

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - September 2003

### Rural Life

In September the Wargrave Local History Society's meeting was an illustrated talk by Brian Eigheten, on Rural Life. Brian had spent most of his working life in the animal feed industry, and is a keen collector of picture postcards, having some 5000, and these formed the basis of his talk.

The illustrations covered a wide range of rural and agricultural topics - which had to be seen to be fully appreciated, so only a brief summary can be mentioned here. Brian began with several 'crops' that are not used harvested now, such as acorns (used as pig feed) and bracken (collected, for example, by commoners in the New Forest to use as bedding). Horse power featured in many of the postcards - such as for ploughing, when chicken would gather in the field close to the plough, to feed on the grubs etc. in the soil. Neither the horse ploughing nor the chickens would be seen now. Brian also noted that the horse collars - by which the horse's 'pull' was applied to the plough or other implements, were of a different design in each county. Later ploughing was done by a pair of traction engines - pulling a double ended plough by a wire to and fro across the ground, although this was only practical in large fields.

The process of growing the crop started with the sowing of the seed - originally broadcast by hand, and later by a seed drill - a wheeled box with spouts for the seed to fall to the ground, pulled by horses. Once the crop was ready for harvesting, it would be cut with the scythe, and other farm workers would bundle the cut corn into sheaves, and stacked into stooks. Scythe cutting was replaced by a horse-drawn cutting machine - and later by a reaper pulled by 3 horses, which would bundle the corn as well as cut it. After the harvest, local villagers had the chance to be 'gleaners' - crossing the field and picking up any ears of corn etc. left behind.

The building of ricks to store the crop was a very skilled job - the ricks being thatched on the top. When the grain was to be separated, a contractor would be summoned to thrash the corn, using a traction engine driving the threshing box by a long belt. As the rick was taken down, it was quite usual for many rats to emerge from the base -- the farm workers tying string round their trouser legs and equipping themselves with sticks to deal with the vermin. The corn would be carried away in sacks - each weighing up to 2• cwt, (about 114kg) which a man would be expected to carry on his back.

Amongst the livestock, the shorthorn cattle was popular, as it provided both milk and beef. A typical milking herd would be half a dozen cattle - 20 being considered a large herd, and with no milking machines available, outdoor milking was often to be seen.. The milk would be carried to the farm dairy in pails - one from each end of a yoke placed across the shoulders. Many farmers would sell their milk direct to customers, using a ladle to transfer the milk from a churn to the housewife's jug. Other livestock included sheep, pigs, turkeys, chickens (which the farmer's wife probably kept to provide for 'the family', but any surplus would be sold), and geese. Animals would often be taken through the street to market - most country towns having a market, where the local butcher, greengrocer etc. would buy the produce.

What was apparent was that farming was very much a 'family job' - the adults and the children would all be involved. There were many pictures of women working in the fields, doing 'heavy' work -- such as using a pitch fork to load carts with hay ( a skilled job). The farming industry also relied on the merchants, to dispose of their produce.

Brian's talk included many other aspects of rural life - from the agricultural shows to the village blacksmith, hunting (foxes and stags), duck shooting, ferreting rabbits.

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