

Whatever it takes to survive during times of War

Extract from the Collection known as the Bourton House papers

Collated and written by Neil B. Maw

The War Agricultural Executive Committee (for Wilts WWAEC) was formed during the First World War with the aim of the better management of agricultural resources to help keep the country fed. It was later reformed at the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 and Hinton Marsh Farm came under the county of Wiltshire, being located directly on the border of Berkshire and Wiltshire.

In 1940 the farm belonged to the Bourton Estate and the tenant farmer was Mr Frederick James Parsons who ran it as a dairy farm. The committee for Wiltshire had looked at the figures for the milk production of the farm and decided that it was too low. Because it was a time of war, the government committee had extraordinary powers and were able to issue orders to farm owners as to what they must do in to increase production. In the case of Fred Parsons, the committee decided that he was too old (aged 84) and should be persuaded to retire and voluntarily surrender the tenancy of the farm, *'so as to avoid the necessity for my committee to use their compulsory powers under the Defence Regulations, either to take possession of the farm or to terminate the tenancy.'* (letter WWAEC dated 28th Sept 1940).

Lady Louisa Mary Kendall Butler was the head of the Estate, her husband, Sir Cyril Kendall Butler having died in 1936. She was appalled at the idea of removing her much respected tenant who had been running the farm for 50 years. The local Agent for the Estate, James Fereman, was asked to assist and he wrote in very complimentary terms that Mr Parsons was a *'very satisfactory tenant and the management of his farm compared favourably with local dairy farmers.'* He further went on to explain that although Mr Parsons was old, he was always on the farm and employed a reliable Foreman. As for the cattle numbers, the farm could take another 10 but Fred wanted to slowly increase his pedigree herd with the use of his quality bull. But the committee believed Parsons must go.

Appeals by Lady Louisa, James Fereman and Mr Parsons, meant that the matter was referred to the Minister of Agriculture, who in turn referred back to the committee. The Committee wrote back through Lady Louisa's solicitors, as usual, and relented with regard to removing Mr Parsons. But the proviso was that he must purchase another 15 dairy cows to get the milk production up. A further letter from the WWAEC dated 4th November 1940 addressed the matter of accommodation for the increase in the size of the herd and asked if Lady Louisa would be prepared to pay for this stating, *'It is considered that by increasing the building accommodation for the dairy herd, it would enable Mr Parsons to keep a greater number of cows, which would result in an increase in production, which would be of benefit to the farm, Mr Parsons as tenant and the nation.'*

Lady Louisa of course agreed to the proposal and her estate workers set about sourcing material to build the new cattle accommodation, a considerable problem in time of war. The CEO of the committee wrote that he could help source the material if necessary, but Lady Louisa replied that it was all in hand and the materials would be found on the estate.

The letters stop in the middle of December 1940, which was right in the middle of the period known as the Blitz. Great Britain was fighting for its life; leading the fight was the RAF in the air, on the ground were the farmers keeping the nation fed.