



Rural Life and Food Production

RURAL LIFE

Farm workers before and during the First World War were paid very poorly in comparison to industrial and domestic workers. In 1913 ordinary labourers were paid on average about 18/6p a week. This would have been less than £1 a week. This was inclusive of "allowances" which did not include beer or cider.

True they all had good gardens in which they grew potatoes, onions, runner beans and winter greens. Many of them kept poultry and at least one pig. Without these and with large families they would have hardly survived. If a farm worker lost his job he and his family would have lost their house as well as most were tied to the job. Also there was no unemployment benefit at that time.

Their wives gleaned fallen corn from the fields at harvest time, picked fruit from the orchards in Elvaston when it was available and probably were responsible for the seeding and harvesting of the vegetable garden. They had to get their husbands off to work by 6 o'clock (horsemen had to be at work by 5.30 to groom and feed their animals). Then get the children off to school do the housework, wash and mend clothes and have a hot meal ready by the time the family returned home later in the day.

Children went to school often walking miles to get there. For Charley Garratt and his friends school was nearby in what is now the village hall.

FOOD PRODUCTION

In line with the fact that wages seemed so low in comparison with today, prices were also much lower.

Yearly **Rents** on average around the country were recorded as being 75 pounds 16 shillings and 4 pence in 1914 rising to 92 pounds 1 shilling and a halfpenny in 1917. We have no record for 1918. Of course many farm labourers lived in tied cottages which went with their job. They did not have to pay rent for these but lost their home if they lost their job.

Apart from rent families would necessarily have to purchase those items of food that they were unable to produce themselves. **These basic foods would have included bread, butter, margarine, sugar, eggs and flour.**



Milk and Butter. In the Derbyshire Advertiser of the period, the farmers of the area commented strongly on the claims of watered milk by some companies receiving milk. Perhaps people involved in the transport of milk were involved.

Price was also an issue. For many years prior to 1914 milk prices remained steady with only small variations being related to the district.

Milk generated within the parish of Elvaston was utilized within the Castle, sold to local villagers, and through contract sent by train to various cities and Co-Operative

The pre war price of butter was 1 shilling 2 pence per pound. In 1914 – 1915 it rose to 1 shilling 5 pence per pound. By 1919 it had reached 3 shillings per pound.



In Elvaston, as in other parts of the country, the farmers who employed these men were usually tenants themselves, and were forced to pay their workers such low wages because they themselves found it difficult to make a living. They had to pay their rent to the landowners (such as the Earls of Harrington) in order to keep the tenancy.

The farm labourers worked twelve hours a day at very hard often highly skilled work for a pittance of a wage. They would attempt to supplement their wages by poaching pheasants, partridge and hares to sell, and rabbits for their own table.

If they could they would work overtime (15 hours a day) at harvest time to bring in more money.

The work was hard and skilled. Ploughing and harvesting was accomplished with teams of horses. Walls were built, hedges laid, ditches dug, hay stacks and corn ricks were thatched by hand. Sheep were sheared by hand and cows milked by hand.



However despite the hard life rural workers had their days off. They had many activities to amuse themselves. The garden party on the vicarage lawn, the amateur concert in the village hall, the annual village fete and the occasional visit by a travelling fair. There were also the plays and concerts put on by the children at the school and events around the church.

In his book "Charley's Tale" Charley Garratt describes the annual childrens' holiday to Mablethorpe. Here they stayed for two weeks all paid for by the vicar Mr Progers.

He also describes how he and his friends got into trouble with Charley's father for recreating a fairground ride which resulted in one of them falling – but luckily not hurting himself.

Christmas was also a happy time were families got together to share food and games.

Every summer the Earl of Harrington invited children from surrounding parishes to a massive party held on the polo ground adjacent to Elvaston Castle. The children arrived in horse drawn wagons which drew up to The Golden Gates. From there they were led to the polo ground for the party.



Bread was never rationed and nationally the price varied from district to district. Often the flour was a mixture of rye, rice, cornmeal, barley flour, soy and ground beans. Those living close to a corn mill probably had the opportunity to buy unadulterated flour for home use. In 1914 bread prices varied between fourpence halfpenny and seven pence. By 1920 prices had risen to between twelve pence halfpenny and twelve pence three farthings.

THE LAND

Because of the low lying nature of the land on the 13,000 acres of the Elvaston Estate many fields were subject to flooding. For this reason the land was primarily used for cattle, sheep and horses. The inhabitants of the three villages were most likely to be able to eat locally produced butter. However the government encouraged the use of **margarine** which consisted of a mixture of skimmed milk, refined animal fat, vegetable oil and palm oil. The price of margarine in 1914 was seven pence for a pound. By 1918 it had risen to twelve pence three farthings.

