

## FARMING IN BATTLE IN AND AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

This article has as its centrepiece three articles about the life of Battle farmers in the twentieth century:

- The story of Gerald Gay at Horsman Farm during the Second World War
- An account of Le Rette Farm in the war years through to the 1970's, written by Simon Alexander about his father Harry's life as a farmer 1942-79
- A remarkably prescient view of the future of agriculture on a global scale, written by Harry Alexander in the 1980's and drawing from his experiences at Le Rette Farm.

Also relevant to those interested in East Sussex agriculture, is the permanent exhibition in the Battle Museum of Local History, about rural life in East Sussex in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Several inferences may be drawn from it about what agriculture was like pre-war, for example:

- The smocks shown were worn well into the twentieth century, nowadays only seen at ceremonial Marbles events on the Abbey Green. This implies a very conservative, unchanging way of life which was to be turned upside down by the changes arising from the Second World War
- The cart horse shoe reminds us that even in 1939 horse drawn ploughs were the norm in Britain
- The Sparrow and Rat Club rules tell us that eliminating pests was as much a problem in the nineteenth century as it was in the Second World War
- The iron tools remind us that work on the land involved huge amounts of physical labour- the Second World War marked the advent of serious farm mechanisation as the Government set ever higher production targets. Clay soils in the Battle area made this kind of work very hard. William Cobbett records in the early nineteenth century that some country roads in East Sussex were so bad that oxen had sometimes to be used to pull carts and carriages through the mud, as illustrated in our turn of the century photograph:



### **Agriculture and farming in the Battle area, before and after 1939**

The impact of the Second World War on farming was immense. Between the wars, there was an agricultural depression in the UK and farms bred livestock because they could not compete with US grain. In 1939 some 70% of UK food was imported. But then in the Second World War the Government faced blockades and sinking of supply ships by the Germans- by December 1940 some 4

million tons of merchant shipping had been lost. So the Government did a U turn, requiring farmers to switch to arable cultivation of crops and vegetables, (especially sugar beet to replace imported sugar) a more effective use of the land in terms of calories per acre, as the nation strove for self-sufficiency in food. Increased amounts of flax was grown, for a variety of uses including fabric used in planes and parachute harnesses. Farmers were asked to create an extra 6 million acres of arable, an area equivalent to Wales. Sheep and beef stock numbers were reduced through culling, and to provide a supply of bacon, pork and ham, "pig clubs" were set up among local people to feed pigs on scraps, and slaughter them, the Government taking half of the produce. Throughout the war and beyond there was often a crisis in availability of food which required yet more farm production. Even in 1946 there were food shortages to be made good when the USA ended financial subsidies to the UK which as a consequence could not afford the necessary levels of food imports. Part way through the war, chemical fertilisers were introduced for the first time on a large scale to boost productivity- there was less manure to use because of the earlier decision to cull. Ammonium nitrate was used especially for flax and in wet summers such as that of 1944, when frequent rain leached nitrogen from the soil. Thus switch to chemicals became a permanent feature of British agriculture.

Farmers faced huge problems adapting to the new situation. In 1939, for ploughing, there were twenty times as many horses as tractors. As our photo shows, possibly from Stream Farm Sedlescombe, oxen and hand-held ploughs, were sometimes used for breaking up the soil.



The number of tractors- mainly Fordsons- tripled to 170,000 by 1945 compared with 50,000 at the start of the war. Only one in ten farms was on mains electricity in 1939. Some 4 million acres of farmland needed draining.

Farmers faced other changes as well. Many conscripted farm hands were replaced by Womens Land Army women ( Ruth Pearson pictured below in 1942) who may or may not have had any previous experience of farming.



Help also came from sources unthinkable today, for example in 1943 70,000 children nationwide were sent to farms on “Harvest camps” to pick plants of medicinal value in the effort to substitute imported medicines which could not get through to Britain. Towards the end of the war, when even the supply of women labourers began to run short, Prisoners of War were used, some 150,000 Italians and 300,000 Germans.

There was also the bureaucracy arising from two Ministries: Agriculture and Food. Agriculture was closely regulated through committees – the East Sussex County War Agricultural Committee or “War Ag”, based in Lewes, was in charge of this local area. Such committees had powers under the 1939 Emergency Powers (Defence) legislation: if farmers did not obey their instructions, they had the power to remove farmers from their land without compensation or alternative accommodation [across the country, some 2,000 farmers were removed in this way although no local examples have come to light].

Foraging for wild foods worked side by side with farmers. The Women’s Land Army and the Women’s Institute organised tinned and jarred fruit to be sent straight into the rationing system. Wild hips were favoured sources of Vitamin C as well as other wild fruits; even conkers had a use as a source of starch in the manufacture of cordite for ammunition.

In the Second World War, farmers had many additional tasks beyond tending their land. Some were in the Home Guard or, because they knew the land so well, even in the Special Auxiliaries preparing to be guerrillas in the event of an invasion. Some farmers near towns agreed that their land could have decoy fires lit on it, to lure enemy bombers into believing they were near towns that were alight, so they would drop their bombs off target.

Great as the impact of the war was on Battle, the demise of the livestock market in the town took place in the 1980’s. Until 1939 weekly markets were held.



## Horsman Farm

The difficulties faced by farmers were detailed in the records of Horsman Farm in Sedlescombe—there is no trace of it today. Gerald Gay, the farmer, expressed his frustration at a compulsory inspection of his farm as part of a campaign against rat infestation, in spite of the fact that as a fruit farmer he had no animals. More seriously, he suffered from the Government regulation of soft fruit prices: in 1941 and presumably other years, a table broke down prices into type of fruit, size of container and weight range. In a letter to the local National Farmers' Union, he protests at the 'ruinous price' which meant he was not able to recover a recent 2d increase in wages and would thus be selling at a loss. In the case of tomatoes, the maximum price schedule was even more detailed, with different prices for different times of the season and for different counties.

Towards the end of 1941, The East Sussex War Agricultural Committee issued a circular requiring new arable areas to be created in 1942; land that was to lie fallow must be sown with grass to enrich it with nutrients for its later return to arable.

Other difficulties included obtaining supplies such as containers. In 1942, Gerald also was informed that military training by the Canadian Corps would be taking place on his land, but there was no mention of compensation for any damage to crops. A neighbouring farmer also complained about lack of help – on the one hand he thought Land Girls expected to be "housed like the Ritz" but on the other hand his Land Army girl had left and he could not get a replacement, resulting in his son being overworked. As a result of that, land work was at a standstill and crops were spoiling. This cannot have been the only such occurrence.

Gerald Gay's farm must have also have undergone at least a couple of attacks from the Luftwaffe – in July 1942, he received an insurer's letter saying his damage claim could not be accepted because any enemy action prior to 17 April 1941 was not eligible for insurance cover. The second attack mentioned must have occurred later in 1941 as the company seemed to be willing to cover this instance. Judging from the letters, German aircraft had dropped about 19 incendiaries and an 'oil bomb' on the farm – oil bombs were drums between 10-120 kg in weight filled with oil and phosphorus, designed to set fire to crops on impact. The raid destroyed his strawberries, apple

trees had to be uprooted to get at the remains of the bomb and, to cap it all, he alleged that the bomb disposal squad stole the picked apples!

At least one local farmer took his opportunities during the war: he rescued a crashed German pilot and discovered he was a dairyman by trade, so got him to help with the morning's milking before taking him to the police!

### **Life at Le Rette Farm 1942-79 by Simon Alexander**

"My father bought the seventy five acres of Le Rette Farm in 1942 having sold his smallholding near Lydney in Gloucestershire. I think he paid about £3000 for the property which was to become home over the next thirty seven years to two wives and four sons. He was thirty seven years old at the time. Dad's only real experience of farming had previously been in British Columbia where he worked for a time on the four hundred and fifty thousand acre Douglas Lake Ranch.

Over the next thirty five years Dad became a well- known local farmer and a pillar of the community of Battle.



Harry Alexander circa 1942, in Royal Observer Corps uniform with his son Nick, Simon's brother, in the foreground.

Although Le Rette, colloquially known as Rat Farm, was in Netherfield parish it was natural to turn left out of the farm lane, cross the River Line (now a mere dribble) and conduct farming affairs in Battle. Jenner and Simpson's mill, Jenner and Mathew's garage, James Woodhams market and, of course, the bar at the George Hotel, all played their part in the life of Rat Farm.

The soil at Le Rette is weald clay as is most of the land in East Sussex. It was analysed in the early 1960's and one field, the "eight acre" bordering on Netherfield Hill, was classified as being only good enough for brick making! The rest of the land was workable but required considerable loving care and attention which it got from my father in order to grow the crops and stock the land in the way that he did with some success. Sadly, since the farm was sold in 1979, for £137,000.00, no care has been lavished on the land, only on the house and buildings.

The farm buildings were dominated by the Tudor farmhouse with its Victorian extension. There was a garage which soon became a tractor shed and workshop area. The stable where Bluebell the horse was housed subsequently became a tractor shed and adjacent was a pole barn and yard for cattle.

There was a well here but it soon came to be filled up with rubbish and rubble and ceased to have any practical use. Next to this pole barn was the brick built cowshed and dairy and a yard in which at one time pigs were kept.



Use of horses for ploughing was the norm until 1939

Farm dealerships that dealt with Le Rette included Harper and Ede in Hurst Green (now Ernest Doe and Sons ) Culverwells in Lewes and Barnes of Bodle Street. Much of the maintenance at Rat was done by Frank Philcox from Catsfield, and Tom Spears who had a forge in Station Road was also used. Day to day maintenance was carried out by farm employees.

Initially, Rat Farm was a dairy farm and a herd of Friesians was milked twice a day. The milk was then taken to the end of the farm lane by horse and cart where there was a milk stand from which a lorry collected every day. This herd of dairy cattle was sold in 1947 as Dad found it difficult to maintain the twice daily routine of milking. There were two reasons for this: his wife, Dora, (nee Bankes) my mother, died of a brain haemorrhage at the early age of thirty nine and the bull escaped from his pen and terrorised the farm yard until caught. Two young sons and a farm to run were quite a challenge. And, of course, the war had had a great impact on life at Le Rette.

Dad was in a reserved occupation but still found time to join the Royal Observer Corps and he was thus away from the farm in Sedlescombe quite a lot of the time. Le Rette was the unintentional target one night of returning enemy aircraft which unloaded their remaining cargo on the fields. The craters, nine of them, can still be seen if you know where to look though not all the bombs exploded. On another night several small fires were started by incendiaries being offloaded. Italian prisoners came to work and Canadian soldiers used the farm during their time in Battle. Dad was also away for some time in June 1944 as he was an aircraft spotter on a large ship patrolling offshore just after D Day itself.

The Friesians were replaced by beef cattle and Dad started to experiment in breeding to find an ideal beef animal. All sorts of crosses were tried from Hereford to Charolais to Aberdeen Angus. He eventually built up a well-known herd of Simmental. Rat became known as “the league of nations” because of all the different crosses that were tried. I remember taking the train with him to Dundee in the early stages of building the herd where he bought, as I remember, two Simmental heifers which had been imported from Austria. The farm grew to about eighty five acres and the regret was that Horseshoes Farm and Sunnybank farm were not added to Le Rette. Both these smallholdings are to the south side of the River Line and would have brought the acreage up to about one hundred and ten. Over the next thirty years the beef herd was built up to about seventy five head. Meticulous records were kept, but no bull. The easy alternative was “the Bull in the bowler hat “

who would turn up from Wyedown with the necessary equipment to inseminate the in season cows and heifers. If the timing was right this generally resulted in a calf, nine months later, but there were occasional failures. The veterinary side of the farm affairs was, at first, undertaken by George Hendry who was then succeeded by Hoppy Hopkins who, in turn, was succeeded by Mike O'Connor from a veterinary practise in Hastings.



Bargaining for beef cattle in Battle Market – around 1960's

John Fletcher was an early employee and he was followed by Michael Dawson until Bob Robinson joined Dad from the Guinness hop farm in Bodiam in the early sixties and stayed at Le Rette until the farm was sold in 1979. Bob went on to become a postman in Battle whilst Michael Dawson bought Horseshoes Farm bordering on Rat but the south side of the River Line. Another person to be connected to Le Rette was Gordon Wenham who was the local milkman and also a fireman in which capacity he visited the farm a couple of times. Sammy Kingston was often at the farm. He was of the NAAS (National Agricultural Advisory Service) and my father relied on Sammy for governmental advice and information from various sources such as Brogdale..... and they also became good friends.

To carry seventy five head of cattle on eighty acres of required careful management and this included care of the land. Le Rette is on clay soil and not much of it was good quality. The basic plan was that the animals would be kept inside through the winter and fed the hay that had been made during the summer. During the summer months the herd would be kept in paddocks and let out twice a day for two hours of grazing. This was to prevent stodging of the ground which, on clay, is a very bad thing to do and cattle grouped in a herd can make an awful mess in wet weather. It also allowed controlled management of the grazing land and enabled daily observation of the herd.

Much of the winter feed was grown on the farm, notably about thirty acres of oats and barley, and hay was made as well. Flax was grown, perhaps only once, during the war years. Harvesting before the advent of the combine meant the use of a binder<sup>1</sup> to cut and bind the grain into handleable sheaves<sup>2</sup>. Before the advent of myxomatosis rabbits were abundant in the standing corn. The

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<sup>1</sup> Binder: a reaping machine pulled by horses or a tractor that cuts the standing grain and makes the sheaves.

<sup>2</sup> Sheaf: a bunch of cereal crop stems bound together after reaping. Six sheaves make up a stook.



resulting six sheaf stooks<sup>3</sup> were then left to dry before a tractor and trailer was used to bring the sheaves to the farmyard where stacks were built. The threshing box would arrive, drawn once by a steam traction engine, and set up to thresh the grain. It was driven by a belt from the traction engine or tractor pulley wheel and fed with a sheaf at a time into the drum. Rats lived in the stacks and were treated harshly as they were disturbed.

Sheep would be taken in from Romney Marsh during the winter and Dad would under sow<sup>4</sup> a few acres of cereal with rape and turnips for their keep. Usually the cereal crops were under-sown with grass and clover which became the grazing for the following year. Rotation was important and a top dressing of fertiliser was often applied though in light doses. Bournes from Northiam came every so often to give the farm a dose of lime which was an essential treatment of the clay soil at Rat.

Geese were kept on the farm, there was a reasonably sized pond, and these were fattened up for Christmas and generally sold to friends. Turkeys were tried but unsuccessfully except for one large stag turkey who lived a charmed life until he met the pot at about forty pounds weight. In later years Dad imported half hogsheads of wine which were bottled on the farm and also sold to friends. This, for a few years, was quite a successful little enterprise albeit a hobby.

Dad was an innovator in animal husbandry and also in his purchase and use of modern farm machinery. In 1949 he bought a Massey Harris self-propelled combine which was probably the first in the district. It was an eight foot cut bagging model and, including contracting, generally harvested over 300 acres a year for various farmers in the area.



1949 Massey Harris self-propelled combine

This machine was succeeded by a series of pull type combine harvesters: each had an engine for threshing purposes but not for motive power which was provided by a tractor. The Massey Ferguson model was a disaster as the welds broke with monotonous regularity and this made a mockery of harvest time. Dad had a huge fight with the dealer and manufacturer before a brand new replacement machine was delivered. In the seventies harvesting was done with an Aktiv tractor drawn PTO driven combine, It was a Swedish machine imported by Ransomes of Ipswich and sold by Pevensey Engineering.

Next came the Twose backhoe, fitted to the back of an ordinary farm tractor, which was a fore-runner to the modern tractor digger machines. We dug and cleared ditches at Rat doing a job that was formerly done by hand. An Allis Chalmers Roto-Baler followed next and this machine was the

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<sup>3</sup> A group of sheaves stood on end in a field comprising six or eight sheaves

<sup>4</sup> Undersow: the traditional way to establish a ley ( piece of land put down to grass and clover for a defined period) , broadcasting grass seed on a cereal seed bed before it germinates



fore-runner to the huge round bales seen in fields today at harvesting time. Instead of making square bales and having to carry and store them as soon as possible the theory was that rain water would not penetrate the round bale.....and it worked though stacking of these small round bales was difficult.

Cultivation was by plough or, Dad's preference, by Howard rotovator. This was a tilling machine which was power driven machine from the tractor PTO<sup>5</sup> and was designed that one pass only would produce a seed bed. In practice this was not always so. In the early years of the Alexanders being at Rat Farm an Australian seed drill was used. This was a Sun Drill and it required someone to ride the footplate at the back to keep an eye on the dual flow of seed and fertiliser. When the land was ploughed, to a depth of up to eight inches, a two furrow plough was used and latterly a reversible plough came to the farm. This was useful in that the land to be ploughed no longer had to be marked out into cants<sup>6</sup> as with the reversible you simply started at one side of the field and worked across.

Tractors are a necessary part of farming although Bluebell the horse did sterling work in the early days of Alexander ownership of Le Rette. The first tractor was a steel wheeled Fordson that was a bit primitive but did a job though it was somewhat difficult to steer and, of course, had no hydraulics. When Harry Ferguson produced the first of his "little grey Fergies"<sup>7</sup> one soon appeared at Rat complete with two instrumentation dials one for fuel and one for water temperature. It was fitted with the revolutionary hydraulic linkage, a system that all tractors are fitted with today. This Ferguson TE20 in due course gave way to other tractors not least the Nuffield which was still in use when the farm was sold in 1979.



Ferguson TE20

There was an unacknowledged footpath from the farm buildings to Netherfield Hill which was used by the postman who would walk up from Canadia, deliver and collect mail, and then walk across to the Hill to continue his deliveries. Not only did this postman deliver, he also collected letters and put stamps on, money for this being left on the shelf by the door. Doors were seldom locked in those days at the farm.

The big snow of 1962-63 arrived just after Christmas and lasted for several months. A snow blade was fitted to the front of the Nuffield tractor and plenty of work was found clearing snow on the farm and also for residents of Battle.

The sale of Le Rette Farm in 1979 was carried out by Graham Walker of Burtenshaw Walker (formerly James Woodhams) and a price of £137,000.00 was achieved. This modest amount can be compared to the sale price of the farm in 2017 of over two million pounds! The farm is now a

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<sup>5</sup> Power Tail Off from the tractor to drive a towed/attached machine.

<sup>6</sup> Cant: part of marking out a field for ploughing, not necessary for reversible ploughs.

<sup>7</sup> The Ferguson TE20 agricultural tractor manufactured 1946-66. It became the iconic British tractor.

shadow of its former self and is simply let to grazing. The Tudor farmhouse has been modified into a luxury country dwelling with outlying buildings.”



Le Rette farmhouse today

### **The future of agriculture: an East Sussex farmer’s point of view**

During his 35 years of local farming at Le Rette, Harry Alexander developed his own philosophy about agriculture. What follows, brought to us by his son Simon Alexander, is the text of a talk he used to give in the 1980’s, locally in Battle. His views about conservation, pollution and a range of environmental issues were well ahead of his time.

“The subject of this talk might possibly be described as the Philosophy of Agriculture but that is rather an alarming title.

I am going to cover an extremely wide field in a short time and I must ask your indulgence for what may seem to be only a catalogue of generalisations.

My theme is, roughly, about the way in which man has conducted himself agriculturally since pre-historic times and the results of his actions as they affect us on this planet today. And I am afraid that the simple facts of the matter are that sometimes through ignorance, sometimes through greed and only sometimes through forces beyond his control, mankind has laid waste to his resources in a way which, had they been in cash and not in humus, would have caused all the banking community to emigrate to the moon.

In the beginning it was man’s ability to turn his surroundings to his own advantage that caused him at last to qualify for the self- imposed label of HOMO SAPIENS. Which being translated means wise. What an ironic adjective to give to a species which has plundered the natural resources of the soil to such an extent that at this very moment there simply isn’t enough food available to satisfy the hunger of everyone in the world.

True enough we are all wise in relation to the ant, the whale or the ape. And equally all of us, the Eskimo, the Turk, and the Tartar are dependent and responsible to the globe on which we live and from which we derive our being.

A hungry communist is in exactly the same position as a hungry Archbishop and it takes precisely as much of the earth’s surface to provide nourishment for a supporter of Wolverhampton Wanderers as it does for a partisan of the Moscow Dynamos. For we are apt to take too much for granted the fact that food, in constant and adequate supply, is an essential to keep us all alive. Faith will not do it long enough to be a practical proposition, hope deferred maketh an empty stomach as well as a sick heart, and Charity will avail nothing when the larders of the benevolent are as bare as all the rest.

What I am trying to suggest to you is that humanity in general would be well advised to quit trying to force its various opinions down each others’ throats and to turn seriously to the urgent business of

restoring and augmenting the potential of the land. And by the land I mean the thin layer of soil in any part of the world that enables vegetation to survive long enough to ripen and decay. It is not for nothing that one of the words no longer in repute among us is husbandman, a man who is married to the tillage of the soil. Humanity has succeeded in divorcing itself from responsibility to its natural resource and the world today is full of nations who are the unhappy and neurotic children of this ruptured relationship.

It is a simple fact that the total quantity of food available at any moment.....this moment.....in the world is not enough to give each of its inhabitants a square meal and so there are people dying right now of starvation brought about not necessarily by own improvidence or inability to buy the food, but because it simply isn't there. And this state of things is getting worse because day in and day out 60,000 fresh consumers appear on earth over and above the natural diminution caused by death. In spite of our scientific knowledge, our welfare schemes and our methods of educating primitive people to our own way of life it is no use to give the savage a knife and fork and a clean table cloth if, when he sits down to dine, there is nothing for him to put on the plate.

All this may seem wildly fanciful to you after the pleasant meal we have had today but I am leading up to the fact that we as a race, I don't just mean the English, or the Americans or the Russians, but the whole human race exist solely by virtue of the product of the soil that covers the favourable portions of the earth's surface and for thousands of years we have been incredibly greedy in our use of the earth's true wealth.



Cattle market in Battle High Street early 1900's

When Man first began to get the idea of using the soil to provide his daily bread the whole vegetable potential of the earth was at his disposal. He was the heir to a vast fortune which had been accumulating slowly for perhaps 300 million years. There has been vegetation on earth for as long as that and it was on the day that the first leaf fluttered down from the first tree and started to decay that the first deposit was made in mankind's deposit account.

Ten thousand years perhaps, is the time that we have been tilling the soil and in that short time we have managed to dissipate almost completely the legacy of fertility that came from the Creator in the beginning of time.

This is not to say that there has been no attempt at control. No sooner had Man begun to organise a rudimentary food supply for himself than the knowledge of what to grow and when to plant various

crops to the best advantage became the powerful possession of a few more intelligent members of the community.

These people became known variously as Medicine Men, Witch doctors, Priests or Druids. And so from the very start the poor chump with the spade, the ordinary man, the unambitious and biddable citizen began to be pushed around by his brainier brethren and has been ever since. Not all cases to his disadvantage, either.

We regard Stonehenge as an interesting relic of the barbarous past when sacrifices were made to propitiate the Goddess of Spring but there is ample evidence to show that the famous circle of stones is nothing but a primitive Almanac erected by the Druids to give a permanent check on the seasonal movements of the sun. An elaborate gadget camouflaged under the name of a Temple and justified as such. Another example of how specialised and vital knowledge was exploited can be seen in the Muhammadan Festival of Ramadan.

During the period of a month a large number of people in the East more or less cheerfully undergo a fest in the form of a religious ceremony. Is it a coincidence that Ramadan comes, or came originally for it is a moveable feast like Easter, that it should happen at the time of year when last year's harvest is beginning to run low and before the next one is gathered in.....Lent has the same origin.

I think the wise men of the time devised a clever way of suggesting to our friend the common man that a little organised hunger was part of his spiritual education. Rather than let it be realised that the vagaries of climate and a primitive technique made it unlikely that enough food could be produced to last the year round.

Just in passing it is worthwhile to pause for a moment and note the thought that in the old days the Priest and the Scientist performed the same function. They were usually the same person and had in their care the material as well as the spiritual life of unsophisticated man. Today these functions have become separated; sources of knowledge have become far easier to access and it is to man's disadvantage that he now pays scant attention to either science or religion. But that is only part of my theme today and I must go back to my original argument and try to explain to you why there should be this shortage of food in the world.

When the first farmer began his labours the soil of the earth was rich in humus. Now humus, I know, can be a sort of catchword for cranks but it is in fact an essential in the long term survival of the soil and it is the result of the breaking down of animal and vegetable matter by the action of benevolent bacteria. Mankind exists by virtue of this very process of decay which Nature, properly handled, will maintain indefinitely. It is the legacy of the past and a justification of the future. The greater and more rapid it is, the more durable and fertile will be the layer of soil that separates us from rock and fire of the world's interior.

I suppose there is some justification to be gained from the fact that a man's life, never so mean or tyrannical his body, must one day enrich the earth he lived on.

There is an old American song which acknowledges this failure of man to conserve his environment; it goes:

*Adam was a gardener, father of his race,  
Lived in Garden of Eden, mighty fine place  
But he caught cholera morbus from his wife's apple-pie,  
And had to leave his garden for a kingdom in the sky.*

Well, man as embodied in Adam has indeed left his garden. Populations have increased, values have changed and gold has grown in man's mind till it has become the symbol by which the material worth of nations and individuals are judged by one another. Plundering armies, Explorers, Trading companies even down to a mass of ignorant cultivators have all been ravishing the soil for their own personal gain. Seldom conserving and almost always recklessly indulging the demands of an ever increasing population. And all the time man's overall need of food has been increasing and so have his difficulties in bringing food to the places where he has congregated, in spite of the advantages of better transport.

We are accustomed from the study of maps, to take the presence of deserts for granted as some form of natural phenomenon; but I don't think that at the beginning of things there were many such places on earth.

A desert is a place where the soil through lack of moisture and humus is unable to support vegetation and where the elemental cycle of growth and decay never began.... or has been interfered with by an upsetting of local conditions. A great many of the areas now arid and incapable of supporting life have been made so by man himself. The vast Gobi desert for instance was formerly the cradle of Chinese civilisation; if we go back only to Roman times we can find big spaces in North Africa and Palestine now only rock and sand but which two thousand years ago grew wheat and were well wooded.

The concentration of population in Italy made it necessary for the Romans to import wheat from Palestine and North Africa. It was grown by local farmers to satisfy a demand greatly beyond their own needs. Trees were cleared away to get more tillage. The tillage was overdone and the texture of the soil grew thin, and finally failed. With the failure of the soil the population disappeared and the landscape became only drifting sands and bare hills from which the last particle of soil had leached away. There is no doubt that the wholesale felling of trees had much to do with this state of affairs but the ubiquitous and indiscriminate goat also played its part, as it still does today, in the denudation of the earth.

It has for instance caused a serious erosion problem in Malta and in other Mediterranean countries by its habit of consuming every stick of available vegetation and it is not for nothing that this animal is cited in the New Testament as being unworthy to compare with the sheep. This making of deserts is not, alas, a thinking that has ceased with the passage of time. Man is still as adept as ever at robbing the soil for his temporary benefit. Indeed the use of modern machinery and implements has greatly speeded up the process. I suppose the ground nut area in East Africa is one of the quickest and most expensive man made deserts on record.

Usually, I must say, the cultivator has gained some temporary advantage from his exploitations. Before the war England was able to import large quantities of cheap grain from North America. The cultivators went all out to cash in on this demand and there came as a result the enormous dust bowl of the mid - western USA.

Even today, when we are supposed to be enlightened and to have learnt some sort of lesson from the misdemeanours of the past, the precious top soil is still being washed off the surface of the United States at the rate of one hundred million tons a year. Nature, unmodified by man, takes about one thousand years to lay down one inch which by ignorant or misinformed action may be lost to humanity in the course of a few minutes.

I think I had better leave this gloomy global picture now and say a little about agriculture on this Island. For climatic reasons we have been spared most of the consequences of greedy farming but

nevertheless our soil is threatened most seriously by other things. Each year the industrial population of England increases and each year this population of necessity demands that more and more of the land shall be covered with bricks and concrete.

New roads, new towns, new airfields, new factories, new areas of opencast mines, all in themselves splendid monuments to an industrial civilisation are none the less only lumps of inedible cement in the national larder which already has a parlous shortage of space. One hundred and fifty years ago there were six acres of tillable land to each member of population; today that figure is barely a half acre each.

It is true that man's ingenuity has not lagged behind in the matter of agricultural technique. But although the average yield of wheat per acre has risen from ten bushels in the middle ages to thirty five today, this gain is greatly discounted by material loss of potential. Nor is it any great comfort to know that harvesting, to take only one transient operation of the agricultural year, has improved in efficiency from one hundred and thirty five hours per acre in 1810 to five in 1948.

In 1938 the gross value of the hay crop alone exceeded the gold export of South Africa. You are surprised? Just think for a moment of all the haystacks dotted about the fields of a single parish. Five tons here, ten there, it adds up to a formidable total over the whole country.



Next time you travel through the countryside look more closely at the farmer's stock in trade; his mobile and highly vulnerable assets. That herd of cows sauntering along in front of you as you are hurrying home to tea may easily be worth several thousand pounds as well as requiring conscientious attention at least 730 times a year.

Look well at the sheep that perhaps gets into your garden trailing brambles from its fleece. It carries whole chapters of this country's history on its back. Look at the old sheds that may be sheltering valuable machinery for use in only a few short weeks of any year. Yet without them the farmer could not possibly avail himself of the increased crop yields on which his livelihood depended (*indecipherable*) cooperative ignoramuses and grumbles when times were bad and spends all market day in the local.

You may see things in a different light if I suggest to you that each field, each head of livestock, each implements has are the items he commands in the unending contest with the forces of nature to which he and his money are committed. Perhaps at this point I should also mention the man made forces of supervision, suggestions and official interference which are, no doubt, from the best motives imposed upon the industry from various official sources.



Governments nowadays are stuck fast upon the fly paper of currency restrictions and exchange control from the grip of which they can only get comparative freedom for one limb at the cost of sticking down two others. This helps to impose curious and unreal values on many products of the land, both home grown and imported.

I could however help to explain why the farmer in England gets a much higher price for his meat than is offered overseas or why he should be paid less for such things as barley or linseed. But this is dipping into the terrifying ocean of international finance and I will hasten away from the brink at all speed. Only remarking as I go that the pronouncements of the contemporary witch doctors all help to baffle and delude the cultivator unlike those of the past which were at least based on fundamentals.

Finally I want to leave you with the thought that each man alive derives his mortal being from the earth. We may, at some time in the future, evolve into a species which needs nothing but a couple of proprietary vitamin pills to get us through the day. But even then the raw materials for them must be got from somewhere.

In the meantime and for a long time to come we have an obligation to the soil that goes back far beyond the mere pounds, shillings and pence of agriculture. There is nothing new in this doctrine as you will see from this quote from the book of Job: 'If my land cry out against me and the furrows thereof weep together let thistles grow instead of wheat and cockle instead of barley'.

For the moment it is the custom of the powers that be to treat the farmer with some of the deference given to a civil servant. Indeed State and people seem but recently to have discovered that not only are there actually farmers in England but a considerable agricultural industry as well.

Yet over 100 years ago before the heart of the English farmer was cut out and buried in the seemingly inexhaustible wheat lands of America this country grew well over two million tons of wheat each year. I don't think that our peak acreage in 1943 when the sea wolves were all around the door exceeded this figure though by now our population is three times as great.

You may smile when I suggest that the man with muddy boots who wheels a barrow load of dung across the yard is a more significant symbol of man's wealth than all the glittering shop windows of a city. Because agriculture is an extended industry, without any great concentration of material to take the eye, and because it is practised by individuals who each put their personal interpretation on the problems set by nature, the ordinary citizen may well be excused if he discounts the intrinsic value of the whole industry."

Battle Museum and Simon Alexander 2019

The photographs are sourced from Simon Alexander and from Battle Museum's archive.

