

MEMORIES OF FARMING BETWEEN 1943 AND 1950

By Donald Cousins

1. CROPS GROWN

WHEAT - "Yeoman". Long straw particularly used for thatching both stacks and buildings. Wheat was always autumn sown. Corn used for cattle feeds more than for flour production.

BARLEY - "Sprat Archer". Usual only autumn sown variety, but unlike wheat most barley spring sown.

OATS - First crop to be cut at harvest, but not first to be harvested. Always said that oats had to be 'shocked/stooked' and stand in the field for three Sundays before being stacked. Always spring sown if my memory serves me right?

BEANS - Generally not a great acreage grown. Again, I think a spring sown crop. I recall taking oats and beans down to the mill in a tumbrel (alternative spelling is 'tumbrel'; a two-wheeled cart pulled by a single horse) for grinding. When ground it was always referred to as 'grist' and used in cattle feed. Bean meal was always said to put a lovely shine on the horses' coats.

BARLEY - Was often used as animal feed when ground or sold to barley merchants e.g. E G Clarke & Sons of Framlingham, who in turn sold it on to brewers or whisky distilleries. Incidentally, I worked at this firm for ten years, so have a reasonable knowledge of the selection and methods employed by these merchants?

SUGAR BEET - Not certain, but probably grown under contract to British Sugar Corporation or similar body. Seed was sown in rows 21" apart and a few weeks later the growing seedlings were "chopped out and singled", plants being spaced 10" apart. This operation was always done on a 'piece-work' basis, incidentally the only job ever done piece work at Abbots Hall although this was not the same at East End Farm. The men would agree on a figure "per chain – 22yds long". They would 'chop out' the beet in clumps and then village boys or girls would 'single' the clumps leaving, hopefully the strongest plant. This was a terrible back aching task.

After the 'second hoeing' the beet would be 'horse hoed' once or twice and then in the late autumn would be 'lifted' one row at a time by a special plough. Broached and topped and carted off the field by horse and tumbrel, put in a clamp ready to be taken to the factory at Sproughton near Ipswich.

The task of harvesting the sugar beet was one of the worst of the whole year – being very hard work carried out under the bad conditions, both weather and soil conditions.

MANGOLDS - CATTLE BEET. Much the same as sugar beet regarding growing but harvesting much easier. However, they were sown later than sugar beet. I remember the old saying about mangolds - 'The last of May and the first of June is not too late, nor yet too soon'. Mangolds developed more or less above ground and were less difficult to 'top', only the leaves being trimmed.

CLOVER MIXTURES. These were called 'under lays' and sown usually in barley. The seed was either broadcast by 'fiddling' or by hand, when only a 'pinch' was taken each time between thumb and first finger.

WHITE CLOVER FOR SEED. I only recall the once at Abbots Hall. The crop was cut by a 'sailer reaper' (reaping machine drawn by horse or tractor which had rotating wooden paddles on a circular frame which scooped up the sheaves of the grain plants as it went along) whilst the dew was still on it and harvested again early morning.

2. WAGES.

Basic wages were agreed each year. I don't know which government department was involved for the employers but the workers side was represented by the then National Union of Agricultural Workers. Kenneth Cutting, as I recall, always used the agreed rate for the "labourers", with I expect variations for head horseman, stockman etc. On East End Farm things were different. The basic wage was improved upon for anything other than general labouring (e.g., when I worked in the mill, mixing and grinding the various meals, I received extra) but I cannot remember what the basic or extra was. Another difference was that at East End Farm more jobs were done on a 'piece-work basis' again giving the opportunity to earn that little bit more. It was usual for a harvest bonus of £5 to be paid to all employees.

3. SEASONAL ACTIVITIES.

Many activities were routine and therefore for horsemen, stockmen, pig men, poultry men the work each day was more or less constant. Other work followed a yearly pattern.

PLOUGHING - Always tried to be finished by year-end.

PLANTING - As explained, either autumn or spring depending on weather conditions, thus on our heavy clay soil any autumn drilling would have to be finished probably by October and spring sowing from late February on.

HARVESTING - Obvious

HEDGING AND DITCHING. - Usually between sowing and harvesting.

THRESHING OR 'THROSHING' AS WE CALLED IT. There were always a limited number of people farmers who had the necessary equipment. There, this operation was carried out between the first corn harvested and probable May – June. Priority always had to be given where crops were grown for seed rather than for utility purposes.

DOCK-SPUDDING. Before the use of chemicals, growing crops were often contaminated with various weeds. This could be tolerated to some extent in general, but where seed-crops were grown extra care had to be exercised. Dock seed in any sample of seed corn offered for sale would immediately be rejected so 'dock spudding' took place. Men would usually be sent in pairs into a field and using a dock-spade – a small spade-like tool about 2" wide on a straight handle and they would dig the growing dock plants carrying them to the edge of the field. The reason for going 'two

by two' was because it was always reckoned that each man would recognise and point to any plant the other man missed.

WILD OATS. Again, the removal of these from 'seed corn' fields was absolutely essential. It must be remembered that this crop was always grown under contract to the merchant. Obviously, this meant a premium for the farmer, but in turn this meant additional care had to be taken by him. From the merchant's point of view he had to ensure the crop was grown correctly and so would inspect during the growing season. In this regard if simply looking at the field just before harvest, if he could see any wild oats, he would immediately reject the crop. The farmer would therefore ensure that this did not happen by getting his employees to walk through the crop cutting off the offending 'heads' and again carrying them to the edges.

MANURE, ALWAYS REFERRED TO AS 'MUCK' CARTING and SPREADING. This was carried out either prior to ploughing or when the bullock yards were empty of store cattle. If the former then the muck was loaded on the tumbrils, carted to the appropriate field and 'laid-out' in small heaps on the fields in rows about 6 yards apart and approximately the same distance from heap to heap. Using 'muck' forks this was then spread on the land, and it was reckoned that if the farmer walked onto the field and could put his foot down and not place it on a piece of 'muck' then the spreading had not been done efficiently.

If the bullock yards became empty when ploughing had finished then the same procedure would be followed, but, by this time, the 'muck' would be stacked at a convenient place and the end product would be a 'muck hill'. This would at some convenient time be put onto a field.

RABBITING. - Usually just before Christmas one or two of the employees might go catching rabbits using ferrets, nets and spades to dig out the rabbits. The ferrets were collared and lined so they didn't get lost, they could often kill so that digging was essential. If it was not certain that the burrows had rabbits in them, sometimes a long bramble would be used. This was pushed into the burrow, twisted and withdrawn. Fur/or not on the bramble thorns would indicate rabbits or not!! The rabbits would be 'cleaned' – internal organs removed. Suffolk word for this 'hulking', and sold to local butchers.

Some farmers would give permission to their men so that they could catch rabbits. These would be used to make rabbit pies or put into stews. I remember the rabbit pies – which always were baked with a piece of fat and lean pork being very good.

WATER FURROWING, MOLE DRAINING and PIPE DRAINING.

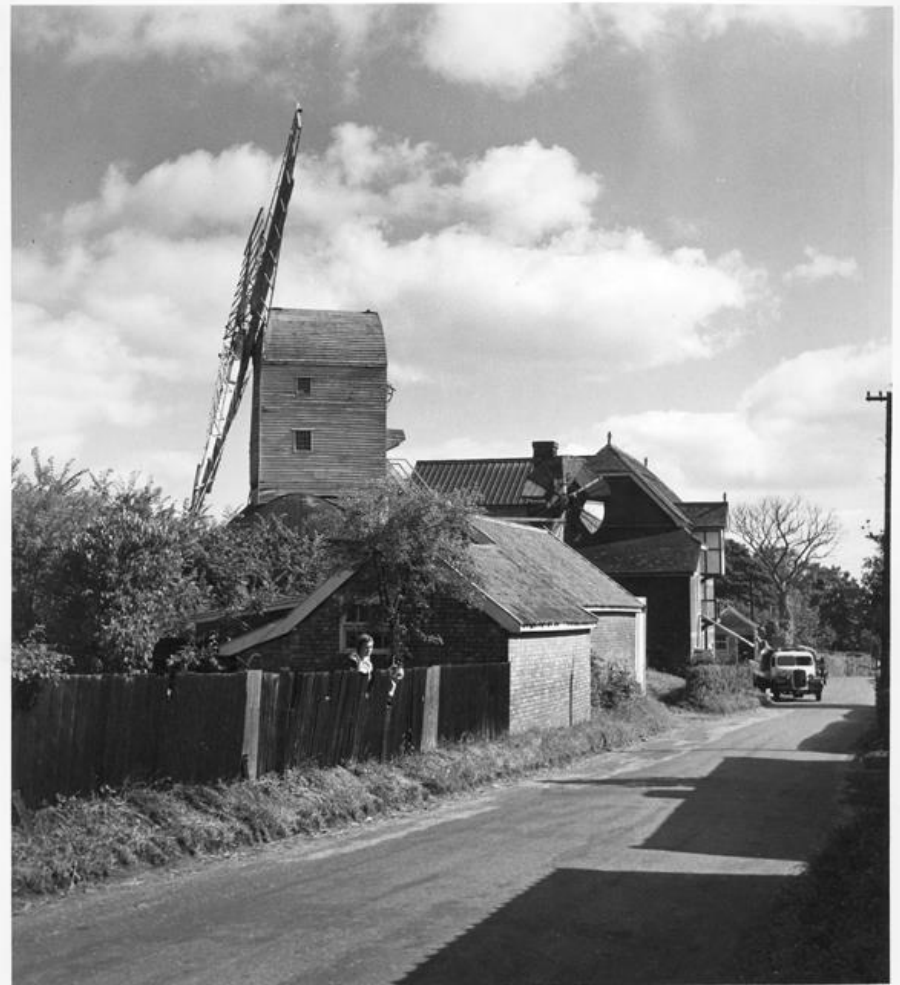
Where fields were badly drained, trenches about 1 foot wide and deep would be dug, creating a water furrow, to the nearest ditch thus alleviating some of the problem. The problem was that at harvest time when the sheaves were being loaded onto the wagons, the person on top of the load could overbalance and fall. To avoid this at the approach of a 'water furrow' the 'pitchers' would always shout "hold tight, water furrow".

Mole draining was carried out by contractors using two steam engines, one at either end of the field. A steel cable attached, and a plough-like piece of heavy machinery with a shaft attached, some 2.5 ft long to which was attached a bullet shaped, circular object. This was hauled, downhill through the ground penetrating the clay sub-soil where it left a round hole.

Pipe draining. This was a labour-intensive operation. A channel was dug – one spade wide and varying depths. Drain pipes were laid on the bottom, which had always to be very carefully finished. The pipes were baked clay, laid side by side, not sealed joints. On top was laid some rough cut thorn hedging and the trench was then back filled. The drain was extended into the nearest ditch, and I recall the outflow being used for making pea-soup and general usage.

Editorial note (January 2021; Hilary Marlow). Don Cousins wrote these notes in 2009, based on his experience of working on the Abbots Hall farm for Kenneth Cutting in Pettaugh and East End Farm for Cecil Turnbull in Stonham Aspal. The photographs were taken on Abbots Hall by a Ministry of Information photographer in October 1949, and are reproduced with kind permission of the Ministry.

Photo (right) shows a scene in Pettaugh village of the windmill and roller mill (behind).



The Cutting's lorry is waiting to load grain bags from the roller mill; leaning over the fence are a mother and little daughter who had been refugees in the war and who often visited the village after the war. Photos below show Don Cousins on his tractor carrying out the task of 'muck spreading'; Jack Pallant tying a bag of corn from the threshing machine; workers resting during their 'fourses' afternoon tea break with Elsie Parker who had brought the tea to the harvest field with husband, George Parker, who was the driver of the steam traction engine sitting next to Elsie; Reggie Jones loading straw onto a wagon; men loading stooks (shucks) of cut grain onto a tumbrel with David Boyes, the son of the rector on the horse; farm workers spreading straw in the pig enclosure; Arthur Carless loading beet onto a tumbrel; the threshing machine working in the stack yard





