

Children's labour in the countryside during World War II: a further note

by Richard Moore-Colyer

In 2004 I published an article in the *Review* dealing with a variety of aspects of childrens' labour on the land during World War II.¹ Subsequently I took part in the BBC Radio 4 *Making History* programme during which I appealed to listeners to forward their childhood recollections of harvest camps and other features of wartime land work. The response was remarkable and I received over 100 letters and emails, many of them lengthy, detailed and replete with valuable information. One lady, for example, a pupil at Princess Mary High School, Halifax, sent me the original school harvest camp log for 1944, a beautifully-illustrated file of essays, poems and cartoons reflecting life at the camp and attitudes towards 'doing ones bit' on the land.² This correspondence has been deposited at the Museum of English Rural Life, where I hope it will form the basis of a useful collection. In the meantime I offer this note as a supplement to the earlier article and as an introduction to the new material.

Although a small minority of respondents hated the whole business, for the overwhelming majority the experience of working on the land and, more especially of attending harvest camps, was a very positive one. People referred to the pleasures of tent life, camp food, fireside sing-songs, the camaraderie with the older farm workers and, in particular, the fact that campers '... found a new freedom and gained a sense of independence denied to many at the time'.³ The work may from time-to-time have been tough, yet '... during wartime we accepted minor hardships in the furtherance of the cause and we knew others were suffering much more'.⁴ Indeed, having suggested on the broadcast that attendance at the camps may have been in response to parental 'push', I was roundly reprimanded by one respondent, formerly a pupil at Surbiton Grammar School, who told me in no uncertain terms that 'patriotic duty' had been the sole motivating factor.⁵ Yet enjoyment was a key feature. One respondent, whose school sustained a direct hit by a V2 rocket while the pupils were at harvest camp, writes of 'the great and joyous experience' of working the land, while another, evacuated with his school to Tunbridge Wells, mentions the 'educational' importance of meeting country characters, also emphasising the

¹ Richard Moore-Colyer, 'Kids in the Corn: School harvest camps and farm labour supply in England, 1940–1950', *AgHR* 25 (2004), pp.183–206.

² Norah Bromley, Hope Valley

³ Typically, Gordon Nelson, Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire

⁴ Peter Collinson, Sevenoaks, Kent

⁵ John Cox, Cerne Abbas, Dorset

sheer revelation of the beauty of the English countryside to urban children who had previously had no chance to enjoy it.⁶ Lady respondents comment on the sweat, the fatigue and the difficulty of keeping clean. Yet after two weeks, '... we went home, suntanned and stinking of wood smoke, but feeling we had done our bit. Compared with evacuation it was a holiday'. At 16 and 13 respectively, the sisters Dilys Thompson and Dorothy Broadbent worked at a harvest camp in Lutterworth where they spent a good deal of time chatting to Italian prisoners ('glad to be out of the war') in their rudimentary Latin. 'We wouldn't have missed it for anything in spite of the sweat and tired muscles'. 'War or no war', writes Norah Bromley, who regularly attended harvest camps at Billingham, Lincolnshire, 'it was really memorable; we had a wonderful childhood, made unforgettable friends and enjoyed so much of it all'. Perhaps with tongue slightly in cheek, the Rev. Barbara Mason from the Isle of Lewis attributed her present-day predilection for gardening to her wartime experience picking potatoes, strawberries and raspberries in Perthshire. Ten years old in 1939, she found little difficulty in picking 100 lbs of raspberries in a day which could yield a wage of up to £3 weekly.

Picking raspberries, along with the conventional harvest tasks, was relatively congenial, although stooking could be a miserable business in wet weather. But pea-picking (usually a girl's job) was invariably regarded as 'horrendous'.⁷ With hessian sacks over their heads to keep them dry, pupils from Manchester High School picked peas near Ormskirk in 1943 to the accompaniment of almost continuous rain. Ormskirk also played host to a group of fifth and sixth form girls from Levenshulme High School, Manchester in the same year. Camping at Bickerstaff in tents, pupils took turns to help with cooking, tidying the camp and maintaining the latrines ('... trenches with handy heaps of soil, [and] scratchy toilet rolls kept in biscuit tins to keep them dry'), before going out to pick peas. The girls travelled along the pea rows, each carrying a 40 lb skep. The plants were then pulled up with the left hand and the pods stripped with the right into the skep which had to be carried to the end of the field when full. This rather grim operation continued irrespective of the weather, giving rise to a campfire parody of Walter de la Mare:

Softly, silently now the loon
Treads the row in her sodden shoon.
This way and that she peers and sees
Row upon row of mouldy peas.

In wet conditions where torrential rain had flattened the crop and machinery could not operate, hand-pulling of flax was another rather depressing task. Joyce Avery, in 1940 a 10-year old evacuee to Somerset, writes feelingly of hand-pulling flax until 11 pm throughout the wartime 'double summer time'. 'Because of the spiked seed heads it was bad enough pulling handfuls of the plants from the ground, but worse to be in the following team as we bent or crouched tying bundles of flax tightly with the rough twine making deep cuts in our hands'.

Potato picking too could be an arduous business, although several respondents make the point that being closer to the ground and more supple, children found 'spud-grubbing' less of a strain on the back than adults. The three-week 'potato holiday' held each October in Angus

⁶ Keith Pocock, London; Arthur Norris, Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex

⁷ The following is from Dorothy Middleton, Manchester

meant that juvenile backs would be put to the test in days which began at 6.30 am and often continued until late in the evening when potato ploughs and spinners eventually came to a halt.⁸ Filling buckets, transferring them to sacks and carrying them to a central collection point were tough jobs for thirteen-year old boys. But, apart from the money to be earned, there were 'social' compensations as the fields filled with children, volunteers, Italian prisoners and legions of chattering grannies sternly supervising the prams parked on the headlands.⁹ This may to some extent have made up for the misery of cold and filthy hands, earth-clogged wellies and sodden caps and pixie-hoods vividly recalled by Monica Evans. Fruit and hop-picking, on the other hand, were great fun. Arthur Norris moved from weeding beans ('boring and back-breaking') to hop-picking in Kent in the company of women and children from East London who were a constant source of amusement and good humour. Overhead, in August and September 1940, the Battle of Britain raged and Norris and his pals often slipped out of the hop gardens to search for wrecked aircraft. Fortunately they did not come under fire, unlike one respondent who had been evacuated to Sussex and was attacked by German fighters while picking swedes! If hop-picking was fun, for Norris at least, picking apples was blissful and taking an apple from the branch in the early morning when the dew was still on the fruit and biting into it is an enduring childhood memory.

While most child harvesters slept eight to a bell tent, some camps were located in schools (with, for example, campers from King Edward's Girl's School, Birmingham sleeping on the gym floor at a Henley-in-Arden prep school), church halls, nissen huts, and occasionally country houses or castles. Tents were generally regarded as being rather fun, although in the wet summer of 1943 many tented camps had to be equipped with a network of trenches to prevent flooding. Camp food was normally 'substantial but ordinary' and would be cooked by school staff and volunteers (even the local vicar), frequently assisted by camp members on a rota basis.¹⁰ When the boys of Colfe's School, Lewisham camped at Benenden in Kent in 1940, they were initially pleased to learn that the headmaster's wife had agreed to shoulder the burden of cooking, only to find out when it was too late that she was a vegetarian with a penchant for serving a barely-edible cheese and apple pie.¹¹ Ray Coker, a pupil at South-East Essex County Technical School was a member of the Scouts and as such his main camp task was to collect firewood for four enormous boilers and to maintain a continual supply of tea for the camp's five gallon billy-cans. Camping near Gargrave in the Yorkshire Dales each wartime summer, Morley Grammar School enjoyed the services of sixth former Gordon Nelson as one of the camp cooks. His duties included picking up supplies from the store in Gargrave, '... often getting titbits from the owner to spice up the menu', snaring rabbits for the pot, tickling trout on Eshton Beck and gathering currants and raspberries from the abandoned gardens of nearby Eshton Hall. In camp, '... we lived like royalty, but at the end of the camp we returned to our meagre rations and plain diet at home'.

Towards the end of each camp, reviews, sing-songs and drama presentations were held, Peter Collinson fondly recalling that his rendition of 'Ragtime Cowboy Joe' was particularly well-received. For older boys and young men there was the prospect of a little sexual *frisson*.

⁸ James, Keiller, Angus, Scotland.

⁹ Alistair Clark, Perthshire, Scotland

¹⁰ Peter Evans, Godalming, Surrey

¹¹ Arthur Norris, Bexhill-on-Sea, Sussex

To Peter Evans of Godalming and his brother the idea of two weeks of holiday in return for some farm work seemed a good one and they travelled to Blunham in Bedfordshire to camp in nissen huts. The camp, for adult volunteers and schoolchildren, was gender segregated and it was believed by the authorities that exhaustion engendered by hard labour would discourage nocturnal wanderings. Even so, '... camp controllers would patrol the outer boundaries of our camp field after lights out to make sure there was no mischief afoot in the long grass.' This measure, apparently, did little to deter the sexually adventurous!

Others enjoyed idyllic pleasures. Work at the Lutterworth harvest camps of 1942 and 1943 was interspersed with trips to Rugby and Leicester on wet days, and on Sundays children cycled to Matins at one of the charming local churches with their 'quiet and spiritual atmospheres'.¹² The presence of Italian prisoners-of-war could make life interesting. Although some boys considered working with prisoners to be *infra dig*, Marjorie Rolfe and Eileen Terry from Birmingham got on well both with German and Italian captives, the Italians in particular refusing to believe that the girls had chosen to work on the land and had not been coerced. Again, Manchester girls working in the Ormskirk area found the Italians, '... very glamorous with their dark eyes and incomprehensible accents' and very few thought of them as being 'the enemy'.¹³

The letters and emails in the collection offer a good deal of information on other aspects of the wartime food production effort besides the harvest camps themselves. Vi Treacher was evacuated with her school from London as a 12-year old in 1939 and billeted on a Hertfordshire farm where she remained for five years, each autumn half-term of which was spent potato-picking. This apart, she and the rest of her class collected stinging nettles for making quinine and rosehips for Vitamin C, besides knitting socks and gloves for sailors from oiled wool and making soft toys to be sold to raise funds for the Red Cross. Meanwhile, Henry Hunt from Swanley in Kent reminds us of the ploughing and cultivating of parks, wastelands and playing fields in urban areas, describing his experience as a sixth form volunteer working on the wheat and potato fields created on their parklands by Croydon Council. Other children had singular experiences. Joyce Avery, evacuated from London to Somerset, got her first 'real' rural job at the age of 11 as organ-blower in the local chapel, the man with whom she was billeted being the chapel organist. Manipulating the wooden handle protruding from the side of the organ was not the easiest of tasks for a small girl.

Once or twice I just couldn't keep up and the music would subside with a dreadful noise like out-of-tune bagpipes. My worst humiliation was during a Harvest Festival service when the large congregation was in the last verse of 'We Plough the fields and scatter'. Mr H. was playing it full volume with all the stops out and, despite my frantic pumping, I could not keep enough air in the bellows. The result was inevitable and, feeling all eyes upon me, I fled in tears.

Today, many would regard subjecting a child to this sort of quasi-torture as overtly abusive, yet for most of my elderly respondents, hard physical labour on the farm or elsewhere was something to be taken in one's stride and even to be enjoyed.

¹² Dilys Thompson and Marjorie Broadbent, Mansfield, Cheshire

¹³ Dorothy Middleton, Manchester.