

FARMING IN WARTIME

was a serious business, and was organised by the County War Agricultural Executive Committees which had the power to turn a farmer off his land if they considered that he was not following government policy. The "War-Ag"'s local representatives made a survey of each farm in 1941 and these secret documents are now available to the public. The questions on the survey included "Is the farmer a full-time farmer? part-time? spare time? hobby farmer? other type?". "Is the farm management classed as A,B, or C? If B or C, is this because of old age? lack of capital? personal failings? If personal failings, details:-" (there were ten lines for recording personal failings). There were 16 lines for General Comments, and this Form B496/E.I. ends with lots of space for "Grass Fields Ploughed Up".

In the Chipping area this ploughing of grassland was perhaps the most noticeable feature of wartime farming. Certainly there were fields which needed drastic treatment, but the national campaign for growing cereals did not adequately consider the limitations of the climate. For instance, the higher farms around Chipping have exactly twice the average annual rainfall of Southport, and much of the excess rain comes in the autumn harvest months. It is not surprising that the traditions of ploughing and cultivating which were essential in earlier centuries had been lost as transport became easier. The risk and effort required to produce a relatively small amount of grain on land which was better suited for grass and livestock was well understood. The Minute Book of the Chipping branch of the National Farmers' Union has a resolution (30 November 1944) proposed by F Ellison and passed unanimously to headquarters, "that no more grassland be ploughed up in the area owing to the climatic conditions". Needless to say, there is another unanimous resolution "that the County Agricultural Committees be done away with after the war".

During the war years the few tractors sometimes ploughed day and night; they cut the corn at harvest and threshed it during the winter. All the carting and lighter work was done by horses. There were only about three threshing machines in the district and the operators had to keep a strict rota round the farms to get through as much work as possible. The larger machines also had a straw baler and needed a team of about a dozen workers. Each farmer had to arrange with neighbours and friends so that the team was ready for work in good time and was liberally fed by the womenfolk (extra rations could be claimed for threshing days). Some farmyards could not be reached by the larger machines, even after moving gateposts, but there were smaller machines which simply sorted out the grain and left the straw and chaff loose.

Bacon and eggs may sound like the typical English breakfast, but in reality they were always luxuries until the vast North American prairies were cultivated and steamships were bringing the grain home to ports like Liverpool. So in wartime, pigs and hens had to revert to their traditional role as scavengers, having only a small ration of feedstuff based on the number kept on each farm in 1939. As time went on and farms changed hands this 1939 basis became increasingly unfair, but it continued until about 1952, and was the cause of some "black-marketing". Farmers and Pig Clubs were allowed a small pig feed allowance if they returned all their bacon ration coupons to the Ministry of Food. If the pig thrived there could be a sudden bonanza of meat and sundries to be shared out. The feed merchants sold "off-ration" feeds such as salvage from bombed factories and dried scraps from Army camps, and some quite useless lines such as oat husk meal and plum stone meal. 40 gallon drums of cattle treacle could be bought, and sometimes a jar reached the kitchen table. One family called it "Chinese Honey".

Cattle and sheep can manage in summer on a diet of grass, but winter milk was needed also, and to keep up the winter supply a feed ration for milking cows could be applied for. It had to be matched by gallons sent to the dairy. Government scientists explained that the dairy cow was a far more efficient producer of human food than any other livestock. It worked much harder than any horse, and then provided most of our beef.