

From ideals to reality: The women's smallholding colony at Lingfield, 1920–39*

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Abstract

The immediate impetus for the colony at Lingfield in Surrey was the desire by the Women's Farm and Garden Association to enable women who had worked on the land during the First World War to be able to farm on their own account. However the motivation for the colony can also be traced back to late nineteenth-century ideals. The colony soon ran into problems which were exacerbated by the adverse agricultural conditions of the early 1920s. The association responded constructively but the colony was wound down from 1929. At one level the colony could be seen as a failure, yet this article argues that the colony provided a rural community where single women lived in a mutually supportive environment.

In the summer of 1920 the Women's Farm and Garden Association (WFGA) bought a 91-acre estate at Wire Mill Lane, near Lingfield, Surrey.¹ The aim was to establish an agricultural colony where women could farm independently but within a community that provided support and encouragement. The colony was founded with much enthusiasm but by 1938 the last smallholding had been sold to one of the tenants.² The colony merits examination for its personnel, operation and dynamics. Its apparent failure provides insights into several gaps in the current literature on smallholdings, women and rural life. First, previous research on smallholdings has concentrated on the smallholdings established by the County Councils.³ The colony is therefore of interest as it was privately owned and operated without financial support from either central or local government. Secondly, the viability of inter-war smallholdings depended on unpaid family labour – especially the wife's – so it is interesting to explore a situation in which the smallholder did not have family labour to call upon.⁴ Thirdly, published research on women

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¹ Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading (hereafter MERL), Women's Farm and Garden Association (hereafter WFGA), WFGA/A/2/2, Minutes of the Executive Committee, 6 May 1920; WFGA/E/1/4, *J. Women's Farm and Garden Union* 134 (May 1920), p. 4. Unless otherwise noticed, all archive references are to the Association's archives held by MERL.

² WFGA/A/1/3, Meeting of Council, 20 Oct. 1938.

³ For example see N. R. Smith, *Land for small man:*

English and Welsh experience with publicly-supplied smallholdings, 1860–1937 (1946); B. A. Wood, 'The development of the Nottinghamshire County Council smallholdings estate, 1907–1980', *East Midland Geographer* 8 (1982), pp. 25–35.

⁴ E. Thomas, 'County council small-holdings in Dorset and Hampshire: 1. Description and sociological', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 44 (1937–8), pp. 18–24, 123–9, 214–21, 348–52, at p. 19.

and the land has concentrated on labouring women in the nineteenth century, so this case study brings the study into the inter-war years and introduces middle-class women.⁵ Fourth, the colony was directly inspired by women's role on the land in the First World War but its underlying rationale was rooted in such late nineteenth concepts as 'Back to the Land', and the 'Surplus Million of Women', as well as the campaigns for smallholdings.⁶ The involvement of Mrs Roland Wilkins (née Louisa Jebb), demonstrates the strong links with late nineteenth-century and pre-war movements. Finally, mainstream women's history has concentrated on the experiences of urban women (both working class and middle class) and has not examined the rural dimensions of the campaigns for suffrage, education and employment.⁷

This article examines two key aspects of the colony at Wire Mill Lane: the rationale and motives that lay behind the establishment of the colony as a key objective for WFGA at the end of the First World War, and secondly, the operation of the colony itself. It explores the responses of WFGA to agricultural conditions and the demands of its tenants. The sources initially used for the case study were the written records of WFGA. Minutes of committee meetings, annual reports and magazine articles were used to construct a history of the colony. Subsequently letters sent to every resident in the lane revealed more material: house deeds, the layout of the smallholdings, and personal accounts from people who had known the lane and its female residents in the 1930s. This oral evidence enabled a vivid image of the lane in the mid- to late 1930s to emerge, although the early years of the colony remain hidden.

I

The First World War provided the immediate impetus for establishment of the colony in Wire Mill Lane, but the colony founded by WFGA was the latest in a line of women's agricultural settlements. King's centenary history shows the involvement of the Association in providing opportunities for women to work on the land during the war. The Women's National Land Service Corps was formed in January 1916 and predates the Women's Land Army by a year.⁸ The records of the association show clearly how, even as the war continued, it was considering its options for the post-war world. Suggestions included establishing a training establishment for women wishing to emigrate. The minutes reveal that by November 1917 it had been decided that a women's smallholding colony would form a key element in the association's future activities (although there is no information on how this decision was

⁵ For example see N. Verdon, *Rural women workers in nineteenth-century England: gender, work and wages* (2002), P. Horn, *Victorian Countrywoman* (1991) and id., *Ladies of the manor: wives and daughters of the country-house society, 1830–1918* (1991), C. Miller, 'The hidden workforce: women fieldworkers in Gloucestershire, 1870–1901', *Southern Hist.*, 6 (1984), pp. 139–61. For a recent study of women in the inter-war period see S. Todd, 'Young women, work and family in inter-war rural England,' *AgHR* 52 (2003), pp. 83–98.

⁶ J. Marsh, *Back to the land: pastoral impulse in England from 1880–1914* (1982).

⁷ One example of an introductory text is J. Purvis (ed.), *Women's History: Britain 1850–1945, an introduction* (1995). One important study that includes the role of women in a rural context is J. Gerard, *Country house life: family and servants* (1994). For a discussion of the term 'Surplus million of women', see J. Worsnop, 'A reevaluation of the "the problem of surplus women" in nineteenth-century England: the case of the 1851 census', *Women's Studies International Forum* 13 (1990), pp. 21–31.

⁸ P. King, *Women rule the plot. The story of the 100 year fight to establish women's place in farm and garden* (1999), pp. 72, 85.

reached).⁹ Undoubtedly one factor was the decision to provide an opportunity for women who had worked on the land during the war. The Chairman, Mrs Norman Grosvenor, is recorded as stating in October 1917 that '... the Union had now come to the dividing of the ways and the choice of two paths lay before them: 1, To go on quietly as before [or] 2, To embark on some constructive scheme which would be of value after the war to women now employed in agriculture'.¹⁰ The association chose to take the latter course and it is interesting to note how the association's minutes frequently note when a woman with war experience on the land was taken on as a tenant. For example Miss Wake Walker, one of the first tenants at Wire Mill Lane, had been a member of the Women's National Land Service Corps.¹¹

There are parallels here with the movement – from which women were apparently excluded – to provide ex-servicemen with the opportunity of working on the land. The Land Settlement (Facilities) Act 1919 empowered county councils to purchase and lease land for the provision of smallholdings with central government providing financial support.¹² For example Surrey County Council bought and leased 2,162 acres between 1919 and 1926 and provided smallholdings for a total of 257 ex-servicemen.¹³ Sheppard in her research on East Sussex came across no evidence of women being settled on smallholdings in the immediate post war period.¹⁴ Nor is there any evidence of women among the ex-servicemen being given smallholdings in Surrey.¹⁵

It is Wilkins, chair of the sub-committee responsible for the colony at Wire Mill Lane, who provides the connection between pre-war campaigns to promote smallholdings and post-war developments. Wilkins had studied agriculture at Cambridge and acted as bailiff on her brother's farm. In addition she had studied smallholdings intensively in Great Britain and in Europe. This culminated in the publication in 1907 of *The smallholdings of England: a survey of various existing systems* based on her research for the Co-operative Smallholdings Society.¹⁶ Wilkins was a governor of the Agricultural Organisation Society and this explains why the

⁹ WFGA/A/2/1, minutes 4 Oct. 1917 and 30 Nov. 1917.

¹⁰ WFGA/A/2/1, 4 Oct. 1917. At the end of the war A. D. Hall wrote an article on 'The position of women in agriculture' for the *J. Board of Agriculture* 25 (1918-19), pp. 785-96, in which he advocated the establishment of a larger and more complicated scheme than the one chosen by the WFGA. *The Times*, 25 Jan. 1919.

¹¹ WFGA/E/1/10, Report and Journal of the WFGA, 1920-1, p. 5. For further information on the Women's National Land Service Corps, see King, *Women rule the plot*, pp. 59-97.

¹² C. W. Rowell, 'County council smallholdings, 1908-1958', *Agriculture* 66 (1918-19), p. 110; Smith, 'Land for small man'; A. Howkins, *The death of rural England. A social history of the countryside since 1900* (2003), pp. 88-9.

¹³ Surrey History Centre (hereafter SHC), Report of Surrey Agricultural Committee (hereafter SAC) presented to Surrey County Council (hereafter SCC), 29 July 1926, Minutes of SCC 12 June 1928, SAC, 14 May 1928, App. 3, 'Memorandum by County Land Agent on

the present position in Surrey' (all cited from the set of County Council minutes in the SHC searchroom).

¹⁴ C. M. Sheppard, 'Smallholdings in East Sussex, 1892-1945' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Sussex, 1999), p. 53.

¹⁵ The records examined make no direct reference to women as tenants and tenants mentioned by name are male.

¹⁶ King, *Women rule the plot*, pp. 47-50; F. M. Wilson, *Rebel daughter of a country house. The life of Eglantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children Fund* (1967), pp. 54, 149, 160; L. Jebb, *The smallholdings of England. A survey of various existing systems* (1907); id., *The workings of the smallholdings act, with suggestions for its amendment* (1907); *The British year-book of agriculture and agricultural who's who, 1913-1914* (1914); WFGA/F/11, Newspaper Cuttings, *The Times*, 25, 29 Jan. 1929. Louisa Jebb also gave evidence to the Departmental Committee appointed by the Board of Agriculture to inquire into and report upon the subject of smallholdings in Great Britain, 1906 (Cd 3277).

colony was to be run as a co-operative.¹⁷ She was to play a vital role in the planning, choice and operation of the colony until her death in January 1929. Thirsk describes her as a 'tireless advocate' for smallholdings and regards her research as 'much the most informative description of smallholder farming'.¹⁸ Towards the end of the nineteenth century a number of concerns coalesced in the advocacy of smallholdings as the 'sovereign cure for all ills to which the agricultural flesh was heir'.¹⁹ One of the concerns was the implication of rural depopulation for the countryside and the nation's human stock.²⁰ Another concern was the increasing reliance on imported foodstuffs such as vegetables, eggs and dairy when the country was capable of producing the goods itself.²¹ Although the end of the nineteenth century has been described as a period of agricultural depression, more recent research has shown that 'alternative agriculture' did relatively well. So, the smallholding activities of dairying, poultry keeping and market gardening were areas of production from which a smallholder could expect to make a reasonable living.²² Agriculture generally did well in the war years, and as Howkins describes it 'a warm glow revealed a rural England that was in many ways, prosperous'.²³

Women's agricultural colonies (or settlements as they were often called) had attracted support since the end of the nineteenth century. WFGA was clearly influenced by the earlier attempts to establish them. The motives behind these settlements was clearly articulated by Frances Evelyn, Countess of Warwick in 'The New Women and the Old Acres', an editorial she wrote for the first issue of *The Woman's Agricultural Times* in July 1899. The rationale presented by Warwick included the suitability of *le petite culture* for women agriculturists, and the attractions of rural life compared to urban life. In addition she wrote of rural depopulation and the role of 'educated' (i.e. middle class) women in revitalizing the countryside. Finally she wrote of the 'surplus million of women' which had concerned society since mid-century.²⁴ There was also a more pragmatic reason behind the settlements. They were to provide employment opportunities for the women who were being trained in agriculture and horticulture in colleges such as The Lady Warwick Hostel (the forerunner of Studley) and the Horticultural College, Swanley.²⁵ In 1902 Warwick provided the foreword for a book written by Edith Bradley and Bertha La Mothe (both of whom had worked at the Lady Warwick Hostel) in which she wrote:

¹⁷ E. A. Pratt, *Agricultural organisation. Its rise, principles and practice abroad and at home* (1912), pp. 103–5, 122–7; N. Goddard, 'Agricultural institutions: societies, associations and the press', in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VII, 1850–1914 (2 vols, 2000), I, pp. 667, 672.

¹⁸ J. Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture. A history from the Black Death to the present day* (1997), p. 214. Wilkin's obituary in *The Times*, 25 Jan. 1929, refers to her 'unstinting work' for the Women's Farm Colony at Lingfield.

¹⁹ R. Perren, *Agriculture in depression, 1870–1940* (1995), p. 65; For an overview of the smallholding movement from the late nineteenth century, Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture*, pp. 207–11.

²⁰ A. Howkins, *Reshaping rural England: a social history, 1850–1925* (1992), p. 226.

²¹ E. A. Pratt, *The transition in agriculture* (1906); MERL, Studley Papers (hereafter SP), WAR 5/8/4, Newspaper Cuttings: Rural Problems, *Bristol Mercury*, early 1905.

²² Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture*, pp. 165–98; Pratt, *Transition in agriculture*.

²³ Howkins, *The death of rural England*, p. 36.

²⁴ Lady Warwick, 'The new woman and the old acres', *The Woman's Agricultural Times* 1 (July 1899), pp. 1–2. *La Petite Culture* was defined as 'taking the direction of flowers, of fruit, of jam-making, of bee-keeping, and especially of poultry-farming'. See also E. Bradley 'Openings for women in the lighter branches of agriculture', *The Woman's Agricultural Times* 3 (Oct. 1901), pp. 49–50.

²⁵ K. Sanecki, *A short history of Studley College* (1990).

What I look forward to is the establishment of women's agricultural settlement in the neighbourhood of manufacturing towns and watering places. I think that such settlements might do a flourishing trade in butter, milk and eggs, in vegetables, poultry, fruit and flowers. I believe that they should be run upon co-operative lines.²⁶

Nothing came directly from Lady Warwick's efforts at the turn of the century. However *The Woman's Agricultural Times* did inspire Victorian Woodhull Martin and her daughter Zula to establish a woman's agricultural settlement at Bredon's Norton, Worcestershire in 1905. The settlement never really succeeded and seems to have faded away before the First World War.²⁷ The connection with Studley College can also be seen in the attempts by Dr Hamilton (college principal 1908 to 1922) to establish co-operative market gardens. Despite her efforts it was not until 1913 that land was bought at Ensbury on the outskirts of Bournemouth. No details are available about its operation and by September 1916 the land had been sold, with a large part of it being used as an aerodrome.²⁸ By contrast the pre-war publications of the Women's Agricultural and Horticultural International Union (as WFGA was then called) did not canvas support for women's settlements.²⁹

The principles behind the formation of the colony in Wire Mill Lane echo the words of Lady Warwick:

... the agricultural settlements, where for those who have small incomes cottages will be built with land attached which the trained woman will know how to cultivate ... cottages should be built in pairs ... six or eight of these cottages will form a settlement. Co-operative principles will prevail.³⁰

The women's smallholding colony may have operated within the agricultural and social context of the inter-war period, yet its rationale was rooted in the late nineteenth century and the years leading up to the First World War. When WFGA came to establish its own colony, the influence of the previous attempts to found agricultural settlements can be seen in the emphasis placed on communal aspects. Yet in 1935, when all but one of the smallholdings had been sold, the Annual Report for 1934-5 reflected on the colony and its history. The account constructed by WFGA stressed the aim of the association had been to provide an opportunity for women to enter farming. 'At that time [it] was almost impossible for a women with experience ... to start on their own, to rent any farm or holding'. The account then distanced itself from the material printed at the end of the war by portraying the scheme as being merely one of 'landlord and tenant' and it 'hoped that they (the tenants) would co-operate among themselves as a separate undertaking' with the association fostering 'any leanings' in that direction.³¹

²⁶ E. Bradley and B. La Mothe, *The lighter branches of agriculture* (1902), pp. xviii-xix. A chapter at the end of the book was devoted to agricultural settlements.

²⁷ O. Stinchcombe, *American lady of the manor, Bredon's Norton; the later life of Victoria Woodhull Martin, 1901-1927* (rev. edn, 2001).

²⁸ MERL, SP, WAR 5/14/2, *News about the Guild*, 4 (2) (May 1912), p. 17; 5 (3) (Aug. 1913) p. 79; 8 (4) (Nov. 1916),

p. 198.

²⁹ WFGA/E/4, Monthly Leaflets of the Women's Agricultural and Horticultural International Union, 1909-19.

³⁰ Lady Warwick, 'The new woman and the old acres', pp. 1-2.

³¹ WFGA/E/1/24, *Report and Journal of WFGA*, Report and Balance Sheet, 1934-5, pp. 8-9.

The association may have looked back and decided to see its role as that of landlord, yet its literature and actions (for example the appointment of a resident manager for a period in the early 1920s) contradicted its own evaluation.

Once the decision to establish the colony was taken two aspects of the project had to be finalized: finance and the land itself. It was the financial contribution of women associated with the suffrage campaign that meant that the scheme became viable. Initial attempts in 1918 to buy land failed, as the £10,000 needed to purchase and equip a colony was not forthcoming. An appeal in *The Times* in January 1919 for the loan of £10,000 at 5 per cent 'to start a cooperative small holding company, so that girls who wish to become small-holders may not do so under impossible conditions and lose their money' was apparently unsuccessful.³² However capital funding was provided by two prominent suffrage campaigners. Miss Margaret Ashton from Manchester (1856–1937) gave £5,000 in return for a life annuity of £125 and Miss Sydney Renee Courtauld made an interest free loan of £4,000.³³ Ashton was a well-known Suffragist in the North of England where she was an independent councillor in Manchester and, between 1906 and 1915, chairman of the North of England Society for Women's Suffrage. Her pacifism meant that she was a founding member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In the 1930s she was a vice-president for the National Council for Equal Citizenship.³⁴ In 1926 Ashton joined the council of the WFGA and in 1929 she presented the report that resulted in the association deciding in principle to sell off the smallholdings.³⁵ (Sydney) Renee Courtauld (1873–1962) was of the textile family, the niece of Samuel Courtauld. She too was active in the pre-war suffrage movement.³⁶ The relationship between the urban based members of the women's movement and rural issues remains largely unexplored.³⁷

In the search for land to buy, the WFGA laid down clear criteria that were obviously based on the professional experience of Wilkins and Miss Katherine M. Courtauld (1856–1936), cousin of Renee Courtauld, and an established farmer at Colne Engraine in Essex.³⁸ In the August 1919

³² WFGA/A/1/2, Minutes of Council, 4 July 1918; WFGA/E/4/10, *Monthly Leaflet*, 112 (June 1918), p. 6 and 113 (July 1918), p. 5; *The Times*, 25 Jan. 1919.

³³ WFGA/A/1/2, Minutes of Council, 20 Oct. 1919. See also WFGA/A/2/1, Minute Book of the Executive Committee, 5 Dec. 1918.

³⁴ E. Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement, a reference guide 1866–1928* (1999), pp. 18–20. Her obituary in *The Times*, 18 Oct. 1937, says that 'Her three chief interests were local government, the woman [sic] suffrage movement and international peace' but makes no mention of her involvement with WFGA.

³⁵ WFGA/A/1/2, Report of the Annual Meeting, 8 July 1926.

³⁶ Crawford, *Women's Suffrage Movement*, p. 143. For the Courtauld family, see Burke's *Landed Gentry* (17th edn, 1952). Her will is noted in *The Times*, 28 May 1962: she left money to animal welfare causes and her house and property to the National Trust.

³⁷ But see E. Crawford, *Enterprising women: The Garretts and their circle* (2002). M. Andrews, *The acceptable*

face of feminism. The Women's Institute as a social movement (1997) remarks on the connection between the suffrage campaign and the formation of the WI, pp. 44–5.

³⁸ Miss Katherine Mina Courtauld (1856–1936) was the daughter of George Courtauld and a granddaughter of the founder of the eponymous textile firm. She farmed at Knights Farm, Colne Engraine, from 1878 and was a member of Essex County Council from about 1914 to 1934. She was involved in the Association from 1900, giving it the financial support it needed to buy its London hostel, Courtauld House in Gower St in 1932 (for which see below, n. 49). For her life, King, *Women rule the plot*, pp. 104, 106–8, Anon, 'Lady Farmeresses: Miss Courtauld at Knight's Farm, Colne Engaine', *The Ladies Field*, 7 Oct. 1890, pp. 182–5 and the short obituary and notice of her 'memorial service' (not funeral), *The Times*, 8, 10 June 1935. There are further press clippings from the time of her death in WFGA/F/12, also WFGA/E/6/14, *Occasional Leaflet* (Sept. 1935), p. 2, and H. R. Haggard, *A Gardener's year* (1905), pp. 128–9.

issue of the *Monthly Journal* the criteria drawn up by a sub-committee chaired by Wilkins were clearly stated. They included: market, soil, aspect, water supply, location in relation to London, roads, size of estate. The tenants were to combine into a co-operative for the buying and selling of produce and for the owning of implements. The co-operative beliefs of Wilkins are evident here. Prospective tenants were required to have agricultural experience and to possess a private income of at least £25 per annum (in addition to the capital sunk into the holding). Some members of the committee argued that the tenants should be required to have a private income of £50 per annum. The minutes of a council meeting in 1921 recorded 'It was never contemplated that the tenants could make an entire living off the holdings themselves, or at any rate not for some years'.³⁹

It is possible to view this requirement as reflecting the amateurism of the female tenants yet the situation was far more complex. Contemporary surveys demonstrated the wide range of smallholdings in Britain with the holdings varying in terms of size, ownership, type of holding, location and potential and actual profitability.⁴⁰ WFGA, by requiring a small additional income, was responding to the realities of smallholding. Astor and Rowntree, in their review of smallholding, stated that about 15-20 per cent of smallholdings were run on a part-time basis so the 10s. a week private income could be viewed as replacing a man's paid employment or pension.⁴¹ In the 1930s Edgar Thomas surveyed county council smallholdings in Dorset and Hampshire and observed that of 215 smallholders, all but eight were married. He recognized the 'great importance of the housewife on the smallholding'.⁴² So again the private income was necessary, as the tenants did not have wives and children to provide free labour. Smallholding in the inter-war years were not as profitable as in the years leading up to the First World War and an additional income, whether earned or unearned, provided a buffer against poor harvests and low prices.⁴³

Despite the professional expertise of the sub-committee, the *Monthly Journal* for September 1919 provided a rather idealistic impression of how the colony would work. One tenant was to run the farmhouse as a hostel. Another would run indoor dairy premises and make butter and cheese having purchased the liquid milk from other smallholders, while others would keep dairy cattle and run market gardens. Yet another tenant would keep horses that would be hired out to the other tenants. The tenants would buy and sell services and produce among themselves thereby creating an interdependent community.⁴⁴ The concept of one tenant undertaking all the horse work for the other tenants was again based on sound economic sense. As Newlin Smith showed in his study of publicly supplied smallholdings, smallholdings that owned under-utilized horses had lower profitability.⁴⁵

³⁹ WFGA/A/1/2, Minutes of Council, 6 Oct. 1921.

⁴⁰ For example see C. S. Orwin and W. F. Darke, *Back to the land* (1935), pp. 40-55. Astor and Rowntree commissioned a series of studies which were published in *Smallholding Studies: Reports of surveys undertaken by some agricultural economists* (1938). Counties such as Lancashire and Yorkshire were included as well as broader studies on Wales and the south-west. Thomas' study of Dorset and Hampshire was one of this series.

⁴¹ Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p. 220.

⁴² Thomas, 'County council small-holdings', p. 19

⁴³ Viscount Astor and B. S. Rowntree, *British Agriculture. The principles of future agricultural policy* (1939), pp. 219-29, Orwin and Darke, *Back to the Land*, pp. 40-55.

⁴⁴ WFGA/E/2/7, *J. Women's Farm and Garden Union* 127 (Sept. 1919), pp. 6-8.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Land for the small man*, pp. 92-3.

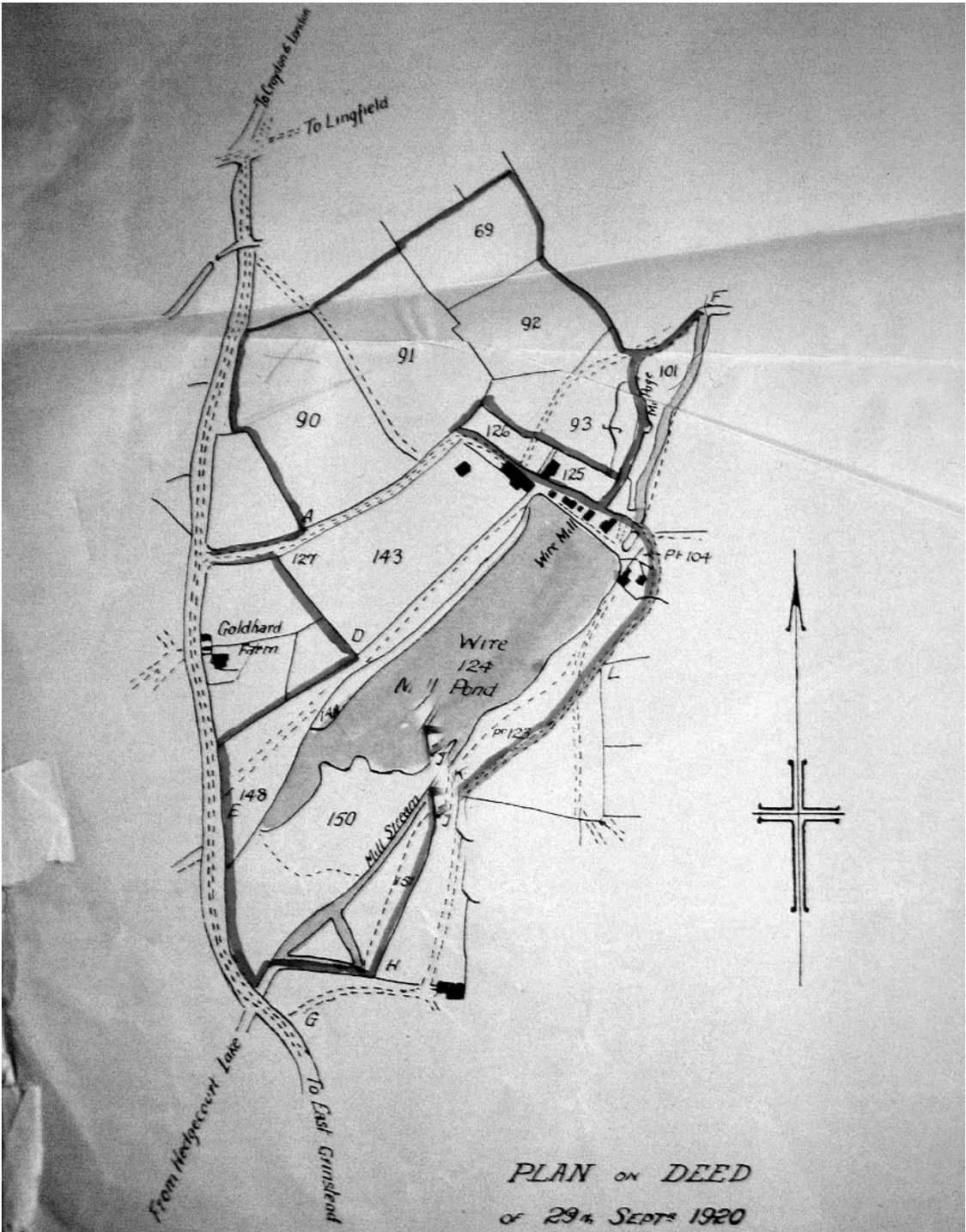


FIGURE 1. Wire Mill Estate c. 1920.

See Appendix for an explanation of tenants and owners.

Source: Property deeds in the possession of M. Arnold, Wembury Publication. Photographed 2003.

Wire Mill Estate, near Lingfield was purchased in the summer of 1920 after a considerable number of estates had been inspected and rejected. The association paid £10,000 for the 91-acre estate. Figure 1 shows a plan of some of the estate in 1920 which was used when a field was sold in 1929. The estate included a lake and woodland. Of the cultivated land, 22 acres were down to apple orchard. As the estate fronted onto the A22 (the Eastbourne Road), no additional roads were required and there was water laid on. There was a good house and several cottages. It was envisaged that 12 to 15 smallholdings would be created and be ready for occupation in the autumn of 1920. It was acknowledged that the rent would be high as the estate was in an expensive residential area but that there would be a ready market for produce.⁴⁶ Once the estate was bought it was decided that there would be three or four small mixed farm holdings, two or three poultry and several fruit and market garden ones, making a total of about 13 holdings. The main house would be let on a rent that reflected the tenancy condition of offering board and lodging (at approximately 35s. a week) to three or four other smallholders.⁴⁷

II

The WFGA had prepared thoroughly yet, from the first day, the colony at Wire Mill Lane was beset with problems of high tenant turnover, a shortage of residential accommodation, unlet smallholdings, drought and falling agricultural and land prices.

The acquisition of the estate had two financial implications for the WFGA. First capital was needed to purchase the estate and later build cottages. This money was lent by members or raised on mortgage.⁴⁸ Secondly WFGA had to find the money to operate the colony in terms of servicing the loans and mortgages as well as financing repairs and covering bad debts. The association was a charity reliant on its own members and activities for its financial survival and it was never prosperous. Table 1 shows the financial health of the smallholding colony and the association using figures taken from the published accounts. The first three columns show the profitability or otherwise of the colony. In the years leading up to 1929, the colony only made a profit for the year ending 31 December 1926. The early years of the 1930s saw a small profit but by then the decision had been taken to sell the holdings. The last few years of the accounts do not accurately reflect the financial health of the colony as the reduced rents could not cover the cost of the loans and other expenses. The final two columns show the financial position of the association itself. A hostel provided the vast bulk of its income. From 1927 it was able to put money to one side in readiness for the acquisition of a new London hostel which was achieved in 1932.⁴⁹ The association was solvent but it could not allow the colony to run up large losses as this would have jeopardized the operation of the association itself. Unlike the smallholdings established by the county councils, the colony received no

⁴⁶ WFGA/E/1/4, *J. Women's Farm and Garden Union*, 134 (May 1920), p. 4.

⁴⁷ WFGA/A/2/2, 7 Oct. 1920.

⁴⁸ WFGA/A/1/3, Minutes of Council, 12 May 1927; WFGA/A/2/2, 2 Dec. 1920.

⁴⁹ After the First World War the association leased

three houses in Park Road and a residential club was run for members which also took students from Bedford College. Financial support from Katherine M. Courtauld meant that in 1932 the association was able to purchase freehold premises in Gower St which it retained until 1963. King, *Women Rule the Plot*, pp. 103-105, 112, 129.

TABLE 1. Financial position of the WFGA and the smallholding colony, Wire Mill, 1921–35

Year	Smallholding Colony				WFGA	
	Expenditure	Income	Profit	Loss	Balance	Comments
1921					-£688 6s. 9d.	
1922					£608 17s. 4d.	
1923	£613 4s. 1d.	£371 9s. 5d.		£241 14s. 8d.	£199 15s. 8d.	
1924	£509 11s. 7½d.	£437 5s. 0d.		£72 6s. 7½d.	£59 9s. 3d.	
1925	£664 10s. 0½d.	£609 1s. 9d.		£55 8s. 3½d.	£122 1s. 3d.	Shed donated
1926	£548 12s. 11d.	£586 18s. 9d.	£38 5s. 10d.		£125 18s. 11d.	
1927	£660 0s. 7d.	£559 15s. 6d.		£100 5s. 1d.	£58 13s. 0d.	£400 to dilapidations
1928	£587 3s. 9d.	£567s 0s. 9d.		£20 3s. 0d.	£64 10s. 10d.	£800 to dilapidations
1929	£629 4s. 11d.	£537 15s. 7d.		c. £92	£33 11s. 8d.	New accounting procedures
1930	£235 4s. 10d.	£372 4s. 6d.	c£137		£62 11s. 1d.	£400 to dilapidations
1931	£286 0s. 0d.	£370 2s. 1d.	c. £84		£48 14s. 9d.	£300 to dilapidations
1932	£300 11s. 8d.	£326 15s. 11d.	c. 26		£48 9s. 6d.	£150 to dilapidations
1933	£268 14s. 6d.	£242 12s. 11d.		c. £26	-£193 10s. 8d.	New hostel
1934	£268 3s. 11d.	£162 11s. 2d.		c. £106	£535 10s. 1d.	£100 for repairs
1935	£148 14s. 6d.	£49 0s. 0d.		c. £99	£288s 2s. 2d.	£100 for repairs

Note: financial years ran 1 January–31 December.

Source: MERL, WFGA/E/13–25, *Report and Journal of the WFGA*, 1923–4 to 1935–6.

assistance from central government. This was mentioned in a rather pointed fashion in the report of the Annual Meeting in 1926.⁵⁰

At the same time the chairman said that she thought the association was to be congratulated on the fact that the Colony is practically self supporting, whereas the Government Colonies for ex-service men, started at the same period after the war, have a permanent charge on the country of many hundred of thousands of pounds.

The immediate problems after the acquisition of the estate were the lack of tenants and the unwillingness of the smallholders to live in the main house. The minutes of Council for October 1921 recorded that all but two of the proposed tenants withdrew when the estate was purchased in 1920 and the association had had to find someone to cultivate the land until new tenants could be found – at a cost of £120.⁵¹ The tenants recruited did not wish to live in the main house but have cottages of their own. Wire Mill House was a substantial house built in 1912 that boasted three sitting rooms, eight bedrooms and had central heating.⁵² The house had been let to the Misses Williamson for a reduced rent in recognition that they were to provide board and lodging for other tenants.⁵³ There is a sense that for some unspoken reason the two

⁵⁰ WFGA/A/1/3, Minutes of annual meeting, 8 July 1926.

⁵¹ WFGA/A/1/2, 6 Oct. 1921.

⁵² WFGA/E/6/1, *Occasional Leaflet of the WFGA* (Oct. 1922), p. 3; Property deeds for Wire Mill House. I am

grateful to Mr Ronnie Gordon for permission to use this source.

⁵³ The Misses Williamson had trained at The Horticultural College, Swanley during the war. Hextable Heritage Centre, Swanley Papers, Annual Report of the

sisters had not worked out as tenants. By October 1922 the house was advertised for sale along with three acres of land, and in 1923 a Mr Creake bought the house and land for £2,850 and its connection with the colony ended.⁵⁴

Housing was an immediate issue. The records indicate that there was, in addition to Wire Mill House, a variety of accommodation, some of which was in need of modernization.⁵⁵ There were two semi-detached cottages in the lane. According to house deeds these two cottages were probably built in 1912 and were in relatively good condition.⁵⁶ There was also a Mill which was eventually converted into accommodation for a number of smallholders.⁵⁷ A rather dilapidated cottage is also mentioned which may be the one sold to Miss Bell in 1926. Although an estate plan does survive, it has been impossible to ascertain exactly what housing came with the estate as minutes and reports provide conflicting information. In the light of the housing shortage a decision was taken by October 1922 to build cottages with the proceedings from the sale of Wire Mill House.⁵⁸ The shortage arose not just from the tenants' unwillingness to live in Wire Mill House but more significantly from WFGA's mistake in dividing the land into holdings that were too large. This meant land remained unlet until housing was provided. Housing was an issue that created immediate operational problems but also it was an important element in the structural issues that faced the association.

Secondly the character of the estate purchased led to some major issues for WFGA. The 22 acres of land planted with apples were a liability. The association no doubt divided the orchards up into viable units, however the women did not want smallholdings of that size and indeed could not work them. It seems rather surprising that such an error could occur despite the experience of Katherine M. Courtauld, who had extensive orchards in Essex. Her obituary, written by Caroline Grosvenor (Chairman of the WFGA in 1920) stated that 'she disapproved in some ways of the scheme, considering the locality unfavourable and the purchase price too high'.⁵⁹ A review of the colony given at a council meeting in October 1921 admitted that there had been problems finding tenants as over 50 per cent of applicants sought a small house with two to three acres of land for poultry or market gardening at a rent of £15-20, yet a reasonable return on the costs of constructing a construction of a cottage would be a rent of £40 for the cottage alone. The association was caught in a dilemma, for if it let the existing four cottages with two to three acres a piece, then the bulk of the land would be unlet. Another reason given in the review for problems in obtaining tenants was the lack of capital on the part of the experienced workers. The requirement for tenants to have a private income of 10s. a week was excluding some women.⁶⁰

Once the association had realized the major problems facing the colony it did respond. Action was taken to increase the housing provision. The Wire Mill was adapted and the

Horticultural College, Swanley, 1916 and *Horticultural College Magazine*, 18 (11) (Nov. 1920), p. 15; WFGA/A/1/2, Minutes of Council meeting, 5 Oct. 1922, Chairman's Report of the Smallholdings Colony for the year Sept. 1921-Sept. 1922.

⁵⁴ WFGA/E/6/1, *Occasional Leaflet* (Oct. 1922), p. 3; Property deeds for Wire Mill House (Mr Gordon, Nov. 2003).

⁵⁵ WFGA/A/1/2, 2 Dec. 1920.

⁵⁶ Property Deeds. I am grateful to Mr Chan for permission to use this source.

⁵⁷ WFGA/A/1/2, 4 Oct. 1923.

⁵⁸ WFGA/A/1/2, Minutes of Council meeting, 5 Oct. 1922, Chairman's Report of the Smallholdings Colony for the year Sept. 1921-Sept. 1922.

⁵⁹ WFGA/E/6/14, *Occasional Leaflet* (Sept. 1935), p. 2.

⁶⁰ WFGA/A/1/2, 6 Oct. 1921.

money from the sale of Wire Mill House used to fund the construction of two sets of semi-detached cottages, nos 1 and 2, and 3 and 4 Wire Mill Lane.⁶¹ Two of the cottages were advertised in the September issue of the *Occasional Leaflet*. They were set in 2½ acres of bush apples. The accommodation consisted of three bedrooms, living room, scullery, hot and cold water, and a bathroom and lavatory. The rent was £40 per annum with the tenant paying the rates.⁶² The money raised from the sale of Wire Mill House also funded the creation of two flats in the mill and the refurbishment of a bungalow cottage.⁶³ By 1926 the association had come to the conclusion that the way to improve the profitability of the estate was to build additional cottages and to let them with about 1½ acres of land each.⁶⁴ These cottages were built next to the main road as it was thought that a tenant might run a tea hut and help with the produce hut (donated in 1925).⁶⁵ The association also reviewed the apple trees. Some of them were grubbed up and sold so that there was more space between the rows enabling other crops to be grown.⁶⁶

Third the agricultural depression of the early 1920s had a major impact on the early years of the colony. Prices fell precipitously in the years 1920 and 1922 and then there was a more gradual decline until 1926, after which there were three years of relative stability. However this stability was destroyed by the worldwide slump in commodity prices. It was not until June 1933 that prices began slowly to recover.⁶⁷ Whetham gives the decline in land prices as nearly £40 per acre between 1919 and 1924–5.⁶⁸ So the Association was left with an estate that had declined rather than appreciated in value yet the rent receipts needed to reflect the estate's purchase price and not its current value.⁶⁹ In addition the early years of the 1920s saw an increase in building costs and this probably meant that the first cottages to be built were relatively expensive compared to the pair erected in 1926.⁷⁰ This might explain why numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 Wire Mill Lane had internal bathrooms but the internal walls were left unplastered.⁷¹ The estate was purchased when there was general optimism for the profitability of English agriculture: yet the early tenants were faced with falling agricultural prices and there was a general feeling of economic instability and uncertainty.⁷² The operational difficulties of the smallholders were compounded by a drought in 1921 which led the association to make concessions at the end of the year.⁷³ Brown

⁶¹ WFGA/A/1/2, 7 June 1923; WFGA/E/1/12, *Report and Journal of the WFGA*, Report and Balance Sheet, 1922–3.

⁶² WFGA/E/6/2, *Occasional Leaflet* (Sept. 1923), p. 3.

⁶³ WFGA/A/1/2, 7 Feb. 1924.

⁶⁴ WFGA/A/1/2, Minutes of Annual Meeting, 8 July 1926.

⁶⁵ WFGA/A/1/2, 8 Oct. 1925 and 7 Oct. 1926.

⁶⁶ WFGA/D/1, Account book of the Lingfield Smallholdings, 1922–34; WFGA/A/1/2, 7 Dec. 1922 and 4 Oct. 1923.

⁶⁷ K. A. H. Murray, *Agriculture* (History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Civil Services, 1955), p. 17.

⁶⁸ E. H. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, VIII, 1914–39 (1978), p. 136. See also Howkins, *Death of rural England*, pp. 45–54.

⁶⁹ The impact of the decline in farm prices on farmers who had purchased their farms is discussed by

J. Brown, *Agriculture in England: a survey of farming, 1870–1947* (1987), pp. 84–7.

⁷⁰ The minutes do not directly refer to this, however the records for the smallholdings run by Surrey County Council show delays, increased costs and poor workmanship. SHC, Reports presented to SCC, 12 June 1928, Report of SAC, 14 May 1928, App. 3, Memorandum by the County Land Agent on the present position in Surrey.

⁷¹ Observed by author at 3, Wire Mill Lane. I am also grateful to Peter Fuller for pointing out the wall finish to me.

⁷² Perren, *Agriculture in depression*, pp. 41–3.

⁷³ Whetham, *Agrarian Hist.*, VIII, p. 138; MERL WFGA/A/1/2, 6 Oct., 9 Dec. 1921. The larger smallholding schemes established after the war by Surrey County Council were also adversely affected by the

has suggested, in relation to English agriculture in general, that 'the losses of 1921-23 had a similar effect of those of 1871-81 in weakening agriculture for several years to come'.⁷⁴ This can be applied to the colony where the problems surrounding its early years diminished its chances of success. The WFGA could probably have overcome its initial problems with accommodation and smallholding sizes; however the general agricultural conditions meant that the association and its tenants were operating within a hostile economic environment.

The minutes and the electoral registers reveal a constantly changing population in the lane, particularly in the early years. In 1924 married couples were accepted as tenants as long as the women had agricultural experience.⁷⁵ This implies that there were problems in finding single women to fill the tenancies. In addition there were some arrears of rent and in 1927 one of the married tenants, Captain Pearcey, had his written off.⁷⁶ However, in spite of these difficulties there were many positive aspects to the colony. Women who had worked on the land during the war were taken on as tenants, including the Misses Wake Walker, Bell, Hanson and Mattingley.⁷⁷ Wake Walker, who had served in the Women's National Land Service Corps, took a farm smallholding in 1921. She left the colony for Youngs Farm in 1925 and in the 1930s was farming nearby at Cherry Tree Farm.⁷⁸ A present resident of the lane, Peter Fuller, recalls a Miss Walker delivering milk to the lane in the 1930s.⁷⁹ There is evidence that at least one of the tenants did well. Miss Miller (Reading trained) took no 5 Wire Mill Lane over in 1926-7. During her tenancy she developed a successful market garden and within 2½ years she had recovered her capital and covered all her expenses. However, she did not remain long as the Annual Report for 1928-9 records that she had accepted a post in Africa.⁸⁰ There is also evidence of the communal nature of some of the activities. A produce hut was donated and placed next to the A22 in 1925 and this enabled the women to sell their produce to passing trade. Miss Whittington had started selling produce on commission at her tea hut (the sign was a yellow tea pot!) in early 1924. She left in October 1926, taking her tea hut with her and prompting the decision to build a further cottage with a new tea hut. In early 1924 a communal dining room operated in the Mill and the tenants took it in turn to supervise a local woman who provided a cooked lunch for a shilling.⁸¹ From the mid-1920s the lane became more settled. For example Mr and Mrs Gentry moved into no 1 Wire Mill Lane in about

drought and this can be seen in the rent rebates made to smallholders at the Sheep and Wells Farm and the Little Woodcote Estate in 1923. SHC, Reports presented to SCC, 13 Nov. 1923, Report of SAC, 15 Oct. 1923. There were rent rebates for two schemes: Sheep and Wells Farm and Little Woodcote Estate for the two years leading up to Michaelmas 1922.

⁷⁴ Brown, *Agriculture in England*, p. 80.

⁷⁵ WFGA/A/1/2, 22 May 1924; WFGA/E/1/14, *Report and Journal of the WFGA* (1924), Report and Balance Sheet, 1924-5, p. 7.

⁷⁶ WFGA/A/1/2, 12 May 1927.

⁷⁷ WFGA/E/1/7, *Journal of the Women's Farm and Garden Union*, 139 (Nov. 1920), pp. 1-2.

⁷⁸ WFGA/A/1/2, 6 Oct. 1921, 5 Oct. 1922 (chairman's

report for the smallholdings colony for year 1921-22); WFGA/E/1/14, *Report and Journal of the WFGA* (1925), Report and Balance Sheet, 1924-5, p. 7; SHC, CC802/40/2 and CC802/52/2, Electoral Registers, Eastern Division, Spring 1925, 1935.

⁷⁹ Interview with Peter Fuller, 14 Oct. 2003.

⁸⁰ WFGA/E/1/16, *Report and Journal of the WFGA* (1927), Report and Balance Sheet, 1926-7, p. 5; WFGA/E/1/18, *Report and Journal of the WFGA* (1929), Report and Balance Sheet, 1928-9, p. 5.

⁸¹ WFGA/E/1/13, *Report and Journal of the WFGA* (1924), Report and Balance Sheet, 1923-4, pp. 6-7; SR WFGAF/11, Newspaper Cuttings, *Manchester Guardian*, c. 1925; SR WFGA/A/1/2, Minutes of Council, 7 Feb. 1924.

1925–6 and Miss Taylor moved into no 3 Wire Mill Lane in about 1922.⁸² However there were some holdings, such as no. 4 Wire Mill Lane, that continued to change tenants frequently. The appendix provides an overview of the main smallholdings with information on tenants and sale dates.

III

In the spring of 1929 the smallholding sub-committee recommended that the land should be sold at auction or privately. The estate had been revalued at £6,750 at the end of 1928 and a report from Margaret Ashton stated ‘... there had been a steady loss and she felt the time had come for the committee to make some decision in regard to the future’.⁸³ An extraordinary meeting of the council in April agreed to a resolution recommending the sale at auction of the mill, lake and wood. However the full council did not ratify a second resolution to divide the rest of the property into lots and sell it privately or at auction. Katherine M. Courtauld, who had not been at the smallholding sub-committee meeting, ‘felt that several of the tenants were making good and might eventually be able to purchase their holding’. Accordingly the second recommendation was not carried and instead the association decided to sell some pasture fields at auction.⁸⁴ Although the council balked at accepting the report’s stark recommendations – Katherine M. Courtauld’s minority view may have had some bearing on this – the events which followed showed that it accepted that the experiment was over. There was no further investment in the colony and the 1930s was characterized by a gradual decline in the association’s involvement with the lane as the smallholdings were sold. By September 1934 Miss Taylor was the only remaining tenant and her smallholding was bought by a Miss Bull (who shared the holding with her) in 1938.⁸⁵ It is not stated exactly what led to the decision taken at the extraordinary meeting of the council meeting in April 1929. Table 1 shows how most years the colony made an operating loss. It is impossible to calculate the exact loss due to sales of land and property as well as the investment in housing. There were other considerations. Mrs Wilkins died in January 1929 and Katherine M. Courtauld in 1935. The Association’s commitment to the colony may have died with them.

Although the 1930s saw the gradual end of the colony, it is also the decade for which it is possible, through oral evidence, to investigate the communal environment created by the residents of the lane. Peter Fuller knew the lane as a child as he visited his great aunt, Miss Beatrice Taylor.⁸⁶ Ernie Borer’s father bought no. 4, Wire Mill Lane in September 1932, so he grew up knowing the women living in the lane.⁸⁷ What emerges from the evidence is a small group of middle-class women (Misses Bell, Taylor, Bull and Mart, Mrs Rayner and Hill) who met for tea and who bartered their produce. Fuller recalled that ‘they were all quite clearly ladies ... they

⁸² WFGA/E/1/14, *Report and Journal of the WFGA* (1926), Report and Balance Sheet, 1925–6, p. 7; WFGA/E/1/12, *Report and Journal of the WFGA* (1923), Report and Balance Sheet, 1922–3, p. 5.

⁸³ WFGA/A/1/3, Minutes of Council, 14 Feb. 1929.

⁸⁴ WFGA/A/1/3, Extraordinary meeting of Council, 9 Apr. 1929.

⁸⁵ WFGA/A/3/1, General Purposes Committee, 12 July 1924, and 27 Sept. 1934; WFGA/A/1/3, Meeting of Council, 20 Oct. 1938.

⁸⁶ Fuller interview, Oct. 2003.

⁸⁷ Interview with Ernie Borer, 14 Oct. 2003; WFGA/A/3/2, Minute Books of the General Purposes and Finance Committee, 6 Oct. 1932.

were educated, they were all nicely mannered and so on ... you couldn't call them working class in any way'.⁸⁸ All the ladies (except Rayner and Hill) were tenants of WFGA who had bought their smallholding.

The evidence suggests that they gardened and kept hens, but it is unclear how financially viable the smallholdings were. For example in Taylor's case she inherited some money in 1928 which meant that her financial position was then comfortable.⁸⁹ Mart, at no. 6 Wire Mill Lane, seemingly kept hens. The electoral register from 1932 includes a record for Orchards Poultry Farm with her either registered there or at no. 6 Wire Mill Lane from 1928 to 1938. The electoral rolls record a married couple living at either no. 6 or the poultry farm which suggests that Mart may have employed staff.⁹⁰ Taylor's poultry keeping might have been on a reasonably large scale. Yet, as Astor and Rowntree observed in 1939, any flock of less than 400-500 birds did not provide full time employment for a man and did not provide a living.⁹¹ Neither Ernie Borer or Peter Fuller could remember extensive poultry keeping when interviewed in 2003. The evidence is therefore insufficient to draw any conclusions (even tentative ones) about Miss Mart's financial circumstances. Thorne, who lived at no. 2 Wire Mill Lane from 1928, was not a member of the tea party group, and Fuller remembered her as always working. Her garden was not as well-kept as his Great Aunt's. On reflection, Fuller suspects that she too must have had private means.⁹² In 1929 the year after she moved to the colony, Thorne bought a field from the association which she sold in 1934 for housing. To purchase the field she was lent the money by Katherine Courtauld and documents indicate that she only paid off the interest on the loan. The land was sold for £500 giving her a profit of about £150. In 1934 she purchased her smallholding.⁹³

Peter Fuller's clearest memories are of the small group of women meeting for tea and of his mother's amusement as Aunt Bee 'would toddle up the lane with ... two carrots and come back with a parsnip'.⁹⁴ When asked if there was a feeling of community among the ladies her replied 'Oh yes, they were always helping each other.'⁹⁵ Yet neither Fuller or Ernie Borer could recall the women being involved in the wider community through church or the Women's Institute. Thorne may have been an exception as Ernie recalled going to meetings of the Young Britons with her.⁹⁶ So what emerges in the 1930s was a lane where single women were able to live in small cottages with a minimum of 2½ acres of land. Their neighbours were of a similar social class and position. It was a mutually supportive rural community where single women were able to lead satisfying and secure lives.

⁸⁸ Fuller interview, Oct. 2003.

⁸⁹ Fuller interview, Oct. 2003.

⁹⁰ SHC, CC802/45/2 and CC802/55/2, Electoral Registers, Eastern Division, 1928-1938; Borer, when interviewed in Oct. 2003, remembered Mart as having a bungalow built in 1936-7. However, when Sheila Rampling (interview, 20 Nov. 2003) knew Mart in the 1950s she was at no. 6 and did not keep hens.

⁹¹ Astor and Rowntree, *British Agriculture*, p. 222.

⁹² Fuller interview, Oct. 2003.

⁹³ SHC, CC802/45/2, Electoral Registers, Eastern Division, 1928; WFGA/A/1/3, Minutes of Council, 10 Oct. 1929; Property deeds, Wembury Park, seen through the kindness of M. Arnold.

⁹⁴ Fuller interview, Oct. 2003.

⁹⁵ Fuller interview, Oct. 2003.

IV

The smallholding colony at Wire Mill Lane can be examined at a series of levels. Superficially it was a failure. From its earliest days there were both structural and operational problems. However the association responded promptly and positively to the major problems. The demand for smallholdings of about two acres complete with cottages was clearly identified and acted upon.⁹⁷ As early as 1923 Wire Mill House was sold so that more cottages could be built. Some of the apple orchards, unpopular with the tenants, were thinned so that other crops could be interplanted. By the mid '20s there is a sense that the colony was establishing itself and in 1926 a decision was taken to build two more cottages. Yet in April 1929 it was decided that there was no long-term future for the colony. The association had nurtured the colony through the early 1920s and probably felt that it had reached its limit in terms of money and effort. Indeed one could argue that the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the colony in 1920–1 meant that its chances of success were very low. Adverse agricultural conditions combined with internal structural problems. The decision taken in 1929 may have been correct as conditions no longer favoured smallholdings.⁹⁸ It is unclear how the illness and death of Mrs Wilkins influenced the decision. Perhaps without her advocacy for the colony, the decision was taken to wind it up.⁹⁹

The colony was not some amateur attempt to provide a rural life for middle-class women. The association was professional in its approach to the colony and this can be seen in the two main women associated with the colony: Mrs Wilkins and Katherine M. Courtauld. Both of these women were experienced, with Wilkins being an expert in smallholdings and Courtauld an established farmer in Essex. If a criticism is to be levied at Wilkins then it is perhaps her failure to recognize that the agricultural conditions of the inter-war years were not as favourable for smallholding, but the same criticism could be levied at many farmers and county councils in the 1920s.

From the tenants' perspective the colony did provide an opportunity for middle-class women with a small private income to take a smallholding and work the land in a supportive environment. The WFGA met its aim in providing smallholdings for women who had worked on the land during the First World War. The smallholdings at Wire Mill Lane provided a physical and social environment that enabled women to live contented and purposeful rural lives in the inter-war years.

⁹⁶ Borer interview, Oct. 2003.

⁹⁷ Darke and Orwin, *Back to the Land*, comments on the popularity of cottage holdings in the home counties.

⁹⁸ Astor and Roundtree, *British Agriculture*, p. 356. For example horticulture, a key activity for many

smallholders and the residents of the colony, was in the 1930s faced with competition from imports and farmers who were increasingly turning to vegetable production.

⁹⁹ Lionel Jebb concurs with this conclusion, letter from L. Jebb to author, 20 Jan. 2005.

Appendix

The tenants and owners of the Wire Mill Lane estate, Lingfield

The exact boundaries of the estate are not known. Some of the houses and buildings along the lane did not belong to the estate when it was purchased in 1920. Furthermore it has proved impossible to establish the exact boundaries for each of the smallholdings. The outline below locates the smallholdings and summarises who lived where using the 1920 plan reproduced in Figure 1 (the plan is not accurate).

1. No. 1, Wire Mill Lane (semi-detached with number 2). Built in 1923 by WFGA in field 90. From 1925-6 Mr and Mrs Gentry lived there. Before her marriage Mrs Gentry had worked in the Association's office. Sold in 1934 to the Gentrys - WFGA hoping for between £600 and £700.
2. No. 2, Wire Mill Lane. Built in 1923 by WFGA. Miss Thorne lived there from 1928 and bought the holding in 1934. In 1929 she bought on a mortgage from Miss K. M. Courtauld 4½ acres of arable land which she sold on in 1934 for building (Wembury Park).
3. No. 3, Wire Mill Lane (semi-detached with no 4). Built in 1923 by the WFGA in field 90 or 91. Miss Taylor lived there from 1922/3?, Miss Bull from 1927. She bought it in 1938. In 1957 Miss Bull left the house to Miss Taylor who died there in 1958.
4. No. 4, Wire Mill Lane, Built in 1923 by WFGA. Let to a Mr and Mrs Allport in c. 1930. Mr Borer bought it and c. 21 acres in September 1932.
5. No. 5, Wire Mill Lane, built in 1912? Semi-detached with no 6, in the corner of field 143 where the lane turns a corner. Miss Owers was tenant from c. 1931. Sold to Mr James Denyer in 1933 for £450 with Miss Owers as tenant.
6. No. 6, Wire Mill Lane, built in 1912? Miss Mart tenant from 1928. Sold to her in 1929 for £550.
7. Cottage in the woods. Miss Bell was an original tenant, bought in 1926.
8. Wire Mill and lake. Sold by WFGA in 1929 to Mr Foster.
9. & 10. Lake View Cottage and Lake Cottage. Built in 1926-7 by the Association (in field 150, fronting onto the main road). Mrs Pyart resident at one (with tea shop) from 1931 and bought both cottages in 1934.
11. Wire Mill House (not on the map from 1920, in field 143), built in 1912 and sold by the WFGA to Mr Creak in 1923.