but the lovely they had was something he could share with them. In addition, government intervention changed how farmers were paid – and pork production would be concentrated in Denmark and Holland. Every pig that went out of the gate lost money. Having 200 pigs on site also meant there was a lot of slurry produced – so local people were also probably grateful when this no longer had to be dealt with!!

By the mid 1980s, production on the farm had been reduced, and planning permission was applied for to develop a golf course on the land. Farming came to an end – and the fields reverted to a form of parkland – as it had been before farming began there. The audience had been given not only an account of farming at Hennerton, but a concise history of post war farming in England.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday March 10th, when the Society will hold its Annual General Meeting, and details of the coming year's programme will be revealed. This will be followed on Tuesday April 14th by a presentation on Culham Court by Dr Phillada Ballard, who has made a special study of the property and its owners, and will enlighten us about its history over several centuries.

Our meetings start at 8 pm in the meeting room at the Old Pavilion on the Recreation Ground, Wargrave. Visit our website www.wargravehistory.org.uk/ for more information about the Society.
