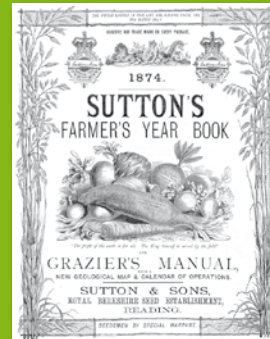


RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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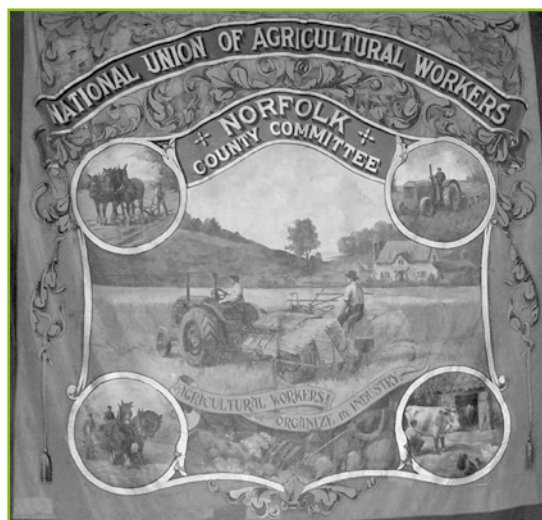
The Centenary of the 'Farm Workers Union

On Friday 6th July 1906 the Angel Hotel in North Walsham in Norfolk was the unlikely venue for the founding (or perhaps the re-founding) of a trade union.

In the upstairs 'Assembly Rooms' a mixed bunch of local Liberal politicians, farm workers and veterans of the earlier unions of the 1870s-1890s met to 'form a union, the object of which shall be to enable the labourers to secure proper representation on all local bodies and the Imperial Parliament, protection from political persecution and better conditions of living...' These diverse aims of the men (and one woman) who attended the meeting were a product of their time and place. What emerged was the Eastern Counties Agricultural Labourers' and Small Holders Union - the direct forbearer of the current 'farm workers union' the Rural, Agricultural and Allied Workers Sector of the Transport and General Workers Union.

Earlier that year the Liberals had won the General Election with a landslide which still challenges 1945 and 1997 in magnitude. Locally they had won every East Anglian seat and at least two of the new Liberal MPs, Richard Winfrey and George Nicholls were in the Assembly Rooms that June morning. The election though had costs. As soon as the results were known there were claims that men were being dismissed by their employers for voting Liberal or publicly showing support for the Liberal cause.

There were also long term factors behind the meeting which were probably more important. From 1872 to 1896 Norfolk had been the heartland of farm workers trades unionism. Although the 'old' Union had been founded in Warwickshire by the hedger and thatcher Joseph Arch its real strength had always been in the Eastern Counties, and it was there that it survived longest, finally vanishing in the



The banner of the Norfolk Committee of the NUAW. Museum of Norfolk Life

bitter winter of 1895-96. Arch's Union left an important legacy - a group of local leaders who, although some were ageing, had experience in organising, local knowledge and a great deal of local respect.

Most important of these was George Edwards. Edwards was born into terrible poverty at Marsham, Norfolk in 1850. He began work scaring crows at six years old and between then and the late 1860s Edwards worked on the land but in 1869, after a dispute with an employer he went to work on the brickfields first in Bressingham then in Alby still in Norfolk. At Alby two things happened which were to shape his life. First, he was converted to Primitive Methodism, which was to shape his political and social beliefs until the end of his life, and second he married a remarkable woman Charlotte Corke. Charlotte taught George to read and write, supported him through out his political life and, from the 1890s to the 1900s, had a pioneering role as a

Continued on back page

Above - Cover of Sutton's Farmer's Year Book, 1874 see page 2

Professor Alun Howkins, author of *Poor Labouring Men, Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1872-1925* summarises the beginnings of the National Union of Agricultural Workers in its centenary year.

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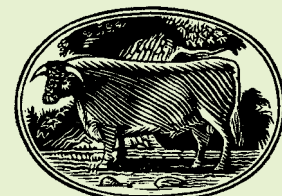
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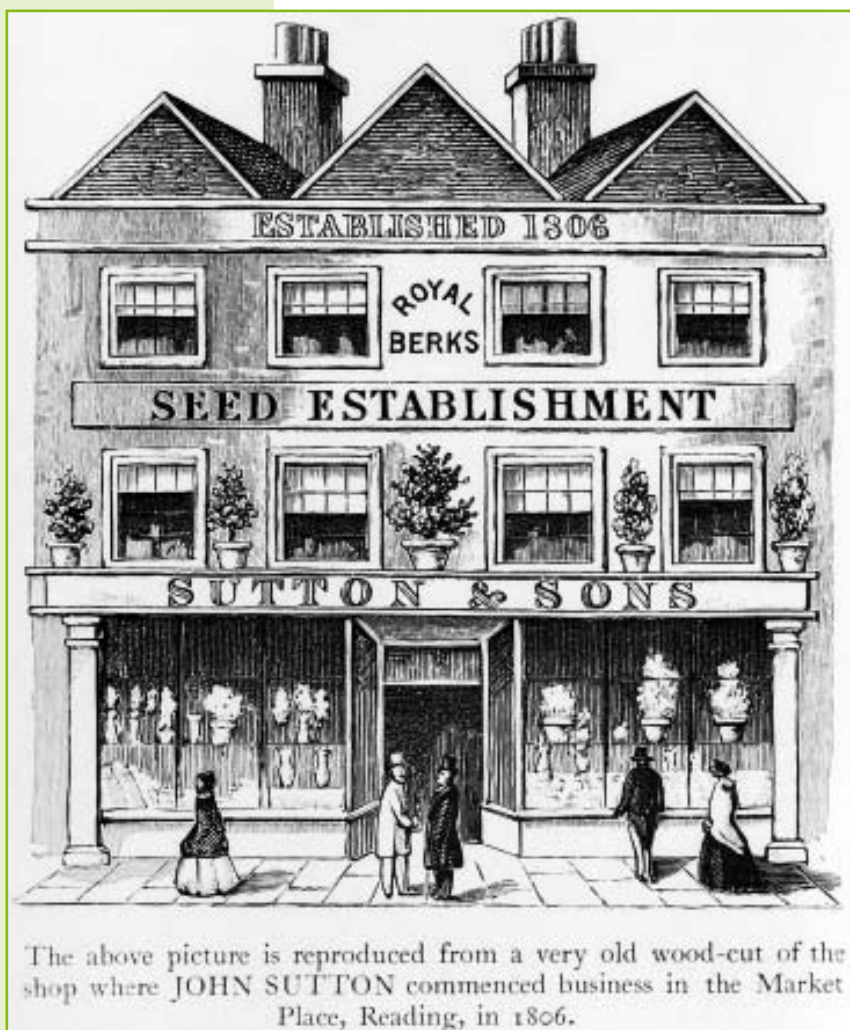
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Suttons Seeds: 200 years of history



the firm began to concentrate on the seed trade while reducing its involvement in corn. He was influential in the struggle against seed adulteration in the 1850s, published a seed catalogue aimed at the amateur gardener in 1856, and pioneered vacuum packaging methods that allowed the export of seeds. In 1858 the firm was awarded the Royal Warrant, and by the 1870s Sutton and Sons was the world's largest seed firm. It was selling the latest crop varieties to farmers, and catering for the needs of both amateur and professional gardeners with a wide range of vegetables, flowers and ornamental grasses, using the penny post and the railways to distribute its products, and advertising them through a wide range of media, including the first mail order catalogue in Britain.

The firm remained in Reading for many years, moving from the original shop in the Market Place, to the Royal Seed Establishment that employed two thousand people in the heart of Reading by 1901, and then in 1962 to new premises on the Bath Road. It was there that they developed the foil packaging system that has since become the industry's standard. The firm remained in the Sutton family's hands until 1978, but was then sold to Weibuls, the Swedish seed firm, who in turn sold the firm to Vilmorin, the French seed company, in 1996. By then Suttons had left Reading, moving first to Torquay in 1976, and then in 1998, a few miles down the road to Paignton, where they are now established in a purpose-built factory that combines both packaging and seed testing and development facilities. The company's 4 hectare Trial Grounds are located near Newton Abbot.

*John Sutton's original shop in Reading, 1806
- Suttons Seeds Ltd*

Dr Paul Brassley summarises the history of Suttons seeds which celebrated its 200th anniversary last year.

In 1806 John Sutton founded a corn merchant's business in King Street, Reading, and also began supplying corn and grass seed to local farmers. Two hundred years later Suttons Seeds, now located at Paignton in Devon, celebrated its bi-centenary with a company history, published at the end of 2006, while back in Reading the Museum of English Rural Life held an exhibition of records and artefacts associated with the company's history.

It was John Sutton's son, Martin Hope Sutton, who was mostly responsible for expanding the firm's reputation from a local to a national or even international one. He became a partner in 1836, at the age of 21, and under his influence

The fascinating story of this pioneering company was told in much greater detail in the MERL exhibition, which ran to the 21st December.

The company history, due for publication during December 2006 is available from Suttons Seeds (see www.suttons-seeds.co.uk) at £14.95

E-Agricultural History

As new websites come on line all the time, it is can be very difficult to keep up. It would be helpful if readers would contact the editor (scwmartins@hotmail.com) with any they find particularly useful.

www.ambaile.org.uk

is Highland Council's bi-lingual (Gaelic and English) heritage cultural website and includes photographic and archive evidence on the rural history of the Highlands and Islands.

Farming by halves: an update

In my earlier article, *Farming to Halves: a new perspective on an absurd and miserable system* (Issue 6, February 2004) I explained that farming to halves was the English version of sharefarming that Arthur Young claimed had never existed in England.

However, I had found well documented examples of the practice on leading Norfolk estates in the late seventeenth century, including Raynham, Felbrigg and Hunstanton. I wanted to know how far it extended outside Norfolk, and asked everyone to look out for references: the key phrase 'to halves', indicating a sharing of the profits. I received a gratifying response confirming, as I had always thought, that farming to halves occurred across the country. The idea attracted the interest of the fund granting bodies and is now part of a research project supervised by Professors Mark Overton and Mike Winter at Exeter. The task is ambitious, we are trying to piece together *The Hidden History of Sharefarming in England from medieval to modern times*, linking past experience to the present day popularity of profit sharing in Britain. Part of our purpose is to dispel the myth that this form of contract farming is a recent introduction based on the success of sharefarming in New Zealand.

The research has progressed well beyond Norfolk and the seventeenth century. For the medieval period, a survey of the literature has shown that, although difficult to detect in the documents, farming to halves existed at every social level, from landowners leasing their demesne for a share of the crop, to tenants sub-letting portions of their holdings and peasants sharecropping amongst themselves. Leading medievalists refer to the practice, even suggesting that it was the most common form of lease amongst peasants. They do not speculate on the role it played in rural society, but as a source of credit and start up capital, farming to halves helps to explain how landless labourers ascended the farming ladder, enterprising husbandmen expanded their farms and how widows enticed young men to farm their holdings: questions which have long puzzled medieval historians.

At the other end of our timescale, a farm diary, found in a private collection in

Shropshire, provides evidence that farming to halves did indeed play this kind of role in rural communities as late as the early 20th century. The entries show that between 1908 and 1940, the farmer used it as a way of hiring grazing for his sheep and cattle. He provided the grazier with the stock and they shared the proceeds, halving the lambs and wool, and sometimes the calves. In 1908, he sent '50 ewes to Worcester at halves'. This enabled him to develop his business without the need for buying or leasing extra land, and kept down his fixed costs. I can't believe this is an isolated example. If anyone has, or knows of, a similar diary containing this type of information, please let me know.

E.Griffiths@exeter.ac.uk



Richard Henry Evans and his wife, Ellen, at Curdale Farm, Cleobury Mortimer, Shropshire c.1945. His farm diaries record sheep and cattle 'at halves' from 1908-1940.

In this short piece Dr Liz Griffiths provides a follow-up to her article in Issue 6 of RHT showing the value of asking readers which can even lead to grant funding. Others should try it!

Low input mixed farming re-visited: a modern success story on the downlands of Hampshire

By Gavin Bowie

In the paper “Northern Wolds and Wessex Downlands: Contrasts in Sheep Husbandry and Farming, 1770–1850”, AHR 38.2 (1990), the characteristics of a high input system of farming which developed on the northern wolds of Lincolnshire and East Yorkshire, and a low input one which evolved on the south-central downs, were defined. This short paper re-visits the subject at a time when low input systems have become relevant to the modern farmer.

The Cholderton Estate, 6 miles to the west of Andover, has recently completed the conversion to full organic status, and its 2,500 acres are divided broadly as follows: 250 acres of woodland, 500 acres of chalk downland reversion and 1750 ‘arable’ or cultivated acres. The arable acreage consists of 400 acres of cereals, 60 acres of peas and beans, 60 acres of kale or turnips and 1230 acres of mixed grass and legume leys.

The latter includes 150 acres of sainfoin (about 8% of the total arable), which is grown as the major constituent of a traditional grass ley – one based on sainfoin, timothy, meadow fescue and cocksfoot. Sainfoin is nitrogenous, can thrive on the poorest of chalk soils, can survive the driest of seasons and is high in protein – just what is needed for young growing stock. The crop was grown generally on poorer downland soils between the 1780s and the 1930s (and in the historical low input system occupied about 15% of a farm’s arable land during the year), but today on the south-central downlands it is only grown at Cholderton. The crop is seen as not fitting in with farming systems based on agro-chemicals, and it is certainly suited to medium and long term rotations rather than a short duration herbage ley.

At Cholderton sainfoin leys are undersown in low impact spring barley, and will remain down for 8-10 years. The grasses sown in the ley benefit from the nitrogen output of the sainfoin and the sainfoin from the protection and shelter proffered by the grasses. The sainfoin leys are generally cut for hay or silage at flowering in early June, when the fields become a glorious suffusion of pink. The aftermath is usually grazed by young stock. It appears that the high levels of tannin within the sainfoin have a powerful vermicide effect.

A typical rotation at Cholderton is 8-course and takes the form of a 5 year ley, spring barley and winter oats on 2 successive years. This can be compared with a typical 7-course rotation worked at Titchborne on the Hampshire downs in the late 1830s. This was on marginal chalk soils, and a 4-year sainfoin ley preceded wheat, turnips and spring barley.

The low acreage of root crops grown at Cholderton today, and the lack of emphasis on root cultivation in the historical low input downland farming system, demonstrates a complete circle in the cultivation of root crops on the estate over a period of about one hundred years. There were numerous problems with root cultivation in the low input system, and the one that is particularly relevant here is that downland soils were often deficient in phosphates.

The emphasis on manures and inputs made on the farm began to change from the mid 1840s, and there was a shift to the general application of purchased fertilizers on the Wessex downlands. Phosphate fertilizers were particularly important as they greatly improved the germination, establishment and yields of root crops on light ‘hungry’ soils, and the breakthrough was superphosphate, a relatively

Gavin Bowie of Hampshire Museums and Archaeology Service, in conjunction and farmer, Henry Edmund describe the return to traditional farming systems which can help conserve downland fauna and flora.

For more information visit www.sustainable-cholderton.co.uk.

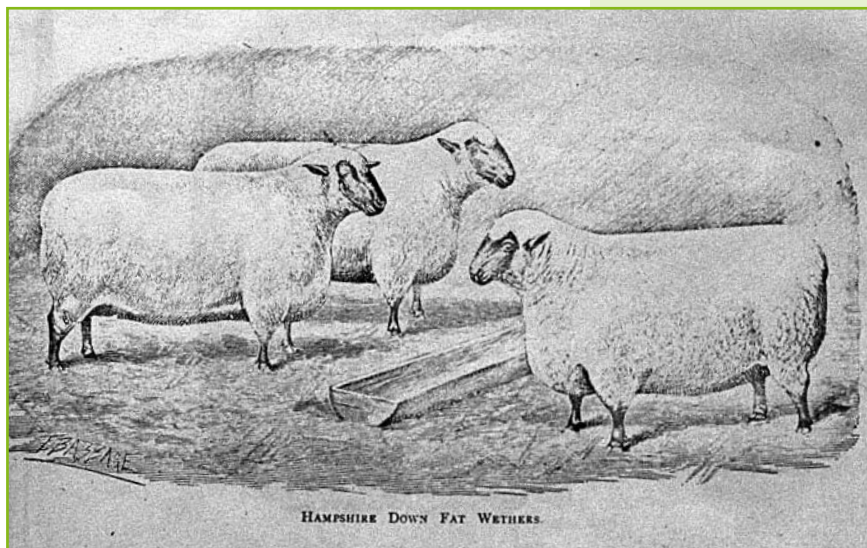
cheap quick acting fertilizer that was produced on an industrial scale after 1850, and could be distributed to farmers with the help of a growing railway network.

Root crops came to be an important part of the farming system at Cholderton. Capt. Edmunds, the current owner's father, used to grow at least four hundred acres of roots every year with the aid of artificial fertilizers. These were generally main crop turnips and kale which were sown in June at the rate of 2lbs of turnip seed and 3lbs of kale to the acre. Given a timely shower of rain and lack of flea beetle, a substantial crop might be grown that was grazed off by the Hampshire Down flock over the coming winter.

This was managed by close-folding the sheep over the crop. If this were good, a fold for 150–200 ewes and lambs would be made 30 hurdles long and 30 hurdles wide, with a similar forward fold allowing access for the lambs via a creep onto the fresh crop. This all had to be moved daily. Sheep manure is fairly dry and instantly available as a fertilizer, and is high in nitrogen. The purpose of this system was to generate fertility for the incoming crop, whether spring barley or winter wheat. Sixty acres of kale are grown annually at Cholderton today, and the seed is sown in March so as to get the crop established before the flea beetles get active.

The main aim of the historical low input system was to produce high value cereal cash crops, albeit on an occasional basis on the poorer soils, but the fertility which had been built up during a ley was largely lost with the cereals when they were sent off-farm. The crucial difference is that at Cholderton all of the cereals are recycled: 70 acres worth are converted into whole crop silage and the rest is harvested with a combine. The grain is rolled and fed to the cattle and sheep, and the straw is baled and used as bedding and feed.

This recycling has allowed the pre-conversion livestock regime to be maintained in the current organic system with the added benefit of the enhanced value of the dairy and meat produce. The livestock kept at Cholderton consists of 25 Cleveland Bay horses (not relevant here but worth an article in themselves), 280 dairy cows and followers, 80 beef suckler cows and 600 breeding ewes,



half of which are Hampshire Downs and the other half first crosses with a Finn ram.

The FYM generated by the cattle in winter is essential for the maintenance of fertility within the system. Manure is spread on the fields in the early autumn or in the spring, immediately before ploughing. It is extraordinary that weeds are not generally a problem and that noxious species like cleavers have almost disappeared. Weed growth is not promoted by cattle manure in the same way as it is by artificial fertiliser. This is probably due to the slow release of nutrients from manure compared with the copious release of nitrates from artificial fertilisers. The cost of inputs in cereal crops here is no more than the costs of making the manure and the wear and tear of the machinery used to spread it.

It would be useful to end with an observation by Henry Edmunds about his career in farming: "When I attended college I was instructed upon modernity and the necessity of copious applications of fertilisers and pesticides to achieve productivity. My suspicions were raised when one lecturer in response to my enquiry about the importance of the Golden Hoof informed me that this was a myth and that stock could do nothing that a bag of fertiliser could achieve. Observation has taught me the fallacy of this and I have subsequently had the pleasure of applying the principles of fertility building with mixed cropping and stock".

KINDRED BODIES

The Agricultural History Society Of Ireland

A society dealing specifically with Irish agricultural history was formed in 2001, and so far its development has been encouraging.

The society has succeeded in its central aim of promoting dialogue between a wide range of agriculturalists and researchers. The main activities to date have been an annual summer conference and winter seminar. Programmes have been arranged to include contributions from archaeologists, agricultural historians, agricultural scientists, folklore experts, sociologists, and of central importance, full-time farmers. The latter have fulfilled a role identified for 'practical farmers' from the eighteenth century onwards, of putting a stop to some of the wilder speculations of their more 'theoretic' colleagues. Their inputs, usually of 'that would not have been possible' kind, have provoked some of the liveliest discussion at meetings.

The society covers the whole of the island of Ireland, so summer conferences to date

have been held in the west (County Mayo), the north (County Down), the midlands (County Offaly) and the south-east (County Wexford). The interdisciplinary approach continues with presentations from scientists, economic historians and archaeologists and papers covering periods from the early medieval to the modern.

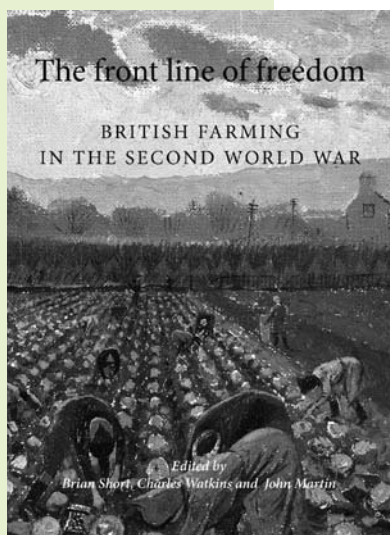
One of the most attractive aspects of each conference is the time allocated to field trips. They have included visits to the tombs of the Boyne valley, the great prehistoric farming landscapes of North Mayo, an ongoing excavation of early medieval corn mills, relics of rundale farming, and demonstrations of distinctively Irish tillage techniques. At the Wexford conference delegates had the opportunity to visit the Hook peninsula, the place where the Normans first landed in Ireland, and where their influence on the landscape is particularly obvious.

The Agricultural History Society of Ireland is keen to establish links with similar groups in Britain and elsewhere. Further information about the society can be obtained from the secretary, Geraldine Stout, or the treasurer Jonathan Bell. Their e-mail addresses are: Geraldine_stout@environ.ie and Jonathan.bell6@btinternet.com

SOCIETY NEWS

A new publication

Supplement 4 in the the British Agricultural History Society Supplement Series is due to be published on 1st February.



Entitled *The Front Line of Freedom, British Farming in the Second World War* and edited by Brian Short, Charles Watkins and John Martin, Supplement 4 covers the main themes of farming between 1939 and 1945. The sixteen essays include topics such as labour supply, mechanisation, organic farming, war time planning and the requisition of land. They sometimes question the long-held beliefs about farming during this period and shed new light on the origins of post-war fortunes.

Members of the Society will receive a copy as part of their 2006-7 subscription package. Others may purchase a copy for £17.50. Enquiries to BAHS@Exeter.ac.uk

CALL FOR PAPERS

COST (European Science Foundation: Programme for the Study of European Rural Societies)

Call for papers for the Second Workshop of Working Group 2 on the theme 'Agricultural Specialisation and rural patterns of development' to be held in Rennes in June 2007. The workshop will be considering the interaction between 'traditional agricultural patterns', usually involving an increase in specialisation, and modernisation.

Anyone interested in participating should contact annie.antoine@uhb.fr

MUSEUM NEWS

Museum of English Rural Life

Now that the new MERL is up and running work on the archive collections proceeds apace.

The **Countryside Archive Project** had involved the cataloguing so far of 600 boxes from 43 countryside organisations including the Council for National Parks, Country Landowners Association, the Campaign to Protect Rural England and the Milk Marketing Board. Films from the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Dairy Council are also being digitised. The Museum is also re-packaging many thousand of glass and film negatives and photographs from the archives of Sutton's Seeds, David Brown Tractors *Farmers Weekly* and the Eric Guy collection.

Temporary exhibitions in 2007 will cover a wide range of topics, from the rural paintings of Clifford Nickson which chart changes in farm buildings since 1945 (January 9th to March 18th) to 'Sustainability, past and present (July 10th to September) and to round off the year, an exhibition of scale models and miniatures from MERL's collection.

Seminars will be held in February and March at 4.30 at the museum, including Dr Peter Dewey on 'The world farm machinery business, 1850-2000 (February 6th), Dr Jonathan Brown on Lincolnshire farming, 1850-1950 (February 27th), David Viner on wagons and carts in rural collections (20th March), and Richard Tranter



on agricultural recession on the downlands of southern England, 1921-38 (3rd April). To register, e-mail imps@reading.ac.uk

The Weald and Downland Museum

New films are being made to demonstrate how agricultural machinery in its collections was used.

Implements for ploughing, drilling and reaping will be featured. The research versions of the films will be 30 minutes long and show a range of examples of each type. They will include demonstrations of preparation, use and maintenance of equipment. 'It is increasingly important to record exactly how these types of machinery were operated since those people with the knowledge become fewer and fewer' says curator, Julian Bell.

One of the prints from Clifford's Nixon's collection which will be featured in the MERL exhibition, January to March.

The editor is always pleased to receive details of the work of museums and record offices which are relevant to agricultural and rural history. Short pieces should be sent to scwmartins@hotmail.com

FUTURE CONFERENCES

The BAHS Spring Conference will be from 2nd-4th April 2007 in Hereford. Speakers will include Phillipp Scofield, Judith Spitchley and Brian Short with topics ranging from medieval to contemporary. Our contributor from mainland Europe will be Professor Heide Inhetveen of the University of Gottingham on Women in German Agriculture. Our field trip will take us into the beautiful Herefordshire countryside to visit sites of agricultural and landscape interest to rural historians.

The Historic Farm Building Group Conference will be held in Yorkshire from 14th-16th September 2007 and will include a

tour of some of the farms on the Bolton Abbey estate. More details from Margaret Fenn, e-mail margaretfenn@tiscali.co.uk

The Eighteenth Century House Conference will be from June 28th-29th 2007 at Saltram House, Plymouth. The aim of the conference is to consider all domestic architecture built during the long eighteenth century. Papers will cover the highland house, and model farms as well as themes covering classical and palladian architecture, social sensibilities, domestic design and vernacular and fine furniture. Further details from Daniel Maudlin, e-mail daniel.maudlin@plymouth.ac.uk

A note from the editor

Rural History Today is published by the British Agricultural History Society.

The editor will be pleased to receive short articles, press releases, notes and queries for publication.

She would particularly like articles on European projects, kindred societies and news from museums, all of which she hopes will become regular features.

Articles for the next issue should be sent by 30 May 2007 to

Susanna Wade Martins,
The Longhouse,
Eastgate Street,
North Elmham,
Dereham, Norfolk
NR20 5HD
or preferably by email
scwmartins@hotmail.com

Membership of the BAHS is open to all who support its aim of promoting the study of agricultural history and the history of rural economy and society. Membership enquiries should be directed to the

Treasurer, BAHS,
c/o Dept. of History,
University of Exeter,
Amory Building, Rennes
Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ.

Enquiries about other aspects of the Society's work should be directed to the Secretary, Dr John Broad, Dept. Humanities, Arts and Languages, London Metropolitan University, 166-220 Holloway Road, London, N7 8DB
Tel: 020 7753 5020
Fax: 020 7753 3159



Continued from front page

women representative, first Liberal and then Labour in Norfolk local government.

In 1872 Edwards joined Arch's Union quickly becoming Branch Secretary. However, like many in Norfolk he was uncertain about the direction of Arch's National Agricultural Labourers Union and in 1889 formed a local Union in North Norfolk. It was this union which finally collapsed in 1896. Edwards though was not the only local figure at that meeting who had learnt the 'agitators trade' in the previous century. 'Comrade Joe' Sage, who left a remarkable memoir from Kenninghall had been active right through the period of Arch's Union, as had William Codling of Briston. Other figures who emerged as important local leaders like Herbert Harvey in Trunch, Jimmy Coe in Castleacre, and George Hewitt at St. Faiths had also been involved in the unions of the 1890s.

Initially though the work of building the Union rested on the shoulders of Edwards who cycled around Mid- and North Norfolk recruiting members. Although in his fifties Edwards gave his time, energy and all else unstintingly to the Union. His figure 'a little humpety-backed man' as a farm worker I interviewed in the 1970s remembered him, bent by hard work and poor diet, became more familiar to the Norfolk labourer than any other farm workers' leaders had ever been, or has been since.

The first branch was set up in Kenninghall in July 1906 by Joe Sage. He was dismissed from his employment and six years later was still unable to find permanent work. At Briston William Codling was also sacked within week of founding a branch, but the union grew. Slowly at first it recruited in Norfolk, then in 1909 it moved into Suffolk, North Cambridgeshire and especially Lincolnshire. By the outbreak of the Great War it had spread to most counties of England although its real strength lay in the great farms of East Anglia where it had been brought to birth.

Looking back to the founding meeting and its 'demands' – how far were they met? In the short term little was gained, although there were bitter strikes and battles in the years before the Great War. The Liberal Party reaped some rewards with a growing number of Liberal farm workers taking a role in local government. However after 1912 the Union turned more and more to the new Labour party and it was as a Labour MP that George Edwards was returned to 'the Imperial Parliament' for South Norfolk in 1920. During the Great War the farm worker



George Edwards speaking in Fakenham Market Place during the 1923 strike. Museum of Norfolk Life

gained the Wages Board, which set minimum wages, which encouraged the Union and certainly protected the worker. The Board was abolished in 1921 and reinstated by the first Labour Government in 1924. It has maintained minimum wage ever since – even if the living wage has never been much more than 50% of what a skilled urban worker earns.

The greatest change of all though has nothing to do with the Union – it is the near extinction of the farm worker. When George Edwards stood up in the Angel Hotel there were nearly 1.5 million men and women farm workers while now there are about 130,000. This transformation, in which the farm worker has become a stranger in his own land, and whole areas of Britain are worked only by farmers and contractors would simply not of been understood in 1906 and certainly could not have been prepared for.

The centenary was commemorated at Norfolk's museum of rural life at Gressenhall in an event organised by the East Anglia District of the Methodist Church and the Transport and General Workers' Union. Speakers included the former editor of the *Landworker*, Francis Beckett and Nick Mansfield of the People's History Museum in Manchester whose special interest in the history of the Union dates back to his time as assistant curator at Gressenhall.