

Haymaking and Harvesting by Gordon Weedon

In Dinton in the late 1903s and 1940s Wootten Farm was farmed by the Miller families. Alf Miller, his wife and his son Harold lived in the farm and the other Miller family lived in the cottage adjacent to Wootten farm. Alf Miller was also the Baptist Chapel minister and with his son Harold took the Sunday services and the Sunday school for the younger parishioners. They knew all of us and we knew them well and when haymaking time came around each year we, the younger children were always made welcome to take part and enjoy the short haymaking season.

The grass fields had to be cut and then dried. This took several days before the dried hay was raked into piles ready for collection by the hay carts.



The unladen cart would be pulled by the carthorse and the children would ride on the empty cart from the farm, along Westlington lane, passing the thatched cottages and into the fields beyond to the west of Dinton village. The journey was slow but pleasant and we had all the time in the world to enjoy these simple pleasures with the summer sun beating down and being pulled by a large beautiful horse.

On reaching the hayfields all the children would climb down from the cart and the farmhands who were already in the field would now begin to load the cart with new hay. Waiting to be taken back to the farm was another hay cart completely full. One of the elder children who was tall enough to reach the horse's bridle would be allowed to lead the horse back from the hayfield to Wootten Farm. This was considered a very responsible and much sort after job but was always under the eye of a farmhand.



Some of us would walk back behind the cart as there was now no room to ride on it. On reaching Wootten Farm the hay cart would now be unloaded onto the hayricks or into the hay barns. We would not wait to see this as there was another empty cart ready to ride back to the hayfields.

In the hayfields the farmhands would stay there all day with lunch and drinks being served to them by the women folk of the farm. Their days were long and hard as the haymaking period only lasted several days and soon it was all over and if the weather had been kind all the hay would have been gathered in and safely stored to provide food for the farm animals during the winter to come. For us, the children, it had been fun riding on the carts and although we didn't contribute to the process of the haymaking the Miller family and farmhands were always tolerant with us and we were always encouraged to be there.

Harvesting the grain followed the haymaking and again we looked forward to this in the long summer holidays from school. The large field opposite Dinton church was farmed by the Hitchcocks from Blenheim Farm. A large swathe of the crop was initially cut by hand all round the field to allow room for the tractor and binder to enter and begin the long mechanical cut which could take more than a day. The early cuts around the field were long and slow but as the day wore on the area to be cut grew smaller and smaller. We knew then that it wouldn't be long before the odd rabbit or two would make a run for it towards the spinney. We all had stout sticks and as each rabbit ran out it had to run the gauntlet of several youngsters. Most of the rabbits survived but it was fun chasing them and even better if you caught one as it meant that mother would be making rabbit stew or pie in a day or two.

Tractor and Binder



The sheaves of wheat/barley or oats were stacked into 'Stooks' usually six or eight sheaves to each stook to dry out and as the binder finished it's work the farmhands would continue until all the sheaves had been put into stooks. After several days the stooks were picked up on the carts and taken back to the farm for threshing. Again the days of the farmhands were long and hard.

My brother Frank tells me that in 1942 when he was just twelve years old he would work up to nine hours a day at Wootten Farm in the school holidays and was paid one shilling (5p) per hour! This would not be allowed today but in the war many of the older men were away. Land girls came to work in the farms and they were very effective. One member of the family, Tommy Miller, was another Dinton man who did not return from the war.

Threshing was popular to watch and we would usually go to Westlington Farm which was farmed by the Gregory family. The sheaves had been stored in ricks and these were now taken and fed into the threshing machines which extracted the grains and this grain was fed into Jute sacks. The remaining straw was put back into straw ricks for future use. The threshing machines were noisy and dusty and as the rick got smaller the odd rat or two would run out chased by boys with sticks. Most of the rats got away!

When Harvest Festival came round each year most of the village people attended the service and joined in singing with great gusto the well known traditional harvest hymns.

A Corn Stook

