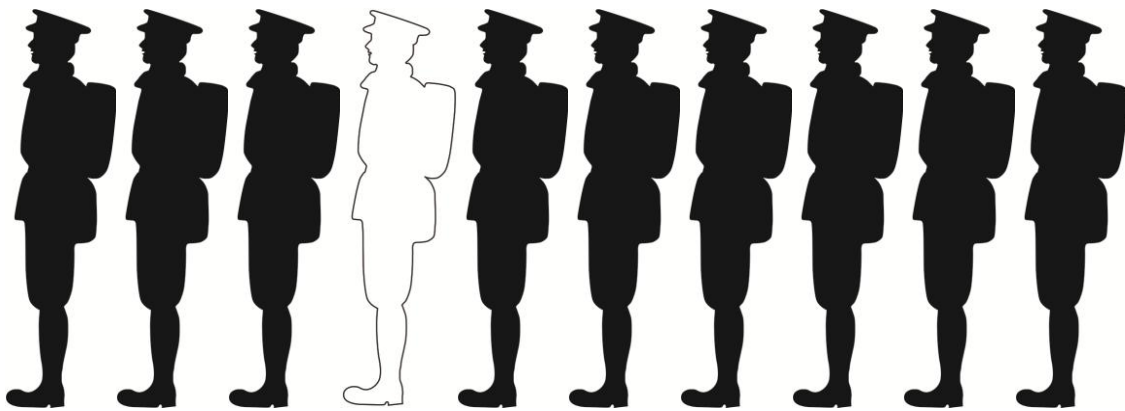


The Great War
Our Community Commemorated

Feeding the People



Booklet 7: Janet Yarwood



Holmes Chapel and District U3A Local History Group

This booklet, the seventh in a series about the effect of the First World War on Holmes Chapel, describes the impact on agriculture during this period. Using information from the Cheshire Records Office, newspapers and the Parish Magazine the effects on agricultural life, the work at the Agricultural College and food production is discussed.

Photograph on Front Cover is of a Land Army girl at the Agricultural College, Holmes Chapel 1917/18 (IWM)

Agriculture and the Great War

Before the War

Prior to 1914 Cheshire was predominantly a dairy farming county. The rich pastures were ideal for grazing cattle, giving milk in abundance, not only liquid milk but also for cheese making, which was very often carried out by farmers' wives, daughters or dairymaids. Arable crops were grown, mainly oats and wheat with some potatoes and barley, but nothing like the acreages of pasture for grazing and haymaking. This was brought about by the fact that farming from the 1870s was in a depression caused by foreign grain imports, leading to a fall in the price of wheat. The government's emphasis for the financial future of the country was the development of commercial and industrial wealth. Farmers and landowners reacted by turning their arable land to pasture where they made a good living producing milk and cheese.

Locally, in 1914, the townships of Holmes Chapel, Cranage and Cotton were a strong rural farming community. The land area totalled 3,098 acres of which 2,511 were farmed by 31 farms varying in size from 21 to 187 acres. One such enterprise was Back Lane Farm (later Croco Brook Farm, Chester Road), which specialised in a prize herd of dairy shorthorn cattle, the milking cattle of Cheshire. Henry Ford owned and farmed 63 acres and rented extra fields across the road that reached almost to the centre of Holmes Chapel, where Westway is today.

Besides the farms there were innumerable small holdings, market gardens or fields of a small acreage producing crops and farming animals in a small way. Most farms kept poultry and pigs, using the whey left from cheese making to feed the pigs. Many households with large gardens also kept poultry and pigs which provided the family with bacon and ham.



Dairy Shorthorn cattle

Farming was labour intensive and many farm workers were skilled men. Teamsters ploughing the fields with pairs of horses, cowmen, waggoners; even some men described as farm or agricultural labourers had special skills indispensable to the farmer. Most machinery was powered by horses. Steam tractors were on the scene but mainly used for road haulage, they were heavy and not practical on the land. Steam powered engines were used in the farmyard.

Prior to 1914 there were 126 men engaged directly on local farms, of which 31 were farmers who between them employed 95 men. There were also 14 female dairy workers, farmers' daughters and dairy maids. Figures obtained from the 1911 census for the townships of Holmes Chapel, Cranage and Cotton, show there are 20 farmers' sons, 14 cowmen, two milk boys, 12 waggoners, five teamsters and a poultry lad. The largest group of 41 were described as agricultural labourers or working on the farm. Farmers' wives also played their part on the farms.

No tractor driver occupations are mentioned for the parish although petrol driven tractors were in their infancy. Horses were still being used for ploughing, harrowing and sowing and many other tasks where power was needed. As would be expected in a rural area, there were ten blacksmiths in and around Holmes Chapel, needed to shoe farm horses, draught horses for the wagons used to transport produce and goods on the farm and road and ponies for traps or riding, allowing the local population to get about. Even the local doctor did his rounds on horseback. There were two wheelwrights who would keep the wagons maintained.

The marketing of some produce was taken care of by local people among whom were a potato dealer, a corn agent, a straw merchant, two egg and poultry dealers and a wholesale butcher and cattle dealer. Grain went to Cranage Mill where Thomas Massey was the miller and corn merchant. Another Massey, Edward, was a corn and cheese factor. Park Mill, on the border of Holmes Chapel, often referred to as Brereton Mill, was also milling grain. Churns filled with milk were transported by wagons for distribution locally or taken to the railway station from where they could be transported very quickly so fresh milk was available in the cities. A regular Farmers' Market was held on the cobbled square at Sandbach every Thursday. Farmers, small holders and market gardeners from surrounding districts would take their produce, by horse and wagon, for sale to both wholesale and retail customers. This market continued well into the 1970s.



Park Mill

Steam or traction engines provided power for heavy transport and any machinery needing it. Willie Davies, a farmer from Dane Bank Farm, Knutsford Road, Holmes Chapel, was a contract thresher. He travelled to farms when needed using his traction engine (named the Village Queen) to transport and operate his threshing machine. He employed a regular gang of Irishmen, who returned every year as they knew the work and could be relied upon.



Willie Davies on his traction engine (Village Queen) with his men

Although few women were employed in farming at this time, there was at Worleston near Nantwich, the Worleston Dairy Institute established in 1886 to provide full time courses in cheese-making and dairy work. In 1895 Cheshire County Council established, at Saltersford Hall, Holmes Chapel, the School of Agriculture and Horticulture to train young men in the sciences of farming. They were thriving establishments in 1914 and both were to play their part during the coming four years.

Agricultural production within the county and locally may have made Cheshire reasonably self sufficient for food. Nationally, in the three years preceding the war, farmers were producing about one third of the nation's food, the remainder coming from overseas. British farmers only produced one fifth of the wheat consumed in 1914, the rest was imported; also half the meat supply, all sugar, three quarters of fruit

and a large proportion of other foodstuffs including, surprisingly, over three quarters of cheese. In 1914 home supplies of grain and stored imports were sufficient for five months. This was the system in place whereby the nation was fed - there did not seem to be any reason why it should change as the war was expected to be over by Christmas. Circumstances over the next four years were to change the government's priorities as far as food production and supply was concerned and prompted permanent changes in farming practices.

The Fight for Food

On the declaration of war in August 1914, the President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, Lord Lucas, said there was no need for the public to be alarmed over food supplies or for any change in agricultural production as it was the least likely to be affected.

The war came at a bad time in the farming year, with the harvest about to be brought in. Farming was labour intensive in normal circumstances, but at harvest time many extra hands were needed and the normal routine work still had to be done. All of a sudden, there was a mass exodus of skilled farm workers, all encouraged to join the services. They were strong, skilled men and therefore very useful to the army. The farms were very quickly reduced to a labour force of unskilled labourers, women, children and the elderly, although locally only eighteen men who appeared in the 1911 census as working in agriculture enlisted. They were three cowmen, a milk boy, five farmers' sons, two waggoners, one teamster, two blacksmiths, the poultry lad and, surprisingly, only three farm labourers. The farmers not only lost their regular skilled workers but also the extra hands they relied on at busy times. In spite of this, the harvest was successfully brought in. In addition, good strong horses were requisitioned by the military, which paid the market value, to pull gun carriages and heavy army equipment. Hay and clover crops were also requisitioned. In a matter of weeks, the whole farming situation changed: the war was not over by Christmas.

The government was made aware of the importance of food production and wanted output increased. Retail and wholesale prices were rising, cereals by 75%. With the shortage of labour and horses, farmers were finding it difficult to carry out their seasonal work; also they wanted guaranteed minimum prices. They were encouraged to enlarge the crop for the 1915 harvest in the knowledge that the authorities would pay them good prices. Extra labour was made available for harvesting by releasing soldiers to help. There was a call for the employment of more women for the duration of the war to work in areas other than dairy work on the farm. Farmers had yet to be convinced of the benefits of employing them for general farming.

The importation of food had not been considered a problem and no one doubted the ability to keep sea routes open but in the spring of 1915 the first German submarine blockade occurred, not only sinking cargo but also passenger vessels e.g. the liner "Lusitania" was torpedoed with the loss of 1,198 people. Imports of grain from the United States were put in jeopardy. By the summer the blockade abated and along with the good harvest at home supplies were adequate for a while.

The coalition government, formed in 1915 by Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, decided to set up County Agricultural War Committees to ascertain the needs of the farmers and the best means of assisting them in the cultivation and manning of their land. The Committee held meetings under the control of the Board of Agriculture, to whom they were answerable. The new President, Lord Selbourne, was appointed in May 1915. This was the start of changes in farming practices. The Cheshire Committee's inaugural meeting took place on 4th October 1915 at the Crewe Arms Hotel, Crewe, with monthly meetings thereafter. There were nine main Committee members, among them the vicar of Holmes Chapel, the Rev. John H. Armitstead and his father

Canon John R. Armitstead, the vicar of Sandbach. In addition there were representatives from several Cheshire organisations connected to agriculture. A total of twenty eight people attended.

The committee was given extensive powers, among which were to report if the supply of labour was adequate, the acreage under various crops, pointing out the immediate need for an increase in the production of wheat, oats, potatoes, meat, milk, cheese, bacon and poultry, also there was a huge shortage of fodder for animals. Suggestions were made for small farmers to overcome manpower shortages by sharing labour and implements where possible. They encouraged cottage dwellers and allotment holders, many of whom had large gardens or small fields available, to produce food such as potatoes and vegetables, to conserve fruit and vegetables by bottling, to bake bread and to rear more pigs and poultry.

The Mid Cheshire Farmers discussed the question of female labour at their April 1915 meeting. There was a suggestion they could be employed in turnip hoeing, potato lifting, milking and calf rearing as this was being done in other counties but not in Cheshire. The question asked was, "Can anything be done here?" One gentleman replied, "The reason was because they would not do it here, and in twenty years experience he had never had a woman who could milk." Twelve months later an appeal by the Cheshire Agricultural Committee resulted in 600 women offering themselves for all types of farm work, from milking to cleaning shippens. Farmers reported they were doing the work as well as men. By 1918, village women formed the largest group of non-government replacement workers, the majority working part time.

The Dairy Institute at Worleston, was able to contribute with skilled female workers. Its main training was for dairy work, cheese and butter making. There was a steady intake of students and, when asked to take

on extra under a government scheme, the Institute declined saying it would interfere with the training of their normal students.

At the end of 1915 Women's War Agricultural Committees were set up with local organising officers for women workers attached to labour exchanges with a view to matching women with farmers who had a labour shortage. The Cheshire County officer was Miss Knowles based in Warrington, who worked closely with the Board of Agriculture. She would also place women who could work on a voluntary basis for seasonal work. Eventually, in January 1917, the Women's Land Army (WLA) was established and farmers were able to call upon a new professional unit of women. They were to prove invaluable in forestry, horticulture and all types of farming especially when mechanisation was introduced.

In December 1915 the Committee proposed a scheme with the President of the Board of Agriculture to stop expert male and female labour being used on munitions work where the wages were better. It was also important that men who were indispensable for farm work should not join the army but continue their occupation and be placed on a reserve list. If at a later date they were called up they were to be given the opportunity to go before a tribunal. Many men such as those working with agricultural machinery, steam ploughs and threshing machines were 'starred' (a method of identifying men needed for certain civilian occupations). If a man was inadvertently enlisted and wished to be re-employed, his employer could apply to the Area Commander through the local recruiting office or tribunal for his release. The War Office undertook to make efforts to return the man to his civilian occupation.

Skilled ploughmen were scarce and more were needed for the spring of 1916. The army authorities offered to release men to help farmers get over the effects of recent bad weather, which had made it impossible

to work their fields. They also loaned light draught horses. Four hundred and twelve Cheshire farmers applied for 600 soldiers, and after one week 140 men had been supplied by the military. The problem arose that few of these men knew anything about ploughing or had experience of farming. Efforts were being made to release men for the summer hay and corn crops. Eventually 1,760 soldiers applied for release for the hay harvest and 850 for the corn harvest. The average length of time a man was released by the military was for two weeks. Farmers had to cover the soldier's wages at a rate determined by the War Office which was 24s (£1.20p) for a six day week: this proved expensive to the farmer as the rate for a skilled farm worker working with animals was 24s 2d (£1.21p) per week. There was no board or lodging allowance and, if a soldier was injured on the farm, he would not have a claim for an army pension, but would be covered under the Workman's Compensation Act.

The Board of Agriculture, in December 1915, called for the education authorities to release boys and girls either for employment on the farms or to assist at home so their parents could work. The authorities passed by-laws to enable children to work during school terms as well as holidays. They were the second largest group of non-government replacement workers. By the summer of 1916 several local children attending the Cranage and Macclesfield Road schools had exemptions to allow them to help on farms, mainly potato picking. Some children worked with permission and some without. Children from the Macclesfield Road School had been engaged in this work during the 1915 harvest.

In the summer of 1916 the two local head teachers, Mr. Hodgkinson and Mr Oakes, for the Cheshire War Agricultural Committee, undertook to act as Local Registrars for the Voluntary Labour Bureau and register all persons with spare time willing to volunteer to help on the land. A register was available of men over military age, women and the

masters and boys from the local schools who were able to work in the summer holidays.

Farmers considered prices to be one sided. The prices they could get for producing potatoes, corn and milk were controlled by the government. They did not like the fact that the prices of feed stuffs and manures were not. Consequently they had no control on the price they could charge for produce to ensure it covered production costs. They were paying 100% more than pre war for manures and only receiving 50% more for their produce.

Recruitment to the military had always been voluntary until the Military Service Act of January 1916 which specified that single men aged 18 - 41 be called up for military service. Conscription started on 2nd March 1916. It was extended to married men on 25th May 1916.

Although the Act was another setback for the farming industry it did provide for men engaged in certain occupations to be exempted if their work was certified as of national importance. The agricultural occupations certified by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries were:-

“Agricultural engine men and mechanics – agricultural machinery. Steam plough and threshing machine attendants, drivers and mechanics.

Farm workers:-

Bailiff, foreman, griever (*i.e. a farm bailiff, overseer*) steward, beastman, byreman (*a byre is a cow house*) cattleman, stockman, yardman, carter, horseman, ploughman, teamster, waggoner, hind - if a foreman or ploughman (*hind is an old term for a farm workman skilled and usually in charge of two horses*), shepherd, thatcher.

Farmers, market gardeners and fruit farmers.

Fruit and market gardens - foremen in all departments.

Stud attendants, stallion man (*a man who looked after and travelled with a stallion*).”

Under the Act local men granted exemption certificates confirming they were “engaged on farm work of national importance” were Alfred Snelson of Cranage; Thomas Bell of Cotton Farm, Holmes Chapel; W.Kennerley of Nook Farm, Cranage; W.A.Baskerville of Spring Bank Farm, Cranage and J. Cooke of London Road, Holmes Chapel. This is surprisingly few, considering the long list of men applying in Cheshire.

Later, in June 1916, following a memo sent from the Local Government Board at Whitehall, the Army Council agreed with the Board of Agriculture not to withdraw from farms men who proved to be indispensable. The general guide was :-

- One man to each team of horses to cultivate land.
- One man to each 20 cows in milk when assisted by boys or women available.
- One man to every 50 head of stall stock assisted by boys or women.
- One man to every 200 sheep exclusive of lambs grazed on enclosed land.
- One man to every 800 sheep on mountain or hill pasture.

After the spring of 1915 and through 1916 the German submarine blockade was intermittent. It intensified in the spring of 1917, both passenger and merchant vessels were sunk, having a drastic impact on the food supply. The German policy was to “starve the British people” and many thousands of tons of wheat, meat and sugar were lost to the bottom of the seas, besides the terrible loss of life and ships. By April 1917 Britain was six weeks from running out of wheat. When the war began, the possible effect of submarine attacks was unknown and there seemed to be no reason why food should not continue to be imported.

At the end of 1916 the Asquith coalition government resigned. David Lloyd George was now Prime Minister and formed a new coalition. Rowland Prothero replaced Lord Selbourne as President of the Board of Agriculture. His main duty was to increase food production and he was given powers under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). He established Executive Committees, within the County War Agricultural Committees, at the same time reducing the Committee to seven members, meeting weekly instead of monthly. These Committees became the local agents for the Board of Agriculture. There were sub-committees for labour, machinery and the military review system for military service exemptions. They had wide-ranging powers which literally took control of farming. For example, under the Sale of Horses Order 1917, horse sales could only take place with a licence granted by the Committee, any infringement being liable to referral and prosecution by the police. Export licences for sulphate of ammonia and the developing artificial fertilisers and manures were suspended. Farmers were having problems obtaining fertilisers as they were also needed for munitions production. Massey Brothers of Cranage Mill were appointed to store and act as local agents for sulphate of ammonia. Petrol was controlled by a petrol committee. Applications for allowances had to go before the committee. A guide of two gallons per week for work of public duties; for machines for business purposes two gallons per month, but if urgent not to exceed six gallons per month was noted in the Committee minutes.

One of the main intentions was to ensure higher productivity. The Committee had the power to decide the crops sown and it encouraged an increase in the land under cultivation by promoting a “plough campaign” to bring pasture into arable farming. Farmers were not very happy about this. For 40 years they had been creating pasture at the expense of arable, they were now being asked to reverse that in a matter of months with the plough campaign. It was calculated that 100 acres of pasture would feed nine people if used for fattening; 41 if

devoted to dairying; 172 if ploughed up and planted with oats; 208 if planted with wheat and 418 if planted with potatoes. Many of the farmers asked to plough their prized pasture and grow arable crops had only ever experienced livestock rearing and distrusted the guarantees of minimum prices for wheat, oats and potatoes. They had to be careful as the price per measure was 41s.3d (£2.06p) for oats grown on ploughed pasture, but only if the crop went to the army; if not, the price was 38s.9d (£1.84p). Nationally, the acreage under the plough increased by 1.75 million acres: a local figure is not available. In addition, minimum prices for produce and minimum wages for agricultural labourers were guaranteed under the Corn Production Act of 1917. The wage for a farm labourer was 25s per week (£1.25p); it was being considered to raise the wage for a woman worker from 18s to 20s (90p to £1) per week.

In September 1917, a “horse ploughing scheme” was introduced and teams were sent to farms for ploughing and sowing. At the same time a transition to mechanisation was taking place. The Committee were rapidly bringing in tractors: 19 were made available for distribution around the county and a further six 20 h.p. Titan tractors were sent by the Board of Agriculture. It was found that tractors could work on any soil in Cheshire and that Ransome three furrow ploughs were ideal. The Board also issued drivers with two suits of dungarees and waterproof overalls.



20 h.p. Titan tractor

The military were still very much involved and the Committee applied to have 12 soldiers trained as tractor drivers. (Wages for the military were now the same as for normal farm workers at 25s per week.) Farmers could hire machinery from the Executive Committee at rates that included fuel and the driver's wages at the following rates:-

PRICES PER ACRE

	<u>Light Land</u>	<u>Medium Land</u>	<u>Heavy Land</u>
Ploughing per Acre	20s	25s	30s
Cultivating and Disc Harrowing	3s	3s	4s
Harrow and Rolling	2s 6d	2s 6d	3s
Drilling	4s	4s	4s 6d

In addition, tractors and threshers were available at £3 per day including fuel and driver. Traction engines were used to move the threshers. It was noted in the Committee minutes that “women working on threshers were paid a minimum of $\frac{3}{4}$ of the local rates paid to men and if farmers were not prepared to employ them they will be passed over in favour of those who will”.

The Women's Land Army

Owing to the dire need for farm hands through the early years of the war, women were gradually being accepted for general farm work other than in their traditional area of dairy work. Some farmers still had a dislike of working with women as “they had too much to do to go messing around girls”.

In January 1916 the government provided a grant and the Women's National Land Service Corps (W.N.L.S.C) was formed on a voluntary basis. It was established to bring urban women, usually educated and middle class, into the countryside to take on the lighter roles of farming with the aim of increasing domestic food production. There had been an earlier reluctance to use women because of the physical nature of the work. Two thousand joined in the first year and after six weeks training mostly worked as carters and milkers with some as plough women.

In April 1916 there was a meeting at Cranage Club organised by the Board of Agriculture under the heading Women Land Workers, presumably to recruit women to the Women's National Land Service Corps. It was addressed by Miss Talbot, the first woman inspector on the Board of Agriculture, who was later appointed Director of the Women's Land Army.



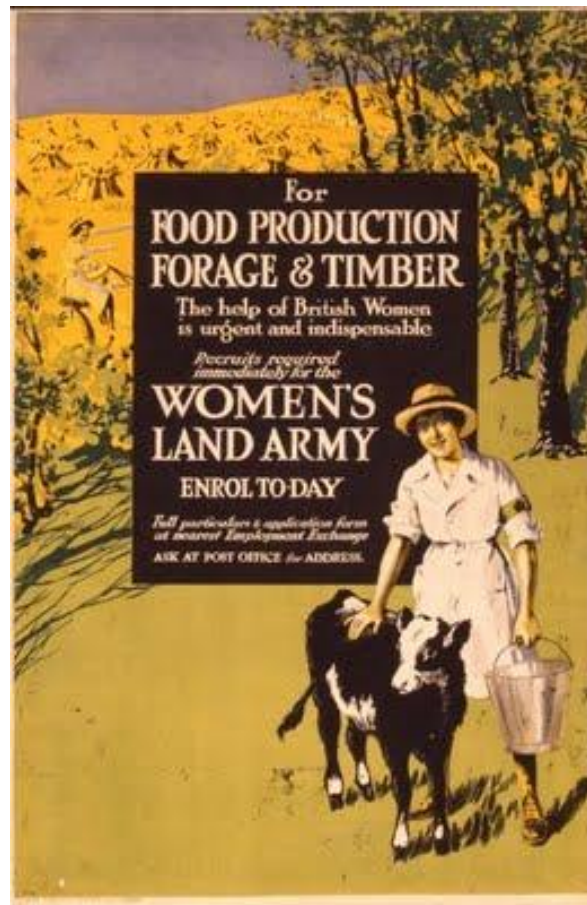
A certificate issued to W.L.N.S.C members

A letter in The Spectator on June 16th 1916 from the Secretary of the W.N.L.S.C. appealed for recruits:-

"The Women's National Land Service Corps asks all young, strong, educated women, who can give their whole time, to come and take a short training for work on the land. We want all we can get between eighteen and thirty five, but particularly want those over twenty five who have had some experience in leading other women. We offer training at 16s a week, including maintenance, to those who can afford it, and free training to those who cannot. We also want for six weeks, from the middle of June, untrained workers for fruit picking, hay making, etc. Will all those who can take their holiday then help to save the home grown food supply of the country?"

By the end of 1916 with the demand for women becoming greater than the small W.S.L.N.C organisation could manage, it was decided by the

Board of Agriculture to incorporate it in the proposed Women's Land Army under the guidance of Miss Merial Talbot as Land Army Director.



A call for the Land Girls

Recruitment and selection

The Land Army was formed in 1917 with three sections, agriculture, timber cutting and forage. Posters were displayed round the Country: "The help of British women is urgent and indispensable. Recruits required immediately for the Women's Land Army. Enroll today". Applicants had to apply to their nearest employment exchange

or post office. It was not easy to be accepted. They had to be eighteen years of age or older, supply three references, two of which had to be their doctor and local minister, the other an employer or similar and a medical certificate. They had an interview before a selection panel and if accepted were required to sign a contract for six or twelve months' service.

The applicants came from many different backgrounds: shop assistants, domestic service and the upper, middle and well educated classes. Although there was a huge need for recruits not all were selected, though 23,000 were enrolled. Miss Talbot believed "nothing would be more damaging to the whole enterprise than to take on a girl who would not stick to the tasks". Once selected, a uniform was issued consisting of made to measure breeches, a knee length buttoned white overall with a belt, two pairs of boots, gaiters and a soft hat. In the summer leggings and in the autumn mackintoshes and jerseys were issued. The Land Army Handbook reminded the girls who they were :-

"You are doing a man's work and so you are dressed rather like a man, but remember that just because you wear a smock and breeches you should take care to behave like an English girl who expects chivalry and respect from everyone she meets. Noisy or ugly behaviour brings discredit, not only upon yourself but upon the uniform, and the whole Women's Land Army. When people see you pass show them that an English girl who is working for her Country on the land is the best sort of girl".

They were initially paid a weekly wage of 18s (90p), increasing to 20s (£1) and 22s.6d (£1.25p) in 1919. The training period varied between four to six weeks at various locations across the country, one of them at Holmes Chapel.

The training provided at Holmes Chapel

The Agricultural College at Saltersford Hall was available and ideal to train the women. It agreed to provide courses of four weeks each and the College was used for six months. The Board of Agriculture paid the college 25s (£1.25p) a week for each student and students were allowed to apply from all over the country. They also required a Management Committee with women co-opted from the Women's War Agricultural County Committee. An eventual Committee of 24 members was formed.

The first 45 women, National Service Girls, entered the College on Monday 14th May 1917. The course provided practical farm, dairy, poultry and horticulture work and a series of lectures on farm management, farm stock, dairy and poultry keeping. Part of the training required being sent out to farms to work with farmers. The courses lasted four weeks with an extra two weeks offered to anyone capable of being a forewoman. There were strict rules in place: students were not allowed to leave the premises after supper, to have visitors unless they were sick, to miss a meal without permission and they had to obtain permission from the superintendent to leave the grounds. They had to make their own beds and keep their rooms tidy, clean their boots in the boot room and not drive nails into any walls. The working day was long - rising at 6.15 to 6.30am; 6.30-8am in the yard; 8-8.30am breakfast; 8.30-9am making beds and tidying rooms; 9-12.30pm general work; 12.30-1.30pm dinner; 1.30-4pm general work; 4-4.30pm tea; 4.30-6pm work in the yard; 6-6.30pm dress and change; 6.30-7.30 lectures; 7.30-7.45 questions on lecture; 7.45-8.30pm supper and prayers; 8.30pm-9.30pm off time; 9-9.30pm in bedrooms. 9.30pm lights out.

The Superintendent of the College was Miss Bowen-Colthurst. Her report on the first set of students who finished their training on 9th June 1917 stated:-

“Hardly any had done farm work before, she had not one single complaint about the long hours, hard work or had anyone reporting sick. The dairy girls have attained an intelligent knowledge of cheese and butter making and one was placed in a dairy making cheese from 75 cows. All the rest of the girls found employment”.



Once employed for three months (or not less than 240 hours service) an official armlet, a green band with a red crown (above), was presented to them for passing proficiency tests in milking, horse work, tractor driving, stacking corn, hoeing and manure spreading. There were further service and proficiency badges as more experience was gained.



Land Girl at the College (IWM)

There were five intakes of girls taking the four week course. At one point there were not enough cows for milking and an artificial udder was used for practising. Later, more cows were available and one girl managed to milk seventeen until her hands were swollen. After the first course there were several cases of illness, mainly rheumatism caused by getting wet and the College called for any warm cast off clothing. It was not an easy life for the girls.

By August training with machinery was included in the course. The Board of Agriculture sent a 16 h.p. Mogull tractor, a Ransome three furrow plough, a Rushton and Proctor threshing machine and a reaper

and binder. The students brought the harvest in with the horse drawn reaper and binder, not only for the College but for neighbouring farms, the College insisting the farmer's own horses be used.

A communication dated 20th September 1917 from the Board of Agriculture stated:- "In view of the facilities available for the training of women which have been offered by private farmers and the limited number of women enrolled under the National Service scheme who still need training for work on the land, Mr. Prothero (President of the Board of Agriculture) has decided it is not necessary to continue for another six months with the special course now being provided at Holmes Chapel. Special thanks for the valuable contribution in carrying out the present scheme".

The final term ended on 22nd October 1917. The training lasted for five months and one week of the six month contract. One hundred and ninety nine students passed through the College for the four week course: 188 completed it; three were not suitable and eight were released on medical grounds.

Training over, the Land Army girls were employed in all aspects of farming. They became proficient in the use of the newly introduced tractor, the "ammunition" of the Land Army. They milked the cows, ploughed the fields, planted and harvested crops, made butter and cheese and worked in market gardens, forestry and even road making. One lady, Mill Jones, worked at Cranage Hall as a Land Girl. One of her jobs was to bring a small cart called a "dandy" pulled by a pony from Cranage Hall to collect drinking water from a spring known as the "Spout" situated at the bottom of Cranage Bank. Cranage Hall did not have mains water at that time. She later married Percy Moody from the village who served in the war. They went to live in Knutsford to run an off licence.



Land Girl Mill Jones and her husband

The Women's Land Army was disbanded in May 1919 after an existence of only two years. Women were finally accepted on the land: farmers not only employed them but took over their training. Miss Meriel Talbot was created a Dame for her services to the Board of Agriculture. Our local farmers and community made an immense contribution to food production helping to feed the nation. It was to their credit as they did not have an easy life. The biggest continual problem was manpower: supplies of conventional farm labour fell by 90% by 1916 and replacement labour had to be found. The release of soldiers by the military accounted for half the labour available throughout the war. Village women rallied in great numbers along with children, and in the latter stages of the war the Women's Land Army filled the gap. The introduction of tractors went a long way to rectifying the problem of

horse and manpower shortages, to become the most significant permanent change in farming practices caused by the war.

The College of Agriculture and Horticulture

The early days

The College, opened in 1895 by Cheshire County Council, was established at Saltersford Hall, Saltersford Corner, Holmes Chapel and was under the control of the County Education Sub-Committee for Agricultural Education. It was to fulfil the need for agricultural education for the sons of the Cheshire farming community. Prior to the opening of the College, students attended Bangor University.



The College

Comprising a one hundred acre farm and extensive gardens, the College provided students intending to work in agriculture or horticulture with sound technical and practical knowledge. Whilst the emphasis was on scientific and technical subjects, it also gave tuition in all aspects of practical farming - valuing, growing, gathering, marketing and storage of fruit and flowers. Research work was undertaken both in the laboratory and on the land, with trials in fruit production, farming practices and forestry. The horticulture division was the only establishment of its kind in the country. Affiliated to Manchester University, two year courses were held in the sciences of farming and culminated in students sitting exams of the Royal Agricultural Society. Later, in conjunction with the university, B.Sc degrees in agriculture were awarded. Funding came from the County and the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Farmers and private individuals from all over Cheshire had always turned to the College to use the advisory service they gave. The College would report on samples provided for analysis, on anything from milk for its fat or acidic content, seed germination, grasses to use for permanent pasture, analysis of manure and fertilisers, farm drainage, even rations for horses by the Denbigh Hussars to illnesses or cause of death in livestock. Dr. Lionel Picton and the General Infirmary in Macclesfield had milk samples analysed. The botanist, chemist or biologist would give a written report or visit to give advice. Mr Reiss of the Hermitage wanted to know about the destruction of pond weed and had samples of water analysed, presumably for drinking water and later in 1917, along with many other local people, advice on keeping poultry and pigs. The work of the College was invaluable to farmer and individual alike.

The effects of the war

By 1914 the College was well established and highly respected both in the county and nationally. In 1911 there were 37 resident students and

others living in the village, their ages ranging from 17 to 20 years; by March 1914 there were 56. Immediately after the outbreak of war and the call for young men to join the services, those students who were eligible enlisted. By September 1915 it was reported the College had provided the army with 40 officers and men. Consequently, the large reduction in the number of students interfered with the running of the College and it became a very expensive establishment. Through the coming years there was continual concern to justify not only the costs but its very existence.

At the start of the war there was a possibility that the College would be required for use as a military hospital for 40 patients. It appears the College may not have been keen on the idea, for a meeting of the Education Committee reported in November 1914, "Steps were taken by the Director of Education and the Principal in connection with the attempt to use the College for hospital purposes." Nevertheless, the village prepared for a hospital by training V.A.D nurses and the newly established Sewing Guild made suitable garments for patients. The College was not needed and early in 1915 these preparations were transferred for use at Somerford Hall where a hospital was established.

In March 1915 Mr John Young, the Principal and Professor of Agriculture, reported that the number of students in residence was down to nineteen. Financed by the County Council and grants from the Board of Agriculture, the Committee immediately started to look for ways to reduce the expenditure, though the Board of Agriculture forwarded a further grant of £100. An estimate of the College expenditure taken for the year ending 31st March 1915, amounted to £5,170, a huge amount of money for the number of students attending. One of the largest expenses was a £300 annual rent for the property on a 65 year lease from 1895. The Principal said it may be possible to economise by concentrating the timetable and regrouping work to allow one member of staff to be withdrawn. A reduction in the number

of household servants to a minimum by closing parts of the building had already been put in place. He proposed lowering the acreage of the gardens by three acres, which would reduce the wage bill. Although the debate about the expenses was continual the College managed to carry on the work for which it was originally intended, and provided an education in agriculture and horticulture for students who were in a position to attend. Farmers' sons who would have liked to attend were unable to do so as they were needed at home to cover for the shortages of farm labour.

Although the College was under the control of the Cheshire County Education Sub-Committee for Agricultural Education, they could not manage without additional funding from the Board of Agriculture and had to get agreement from the Board for anything they wanted to do. By July 1915 the latter started to have doubts as to whether they could justify the grants with the reduced number of students. It was suggested that the College find a means to justify the expenses. (This recurred time and time again.) Despite this, at the end of September 1915, before compulsory conscription, the Faculty of Science of the Victoria University of Manchester requested that students with B.Sc.Honours degrees in zoology, chemistry and botany be allowed to attend the College as postgraduates with a view to obtaining a Diploma in Agriculture. This gives an indication of the status of the College, which was struggling to survive when it had so much to offer. At least with these extra students the College could justify some of the expense. Self-sufficiency in fruit and vegetables, dairy and poultry supplies defrayed some of the cost.

In June 1916 two College students who enlisted at the outbreak of the war were mentioned in Sir Douglas Haig's dispatches for gallant and distinguished conduct in the field. The men were Second Lieutenant J.C. Cornforth of the Grenadier Guards and Lance Corporal C.B. Jones of the Royal Fusiliers Public Schools Battalion.

The soldier students

The War Office decided, in agreement with the Board of Agriculture who financed the scheme, that suitable disabled soldiers and sailors, no longer able to serve in the forces, could attend the College for training in agriculture and horticulture, with a view to them taking over small farms of their own or acting as managers or foremen. The men did not take all the lectures the regular students took, only the simpler practical portions. Most of their time was spent learning practical operations on a farm. Initially, fourteen men took the course which lasted twelve weeks, at the end of which they should be able to obtain satisfactory employment on farms. Those men who were capable received a further two courses to cover all the seasons of the year. The first course started in January 1916 with a charge for board, lodging and tuition of 25s (£1.25p) per soldier. Among the men were manual workers and former public school boys. Several of them obtained posts on farms or in gardens; one was appointed as sub-inspector in the horticultural branch of the Board of Agriculture. The down side of this scheme was that some men regained their fitness and were re-enlisted into the army.

Things were looking up for the College during 1916, with an increase in student numbers made up of soldiers, ordinary students, five women and some scholarship students. The numbers varied from 38 in June to 57 by December. They must have been feeling confident as there was an offer of three new scholarships in September for young men between 16 and 22 years, to provide instruction in wood work, poultry keeping, bee keeping, practical work in the chemical laboratory and fruit and flower cultivation. The entrance exam consisted of an essay from a choice of subjects, tests on arithmetic, elementary maths and the geography of Great Britain and dependencies and a general knowledge “viva voce” (oral examination) with the Principal.

Closure

The Education Committee on the 16th January 1917 was quite shocked to receive a report on the findings of an earlier Sub- Committee meeting. It stated that 45 out of every 100 students attending the College were not from Cheshire, their fees not covering the costs. The County Higher Education budget was paying an average of £67 per student and they were not prepared to pay for non Cheshire students at the expense of local ratepayers. The College had developed into a national institution. The result was a resolution recommending the closure of the College, to take effect at the end of the March 1917 term. Notices of termination were to be given as soon as possible. Once the war was over the College was to be re-opened for the sons of Cheshire farmers. A request was sent to the Board of Agriculture that they take over the College. The response was a telegram from The Board of Agriculture on 16th March, asking if the Cheshire County Council would consider the Board meeting all expenses for the temporary women's education in addition to the present students, subject to fixed contributions from the Council. At a meeting of the Committee on 23rd March the Principal reported that the decision to close "has naturally had some unsettling effect on the continuity of study". The meeting was attended by Mr. A.B. Bruce from the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries and Mr. R.P. Ward, Director of Education. The Committee accepted that the Board was not prepared to take over the College. The County Council would continue to provide a fixed proportion of the running costs and the College would be made available for the training of women for the Women's Land Army.

The cessation of the training of women on 22nd October 1917 meant the further winding down of the establishment. The Board of Agriculture terminated their arrangement with Cheshire County Council the day before, on 21st October. Records are vague as to when the education of normal students and soldiers ceased, except for the report of a meeting on 5th November 1917, which records that the farm and

garden would continue to be worked and research work in conjunction with Manchester University was still operating. The scholarships were discontinued as well as special university scholarships.

In January 1918, a lifeline came for the County Council with an application from the Home Office for the College to be used as an annexe to the Bradwall Training School for the duration of the war. Because of the war, the premises at Bradwall were not sufficient as there had been a large influx of boys requiring training, caused by the lack of discipline at home as their fathers were away with the military. This was agreed. By May, 70 boys were in residence. They came from London, Liverpool, Manchester, Birkenhead, the Potteries and Birmingham. A year later, in January 1919, it was decided to transfer the whole of the re-named Reformatory School to Holmes Chapel and the managers of the Bradwall Training School purchased the lease from the County Council.

The sad decline of a thriving and successful College was all down to the war causing a lack of students. The hope to re-establish the college at Holmes Chapel once the war was had finished was not to be. In 1919 the Cheshire County Council purchased the estate at Reaseheath, Nantwich where the Cheshire College of Agriculture is today.

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Photo of Willie Davies by kind permission of Susan Sproson, his
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Booklets in this series produced by the Holmes Chapel U3A Local History Group:

1. Holmes Chapel before the War
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WW1 and Holmes Chapel & District U3A

In 2011 the Holmes Chapel & District University of the Third Age (U3A) was set up in the village and one of the activities under its umbrella was a local history group. This attracted people who had been involved in research in the past as well as some new volunteers eager to learn more. After an initial period of encouragement and training for the newcomers it was decided that the group would work together on a topic - The Story of Holmes Chapel and district during the First World War.

This is one in a series of booklets describing different aspects of life in Holmes Chapel and district before and during the First World War. A full list of the booklets is given on the inside of this back cover.

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