

Series of articles by Alan Lord, member of Friends of the Dales, for the Westmorland Gazette

Article 1

Born and brought up in north Lancashire, much of my spare time was spent on the farm which my uncles and grandparents worked a few miles away. It was the focal point for all the grandchildren and there were quite a few of us. It wasn't all play of course, in busy times we were expected to pull our weight and soon learnt the farming routine. As soon as we were tall enough to reach the pedals, uncle Roy taught all the grandchildren to drive and he was an excellent instructor. This was a useful skill on the farm and we were an extra pair of hands to drive the tractor.

It wasn't really a tractor, there weren't many about at that time, but it served us well. It was the chassis and cab of a large Crossley saloon car. Another uncle had found a second compatible gear box which, with the assistance of the local blacksmith, was fitted in series with the original, converting it into a nine speed box. With a large stone gatepost lashed to its rear end to give it extra traction, it would pull anything.

The driving skill could be useful in other ways. On one occasion Roy had to be away all the following day. Just why I never knew, but it may well have been to do with his wartime duties as a Special Constable. This caused a major problem because there would be no one to deliver the milk. Everyone had their their own jobs to do and there seemed to be no way they could fit in anything extra.

We stood in the yard and they talked round and round the problem without coming to any conclusion until Roy turned to me and said "Do you think you could do it on your own?" Full of the confidence of youth I said "Yes I'll do it". So the following morning I was up before six, loaded the van full of milk crates and set off on a seven mile milk round. - Eleven years old and no driving licence. - Well somebody had to do it.

Article 2

With all the modern machinery available and the new methods of working, one man can do as much in half an hour as a field full of people were able to achieve manually in half a day.

In the mid to late 1930's farms were so much smaller and such machinery as was available was mostly horse drawn. Most of the manual skills of those days have long since lost their purpose and are long forgotten. Skills like loading a hay cart for instance, the horse too seeming to know the routine.

Haytime often meant long hard tiring days, sometimes working till the edge of dark if the hay was ready and the weather looked threatening. Hard work it undoubtedly was, and glad to see the back of it, but much else has been lost along the way. The neighbours coming out to help, the teamwork in the field and those convivial breaks at "bagging time" when the basket of food came out accompanied by the stoneware pop bottle full of home brewed lemonade.

It wasn't always hot summer weather though, there were some years when they fought the rain to rescue a crop which in the end was barely worth the effort. Reluctant as they were to give such poor feed to the young stock through the winter, there was little else to offer them and George in

his usual philosophical way would remark with a sigh that “what won't fatten will fill”.

Very few farmers worked on Sundays other than doing the essential jobs like milking and fothering if the cattle were indoors through the winter. Sunday was a day usually for taking a walk round to see how crops were growing and whether fences were in good order. In town there was no Sunday trading and either Wednesday, or in some other towns Thursday, was half day closing when all the shops pulled down the blind and shut down for the rest of the day.

Article 3

We are all aware of the change in our ways of shopping with the rise of the supermarket and the decline of many of the independent small shops. Alongside it have come food and hygiene regulations, largely unheard of in the 1930's.

Packaged food was limited in its range, ready meals were unheard of and most foods were sold loose. Bread was never displayed wrapped. Biscuits were displayed in tins about a foot square and a similar depth, with a glass lid, if you were lucky. Flour was weighed out into a paper bag. “I'll put a W on this so you will know which is white”. How he spelt wholemeal I never found out.

Butter was a large block on the counter to be weighed out in whatever quantity you asked for and formed into a rectangular shape with the “Scotch Hands” before it was wrapped. Many of the smaller shops were not all they might have been. Sometimes my granny would send me off to the local shop and “Make sure you get the butter before you ask for t'paraffin” was advice I have never forgotten.

The Co-Op was better organised and currants were weighed out onto purple paper and folded skilfully into a neat package, sultanas similarly onto a matching orangey brown paper, so that you knew which was which.

In those days the Co-Op was perhaps the nearest we got to a supermarket. In large towns they sold almost everything you needed. There was a butcher's department, a grocery store, a furniture store and the bank. The tailoring department was alive with school children and frustrated parents at the start of term time. If you wished to advertise your status there were other shops, but the Co-Op stocked the school uniforms for all the schools within ten miles at half the price.

The receipt for your purchases was a little yellow strip of paper to be licked, and stuck down onto a gummed sheet to be totalled up at year end for a “dividend”, possibly 2% or more in a good year.

We enjoy a laugh at the antics of Dad's Army on the television, but in reality it was a very important line of defence. George may not have been tall enough for the regular army, but with his size twelve clogs and a rifle he was more than a match for any invader. In town, those not fit enough for the Home Guard were on the nightly fire watching rota.

As losses at the front continued, those in reserved occupations were under constant review and eventually my brother, also farming, was conscripted into the navy, much to my father's distress, knowing what he had gone through only some twenty years earlier. However he was trained as a radar mechanic and served with the Fleet Air Arm in Singapore, well behind the fighting and was, thankfully, returned safely to us. Whatever happened to all those wireless shops that sold valves and spare parts of all sorts?

Whilst my brother was away, it was thought a good idea for me to spend my long summer holidays from Grammar School to help out in his place. With no family of their own they seemed unaware of my limitations and I had only been there a few days when I was told to gear up the horse and finish ploughing a two acre field. I knew what to do of course, but this was spectator interest suddenly become stark reality. You soon learnt what work meant under those circumstances. "Work experience" they call it nowadays.

Another task was to get the milk cans down to the gate and up onto the milk stand ready for collection and the milk wagon wouldn't wait if you were behind time. Those milk cans were heavy even when they were empty and with ten gallon of milk in them, they weighed more than I did, so getting them onto the milkstand was as much as I could manage with a struggle.

Now those structures stand by the roadside, victims of progress, monuments to an era long gone and there will be many who have no idea of their original purpose.