

A Child's View of Life on a War-time Farm

The following account is extracted from Col Tim May's autobiographical writings.

Background to life on the farm

My grandparents, Fred and Susie lived on a farm known as 'Bradley' consisting of some 650 acres, which straddles the A420 and the B4017 Cumnor to Abingdon road just south of Cumnor village. The farm incorporates the lesser farm of Little Bradley which is about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile south of the main farm in Wooton. To the east the land extends to the foot of Chorley Hurst and to the south to the Wooton-Besselsleigh road. Most of the land is what is known as 'stonebrash' -- full of limestone lumps and pebbles -- about six inches of stony soil above a base of flat unyielding limestone rock. It cannot be seen as readily fertile or productive, and it was this that my grandparents took on in 1894 and where they made a reasonably successful life. In 1940, and until the Dutch Elm Disease of the 1970s, the farm was particularly characterised by the abundance of large mature great elm trees especially in the area of the house and its surrounding parkland.

My real association with the farm began in 1940, when I was nine or ten and started to stay at Bradley for most of my school holidays. I was a frequent visitor until Fred sold up in 1948. If there was a reason for me going to Bradley so much it is probably because the house at 49 Sandfield Road Oxford where I normally lived was rather crowded containing, in addition to my mother and my two sisters, her sister Barbara and her two-then three—daughters, plus, from time-to-time, my Lewis grandparents, my father, when on leave, Herbert White (Barbara's` husband) and Ted Weakley (husband of Molly my mother`s elder sister). I suppose I had ambivalent feelings about it, partly enjoying the bustle of a busy farm and partly homesick for my family in Oxford.

The fact is that, during the war, Bradley was a very busy place.

Over the years between 1894 and 1948 the fortunes of British farmers varied a great deal. Fred May had managed to survive the bad times with what he had put by in the good. In the period up to the outbreak of the First World War British agriculture flourished along with British trade and industry. So did Bradley and Fred could afford to send my father to a public school in 1914: (the older brothers had had to make do, at first, with City of Oxford High School although they went later to Taunton as boarders) as well as sending Dorothy to finishing school in Switzerland. Doubtless, Bradley continued to flourish through the First War when food was desperately needed.

Between the wars was another matter. Abundant cheap imported food meant that many farmers had to give up, including my father in 1936. My uncle Eric had already given up and emigrated to New Zealand in 1925. I have no doubt that Fred also found things difficult at that time.

Suddenly in 1939 everything changed. Farming became extremely necessary and a vital component of the Country`s war effort. Every possible bit of ground

was expected to produce food for the nation. To a large extent farming fell under the direction of the local War Agricultural Executive Committees (WAECs). These committees were composed of farmers and officials. They decided, in detail, what would be grown and where, by way of implementing the National Agricultural Strategy. They could order land to be cleared and old pastures and parkland to be ploughed up. Farmers who failed to comply or were inefficient could have their land taken away and given by the WAEC to someone else to manage. Generally speaking I believe the WAECs operated sensibly and did not abuse their draconian powers. Certainly I don't think Fred had any problems with them.

The farming that you can see nowadays is very different to the farming that I knew during the war. Today there are huge machines, far fewer but beautifully trimmed hedges, large fields, almost no milking-herds and a lack of human beings.

The farming landscape then included more and smaller fields, many more trees and straggling hedges and "green lanes", a lot of draught horses for the predominantly horse-drawn carts and equipment, many milking-herds, many `ricks` of hay and straw, stooks of corn at harvest time, a lot more `muck` than now and many, many more people.

Working the farm in war-time

By today's standards, farming in 1940 was incredibly labour-intensive. That expression was meaningless then—there was not really any practical alternative. Yes there were certainly more machines available than Fred chose to possess, for he was slow to change. Although he had three tractors, he seemed not to get near them himself and I sense that he hated having to rely on them, which, of course, to some extent he did. I estimate the normal year-round labour force at Bradley at fourteen to eighteen hands. At peak times like corn-harvest this probably more than doubled and I remember counting thirty-three people waiting to be paid in the side entrance at Bradley at 4.0pm on a Friday during harvest. They were paid, in cash, by Fred, standing in the doorway of the tool-shed, each man coming up, in turn, as his name (surname only) was called. These figures do not include the people who worked in the house.

In addition to his 650 acres and his work-force, Fred had the three tractors mentioned, six draught horses, a TT milking herd of about eighty shorthorns, a pedigree bull, a separate herd of about sixty steers being fattened for beef, a flock of sheep, ranging about 400 I guess, usually some pigs, about 300 laying hens and a small number of ducks. There were quite a few carts and trailers, plus ploughs, harrows, grass-cutters, binders (for corn) and drills for planting seed and spreading fertiliser. The appliances were special to either horses or tractors and few could be used by both. Fred was a liberal user of `artificial` fertilisers as well as the farm manure—very necessary on the poor land. I never saw pesticides or other chemicals in use—I don't think they then existed as we know them now. There was no electricity, mains water or drainage at Bradley even in 1948 and this greatly added to the number of tasks that had to be performed by hand.

Water, was, of course an essential requirement. At Bradley all the water for farm and house came from one well which rose under the dairy. This well must certainly be as old as the house and farm as neither could have survived without it. It produced water for all the stock, for washing down, cooling milk and for all domestic purposes. In dry weather water was taken by water-cart to outlying parts of the farm for the stock there. Apparently, even in prolonged droughts the well never dried up despite the considerable amounts of water taken from it. A small Lister petrol-engined pump in the dark cellar under the dairy was used to suck the water from the well and deliver it to tanks over the dairy, the house and various other buildings. From these tanks water was piped to troughs and other outlets round the farm buildings and to sinks, baths, a boiler and one loo in the house.

Looking back now, I believe at least a proportion of the water at Bradley was effectively `re-cycled`. About a hundred yards from the farm buildings to the south, across the park was the farm pond. It was into this pond that all the effluent from the drains, both house and farm was discharged. The pond, like the well, never ran dry. It seems to me inconceivable that water from the pond did not leach into the well. Appalling as this may seem, our family were at Bradley for nearly sixty years without any incidence, so far as I know, of any serious dysenteric problems, so the layers of limestone must have acted as efficient filters. I think that any Sanitary Inspector coming on that situation nowadays would condemn it out of hand!

To produce an adequate supply the Lister engine had to run for about two hours every day. It had to be started by a `difficult` starting handle and was for ever breaking down. With stock, the milking, and indeed people having a vital need for water, the engine had to be repaired at once and this caused a great deal of stress! As was often the case, those on the farm were unable to get it going and `Moss` from the garage in the village was sent for. I think that sometimes the engine had to be stripped right down and rebuilt, there and then! As there was no decent light in the dripping black hole of the cellar, this was no easy task. Apart from the other difficulties, tools and bits of the engine were easily dropped into the oily black water that covered much of the floor and not easily found. It was on those occasions in that cellar that I became only too familiar with the `four-letter` `Anglo-Saxon` words that adorn the English language!

Livestock at Bradley

Fred was proud of both his Tuberculin Tested (TT) milking-herd and his beef-herd. The TT status had been acquired by a process of careful breeding, cleanliness and care over many years and earned a higher price for the milk. The herd provided a monthly milk cheque which must have been essential to pay the weekly wages. The milking of 70 or 80 cows by hand, twice a day, while, at best, a reassuring routine, was a continuous drudge (milking cows have no days-off even at Christmas!) regularly involving five or six people. Morning milking took place at about 6am and afternoon milking at about 2.30pm. Each `milk` took about two hours depending on the number of hands available but the associated work took much longer than that.

First, food had to be placed in the manger in front of each cow's milking stand. The food, depending on the season, would be a mix of linseed cattle cake (commercially supplied in large slabs that had to be broken up), crushed mangolds or sweets, flaked maize (I found this delicious to eat myself), crushed barley or oats, chaff and –occasionally- lovely broken biscuits which the manufacturers sold off cheap. Each cow had her own water basin which filled automatically as she drank and *ad lib* hay was supplied in the winter.

Having arranged the food, the cattle had to be got in. This did not present many problems as the cows wanted to be milked and fed and had learnt to wait by the appropriate gate to be called. So far as was possible the herd grazed the parkland nearest to the farm but, when the grass there was used up, had to be fetched from further away. This could be as much as $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile and involved crossing the Wootton road and this meant involving two or three people. I found it an enjoyable experience, as a ten year old boy, to call the cows "Cu-up cu-up", on my own, and see them respond. They ambled slowly into the cowsheds, their large, heavy udders swinging as they walked. Each knew her place, found it and started to eat. It was barely necessary to chain them up but this had to be done to prevent them leaving prematurely. Each cow had a name and the cowman and milkers knew them all.

There would normally be five or six people hand-milking the cows. The routine involved the team starting at one end of the cowsheds, finishing one cow and then moving on to the next one free. Each cow took about five minutes to milk depending on the cow and the skill of the milker. To milk, the milker sat on a three-legged stool with a galvanised pail between his legs to receive the milk. Before starting, the cow's udder and teats had to be wiped with a sterile grease called 'Udsal' and the milker was supposed to wash his hands between cows. The process of drawing the milk from the udder is soon learnt but it takes time to become expert. I quite often did it myself to help and found it soon became pretty boring.

When a pail was nearly full of milk it was carried, two at a time using a yoke about 50 yards to the dairy. (I still have the Bradley yoke at Ickford—it has recently disintegrated due to woodworm (2006)). In the dairy the still-warm milk was cooled by being trickled over a sort of cold water radiator and passed through filters into ten-gallon churns for once-a-day collection by the milk lorry. All the equipment used in the milking process, pails and all the cooling gear, had to be sterilized once a day. For this purpose there was a large steam chest into which the equipment was sealed and which was fed with super-heated steam from a boiler in a shed outside the dairy. The boiler was fired by a wood and coal fire which had to be got going well in advance of its use—another tedious task connected with milking.

Another well remembered feature of the milking was the emergence of the farmyard cats, anything up to a dozen of them, to get fresh warm milk which was poured into flat dishes for them, and, in some cases, squirted directly into their mouths from the cow's teats—usually good for a laugh!

When the milking was finished the cows were let out and returned, pretty much on their own to the pasture they had come from. The milkers, or some of them, were left with the task of cleaning up the cowsheds. This involved clearing up all the dropped manure and other detritus and taking it, by wheelbarrow to the muck yard. All the cowshed floors then had to be washed down with hoses, brooms and disinfectant before those concerned could go for their breakfast or tea,

This brings me to another labour intensive operation, the shifting of the farmyard muck. With the manure of 70 cows, six horses and sundry other animals, the muck yard soon filled up and had to be emptied several times a year. While the manure was excellent for fertilising the stony land of Bradley the labour of getting it there was considerable. The method used was two or three horses and muck-carts, short but high two wheeled tipping carts designed for the job. The muck-carts were loaded by hand using long-handled muck-forks. Nowadays `muck` is picked up and loaded directly onto a high-capacity spreader by the means of a large mobile hydro-mechanical fork. The spreader is then driven to the place where the `muck` is needed and evenly spread to the required thickness. The whole operation is now achieved in a fraction of the time, and, by one man sitting in comfort in an air-conditioned tractor with radio and a beautifully padded seat! Farm labourers of the forties would be amazed.

The other of Fred`s enthusiasms was, of course, raising Beef Cattle. By the time I got to know Bradley during the war, raising beef was, rightly, not a priority. Nonetheless, there was always a beef herd in evidence and they looked splendid. The beasts were neutered bulls known as Bullocks, but Fred always called them Steers. Fred`s liking for them was shown by the fact that, for three years running, he had won the cup for the "Best Beasts in Show" at the annual Abingdon fat-stock show. There is a large engraved silver cup to this effect but I don't know who has it now.

Fred always had sheep on the farm which, being on dry `stonebrash` land, was well suited to them. They alternated the grazing with the cattle and also were put on the young root crops to eat the "tops" to stop them growing too fast. The routine of sheep-farming was conducted by the shepherd assisted by his wife.

For lambing, a `fold` was constructed, using straw and wooden hurdles, in an open field to give protection to the animals as they gave birth. The shepherd was permanently in attendance and lived for the whole lambing period in a special iron-wheeled wooden caravan designed for the purpose and fitted with a bed and a coke stove. I think his wife stayed in their cottage to look after the children and to prepare and take the Shepherd`s food out to him. The next significant `sheep` event was tailing all the lambs and castrating the ram lambs in which I played no active part and certainly did not enjoy.

The shearing was, as they now say, "something else". To do the job there was a mechanical shearer similar to those in use today but with the important difference that the power was supplied by hand, that of the shepherd`s

doughty wife! She accomplished this by turning, for days on end, the wooden handle on a large cast-iron wheel. I tried it at the age of eleven or so and couldn't manage more than about five minutes.

Looking after over four hundred sheep without modern equipment, and performing every task by hand, must have been a life of never ending drudgery, typical of the lives of the many men and families who depended on the farm.

I only ever remember a limited number of pigs at Bradley during my times there, probably no more than one or two sows with their litters. On reflection, I think this may have been simply to maintain a food source for the family during the war. The pigs were, as was the custom, fed largely on scraps from the house, and I certainly do not remember them being slaughtered on the premises. However, my father told me that when he was working on the farm for his father, pigs were major part of the farm's economy for which his father gave him personal responsibility. I gathered that, in the early twenties, there were fifty or so sows. Looking after all these, including farrowing and selling the piglets and slaughtering some of them, must have been quite demanding. It didn't end there; my father described to me quite, graphically, the process of making the sides of pig-meat into bacon for the house. Apparently this involved, every day for a week or two, rubbing by hand a mixture of salt and saltpetre into the carcasses which were kept, for that purpose, in a shallow lead trough in the cellar of the house. The effect on the hands was, my father said, most painful! Of course, up until the thirties, most houses in the country, including most farm-labourers cottages kept a household pig which consumed the household food refuse, as well as other material to provide a most valuable food supplement for the family concerned. Good farm employers supplied not only a piglet, from their stock, but also some supplementary food for the growing pig, alongside milk and a supply of basic vegetables such as potatoes.

During my time at Bradley, however, poultry **was** a significant item. There must have been over two hundred laying hens, Rhode Island Reds or White Leghorns. They were the responsibility of my aunt Dorothy. They were run on a free-range basis. About half lived in a large hen-house quite near the back of the house with the rest in a number of mobile hen-houses kept in the orchard most of the year, but moved to harvest fields to scavenge grain after the harvest.

Looking after the poultry included letting the birds out in the morning and shutting them up before dark. This was vital to avoid the predations of the ubiquitous foxes; sometimes, despite best efforts, a fox would get into a hen-house and kill lots of the birds, far more than the fox took away to feed her family. Food and water was put down for the birds, usually mash in the mornings and wheat in the afternoons at the time of egg-collecting. I had a source of income when staying at Bradley. This was, I think, sixpence or a shilling a week, paid to me by Aunt Dorothy for helping with the hens. It probably took about an hour a day of not too onerous `work`. In fact I enjoyed it and it was very satisfying to collect the eggs, up to about twelve dozen a

day, in big shopping baskets. There was a bit of a problem with ``broody` hens, who, having come into season, wanted to hatch a clutch of eggs and had to be forced to let the eggs be taken away. They would indicate displeasure by making noise and pecking ones hands, but I did learn to cope with them eventually.

During the war, it was the law that **all** chicken`s eggs had to be sold to the government for distribution to people all over the country, although it seemed to be understood that farmers would keep back eggs for their own use (the real offence would be selling them to anyone else). The Government established a network of "Packing Stations" to receive and classify the eggs. `Our` Packing Station was run by a farmers` son called Walter Painter from Appleton about three miles away. He was aged about forty, and came once a week in his van to collect the Bradley eggs. Some said there was a romance possible between Aunt Dorothy and Walter and she used to blush at his remarks, but it came to nothing.

Produce for the war-effort

After milk, Bradley`s main crop was cereals, wheat, barley, oats and rye. I have no means of knowing what proportion of the land was used for grain production, but I guess it must have been about half or three hundred acres plus. The use of the land was "rotated" so that a plot never carried the same crop two years running. Rotation did not apply to the permanent grass `leys`, grazed by cattle and sheep and comprising about, say, 150 acres. The non-grass, or arable, land, therefore rotated between the various types of cereal, roots such as mangols, swedes, beet and potatoes and vegetables such as kale, vetches and peas.

All these crops had specific uses and the proportions grown, during the war were clearly related to national needs. Some crops were for use on the farm, so it is interesting to consider what was produced for what purpose:-

1. Milk for national consumption with a small amount retained for domestic use and for feeding calves.
2. Calves for maintaining the milking herd and to be sold on to other farmers (no veal in the war).
3. Beef for national consumption.
4. Sheep-meat (lamb and mutton) for national consumption.
5. Wool then much needed for clothing production.
6. Pig-meat, as beef.
7. Eggs, as beef.
8. Wheat sold for flour to make bread. Enough retained to feed the poultry.
9. Barley, about half to brewers for beer and half retained to be ground up for stock feed.
10. Rye, only a small amount grown, for food industry.
11. Oats, mostly to feed the farm horses, any surplus sold to the trade for other animals.
12. Kale purely for cattle feed. Normally `grazed` in sections.
13. Mangols, turnips and swedes, entirely used for feeding the farms own cattle, kept near the main barn to chopped up to be put in cattle feed

over the winter. A few swedes (neaps in Scotland) would be kept for the house.

14. Beet, or sugar-beet. The WAEC called for an increasing amount to be grown to help meet a national shortage of sugar. Fred hated it!
15. Vetches, a nitrogen-rich vegetable grazed by cattle and sheep when young and the ploughed in to enrich the soil.
16. Peas grown infrequently and used as vetches.
17. Straw, for thatching and stock bedding. Eventually returned to the land with the farmyard manure.
18. Hay; enough grown on grazing land to provide sufficient winter feed for all cattle, horses and sheep. Any surplus sold. Bad management if any had to be bought in.
19. Farmyard manure. All returned to the land at Bradley. Absolutely vital.
20. Potatoes. About twenty or thirty acres grown every year. Planting and gathering very labour-intensive. When harvested, were stored in soil and straw "clamps" to protect from frost, then drawn-off and sold to shops and others. Used by the house and supplied to farm staff `ad-lib`.

Looking at this list, with the inter-dependencies implied in it, I find myself surprised by the number of forward decisions that must have had to have been made continuously, year on year in a mixed farm like Bradley. What is more, there must have been an obvious penalty for getting any of the decisions wrong. I didn't see it then but, the numbers of right and wrong decisions must have been an important component of what constituted a "good" as opposed to a "bad" farmer. Bearing in mind, the infertile nature of the land at Bradley, I think Fred must have been a reasonably ``good' farmer.

War-time visitors to the farm

I recall one or two other individuals, effectively displaced because of the war.

There was a lady, about forty, said to be traumatised by the London blitz, who came, but stayed only a few days because she found the silence of the country even less bearable than air-raids!

Then there were conscientious objectors who could choose to work on the land. This gave them official recognition of the conscientious basis of their objection to military service. Although the Mays fully supported the Nation's involvement in the war, the COs, as they were known, were sympathetically welcomed, even if they did not readily adapt to farming in the Bradley style. `Class` and status raised their heads in the case of a pleasant, tall, handsome, young man called Benson. Although he lived in the house, his work was that of a general farm labourer. I, in my innocence, adopted what then seemed to be the normal practice, for me, of addressing and referring to Benson that I, a ten year old boy, used with all the other labourers, that is addressing and referring to them by their surnames only, no handle, as I had learned at school. This brought about a strong, and understandable objection from Mr Benson which I was told to respect!

Another more interesting CO was Mr White. He had fantastic hawk-like features, was aged about fifty and had a marked speech-impediment, a stammer. He also had, what seemed, to me, to be a foreign accent which, I calculated, he had adopted his stammer to conceal. He kept a notebook on him in which he recorded all work instructions given him as well as everything else that happened. My view that he was probably a German spy was confirmed by the fact that he never missed an opportunity to visit the neighbouring war airfields at Culham, Abingdon, Stanton Harcourt and the like. He would always ask me to accompany him if I could. We went on bikes and would spend ages looking at the aircraft and counting them. I was glad to go with him as I was very interested in the aircraft myself, but, I reasoned, would have been an excellent cover for Mr White's real purpose of gathering information for the Nazis. Moreover, looking at bombers for fun seemed an unlikely hobby for a CO. When I mentioned my view to adults they rather poo-poo'd it but I still feel Mr White could well have been a spy. Eventually he, like the other CO's, disappeared as suddenly as he came.

You will, by now, have gathered that Bradley, taking into account shooting-parties, bailiffs, pupils and conscientious objectors, had plenty of residents, and that was without including a constant stream of `family` houseguests. There was a further stream of friends and relatives, plus student ministers, who added to the numbers present at meals particularly lunch and tea. This meant that there were seldom fewer than eight present for meals and that this could sometimes rise to as many as sixteen. I have mentioned most of the relatives who I met at Bradley in the section about the Mays and will not try to list them here.

Bradley, in wartime, was the busiest household I have ever lived in or ever expect to. I enjoyed it. Apart from the fact that there was always someone to talk to, or to avoid, there was always plenty of space into which a boy could vanish if he wanted to be either un-noticed or unobserved. It was a good place in which to gain a sense of one's relative importance!

Prisoners-of-war, on the farm.

A lot of people nowadays may find difficult to grasp the concept of 2nd War prisoners being used to help cultivate our land and bring in our harvest. I think that, at the time, our own prisoners in Germany or Italy may well have had the same offer but it might have been regarded as traitorous to accept it. The fact is, though, that both German and Italian prisoners worked at Bradley very happily and co-operatively.

They had, of course to give their "parole" (solemn promise) not to try to use the implicit freedom to try to escape back to their country and to work harmoniously for the farmer to whom they were sent. So far as I could see, they were a great success. Many of them came from farming backgrounds in their own countries and they therefore brought with them useful skills as well as their willingness and strength. I think they were paid only pocket money most of which went, I suspect, on tobacco. They were not, in any event, allowed to visit shops or pubs, and had to limit their travel to, I think, within a

mile of the farm. All their food and necessaries, including tobacco, were bought by my Aunt Dorothy and apportioned by her according to the same ration-scales as everyone else. This was not such an imposition as it might seem as Aunt D was already doing the same thing for everyone at the house. My grandfather allocated them one of the farm cottages to live in together with basic furniture (i.e. beds and bedding, a table and chairs and cooking implements and crockery).

We had four Italians from early 1942 (captured in Libya) until the fall of Italy in early 1944. They were then replaced by three Germans who only left at the end of the war. The Italians were much the better company but my grandfather said that three Germans could do twice the work of four Italians! I was invited to supper by both nationalities and enjoyed the food of both. The Italians sang a lot and one of them cut my hair. Both nationalities looked after the premises well and both spent a lot of time and effort cultivating their gardens to supplement their rations; I think too, that they probably sold some of their produce to neighbours to supplement their pocket-money. The Germans told me lurid stories about their survival of the Russian campaign; being a prisoner in Britain was a rest-cure by comparison, and I think they were convinced by this stage that Germany could not win the war. The Germans made bicycles for themselves by scavenging bits from the local tip just up the road. Working at Bradley obviously made a lot more sense to them than the alternative of sitting bored out of their minds in a prison camp.

Meeting representatives of two nations, our enemies at the time, and seeing both the variations in national character and culture while, at the same time, seeing that they were all human beings like those I already knew, not monsters as our propaganda tended to imply, had a profound effect on me. Perhaps it humanised the rabidly nationalistic teenager I was becoming!