

Farming Life in the Fens



Ploughing by horse, bog oaks and beet singling

Produced by Great Fen staff and volunteers, with the help of Ramsey Rural Museum, as part of the Great Fen oral history project.

Photo above courtesy of John Edwards.

Great Fen 



Starting young

Many people worked on the land from an early age. John Edwards, who lives in Ramsey St Mary, said:

"I got my first job when I was thirteen, at a farm in Rays Drove. It was a part-time job cleaning out the cows and horses. When I was fourteen, they asked me if I wanted to stay and work full time. Eventually I took the farm over and I stayed till I was 66.

"We grew wheat for Larratts Mills at Ramsey. At harvest time we hired in a threshing machine and put it in sacks for a fortnight until they were ready to come and collect it."



Photo: Threshing machines in Upwood 1915 -1925, provided by CCAN

John said: "We also grew sugar beet for the Peterborough sugar factory and potatoes for the merchants at Ramsey - mostly Colemans."

Singling the beet

Nowadays when beet are drilled by machine, only one seed is planted at a time, but in the past, several small beet grew up in one place in a cluster. They had to be separated, or "singled", to make enough room for one plant to grow large.



Gang of beet hoers, 1935 to 1945. These men would also have done beet singling (photo from CCAN).

Beet singling was a hard job as Lynn Jacklin, John's daughter explains:

"In the spring, after they'd done the hoeing, you tied plastic bags to your hands and knees with a bit of string and crawled along the field, up and down, up and down."

The plastic bags weren't always very effective, as Lola Carter explains: "Sometimes I had blisters as big as hen's eggs on my knees. If they burst we had to put metholated spirits on them to take away the pain!"

Good money

Lola said: "You got paid by the acre - it was about 35 shillings I think - and it took about three days to do an acre.

Good company

Lola added, "It was hard work but I enjoyed it because there used to be four or five women all together and we used to talk and laugh. It didn't seem as if you were working. One night we were talking so much we didn't get home until after ten!"

Lola was not the only one who enjoyed her job. Ivy baker said: "It was hard work but there were so many of us and we had a laugh."

Harvest work at Mereside Farm,
Ramsey Mereside 1945-1955
(CCAN)



Carrot Washing and the Polish Connection

Wendy Hubbard remembers helping out with the carrot washing on the Polish Co-Operative on Cobalder Farm.



Photo: Karol and Jadwiga Kuras working on Cobalder Farm courtesy of Lech Jasinski

She said: "I enjoyed it because they were friendly and they looked after you very well. They never moaned. They worked hard and they were fair people. A lot of the Polish people lived near us in Bruce's Close, Conington."

Potatoes

Lola Carter said: "**My favourite job was working on the potato harvester.** When we first started we worked on our own. They spun a row of potatoes out and each woman had a certain length to do which was called a "retch". But when they introduced the harvester there were four of us working on it, two on each side.

Right: Peggy Jordan potato picking into cobs Main Drove, Pymoor 1965 CCAN

Potatoes used to be stored in "clamps", or pits, and covered with earth and straw to keep them through the winter.



Riddling potatoes

John Tungate said: A riddling machine shook the eath off the potatoes and then you'd take the bad potatoes off and put the good ones in a sack. They have machines now that take them straight off the land."

Below: Wisbech potato picking gang 1928 to 1932 (CCAN)



White Celery

David and Ivy remember boxing up the famous fen celery for Christmas, when it was a popular dish.

David said: "Nowadays celery is always green but in those days it used to white because they covered most of it with soil - a bit like forcing rhubarb."



Photo: Loading celery in the Fens c.1940 (Peterborough Museum)

Twitch Forking

David Baker said: "Twitch is a grass which can spread underground. You had to shake it out with a fork. They put weed killer on it nowadays."

Threshing

For David the hardest job was threshing: "You used to have to carry eighteen stone bags of wheat on your shoulders and you got covered in dust!"

Wild Oating

Ivy Baker: "You used to walk through the fields of wheat with a bag pulling the wild oats out by and putting them in a bag."

Horses

Before tractors were introduced after the War, horses did most of the heavy work on farm. Reg Hubbard remembers working with horses as a child.

He said: "Dad was the horse keeper at Abbey Farm in Sawtry Fen for 22 years, where we had about 25 horses. **As children we used to walk underneath the shire horses and sit on their backs while they were ploughing.**

"There'd be two horses, one on each side of the plough, and I sat on one and my brother sat on the other - up and down the field all day long. We used to plough an acre a day."

David Baker also remembers working with horses on Park Farm, part of the Holmewood Estate.

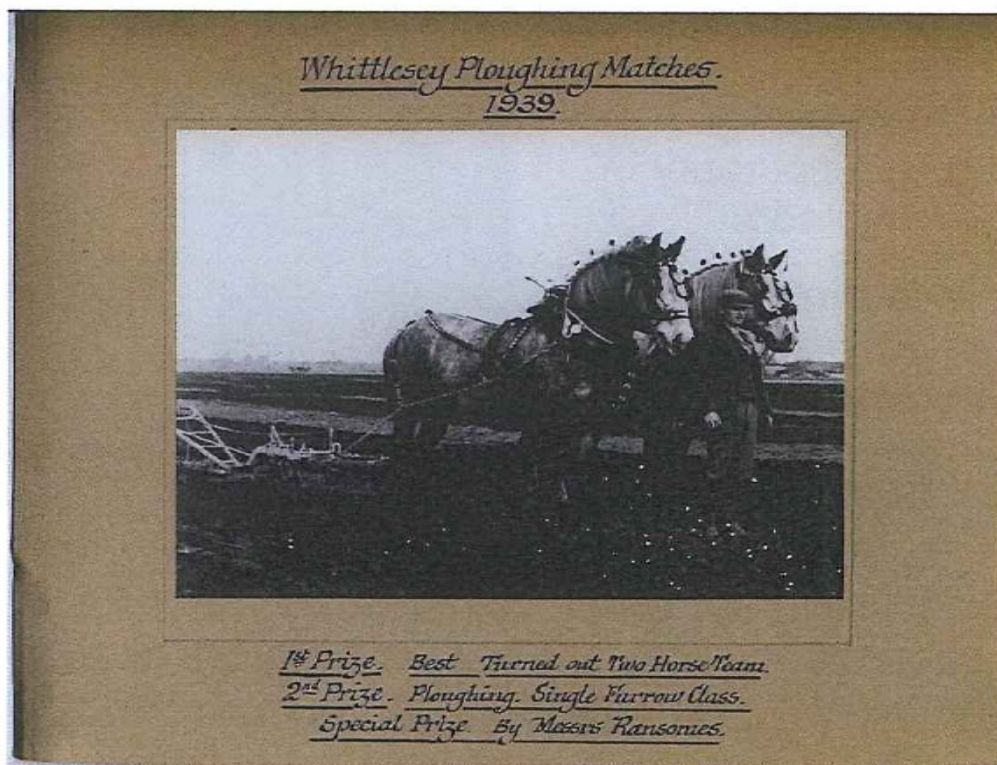
He said: "Everything was done by horses. When we were cutting the corn, the harvester was pulled by horses. We had about twelve or thirteen and the same number of men - now there are about two!



Loading sheaves at Mereside Farm, Tom Greenwood on the left and Jim Cole, c1930s or 40s CCAN

But looking after horses was hard work. Reg said: "You had to get them up in the morning, get them in, feed them, brush them down, harness them up and the get them out to work in the fields. I helped polish the brasses."

Showing horses could be a profitable business. Tony Redhead, who grew up on Holme Fen, said: **"Dad used to show all the horses for a farmer called Mr Starling and all the prize money Mr Starling got he gave it to Dad, just for doing the horses."**



Horrace Redhead (Tony's father) at a ploughing match at Whittlesey, got first prize for 'Best Turned Out Horse' team and second prize for ploughing.

Tied cottage at Darlow's Farm

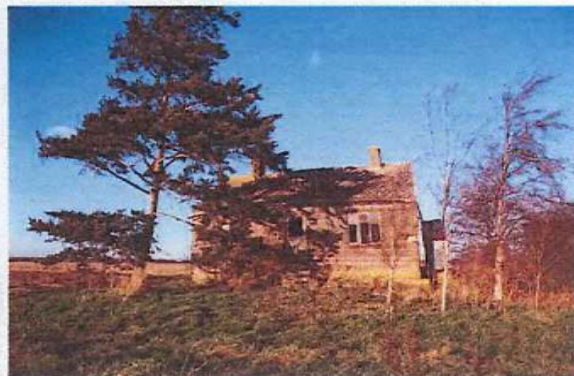
Many farmworkers lived in cottages owned by the farmer or squire. These were called "tied cottages".

John Tungate said, "My father worked on Darlow's Farm - he lived in the cottage - it was a tied cottage and if you lived there you couldn't work for anybody else."

Bet Tungate said: "They had no cattle on Darlow's in those days, just pigs."

Photo of Darlow's Cottage, courtesy of Barry Metson.

The cottage is currently being built and restored by Ramsey Rural Museum.



John said: "Farmers always had more than one tied cottage - there used to be a lot of men who worked on the land. If you wanted to work on a farm you just applied, and if the farmer got fed up with you or you got fed up with the farmer, you applied somewhere else."

Transport by rail

A lot of farm produce used to be transported by rail in those days. Des said: "I remember when The station at Ramsey St Mary's was open. we used to go and take sugar beet and corn up there."



John Edwards said: "We used to collect seed potatoes from the train station at Ramsey North. All the seed trials took place in Scotland. They still do but now they put them on a big lorry and they're down here in eight hours and straight onto the farm, into the greenhouses and sheds.

"They usually start bringing them about December, in store ready for when it's planting time."

Bog oak and ancient secrets

The rich soil of the Fens has revealed a few secrets over the years. Des Cox said: "I once found an ancient burial pot while digging round a potato heap. It's in St Ives museum now."

But the most common find is black oaks - bog oaks - or "roots" as they are called, the remains of ancient forests felled by the incoming sea, which have been preserved in the peat.

Des said: "We used to sell it as firewood. It burns very well when it's dry - if you lit a tree at one end, it would keep burning until it was all gone."

Des remembers one family, the Bonnages, who did just that, keeping a whole tree in their living room and gradually pushing the trunk into the fireplace as it burnt.

He said: "They were all farm workers so they had the strength to lift the tree between them!"

Making history

Bog oaks might be common but that can't be said for what John Edwards found inside one of them - the best ever specimen of a long horn tree beetle, that had been preserved for 4,000 years along with the tree!

John and his boss Mr Butler were working on Evisons Farm, cutting the bog oak into six- foot sections.

John said: "One of the trees was a massive thing, the bole was the size of a tractor wheel and it was sixteen or seventeen metres long. It weighed three or four tons. **When we opened it up we noticed holes running down the side of the tree and towards the middle of the tree, as if a mouse had made them.**

"I called Mr Butler over and we had a look, split another piece of wood off and saw the big beetles, which had crept in and been there about 4,000 years or so we were later told.

"A professor from Monk's Wood came over picked them up with tweezers and put them in a plastic box on a piece of cotton wool and put a plastic lid over it. He said he'd never seen anything like it.



"We made history that day because we'd found the best ever specimens of Long Horn Tree beetles. They're in the Natural History Museum now."

The remains of two sub-fossil Longhorn Beetles, thought to be about 4,000 years old, have been discovered, almost perfectly preserved, in bog-oaks at a Ramsey small-holding.

The beetles, the species of which has been extinct in this country for many years, have been heralded by local research biologists as of considerable scientific importance and interest.

Once before

Only once before in this area had this type of beetle been identified — in poor condition — so the find has proved especially significant for the world of biological research.

The specimens — timber-eating beetles, each two inches long and black in colour — were found by Mr Clifford Butler and his friend, Mr John Edwards, as they were wood-splitting on the small-holding which Mr Butler works at Evisons New Fen Farm, Ramsey.

The two friends realised there might be something strange nestling in the wood when Mr Edwards discovered tunnels weaving into the heart of a piece of oak he was cutting.

'John called me over and we delved into the wood. We got quite a shock when we saw the beetles. I honestly thought at least one of them was still alive.

After about 4,000 years!

'It looked as if it were sleeping. We figured they were unusual, perhaps rare, so we collected them up in an old pot and told the county land agent about them', said Mr Butler.

The beetles were picked up by research biologists Mr Paul Harding and Mr Roger Plant, and taken to the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, at Monks

when it was felled, possibly by floods, and had been trapped there, albeit very well preserved, ever since.

Their future

It is now expected that one of the beetles will be preserved at the British Natural History Museum, and the other at the Cambridge Natural History Museum.

Mr Harding, obviously pleased at the very valuable discovery, had a word of commendation for Mr Edwards and Mr Butler: 'It is certainly praiseworthy that Mr Edwards and Mr Butler recognised that the beetles were, or could have been unusual. If it hadn't been for their actions, we would have missed out on a very valuable find.'

by TONI
SIMPSON

Wood, Abbots Ripton. The experts identified them as sub-fossil Longhorn Beetles (*Cerambyx Cerdus*), a type long extinct in this country. It is thought that the beetles were feeding in the huge oak tree



© Paul Harding, left, and colleague Roger Plant, the research scientists who identified the beetle specimens. One of the beetles remains encrusted in the piece of oak held by Mr Plant.

Farming in the Great Fen

Much of the Great Fen land is grazed with livestock.

High-quality hay is also produced from the land, providing livestock feed.

Future avenues for land produce could include harvesting a British source of reed for thatching. Currently the vast majority of reed is imported.

Sheep on Middle Farm



Hay crops



Cattle on Darlow's Farm



Reed for thatching



Our sincere thanks to all those mentioned in this booklet for sharing their photos, stories and memories.

Local Memories project

If you have a story, photos or objects that you'd like to share with us, please do get in touch:

Great Fen team
at the Wildlife Trust Countryside Centre, Chapel
Road, Ramsey Heights. PE26 2RS
01487 710420
info@greatfen.org.uk
www.greatfen.org.uk

You may also be interested in some of our other Local Memories booklets, including:

Four generations on the Fen:

The Masons at Woodwalton Fen

Family Life in the Fens

The story of the Kemps and the Keightleys

Childhood and School Days

Growing up in the Fens

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