

Ploughing with steam-engines in the late nineteenth century.

(Photo: County Record Office)

Toddington Memories – Men on the Land

By R. V. H. SEYMOUR

THE WAYS OF earning a living in Toddington at the beginning of this century were many and diverse. The new industrial way of life was overlapping the old agricultural one: it was also the day of the small shopkeeper and business man. There were two doctors, two policemen, two preachers and two head schoolmasters in the village. None of these was local born, although some born in Toddington were engaged in these professions in other parts of the country. There were about eight assistant teachers at the two schools, and since the total number of pupils exceeded 400, the average number in a class must have been over forty. There were even one or two city gents, travelling each day to London, walking briskly, bowler-hatted and with rolled umbrellas, the two miles to Harlington Station each day. There were two wheelwright's businesses, two blacksmiths and ten publicans at ten public houses – there were two more 'pubs' in the parish, at the outlying hamlets of Chalton and Fancott. There was one street-lamp lighter, but more workers were employed in agriculture at this time than in any of the emerging industries.

Some twenty-five or more farms drew their labour force from the village, and since a farmer would employ from two to six men according to the size of his farm, a hundred or more villagers found direct employment from this source. The number was increased by the farmer himself and whatever sons he could persuade to join him, and such was the call of this way of life, that few sons abandoned it. Some twenty casual labourers, their numbers fluctuating according to demand and the time of year, were available for seasonal jobs such as threshing, hoeing and scything, while others, craftsmen in their own right, did a regular round of the farms, doing hedging, ditching, thatching, and hay-ticing. There were also repair and maintenance workers for buildings, fences, gates, hay-racks, etc, usually working with locally-sawn timber, the parish being well stocked with many large oak and elm trees.

Tractors, the huge combine harvesters and other mechanical gadgetry used

today were unknown. The binder used then cut the corn, tied it into sheaves and threw them on the ground, where they were picked up by hand, put into rows of shocks and left to dry, sometimes for a week or two. Even this apparently simple job of shocking (or stooking, according to the district you are from) required a degree of skill, six rows of sheaves being collected into one row of shocks. The shocker would fetch a sheaf under each arm from the furthest two of three rows, and on his return kick the one nearest the centre row with his boot, thereby reducing his journeys considerably in the course of a day's work. The stacking of the sheaves was important, as a collapsed shock gave no protection against rain, and the corn did not dry.

Artificial fertilisers were not then used, nor the insecticides, fungicides and other 'poisons' used today. There was no mains water or electricity supply. Straw was not burned, but used first for bedding down the animals, then heaped in a convenient place, to be spread on the land later as manure. The great remedy for most crop failures, whether due to drought, wireworm or blight, was hoeing, men being engaged in the growing season to do this work for payment by the acre.

Every farm had a running brook, a spring, or a pond, or sometimes all three (as indeed had a good many fields) from which cattle drank. It is of some interest, I think, that the hill Toddington stands on is a vast reservoir of water, that has not been known to dry up in living memory. Springs emerge from the ground in many places, and are the source of several streams that eventually find their way to the Ouse or the Flit, turning a watermill or two on their way. Not the least of these is the pond in the middle of the town.

The farms were mixed, producing milk, corn, and root crops; making their own hay for winter feeding and growing their own straw for bedding. To do this they had to have a rickyard where the hay and corn were stacked: each yard was an exhibition of the rick-builder's art. His first job was to estimate the quantity of hay or straw in the field, then start the rick the right



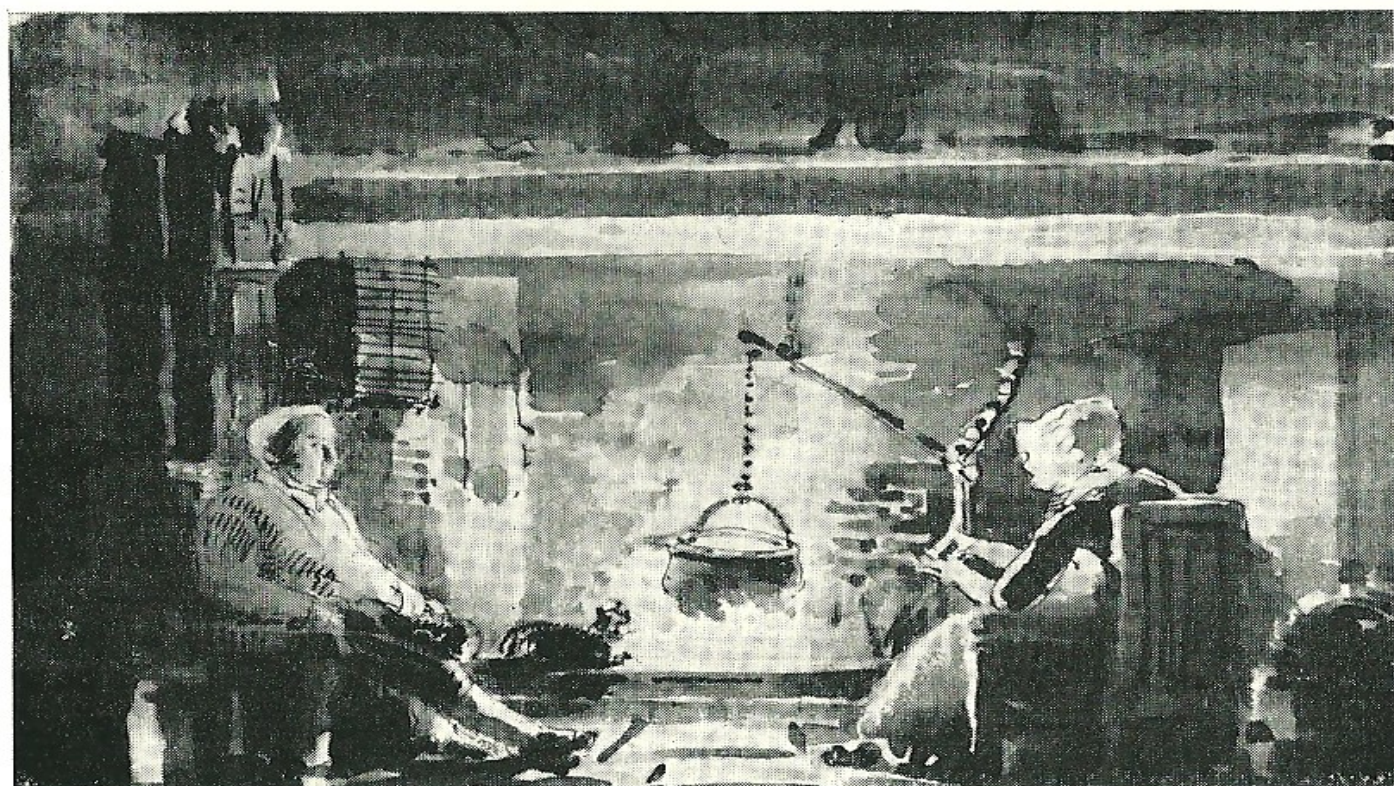
Harvest at Higham Gobion: a painting by Henry Sylvester Stannard.

size. Should he get the bottom of the stack too large, it would end up too low; if he started too small, he would have to make an unsightly heap at the side with the surplus. The bottom had to be started with brushwood and faggot to keep it dry, the sheaves stacked from the middle so that all water went outwards. Each side had to lean out at the same angle as the stack got higher, and the pitch drawn to a point at a precise angle. Nor was this the end – the thatch had to have the correct tilt at the eaves and the ridge clipped in a perfectly straight and level line, perhaps with a straw cock as a finial, crowing defiance to every rick builder and thatcher in the neighbourhood. The thatcher would then stand back to survey his work: well he might, for as his rick stood so would he in the eyes of all men who drank their pint, even beyond the parish boundary. Not every countryman could build a rick, but all considered themselves expert enough to be critics, and knew which man had built which rick. Some that started round would end oval or develop a huge bulge at the side, or lean so much that they had to have the support of Cranfield men (wooden supports) to keep them from falling over, the final ignominy.

The same knowledge and art was necessary in the gathering and stacking of hay. If the grass is picked up a little too green it will heat, and the rick may fire: if too dry it will mildew. Good hay farmers know how to get just the right amount of heat, and all cows when they come to eating it will pick out good hay from bad. There was usually a surplus in the Toddington area, and hay buyers would travel the farms seeking to buy the good stacks. One buyer used to come by rail and then hire a local man with a horse and trap to take him to the farms likely to have a rick for sale. The opportunity to hear these three – farmer, hay-buyer and trap-hirer (the latter already knowing what each party would settle for) – was an education in rural haggling not otherwise to be believed. The horse and cart hirer eventually progressed to the ownership of a motor car, the first Ford 'Tin Lizzie' in Toddington, but continued to drive it as he had done the pony, telling it to 'Gee up' and 'Whoa', especially after there had been a long session of haggling round the bottle. He would also expect the car to take them to inspect a rick, across ploughed fields, just as the horse and trap had done. The last I heard of this hay-buyer was, when after a deal had been completed, they all came out of the farmhouse a bit merry. The farmer and buyer were saying their farewells by the farm pond: the car driver cranked up the car, looked through the window and saw his passenger on the other side but thought he was inside. He jumped into the driving seat and said 'Gee up' but had mistakenly put the car into reverse, so that the buyer was somersaulted into the pond.

The dealer was in contact with a family of hay tiers who lived in Toddington, a father and six sons. Their work was to cut the rick into rectangular trusses each weighing half a hundredweight, and bind each one with two hay bands to keep it from falling apart, and to hold it by when lifting. These bands were as strong as rope and they could make them as long as they wanted. Their work often took them a ten-mile journey from the village, the elders travelling by horse and trap, the younger sons on bicycles.

Another craft much in evidence was that of the hedger. Many hedges are now gone, and those that are left are cut with a circular saw on a tractor. Not so then – a hedge was laid or layered, every branch or stick cut with care, the rubbish thinned out, the good wood selected and partially cut through, leaving

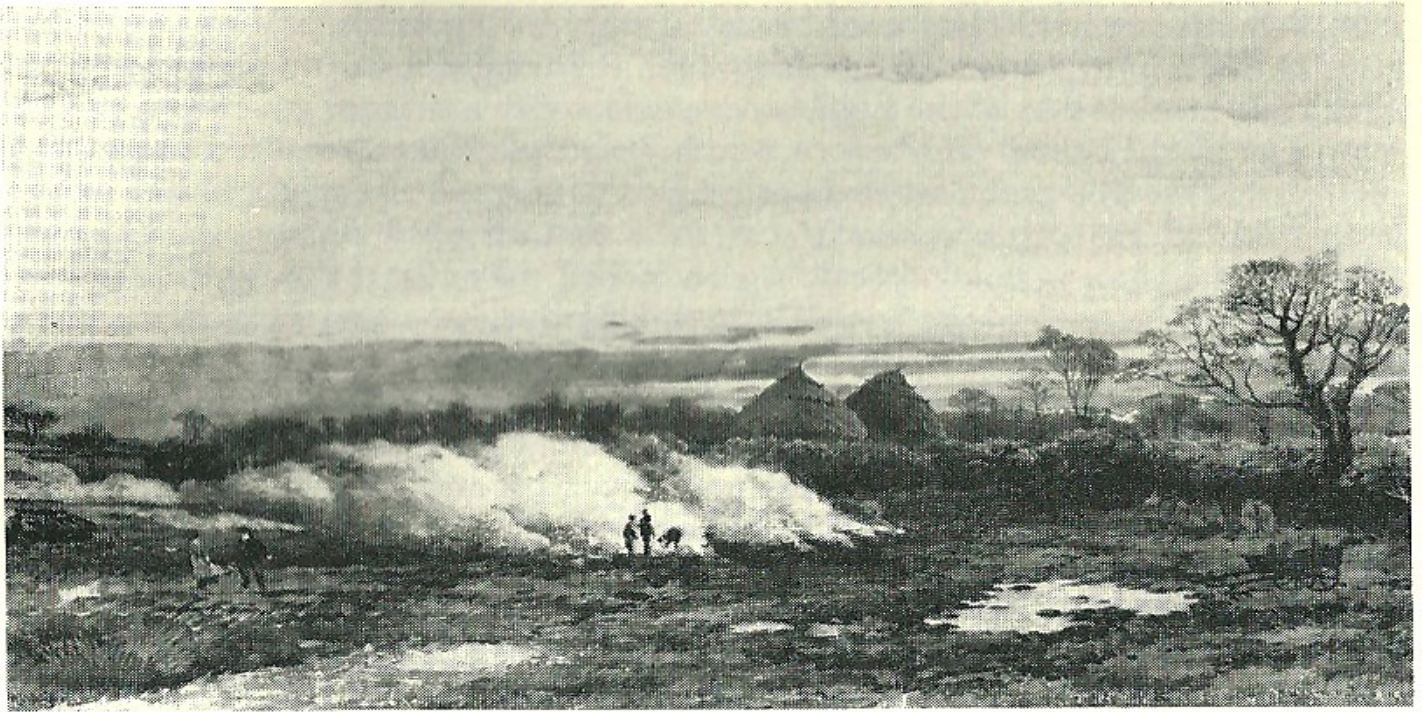


Cottage interior of the late nineteenth century.

(Photo: County Record Office)

a long bevelled cut just above the ground, then bent over at a long raking angle. Upright stakes were driven in at half yard intervals, and a briar binder woven along the top. This was often winter work in an east wind, with flurries of snow. At midday the hedger would sit by a wood fire, the blue smoke curling upwards, eating his dumpling, and with a billycan of tea warming in the hot ashes. Of a number of hedgers in Toddington, one family stood out; three were brothers and one a near relative, by name Buckingham – Sydal, Tarso, Billy and Jack ('Chuck'), Tarso equalling the others with billhook or scythe although he had only one arm. The straight line of hedge from Tebworth to the Mile Stile in Leighton Road, newly layered, the cuts at the base of the hedge exactly matching the stakes at the top in angle and direction, was a pleasant sight and a hedge that neither man nor beast would break through for a long time.

With winter came the thrashing tackle, a great engine puffing smoke, pulling barn parts, a water cart, and perhaps a caravan behind it. If it was Dave Gadsden driving, with his mate 'Orrey', he could take it through the tightest corner or the narrowest gateway without touching a post or breaking a drain. He would arrive in the late afternoon, manoeuvre the tackle beside the right rick, set the engine in the right spot to drive it and all would be ready for a good start in the morning – and God help the fool who had built that rick in that inaccessible place. Meanwhile, men with the farm labourer's bent-kneed gait, straps round the trousers above the calf, a red choker at the neck and a short stemmed clay pipe upside down in the mouth, would be appearing down the drive. They would have a short discussion and make their bargain to start in the morning. I have seen this procedure several times and remember some of the comments. 'Ah, I allers said as A. was a gen'leman, 'ap'ny more an hour 'e gin us 'an 'im over there' and off he went – an extra half pint for him, a bit of dripping or lard for his kids, and something for his missus. I have also seen, when times were bad and too many came, the latecomers' brief



Burning heavy ground: a painting by Bradford Rudge. (Lucas coll, Hitchin Museum)

word with the farmer, then they turned away from each other, the only sign the man made was to remove his pipe and clear his throat as he walked away. No half pint, no dripping or lard.

Most farms had dairy cows, which were milked by hand, a twice-a-day, seven-days-a-week job. The farmer or some of his family would sometimes help out on Sundays to give the cowman a day off. In winter the morning milking would begin before daylight, the cowhouse warm and steaming with the animals' body heat. After the milk was strained and cooled, it was put into churns which were lifted, or rather swung, by two men into a waiting cart, which had about ten or fifteen minutes to catch the milk train at Harlington, two and a half miles away. The first mile of the road was down hill, the last half mile up hill, but up or down there was no respite for the horse. By Harlington claypits the smoke could be seen from the train as it came round Samshill corner. The last hill had to be galloped to make it, and horse and train would arrive in a cloud of steam together. Sometimes the train won: the horse speeding down the hills could step on a loose stone and fall. The result would be a broken shaft, spilled milk, a damaged horse and a driver with a cut eye.

Back at the farm the cowman and a boy were cleaning out the cowhouse, bedding down with clean straw, filling the mangers with fodder (mangers low for a cow, high for a horse). The fodder was a mixture of roots, chaff, oil-cake and sometimes treacle, mixed according to the needs of the cows, the milk yield and the season. Then at about half past three, they would open the gate and call in the waiting cows, and other men would return from whatever they were doing. They would wash their hands at the pump, tie a sacking apron around their waists, take up a pail from the dairy floor and a hurricane lamp from the wall, and proceed to the milking. At busy times, or when labour was short, the farmer's wife could be found doing this job. A woman with a sharp tongue, standing no nonsense, but usually held in respect by the workers as one of the very few people they could talk to when things went wrong, when she would smooth out dissent and become a peacemaker.

I think the first attempt at mechanical ploughing was made years ago by the

use of steam engines. They could only operate in big fields, and the only one large enough in this area was at Chalgrave. Two engines would position themselves one at each side of the field, a wire cable with a plough attached reaching from one to the other, winding or unwinding the cable as required to pull the plough backwards and forwards, a man in a seat on the plough the while. Each notified the other when it was time to pull by a pip on the engine's whistle. Knowing people at Toddington, when they heard the whistle, would say 'Hello, the ploughing tackle's at Chalgrave, you can hear the whistle plain - we're going to get some wet!'

With the exception of the Griffin Farm, which was in the centre of Toddington at the Conger field, the farms were situated near the parish boundaries. The land nearer the village was in smaller parcels and was used for growing vegetables and market gardening, and there were several fields of allotments with interesting names: Prestons, Poor Man's Field, Snowhill, Strangers Field, Stockings Hill Field. Often two or three of the allotment plots would be acquired by one of the market gardeners to augment his production. There were about twenty of these men, their carts piled with vegetables, their horses jogging along, they themselves wrapped in a thick coat, knees covered with a rug, and calling from door to door at Luton, Dunstable or wherever else it was they had their round. On the days they were not delivering vegetables they would be working on their land, often employing another man to work with them.

The cultivation was more intense than that on farms, being a continuous rota of ploughing, harrowing, sowing and hoeing, the first two usually with the help of a horse, the third and fourth by hand. Some jobs like weeding and the harvesting of crops like peas and potatoes required more labour, and women would be recruited from the village for 'peasing', potato picking and onion weeding. Although these jobs could be very unpleasant when the weather was bad, it was mostly summer work and the women seemed to enjoy it, sometimes as many as twenty of them making an attractive picture in their many-coloured clothes, their young children with them and their chatter and light banter on the air. I still wonder at the speed with which the news travelled that certain market gardeners wanted helpers. They were never seen about the streets, you didn't see them go to each other's houses, but the grapevine flashed the message that Fred Rowe wanted peasers, or Will Clark needed 'tater' pickers, and they were there in the morning, right on time and place. The advantage for the women was that they were not tied to time, but were paid for the amount of work they did. The jobs being of only a few days' duration, it meant a short and enjoyable break from housework, in the company of others, with a few shillings at the end of it. They would return home tired, but with a little money of their own to spend on something they had long wanted, but had never been quite able to afford.

Nearer home, in fact right at the back doors of the village, were numerous small fields or paddocks of about an acre, handy to turn the horse into at nights and at the weekend. There are only one or two of these small 'pyghtles' left now, their place being taken by the new housing developments which have surrounded the old village.

In Park Road, between Tingrith Lane and Dog Kennels (a large brick building opposite Foxon House, although I cannot remember dogs being kept there) was the Rectory, standing in several acres of lawn and wooded

gardens. During the First World War, the ornamental part of the gardens and the lawns became rather neglected. The grass on the main lawn, about an acre in size, grew very long, and my father, who kept a horse and a cow, was asked if he would like to make it into hay and remove it to our paddock at 'Clear View' nearby, a service he performed to mutual satisfaction on several occasions. The long grass was cut with a scythe. After a while it was turned with a rake to speed its drying in the June sun, on the second day turned again, and in the evening put into heaps (haycocks) to keep it from the night's dew. On the third day the cocks were spread open and in the afternoon the hay was picked up and carted to the stack. In the afternoon my mother brought refreshment and we would sit on the grass to enjoy it, then she would help turn the hay.

As travelling facilities improved, so more and more people looked outwards from Toddington for their living. There was inflation, too, the need for workers in the towns causing wages to rise, and in this respect local agriculture fared badly. Boys went out of the village when they left school, and were not influenced by local employers. Starting in a factory in their teens, many stayed there until they retired, and spent much of their leisure time in the towns. Even in the 1920s, one could use Luton as a stepping-stone to London – with a motorbike to Luton Station, and thence by train to St Pancras, it was possible to make the journey from Toddington in an hour. Old ties were loosened as people's horizons widened. Since the last war, however, with an increasing population, it is a pleasure to see Toddington again become a town in its own right, looking inwards to meet its own social needs.