

AGRICULTURE & HORTICULTURE

Throughout the country

farm labour costs had risen by 15% since the outbreak of the First World War and the price of corn had risen by 15% over the same period. In view of the general situation in Agriculture the local Agricultural Society decided the Annual Show was not to take place in September 1915, as everyone had too many commitments concerned with the war effort. The old Horticulture Society decided to amalgamate with the Agricultural Society in order to pool their resources and manpower, their first combined effort for the war relief fund and the hospital fund, was to hold a large cheese sale in the Town Hall, the proceeds being divided between the two funds.

There was a serious shortage of eggs throughout the country and everyone was encouraged to keep a few fowl whether it is in the backyard, garden or orchard.

Gangs of women were employed,

in the later years of the Great War, on farms. Generally they worked as dairy maids or milkmaids, looking after pigs, calves and poultry. Because of the shortage of eggs, the vast majority of farmers increased their flocks of poultry. Eggs were sent as a first priority to the base military hospitals in this country and France. This increase in the number of flocks in the country led inevitably to an increase in the pure bred flocks both for meat and eggs so that within a few years hatcheries and breeding stations were common in Lancashire and Cheshire.

One of the first cases to be heard by our local tribunal was an appeal for a 'starred' position by a farmer on behalf of his team's man and general labourer aged 35. As well as this man the farmer had only one boy to help him on a farm of 120 acres, of which 55 acres was corn, with 44 head of stock, 34 of them milking cows, plus nine working horses and a colt. The recruiting officer said the man was to be given his "starred" status and the tribunal gave a certificate of exemption on condition he remained as a team's man in which occupation he was habitually engaged.

The names of the applicants for exemption were never published. The food supply situation was gradually getting worse on the home front; the farmer's task of growing enough food for the families at home and the forces was enormous. It was the Government's task to create a balance between the two.

Middlewich was like the rest of the country having to combat rising food prices, 8 out of 10 loaves were baked with imported wheat, so farmers were encouraged still further to put more land under the plough. Under the cultivation of land order 1916, all local authorities were empowered to take possession of unoccupied land, or by agreement to rent for the duration of the war. This land was to be divided up into allotments or not less than 300 sq. yards each. Farmers and small holders were also encouraged to buy the new small tractors that were available. These tractors were meant to replace the 'half hunters' (horses) that were now at the front. That left the heavy horse, the shires that were unsuitable for army work. Middlewich UDC began to negotiate with various landowners to comply with the land order, the triangular piece of land in front of No's 1 to 5 New King St (now numbered 4-12) was cultivated and a fence erected around it, this was the play area for the children of New King St and Lichfield St. A much larger green space divided into allotments was off long lane in the Manor Field's area. On a much grander scale but still under the cultivation of land act 1916, the army wanted farmers to grow more oats for the horses and mules now at the front, this request put the farmers in a quandary, on one hand they were asked to put land down to grass for bullocks, cows and sheep and on the other to put the same land to grow oats; this led to many small acreages of land, often in poor condition, and never considered to be of any use for agriculture, now having stock on it, or corn.



OS map of 1898 that shows the extent of orchards, field systems and farms which surround the industrial core of the town. By all accounts every bit was used.

On top of this dilemma the Cheshire War Agricultural Committee divided the county into 10 areas to try and estimate the amount of seed potatoes, for example, that all producers would require in the drive for increased food production. The committees of all the land organisations had been informed and a notice posted on every sale yard in the county.

A large number of horses in the agricultural districts have been commandeered by the Military authorities. It is feared that many farmers will have difficulty at harvest as a result. Some horses can be replaced by motors or in Birmingham for example a scheme of letting horses could be utilised but for a price.

Not only were farmers suffering labour shortage but also added pressure to produce more corn with fewer horses!

In 1917 there was a dramatic turn of events in terms of German U boat action, the Germans changed their campaign and began targeting all shipping in the Atlantic, with a great loss of life.

This affected food supply and in 1917, new government policies were introduced by Lord Rhondda recognising the balances of food stuffs and ratio of animal stocks versus grain supply.

This resulted in reduction of sheep and Cattle herds; maintaining cereal supplies, increase in the acreage devoted to grain. Increase in the percentage of flour extraction from wheat and dilute wheat with other grains for bread production.

All British flour mills were now in state control, we had two here in Middlewich at Town Bridge and Stanthorne.

No food control over fruit and Veg, so the prices fluctuated greatly and so did the impact depending on access to home grown food.

By the end of the war, Britain had ploughed up 3 million acres in addition to existing farm land. After much negotiation, and the use of boys from the age of 12 to work as farm labour, the women's land army was set up to great success. This move was very unpopular at the beginning of the war but two years in, saw a dramatic change in farm labour and ensured that Britain did not go without, the advice to all women sums up the feeling at the time: "You are doing a man's work and so you are dressed rather like a man; but remember that because you wear a smock and trousers you should take care to behave like an English girl who expects chivalry and respect from everyone she meets"



a delivery milk wagon coming down Nantwich Road to Middlewich

