

An Agricultural Labourer's Wife: My Mother by Nellie

Jitcombe Talk given June 1930

When the harvest of the year was being gathered, for the work was then done with sickle, she would take her place by the side of her husband for some hours of the day, even with one or two little children out in the field with her. I well remember the time when I, myself, have been out from 10 in the morning to 6 or 7 in the evening, pulling the bonds for the sheaves to be tied up. Then, after the corn was carried, the farmer would allow the women to glean the fields for stray corn so as to enable them to have their own flour for making bread.

June 1930

"OTHER PEOPLES' LIVES"

AGRICULTURAL LABOURER'S WIFE.

MRS Ellen Titcombe (Nellie)

It was a great surprise when I received the letter asking me to give a talk on "Other Peoples' Lives - An Agricultural Labourer's Wife." As one who has lived in the County of Berkshire, in the Valley of the Vale of the White Horse, which is the scene of history of days of war, namely Cromwell and King Alfred, and also of the noted Wayland Smith's Cave which we all read in Tom Brown's School Days. Years ago the average labourers wife was far different to the present day, as then her source of income was far less, as the average wage earner only received the minimum wage of 9/- per week, and in a greater number of cases this had to maintain a wife and several even 9 & 10 children. The activity of the day is necessarily begun by early rising - firstly as her husband would have to be at his work and probably return home to breakfast by 7 o'clock, and then, if as in some cases where they live a great distance from school or village, she would then send her children on to the village school, in those days they would be away all day. She would then do all the housework, and in some instances provide and take the mid-day meal to her husband at his work. When the harvest of the year was being gathered, for the work was then done with sickle, she would take her place by the side of her husband for some hours of the day, even with one or two little children out in the fields with her. I well remember the time when I myself have been out from ten in the morning till six and seven in the evening, pulling the bonds for sheaves to be tied up. Then after the corn was carried the farmer would allow the women to the fields for stray corn, and how many a family was enabled to pick up enough corn when thrashed out to make even one or two sacks of corn so as to enable them to have their own flour for making bread. This was indeed a great help to the home, as the home-made bread was made and baked at the local bakehouse. The health of the children is always a care for the mother, and in those days although the families were larger, illness had to be largely attended to by the mother, or some more elderly persons, as trained nurses were not obtainable so easy as we have today. I know of cases where a good nurse or a doctor would be 6 or 7 miles away from a cottage. The children too did their share of helping in diverse ways, and pleasure then was indeed not very much known, for it was one continual round of work. The same wage was evident in that it had to go round the week, and not much over for anyone. I well remember when I was small, my mother had done her weekly washing and ironing, and had the garments on the clothes horse, airing in front of the fire. She was cooking the mid-day meal, and was gone out to get some vegetables in the garden, left me in the house.

I suddenly saw some smoke in the room, I run out of the house and called my mother - "Fire Mummy, fire! She could see the horror in my face, and rushed in the house to find her horse full of clothes on fire. She gathered up the rug and wrapped round it, but not till it was nearly all destroyed, only at the dinner table did I hear her say "you have no shirt to put on now Dad", and our sheets are burnt, and we have only to thank our daughter the house was not burnt down", this has even lived in my memory. I remember too, I had no pinafore to wear for some time on dresses, I wondered why, but they said the weekly wage would not allow too much for food and clothes. Where there were several boys, and mother put up their lunch and dinner, how heart-breaking for them to find only a top of a small loaf! They would eat it all for lunch and have a turnip out of a field for their dinner. I happen to know of a family whose husband started life with this small wage and had a family of 17 (10 boys lived to grow up). This was indeed a source of trial and thought for clothes had to be provided and the task of sewing was an everlasting job, more so when garments were worn weekdays and Sundays which meant that when the family retired to bed, mothers and daughters plied the needle in readiness for the clothes to be worn the next day. Some will say there was the sewing machine, but in those days the housewife was unable to purchase one out of the small earnings. It is gratifying to know and feel that in spite of all this hardship there was the peaceful love and happiness in their homes. When the children returned from school, the elder ones would do their portion of work which was allotted them, and there was no recreation for either sex to what the present generation indulge in today, but one feels sure that those lads and girls of those days would not like to see their own children live under the same times of hardship, for it was often the allotted task of one or two to go up to the country Squire's house to receive the scraps, and even tea-leaves, which in those days were given to the poor and esteemed a great treat. With regards the care of all the family the hard life they went through is wonderful, but with continual thought and care of parents the hardy life and plain living made the generation of men and women today. Education was not near so far advanced then as today as I quite remember the time when I was given my coppers to take every week, and how some would spend it and play the truant from school. Then in some cases, some were even kept from school and got no education at all, which meant they could not read or write. One must not forget that the agricultural labourer and his wife were the producers of the Empire, and though it has been said he or she is only a labourer, yet we must admit we owe much to them, and should look up to them and not down on them; much could be learnt if they would think for a little time. The many days which they work and toil for the benefit of those who come after. Let us take a day through in the ordinary stage - Rising fairly early in the morning - breakfast for the head and then the dressing of the younger ones,

these to be washed, and those who go to school to have provisions for their mid-day meal. Then follows the necessary cleaning of the rooms, bedrooms and living-room, the preparation for dinner, washing and ironing as each week brings it round, attention to the smaller ones of the family who are too young for school - By now the husband will have returned for his mid-day meal, unless as I may have mentioned one of the elders, or even his wife, took this to him in the field of work. Then there is a continual string of minute details which require the attention for the greater part of the afternoon, then those who have been away all day to school come home somewhat tired, and they require a substantial tea which should be equivalent to their mid-day meal. After this, according to the time of year, one may see some go to the neighbouring village to shop, but this was in the older days a great feat, and only when the money was available for extra necessaries. In those days of our ancestors there were no means of transport like we have today, even bicycles were rare in my mother's early days. It may be of some interest to you that I knew of a family who had the baker call two days a week, and he used to say how many loaves today, and the dear old lady would say "You had better bring 16 today please," and the grocer had his equally large order every fortnight. What would some of the mothers today do, if they only had a baker call twice a week, and grocer every fortnight!

We must admire them for extreme thought and management. The hardness too, of the life and health, as one had to be so dependent on one's own self, not only for work and housekeeping, but nurse and even barber and cobblers. I often reflect back in my mind of the different things I've done even when I was a child, and one thing has ever remained in my memory told me by my father, "Try and do your best, no matter what you sacrifice yourself, and always try and be punctual - minutes mean hours in time." I often see precious minutes wasted and think of his advice. The social and educational part of life was not over great in the days of old, but the gift of needlework which some were given has been handed down from time to time, and it was indeed a help to many a home when free education was introduced to the Country, and also the social life and welfare of the various Institutions organised by different Bodies, which make the life of man and women, youth and age, more easy, and not only from the recreation point of view, but the advantage given to enable them to grasp the facilities of the necessity of health and activities of modern life. Indeed the whole nation now are the fruits of the lives of those mentioned earlier in my talk, which makes us proud when we realise and see what is the outcome of our ancestors, and the advantages we have given to us. Well may we honour them and so hand their remembrance of toil and labour to our own generation. We live in a time when all is hustle and bustle, but the time has come when we must carry on with all that lies in our power to teach the generation to follow

that the life of agricultural people is as honourable today as it was a century ago. Now I would like to add to this feeble talk, the advance the woman of today has in many ways. The earlier ways of washing, cooking, and her hours of daily tasks is much enlightened, and the social intercourse now in village life which is beneficial physically and educationally, her children who are taught the cooking classes at their school centre, has proved that her labour is helpful at home - our boys too are being taught the carpentry and gardening, and so share in home duties. We live in days of rush and bustle but the agricultural wife has proved that she too can take her place in the whirl of life. I myself have seen many able to take their part in social life, and by so doing they know that they are still the producers and help of their King and Empire.

The Women's Institute Movement has been one of the greatest helps to the Agricultural worker, as crafts and work have been learned, and many a home beautified and helped along the road of life.

As the years have come and gone, we too have seen great happenings to when we were children, there are some good old customs gone. The Lord & Lady of the Big House, gave us in those good old days a School Treat every year, and a Christmas Tree at Christmas, also from the Lady was given so many Red Ridinghood cloaks to the girls, and jerseys and stockings for the boys, neither were our parents forgotten - with her own hand she would crochet crossover shawls for mother, and also give her tea and sugar. At the present day I have one which was given to my grandmother, and cherish it.

In passing along the track of time we do not see the needle plied as in days of old, but machines make up for some of this - knitting too is not so much done as when I was younger. I am proud to say I was awarded a first Prize for knitting at the age of five years, I still can ply the knitting needle for my household. Gardening too is a hobby I enjoy, and bee-keeping, and a great deal of benefit can be gained from these.

Cookery lessons for the girls took place in the village hall at Bourton.

Early Shrivenham was well supplied with various tradesmen and shops. Knapps Farm conveniently set in the middle of the village supplied milk etc. There was a shoemaker and a blacksmith. Besides Mrs Moon's shop there was the post office run by Miss Lock and her sister, a grocery shop owned by Mrs Hammond and a butcher who was called Yates.

The village fish and chip shop was a great meeting place for the local teenagers and many a romance started over a bag of chips. (This was later to become Nimo's Fish Restaurant and more recently The Gulshan Brasserie opposite the Co-Op.)

Also in the High Street lived the District nurse, Nurse Donnicks (?).

The highlight of the year was a party held at the Memorial Hall for the village children who were all given a small gift.

Her memory of the coronation was a party in the Rec and a pig roast held at Beckett Park.

Interviewed by Pat Ward - April 2002

Memorabilia connected with this interview:

- 1 Certificate awarded to Ivy Reason
- 1 Memorial Card to Robert Francis Reason
- 1 Photograph
- 2 Newspaper Cuttings
- 1 Book - Vale of White Horse

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Items removed by
Tony Jones
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