



A Country Life that has Vanished

by Lilian E Burr

One must think of a young family in those years before and during the first world war. The young parents working from dawn to dusk, usually happily, in spite of shortages, scratching some sort of living from the green pastures and damp clay.

They had arrived newly<sup>2</sup>married at the farm house, and after the usual preliminaries had settled down to a farming life. On their first viewing of the farm they had been escorted round by the lady who was making the sale, and they were introduced to the six milkmaids, each freshly robed in a print dress which reached to the ankles with a mob cap to match. These girls were capable of managing the dairy side, milking the cows, selling the milk, preserv~~ing~~ing the cream and making up the butter.

~~THE~~ The new bride decided immediately that with finances so low these girls must go for a start, and their work was divided between the head cowman and his staff - and the farmer's wife herself who was to attend to the dairy throughout all their years there.

The animals were of first concern and they demanded constant attention. Milk was sold at the door and the cream saved for the weekly butter-making ritual in the old two-handed handled churn.

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Once set it was transferred to the round keeler and salt was added. Then the butter-boards were used for the final knocking-up and a pattern wheeled on to each pound of butter which was then placed in its grease-proof wrapper. The dairy was always cold with its slatted, white-washed wooden boarding instead of windows on the northern side. No dog or cat was allowed to pass the porch door and it was essential that all pans, churns and cheese cloths were scalded daily and kept ~~scrup~~ scrupulously clean.

Butter-making always entailed an early rising, incurring a four o'clock excursion to the spring some meadows away, armed with a wooden yoke on the shoulders and the twin pails evenly balanced. The prepared butter was placed in trays and had to be on the road by eight o'clock to catch the best sale at the local market. The pony and cart set off at a smart trot on the gravel roads, the iron bound wheels causing many a spark to fly, occasionally giving fright to an already nervous ~~animal~~ pony who had seen ~~war~~ war service at the Front.

The day also started with the eldest son hurrying through these same pastures to the railway embankment where the kindly engine driver, on the watch, came to a halt for the lad to climb up the embankment to reach the carriage door <sup>helping</sup> ~~and then~~ one more boy to arrive at his grammar school on time.

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Always at mid-day in those times there came distantly at first, then ever nearer, the steady tramp of marching feet and from amidst all those quiet and rural surroundings appeared a ~~X~~ troop of soldiers - prisoners of war in their varied garb which included heavy boots, leather buskins and breeches. They were there to help with the harvest and general heavy work on the farm - and indeed they were strong and willing, in return for food.

The language was guttural, the complexions swarthy and without exception ~~bearded~~ bearded as was the habit of the day. ~~W~~ With their large size and height and their military demeanour they were more than a match for the childish onlookers who fled without fail each day in terror while a swift repast of soup and home-baked bread was quickly disposed of by the Germans. Their officer enjoyed a more leisurely lunch with the family.

The farm children were cared for by two youngsters who were sisters, only twelve and fourteen years but wonderfully capable in every way and never hurried or worried. Their tolerance had a pleasing effect on the children they cared for and dressed and they lived in at the farm, in the attics, thus relieving the rather cramped conditions in their own cottage home.

It was unusual and great fun getting any sort of visitor, and one was inclined to stare and stare, even though the egg collectors called weekly. Their cash, with that for the sale of butter and milk was the only cash to be seen and to change hands in all those years of barter.

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There was great excitement over the arrival of the team of men with the steam traction engine. These were hired by each farmer in turn as his crops became ready to harvest for the men were skilled with the elevator and with dealing with the corn, ~~and~~ with the straw stacking, and with thatching those same stacks against all weathers. The men appeared to speak quite another language and they enjoyed a different food, too with their cold tea followed by mustard and dripping sandwiches which they happily shared with the curious children who had crept in close to watch all activities.

On Sunday afternoons all the family packed into the dog-cart, the two youngest children sitting between the parents high up in front whilst the four older children sat with backs to parents and legs dangling against the backboard, covered with rugs as weather demanded. They were jogged along the country lanes at quite a pace to view their own and their neighbours' pastures and to comment as each field succeeded the other. It was a luxury indeed to rest the legs.

On summer Sunday afternoons it was customary to walk a couple of miles down the ~~deserted~~ deserted railway track to wonderful orchards of apples and -during the season - wonderful strawberries, as many as one could carry. On winter and wet Sundays each member of the family settled down to a book of his choice, a rare and much enjoyed relaxation. This contributed as much as anything else to their general education, especially as the day school <sup>was</sup> two miles walk away, a journey to be hazarded in ~~all~~ all weathers.

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It was a very orderly existence. Everything was accomplished without haste and at the same time each day, one member being responsible for the lamps, refilling with oil and trimming the wicks. Darkness marked the cessation of all activities out of doors, ~~except~~ except the lantern excursions to the newly born ~~animals~~ animals. The young chicks and ducklings were often hatched off on the wide kitchen hearth and when mature could be taken to the harvest fields to enjoy the fallen grain. This also entailed a daily trail with buckets of water to the various hen-coops. The animals and their feed and drink were of first importance and with no piped water supply nor a pump, this involved <sup>daily</sup> treks to the pond with the water-cart, and with pails to the spring across the meadows.

To light the grate under the Dutch oven for twice-weekly bread-making it was necessary to make a collection of brushwood which was tied up as faggots. Four or five ~~bundles~~ bundles of these bundles at a time were lighted and eventually created a roaring furnace. The bread was placed in long tins and put in the oven to bake once the embers turned to a red glow, giving an overall heat and sustained long enough to cook the whole batch. The smell made hungry children even more hungry.

Each afternoon there was the fun of egg collecting with a deep oval basket with <sup>its</sup> long handle. Not only the hen-house had to be searched with a hand under each sitting hen, but also the hay and straw stacks and the barns, the cart-shed .....

....the horse-feeding boxes, and even the thick nettle beds. In spite of this daily vigilance the hen often stole a march by secretly sitting on her clutch of eggs in some far-off cover, only to emerge later with her brood trailing behind her - very proud and in the best of condition, glad again of a regular feed.

Throughout the war years the farm windows were kept dark as even lamp-light penetrated the night when it became inky black. Occasionally the children were brought downstairs from their beds to see the wonder of the age - a Zeppelin passing soundlessly overhead, uncanny with only her own ~~flares~~ propelling flare lighting up her shape and size.

There was an unhappy feeling of foreboding in that household which lingered in the knowledge that they were quite defenceless against any assault from the heavens.

At the end of the fighting, the year following the declaration of the Armistice put an end to this solitary life for ever. The government of the day could not guarantee farm prices, and made the industry ~~infinitely worse~~ infinitely worse by flooding ~~flooded~~ the home market with Canadian wheat. Even those summers with good crops, unusual as they were, could not help the dire situation.

One by one, like nine-pins, each farmer sold up or became bankrupt and fled with his family to other parts. Land values fell and farmland was cheap as dirt. These conditions persisted right through until the succeeding war made it imperative once more to look to our own home-produced food.

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The old-time farmer and his husbandry , handed down from time immemorial, had gone for ever.

Today that isolated farm is well-drained and fenced in with government aid and the pastures are thriving - so much so that it has been described as the best-kept farm in the district with special weekend walks arranged for other farming folk to appreciate what has been done. No more early-morning butter-making, free-range hens and tea in the harvest field. Such delights have gone for all time and who shall say whether life now is as contented as it was then.

Country people lived a simple life with few expectations, never thinking of reaping rich rewards. They respected their own frailty knowing full well ~~XXX~~ that death could strike them down at any time from any of the scourges of the day - tetanus, septicaemia and the worst of all, tuberculosis - all without cure.

But it is the sadness of losing <sup>that</sup> ~~the~~ wonderful feeling of independence and freedom which strikes the heart most of all.

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