

Farming during the Great War

Cross farm

Research by Julie Moore.

In 1914 William Dickinson was the tenant of Cross farm. The Dickinson family had deep farming roots in the local area, and William, aged 40, had been tenant of Cross farm for at least 15 years. We know a lot of what happened at the farm in the Great War because William's labour and ledger books still survive. They were generously loaned to us by his grandson, also named William who still works Cross farm with his family today. Another source of valuable information is the 'cultivation of land orders' issued by the local War Agricultural Committee.

Most of William Dickinson's 350 acre farm was devoted to the growing of cereal crops, with 46 acres of pasture to support a dairy herd and some sheep.

In August 1914, the Cross farm wages bill for 4 weeks came to £70 1s 5d. A year later the total was £108 10s 1d. This reflected the law of supply and demand, as men enlisted or moved to other, more lucrative areas of work. The introduction of conscription in 1916 made the labour situation even more difficult.

August was the month when agricultural labourers could expect to take home a larger pay packet than normal. In August 1914, one man named Fox, earned £5 8s 2d; in August 1918 he earned £9 17s. This was a considerable rise, but price inflation during the war rose at a much higher rate than agricultural wages and so the Fox family would still have been struggling.

The regular workforce such as Mr. Fox were joined by alternative sources of labour, and these groups were earning a much lower weekly wage, reflecting their lack of experience, gender, and even nationality. These individuals were rarely named, appearing under a group heading.

Women tended to be shown by the task they were doing that week e.g. hoeing or stone picking. These would most likely be local women, from agricultural families, working on a casual basis as and when needed. Women appeared in the labour book before the war, but the number of entries increased as the war went on, as did entries for unnamed boys, released early from school. Only two women are named in the labour book and they are Miss Windsor and Miss Colman. All the other 'women' are anonymous. Miss Windsor worked from October 1918 to July 1919. Miss Colman appears to have started work immediately after Miss Windsor had left and she appears in the labour book until October 1919. As both Miss Windsor and Miss Colman are identified both by name and the title 'Miss' it may be that they were members of the Women's Land Army. Interestingly none of the named men in the labour book enjoyed the title of 'Mr'.

In the second week of January 1918, William employed both British soldiers (possibly on leave or recuperation from injuries) and German POWs. Did they work alongside each other on the same tasks, or were they kept apart? No women or boys were employed that week. Was that deliberate? Or did it reflect the labour needs for that week? We do not know.

In 1917, William, like farmers across the county, received a visit from two members of the local War Agricultural Committee. They were there to inspect the farm and report on which fields, currently used as pasture or deemed not working to full capacity, should be ploughed up and sown with wheat in time for the 1918 harvest.

This reflected the urgent need to grow more cereals for bread. Many dairy and livestock farmers argued that they were already providing valuable service in producing meat and milk. However, a field of wheat provided more calories than one of grass and the government gave local committees the power to enforce the ploughing-up of fields, taking farms away from tenants if they thought it necessary.

William was ordered to plough up two fields. The first he did willingly, but he argued that the second field was unsuitable. He was over-ruled. After the war he claimed he had lost £30 in following the order because he had to plough up a crop of animal feed. However, he was refused compensation.

The file on William's claim can be viewed at Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies, Hertford under the reference AEC21/120.

Minimum wage for Farm Labourers

Research by Gill Roe

In March 1917, following a suggestion in a speech by the Prime Minister the Herts Chamber of Agriculture passed the following regulations that was reported in the Herts Advertiser

- a) Minimum weekly wage of 25/- (£1.05p)
- b) Working hours to be from 6am to 5.30pm with ½ hour for breakfast and 1 hour for dinner or as an alternative 60 hours per week.
- c) Overtime at hay time and harvest to be paid at 8d per hour
- d) Wages to be paid in cash with no beer or beer money to be allowed in future.