CHAPTER ONE

The Farm

We saw it first in 1924, on a cold grey morning, lying in an isolated little valley on the eastern slopes of the Cotswolds; eighty-five acres of poor, stony land, overgrown hedges, tumbledown buildings, arable a mass of weeds, and grassland, if such it could be called, full of little bushes, or rushes in the wetter parts.

Six miles from a railway station, well off a road over a swampy piece of common land, and far from a school or village; such, probably, were the reasons why it was vacant. Yet a careful inspection showed that it had good possibilities. It was compact, lying in a ring fence, with the buildings well placed. The house was small but sound. A fine spring of water bubbled out of the ground, and although sadly trodden in by pigs and cattle, it supplied every field on the farm, and there were geological indications that it had never run dry. It was a healthy soil for stock rearing, stone brash (oolitic limestone), 450 feet above sea-level, with a general slope south, and sheltered by higher hills. Most important of all, THE LAND—most long-suffering of all Man's possessions—had been

badly neglected, but not robbed, as the situation prevented the selling-off of all the produce other than on the hoof. We have been told since that on more than one occasion four horses were required to drag out eight sacks of wheat through the swampy common land behind which the farm is situated.

So here was a farm that was secluded, too far from a village for stray cats, stray dogs, and STRAY PEOPLE to be a nuisance. It had a water supply free from pollution—at that time the nearest large village drew its drinking water from a stream which drained two churchyards and six farmyards, with a peculiar flavour and rich colour only appreciated by those reared upon it, who now deplore the tasteless, odourless, and colourless product which has to be paid for by a water rate! The overgrown hedges could be cut and laid, the ditches scoured and the swamps drained. The buildings could be made sound and adequate by our own labour. A road could be built from stone quarried from the hillside (it took a thousand tons and all our spare time for ten years to make it 660 yards long and capable of taking the heavy traffic now imposed upon it). Above all, the land could be cleaned and made fertile. Everything else was dependent on this in our case, every penny of our resources would be absorbed in taking the farm, all we put on the land would first have to come out of it by the sweat of our brow.

The vendor was not available to show us round this ‘Small Desirable Property’ as the auctioneer’s particulars and order-to-view described it. But the lad he employed was found asleep under a hedge while his two neglected horses stood yoked to a plough. He was pleased to point out the boundaries and give any information required.

The last harvest had yielded about forty qrs. of corn. Ten tons of straw and five of hay were available. The roots, such as they were, had been given to a neighbouring farmer to pen off. A few calves were reared, grazed on the common and roadside wastes, and sold as stores. A couple of sows, an odd cow, and a few ducks completed the stock. The last tenant had been there for ten years, was reputed to have come with nothing and gone away with £1,000, a story we did not doubt in view of the unparalleled prosperity agriculture had enjoyed during the Great War and two years after it, which left the farms and farmers poor in everything except money. It was very certain that on this farm far more had been taken out than had been put in.

Leaving word with the boy that we would come again three days later, advising the time by telegram so that the owner could be on the spot, we went on to the village inn a few miles away, not with the sole intention of imbibing strong drink, or spending money on a

lunch (although we did both), but so as to acquire local knowledge. The parson or squire might be able to tell a little if so disposed, but no secret is safe from the village gossip, and elderly labourers, having nothing to look forward to, forget nothing of the past, and will repeat themselves over and over again when the beer is flowing.

A few pints produced a complete summary of the habits, morals, ability, and financial standing of every occupier and landlord back to 1837. All, it appeared, had done well; one farmer born there in the 'fifties had had twenty-two farms in his time and left over £40,000.

The name Oathill Farm, for which we could see no simple explanation on the site, was invariably pronounced 'Olt-hill'. This puzzled us at the time, but pondering later we recognized the truth of the saying, 'Words are the only things which last for ever'. The Brythonic 'Alt', still used in Wales and the west of Scotland, meaning a little stream in a valley, correctly described the farm. Some solicitor's clerk drawing up the deeds perhaps a hundred and fifty years ago might spell it 'Oathill' as a familiar word nearest to the pronunciation as he heard it, but the local labourers, who have never heard of philology, still use Althill, as their fathers did before them. The meaning has been lost since Roman times, but waits for

the understanding of those who have ears to hear. If any reader would care to check this, look at any Oathill, Oatley Hill, or Holthill, on the Ordnance map, and he will find that in every case there are a hill, a little valley, and a stream.

The farm had originally been divided into four large fields, from the open field system of about 1776, for the familiar four-course rotation of winter corn, roots, spring corn, and clover. One of these fields had been subdivided in 1890 to provide a permanent grass field, and this general layout can still be seen on the map. But no rotation seemed to have been followed for at least ten years. The method, if such it could be called, was to leave the land in grass, usually a temporary mixture of rye grass and clover, from which the latter soon disappeared, and then plough a strip for winter corn, and then, when too late for autumn wheat drilling, start ploughing again for spring corn on another strip. After two or three corn crops an odd patch would be put in roots and the rest put down to grass again, complete with the arable weeds which had been encouraged by the corn crops. Much of the land in this district is still being farmed on this ‘neolithic’ rotation, but without the saving grace of being left in grass from time to time, growing poor crops of corn, corn, corn, then potatoes to rob the land a little more, followed by

more corn; a procedure which in the long run impoverishes the farmer as well as the land.

At Oathill as many as six crops appeared as odd patches in one field. All the arable was a mass of couch grass and docks. The permanent grass, mostly bent and broom grass, had tumbled down; there were no signs of clover, and little thorn-bushes were springing up everywhere. The stream, which flowed so clear in places, flooded about three acres; these were covered with rushes for want of a little cleaning, excellent perhaps for the ducks, but a wicked waste of good land, a breeding-place for fluke and other parasites, and an eyesore to tidy farmers.

The buildings consisted of a large stone barn, roofed with Cotswold slates, which is simply the oolitic limestone, split by frost and shaped by hand; a stable, with loft over, for four horses; an open cattle shed; two small loose boxes; three pigsties; a two-bay cart shed. The first two were in a good state of repair, but dark, and with bad floors. The rest were in the last stages of dilapidation, with leaky thatch running water on the walls and washing out the mortar, and all threatening to fall down at any moment. What is worse for stock than a damp, dark, building? The accumulation of the manure in the yard was so deep that the anaemic-looking cow upon it was able to eat the thatch, or the corn sprouting from it. Not a gate on

the farm would swing, several were broken beyond repair, and others missing altogether.

However, to return to the inn. The last round of drinks, by which time we had nearly bought the pub up, produced the information that the farm was also haunted. The occupier was lodging in the village, as he did not care to sleep there at night on his own, and one housekeeper had left the same day as she arrived. Believing, in those days, in very little which could not be proved by chemical analysis, this only interested us from the point of view of driving a better bargain. In passing, it may be mentioned that the only manifestation we have seen which could be mistaken for a phantasm took the form of a large white owl with only one claw. Living in the barn, very tame, and largely depending on vermin we trapped and left for him, he has been handled when gorged with food, and he purred like a cat. Living for something over twenty years, and willing to clear up four or five rats at a time, this kindly spirit of the wild illustrates what a service his feathered brethren must render to agriculture. He finally fell a prey to a poisoned rat baited by the official ratcatchers of the local War Agriculture Committee.

Tramps, we were also told, were a great nuisance, lying about all over the place, and the local people did not care to go down there after dark. Gipsies were reputed to camp on the common and steal

everything they could lay their hands on. A pleasant outlook for a lonely farm!

Fortunately, the writer had learned how to deal with all and every kind of vermin which infest the countryside, so we did not worry overmuch. Normally tramps only camp on farms which are not occupied, and are afraid of dogs and men. They depend largely on begging in the villages when the men are away at work and the women are afraid of them, and give them money and food which they can ill afford. There are only two things a tramp should ever be offered: work, if you are very kindhearted, an offer which he does not want; or personal violence. If you must leave your wife alone in the house, buy a second-hand policeman's helmet and hang it in the hall, and leave the door open. Gipsies are different. Play on their superstitious fears by hiding their death sign where you know they will find it, and they move on without taking their horses out. Destroying all the sallow willow is also a good method of discouraging them, because it is from this that they make the clothes-pegs which are hawked round the villages.

Having advised the time of our arrival, as arranged, we duly arrived at the farm again to find the familiar buff-coloured envelope stuck under the door-knocker, showing that the owner had not been at home to receive it. This simple gesture, we understood, was the

old English farming custom of pretending that one is not too anxious to do business. Just as a third-rate solicitor, bank manager, or civil servant is always busy writing when you are shown into his room, while the really big men in business or the professions are always ready to meet you at the time appointed and deal immediately with the matter in hand.

However, as we had come to inspect the house, and had no time to waste, we intended to get on with it. A ladder from the buildings, a loose window catch on the second story and a strong clasp knife helped us to make an entry. All the lower windows were shuttered and barred, and the front door was locked, double bolted, barred, and chained. These precautions amused us so much that we could not resist the temptation to place the telegram in the centre of the dining-room table, before quitting the house and carefully shooting the window catch, and before returning the ladder to its proper place. On his return the owner would have to think the pet ghost had been busy again.

This visit confirmed our previous impression that the house was small, but sound, with four bedrooms, two sitting-rooms, a kitchen, dairy, and outhouse. In the outhouse were a good pump and sink, together with bread oven and copper. We could add a bedroom and bathroom without any great expense, when time and money

permitted. The usual medieval convenience at the end of the garden could also be replaced by indoor sanitation as there was plenty of water available.

The garden contained an excellent crop of nettles, tin cans, and ashes, with a few mildewed gooseberry bushes and plum suckers. The lawn, over which the pigs roamed, and where the ducks were penned, was redeemed by two fine spruce firs, the relics, perhaps, of some bygone Christmas when a happy family celebrated the festival here in the time-honoured way.

An orchard adjoining the house contained a score of old apple trees, some already tumbled down, others in the last stages of decay, and only one worth keeping.

The rickyard and rick sites elsewhere covered a couple of acres, with old rotten straw, dumps of thatch, old implements, thistles, and other rubbish. This is still far too common on many farms, indicating that the farmers have more land than they deserve; they ought to be able to put it to better use than as a site for the rotting down of good straw, which should have been long since returned to the land; it is a pity if the rickyard cannot grow something better than weeds.

Another walk round the farm, summing up its faults and failings (which I have given in detail) convinced us that we could make a

success of it. It only remained to find the elusive owner and complete the deal.

The assurance and confidence of youth! The elder partner was under twenty years of age, and the younger not quite eighteen. Capital £150. Knowledge and experience? Four years' general farming as a pupil for one, two years' engineering and business for the other. Our greatest asset was a mother with absolute faith in all her children, believing them to have inherited in some small measure the ability of their father, who went to London as the penniless son of a small Scottish farmer to build step by step a successful business. This almost failed at his early death, and she was left to rear and educate five children under sixteen. All were given the best education she could afford, a free choice of trade or profession, but in which they would have to make their own way on leaving school. The older sons safely launched, the two youngest, choosing farming, were backed to the limit of her resources, with a farm bought on mortgage, a little working capital borrowed from an old friend, and a supreme trust in Providence. What more could anyone want, excepting perhaps a mother who was also prepared to pioneer in the wilderness and keep house for her sons. In full measure we had all these things.

It should perhaps be mentioned that any so-called expert on farming, whether farmer, auctioneer, land agent, or county organizer, would have predicted utter failure for this venture. Prices were tumbling, old and capable men were said to be losing money. It is quite certain that had there been a War Agricultural Committee functioning in those days we would never have been allowed to take the farm at all. A bank manager poured scorn on all my plans and schemes, refusing to grant even a £50 loan to tide over a short period. I blushed as I stood before his desk and he talked to me like a delinquent schoolboy, yet in more recent years I have lounged in a chair while a bank director listened with careful attention to my views on financial stability in farming, which have not changed in the smallest detail over the years.

Others may be tempted to do likewise under similar circumstances, so ignore the gloomy predictions of those who have looked on the grapes which are sour. Given the will there is hardly anything which cannot be achieved. Remember that the aerodynamic experts can demonstrate, with all the resources at their disposal, that nothing the size, shape, and weight, and fitted with such inadequate wings, as a bumblebee can possibly fly. The bumblebee, not knowing this, but having the will, does so quite comfortably, every day, collects a little honey, and at the same time

performs a service to agriculture which cannot be measured in millions of pounds, by the fertilization of red clover which is the basis of rotational farming.

From what did such confidence spring? From his earliest youth, the writer felt that there was only one thing worth doing on earth—farm it! I had listened for hours on end to my father's tales of his boyhood days in Scotland, visualizing the windswept mountainside where for eight generations our family fought against the rocks and heather encroaching on the hard-won acres from which a living could only be scratched by incessant toil. An old lady who lived with us used to tell how in the Crimean War her father earned seven shillings a week, with bread at a shilling a loaf, as a labourer in Essex. All this could leave me few illusions as to an earthly paradise on the land, compared with the comfort and security of the home in which we were born. Yet I never had the slightest doubt, and my younger brother shared my enthusiasm and assurance that we would some day become farmers.

All that remained was to find the ways and means. Reared as we were under the smoke pall of a great city, with only a few yards on which to keep poultry and rabbits, and our knowledge of the country gained only at rare intervals, it would seem that we had a long way to travel to realize our ambitions. However, as we got older we

spent many happy days in the country, and helped on a farm in the last years of the Great War.

In my last year at school I took the full course from the Agricultural Correspondence College, then at Ripon, Yorks, and now at Warborough, Oxon. It was well worth the ten guineas it cost, running to some hundred thousand words, a masterpiece of condensation of fact, and without a single line which did not teach me something. I should perhaps mention that I have no interest whatever in advertising this particular college; others may run a similar course, but I am convinced that in this class of training one can only take out as much as is put in by study and application. Personally I almost committed it to heart.

On leaving school, my eldest brother asked me what I intended to do for a living, and told me that my foolish dreams of becoming a farmer should be given up. Seeing that no capital would be available, I should be condemning myself to a life of unremitting toil, in mud, snow, or dust; no holidays, no security, poverty and want, saving all the years for a set of false teeth and a coffin, or finishing in the workhouse. On the other hand, as I had done fairly well at school, for a premium of £50 a sure position could be obtained in the more gentlemanly occupation of a clerk, with security, steady promotion, and a pension at the end of it.

A black moment. Were all my dreams to be dashed to the ground? Toil and hardship meant little to the adolescent finding his strength for the first time, but I did want to make a home for my mother in the country within a very few years. No! I would become a farmer by work, study, and prayer, or die in the attempt. ‘Let me have the £50’, I said, ‘and I will be a farmer before I am twenty-one.’

I then wrote to the farmer for whom we had worked in holidays, and arranged to work for him in return for experience. But I soon saw that this was not the place to learn what I required. A kindly, decent old man was this farmer, but always behind, or in a muddle with the work. No rotation of crops was followed, no balanced rations fed, or any of the other things I had expected to find from my correspondence course in agriculture. I learned later that very few farmers in every thousand at that time used the resources of science which were at their disposal. Much of the labour employed was useless, and from such farms nothing could be learned. The animals were always sick or ailing, the crops spoiled by the weather. This farmer, moreover, never grumbled at or found fault with my work; after ten years at school I expected criticism and would have valued it. He told me I was wasting my life in agriculture, advising me to go back to the town or, since I loved the

country so much, to win a scholarship, go to college, and become a County Education official—he had been told they earned as much as five pounds a week, without soiling their hands—more than he had ever earned in his life, and therefore an incredible sum to one overburdened with debts and mortgage interest, and with seldom a shilling he could call his own.

I thanked him for his advice, but I had no objection to soiling my hands and intended to earn a great deal more than the sum that seemed so much to him, as capital and a wage had got to be found. But first, by hook or by crook, I had got to learn my trade.

I advertised and answered advertisements, spent a few pounds on travelling to interviews, and learned just a little by talking to farmers and walking round their farms.

Paradoxically I found it very difficult to enter this bankrupt industry (bankrupt, that is, in the estimation of the farmers' leaders). Apparently farmers required from £50 to £300 premium to teach one how to lose money. At one end of the scale they looked for cheap labour that would pay for the privilege of working, and those at the other end of the scale spoke highly of the hunting, shooting, and fishing in their district, and hardly mentioned their farming.

At last the right place was found, with a young progressive farmer, who had modern methods of rationing, recording, manuring,

and cropping, and good pedigree stock: no rich man's hobby, his farm, but a sound business concern. He was asking a premium of £60, while by that time my financial resources had dwindled to £40. Putting all my cards on the table, I talked him into taking me. It appeared he was shortly moving to another farm, a long way from the railway station, to which the milk would have to be taken every evening. None of his men would take it, as they would not get home till nine o'clock, for they lived in the opposite direction. This was too late, seeing that they had to start again at five in the morning. It was agreed that I should drive the milk after the men had gone home, and in return, if satisfactory, my premium would be returned as wages after six months.

On that place I learned how to FARM, which means a great deal more than the words convey. Good farming is the cumulative effect of making the best possible use of land, labour, and capital. This must not be confused with neat and tidy farming only, which is often uneconomic; although, of course, efficient farming will always have an order and purpose which is apparent to the discerning eye.

Everything was of the very best of its kind: pedigree horses, both light and heavy, cattle, sheep, pigs, and poultry. I learned that one really first-class beast leaves a bigger profit than a dozen average

animals or a score of indifferent cattle. All consume the same quantity of food and require the same labour, but the margin between cost and selling price bears no comparison. How well that knowledge has served me!

On that farm too, some of the finest judges of their day were frequent visitors, and I owe much to their kindness in teaching me how to recognize the best and not be deceived merely by show condition. What a contrast between the able and talented man, who so freely shares his knowledge, and the ignorant labourer, so common in farming, who is afraid that someone might learn from him and profit by it.

It was part of my work to keep the books, and from them I learned the fundamental reason why such small profits are made in farming. True the farmer cleared about £1,000 a year, but there was £60 an acre invested in land, stock, tenant-right, equipment, and working capital. The total capital was turned over once in three years, in which period with ordinary business it might be turned over thirty times. Therefore the solution must be intensity of production. The farm which could turn its capital over once a year with the same margin of profit would pay three times as well. British agriculture with invested capital of some £30 per acre and an output of £7, turning its capital over once in four years, was not, and

could not be, a business proposition for the average farmer. So simple! I could think it out for myself at the age of seventeen, yet I suppose ninety-nine farmers out of a hundred would rather farm a thousand acres extensively and probably lose money than a hundred acres intensively and make some. True, money in farming is not everything, but we have never learned to farm without it, as land should be farmed and maintained, with fences, roads, buildings, and the wherewithal to reward good and loyal service on the basis it deserves. Carried a stage further, we have since learned that, providing the output per acre is really high, it does not matter how extravagantly you farm, you will still show a profit. On the other hand, however carefully you farm, if the output per acre is low, you will make a loss.

On the practical side I was given an opportunity to try every job on the farm, and learned to milk, drive a team, stack and thatch, and prepare animals for show and sale. In some respects I felt that I was not getting all the practical experience I would have liked, because the busier we were haymaking, harvesting, or the like, the less I seemed to have to do with it. The Boss, knowing that he must be right on the spot when important work was in hand, tended to send me to deal with little matters of business he would normally have attended to himself. I have realized since that in deputizing for him

in showing prospective customers stock he had for sale, or in driving a bargain for him, I was acquiring knowledge which would some day be invaluable to me.

Working from five in the morning to nine o'clock at night, I had few opportunities for spending money. For this I was truly thankful, as my personal expenditure could be reduced to four-pence a month on hair-cutting and as little as possible on essential clothes.

I was very happy in my work, finding no toil or drudgery in it. My employer sometimes took me to shows and sales. He also taught me to ride. He was a very clever horse-master, but weighing fourteen stone and standing six feet three inches, could not ride the lightweight ponies and horses for which at that time there was a great demand. With only a few old crocks, mares, and foals, left over by the army buyers during the Great War, anything that could be hunted sold for a high price. Weighing in those days little over eight stone, and taking very easily to riding, under such a capable master, I think I proved quite useful to him. The wiles and guile of such a man in selling a horse were an education in themselves. He would have one broken-in in a few summer evenings.

Then when cub-hunting started and the meet was close to the farm, he would say, 'George, we will go to the meet to-morrow.' Off we would go, perhaps before five o'clock; the only justification

I can see for fox-hunting is the ride in the early morning. Arriving in good time, he would look for a fairly easy jump, and telling me to follow him, he would put his magnificent heavy-weight hunter at it, and mine would follow in the excitement of the moment. Doing this several times, until he was sure the young horse would jump without question, he would then say, 'Hang about here, after they have finished, until I come.'

In due course he would meet someone looking for a horse. 'Ah, yes,' he would say, 'I've got just what you want. I wonder where my pupil is?' Knowing full well where I was he had little difficulty in finding me. The horse having been duly inspected, the customer would ask if it could jump. 'Oh yes. Jump anything. Now what would be suitable?' Here he would look all around the country, but never at the jump the horse had been over several times. As often as not the customer would suggest the obvious place; and I would be told to put the horse over it, doing so as nonchalantly as possible. Thus another horse was sold. He had a hundred similar tricks, but I never knew him fake a horse, or sell one as sound if it was not. He considered that a perfectly trained hunter was wasted on ninety-nine hunting people out of a hundred, but for the hundredth man he could always find a beauty. His own was a miracle of co-ordination between human brain and equine muscles. Sometimes he would let

me ride it home from the meet or at exercise, and I found it a unique experience. With a mouth like oiled-silk, he would start off at any pace on a named foot. So beautifully balanced was he that he could correct the rider's weight in the saddle, so responsive that a rabbit hole could be sidestepped by a twist of the wrist; he could change his feet at the touch of the leg. Approaching a jump his stride could be shortened or lengthened so that he always jumped at a distance equal to the height of the fence, clearing it with effortless ease, to the comfort and security of the rider. Such a horse could be sold for five hundred guineas, and ruined in a few weeks by some wartime profiteer taking up hunting for the first time.

But these interludes were few and far between, and I always felt a little guiltily after a day's hunting that I was neglecting the serious business of learning my trade. The financial side of hunting made little appeal, as I saw many fooling away the easy money on wine, women, and racing. It also enabled me to form first-hand opinions on a sport which has survived from the dark ages and must be considered an anachronism where modern farming is concerned.

Ethically it is wrong to inflict unnecessary suffering for the gratification of a mere thrill, and for that reason fox-hunting is a disgrace to the civilization that permits it, and a reflection on the mentality of those who take part in it. To contend that hunting

provides employment is to put it on a level with crime and lunacy, for which the same thing could be said. The work and trade associated with the sport could be put to more productive use.

Riding can be enjoyed without hunting. It is to this day my greatest pleasure, and it must be remembered that only about 5 per cent ride straight to hounds, the rest of the field career round the lanes and through the gates. For the good horseman there is always the drag-hunt, which almost invariably develops into a steeplechase. (This, however, makes it unpopular with those who only require a little social activity, the admiration of the crowd, the pomp and pageantry associated with hunting.)

So the days, weeks, and months slipped by. I learned something every day. The men on the farm were very helpful. I never hesitated to flatter or bribe to obtain their knowledge and skill. When one old man complained that the Boss ought to send him out a pint of beer each day if he had got to teach me how to thatch, I instantly offered to buy him a barrel on the day I was satisfied I could thatch as well as my instructor. Never was I so thoroughly taught. Others hearing about this went out of their way to impart their knowledge and they found me a ready pupil. Strange as it may seem there are many in the industry who will not help. Quite recently we offered a rural

craftsman, specially skilled in his trade, £20 a week to teach some boys, and although there was no question of him fearing competition, he refused on the grounds that it had taken him sixty years to learn and he would rather his trade died with him than that others should acquire it easily.

That I would offer to wash the dairy utensils for the dairymaid so that she could keep a date, or stop up all night to help the poultry-maid to pluck and truss poultry, was attributed to my kindness of heart. Little did they know it was simply determination to master every task on the farm, whether outside my interests or not.

A few weeks before my year was up, a new pupil came from the Harper Adams Agricultural College. Having had four years there he was now ready to gain practical experience. In my opinion he was doing things the wrong way round, but nevertheless, from him I learned quite a lot of the theory and scientific aspect of farming, and also the standard textbooks with which one should be familiar.

Altogether this was a very happy and profitable year. I finished with £35 in hand, and a very kind and generous reference, in which I was described as 'the gentlest and most efficient milker' the Boss had ever had, and 'a first-class horseman with either heavy or light animals'. In view of the unfailing kindness and patience he had

taken to teach me, I am sorry that I have been unable to get in touch with him again and obtain his permission to mention his name.

Once more I was up against the problem of finding a suitable situation; the faster British agriculture slipped down the precipice of post-war depression, the higher the premiums the farmers asked. My experience counted for nothing. One farmer told me he had lost £7,000 in the last year in depreciation alone, yet apparently he felt qualified to teach, or did he really want the premium of £200? This surely would only be a drop in the bucket, as he gave no indication of changing his methods to meet the times, but could only curse the Government for repealing the Corn Production Act, under which prices were to be linked with wages.

Then I saw an advertisement requiring a young man to milk twelve cows on a small farm in Essex. I applied, and obtained the situation subject to a month on trial.

It was a small grass farm, heavily stocked with poultry and pigs, and with the cows to keep the grass down. The farmer had little interest in his cattle, apart from the milk cheque, but was a first-class poultryman and did quite well with the pigs.

Taking this job I felt was a descent to the ranks of the farm labourers, and looked round for ways and means to remedy the

situation. Carefully laying my plans, I put my whole heart and soul into the job, looking after the cows as they had never been looked after before. At the end of the month on trial, the farmer said he was satisfied with my work and hoped I liked the situation. I told him at once that I did not intend to stop. At this he was very disappointed and offered me an extra shilling a week, raising me to six shillings together with my board and lodging. This also I refused, and was then asked what I wanted.

My conditions were that instead of milking at 7 a.m. and 3 p.m., it should be done at 5 a.m. and 5 p.m., which would give me four hours free during the day to work on the pig and poultry section and learn all about it. I also required seven and six a week. This extra half-crown I would justify by producing an extra two and sixpenceworth more milk *daily* if permission was given to use the feeding-stuffs in hand by feeding according to yield, and not the same all round, as was his method, giving too much for the dry cows and low yielders, not enough for the deep milkers. Also I required one whole day off per month, not weekly half-holidays between the milkings on Saturdays as was the local custom. The object of this was to enable me to interview other farmers when the time came to try for another place.

Telling me that I would soon get tired of my proposition, he agreed to try it. And so while doing my job as a dairyman I made the opportunity to learn how to run a successful poultry farm. Poultry in my experience requires as much knowledge, care, and attention as any other class of stock, yet more people go into this branch of the industry than into any other, knowing nothing whatever of even the guiding principles on which a poultry farm should be run.

An incident which clearly illustrates this point occurred a few weeks after I went to this farm. A gentleman came with his poultry manager (note the manager) to buy some breeding stock. In taking them to see the birds, we passed a pen of large Buff Rock capons. 'What are those?' inquired the gentleman. 'Capons, sir,' I replied. Nothing more was said until they had inspected the breeding stock and selected what they required. And then, when they were about to leave, the manager said to his employer, 'What about having a breeding pen of those capons?'

A capon is, of course, an emasculated cockerel, and useful only for fattening or rearing chickens. Can anyone imagine the manager of an ordinary farm not knowing what a bullock was?

Telling this story to my employer, he said, 'That's nothing, I once sold a man a hen and setting of eggs. Meeting him later and

inquiring how they had done, I got the reply, “She hatched ten, but I supposed she wouldn’t have enough milk for all those, so I drowned four out of the way”.’

Every possible source of revenue was exploited on that farm. We had a dozen breeds of poultry, four of ducks, two of geese, and turkeys. Even peacocks added their shrill cry to that of guineafowl and the challenge of golden pheasant. Hatching eggs, day-old chicks, broodies, fattened cockerels, and breeding pens brought in a steady income, the rare birds being as profitable as the domestic poultry. Peacocks would sell at £5, yet took no more food than a cockerel, reared under broody hens, followed by capons—as they require heat for six months, and the hen gets tired of them after a few weeks. With the secretive attitude of the countryman my employer would never admit he cleared a profit. Yet I calculated he cleared £400 a year on the poultry, against £100 on the cattle, and as much on the pigs. All this on twenty-seven acres, while the great arable farms of the district were falling down to scrub, as their owners went bankrupt. I saw here quite clearly that it is not the acreage you farm, but the intensity of production you maintain, which determines the financial success of the venture.

As week by week went by I studied the advertisement columns in the agricultural papers, always searching for a suitable vacancy

that would enable me to take another step on the uphill path to becoming a farmer in five years.

At last I found it. An elderly sheep farmer in the far north required an assistant. I applied and enclosed a stamp. The reply came, that although he liked my letter, I was too young, and a year's experience of lowland sheep was insufficient. I wrote again saying that a young horse is easier to break than an old one, that sheep were in my blood, my ancestors having been reared on ewes' milk for generations in Scotland, and begged for an interview.

My request was granted, and I travelled through the night for the interview. How the great range of cloud-topped mountain stirred my blood, the purple heather and white foaming streams, the scent of moss and cool sweet air. What a contrast from the flat desolation of the Essex marshland where I had been working!

No one was at the station to meet me. So, buying an Ordnance Survey map of the district, I walked the six miles over the hills to the farm. The more I saw of the country the more I loved it and felt I simply must get the job. Here it seemed to my boyish imagination was a real man's job, shepherding on these hills.

My reception at the farm did not seem too cordial. The farmer eyed me up and down, like a horse he might be buying. The conversation on his part was restricted to 'Aye' and 'So', and an

occasional 'No', while his wife sat silent without saying a word. However, I said my piece, and hoped for the best.

Then, after a ten-minute silence by the clock, he said, 'We'll look round'. Outside, he silently showed me round the steading, leaving me to make what I trusted were suitable comments. At last we arrived at the Dutch barn, and stood under it, as rain was now falling in a steady downpour. Looking across a field he suddenly said, 'What breed of sheep is that?' I could only just see two sheep through the driving rain, and on the spur of the moment, and for no reason at all, except that I had heard they were kept in that district, I said, 'A Swaledale'. A breed I had never seen and could not have described.

Not a muscle of the farmer's face moved. Then he said, 'Is yon a lamb or a ewe?' Once again I guessed, and said, 'A lamb'. Turning to me, with a smile, he said. 'You'll suit me weel, I shall no bother to take up any references.'

Taking me back into the farmhouse, we sat down to a substantial meal, which his wife had prepared, and over it I learned that the farm extended to some two thousand acres, fifty arable, a hundred enclosed grass, and the rest open moor.

The stock consisted of 650 Blackfaced mountain ewes, and thirty pedigree Swaledales for ram breeding. These were his pride and joy,

and I realized what a lucky guess I had made in naming the breed. According to the law of averages it might well have been a Blackface when I said a Swaledale, as I did not then know the difference. Apart from the sheep there were a few cows which reared their own calves, half a dozen working horses for the arable, and the same number of rough ponies for riding round the moor.

Returning in the train that night I took myself to task very seriously. ‘George, my lad, there is not going to be any more jobs got by guessing. You will now study the photographs in *The Farmer and Stock-Breeder* year books, until you can recognize any breed at sight.’ So to this day I can distinguish any of the thirty-six breeds kept in this country, and nearly all the crosses between them.

By the next morning I was back in Essex, and gave fair notice to my employer. He called me all the names he could lay his tongue to, which hurt me very much at the time, but on reflection I realized that a man who is very annoyed in those circumstances has really valued one’s services very highly. We parted, certainly without any animosity on my part, as I had had the opportunity to show I could manage a herd of cows without supervision, had gained a good all-round knowledge of poultry and bee-keeping, and learned to do a number of useful odd jobs, such as concreting, gardening, and hedge-laying, on which that man was very efficient.

In due course I arrived again at the sheep farm, and hid my lack of knowledge as far as possible by outdoing everyone on the farm in taciturnity, never using two words if one would do, not that unless really necessary, and that only after due reflection. This I found invaluable as a form of discipline, as I usually talk too much, and it gave me far more time to think, and forced other people into loquacity from sheer self-defence.

I soon found that my new employer was a very sick man, and drinking hard. Right from the start I had a lot of responsibility thrust upon me. I had to carry all the orders to the men, and report on the work which had been done. On Mondays the farmer went to market and returned drunk. On Tuesdays he was too ill to get up. On Wednesdays he was in a terrible temper. On Thursdays silent. On Fridays apologized for anything he had said on Wednesday. For the rest of the week was one of the nicest men I have ever known.

All this I found very wearing; but after a bit I learned to find out by Sunday night all he wanted done in the following week. On that evening I would often sit up till midnight, absorbing the accumulated knowledge of his fifty years' experience, and then going to bed with a heavy heart, knowing that for the next four days everyone's life would be made a misery, by a man bolstering up his failing health with spirits. For a drunkard is always a very sick man.

Under my new system I gave the orders to the men throughout the week regardless of what he ordered or countermanded. I often made mistakes through lack of knowledge or sudden changes of weather, which I had not learned to forecast. But on the whole we managed better, and were able to keep labour, which had not been possible before.

Once away from the house, what a grand life it was! With a whole day to work and the horizon for the farm boundary. We sometimes went weeks without seeing a stranger. The post and essential supplies were left at the shepherd's cottage a mile away. There was of course a full day's work to be done on the enclosed land as in general farming, but one had only to glance up, to see the great flock grazing on the green surrounding mountains, which shut in the farm like the rim of a saucer. This never failed to thrill me: some age-old instinct, I suppose, from generations of men whose lives must have been spent in the care and protection of the flocks and herds from neolithic times.

So deep does that instinct lie that the best type of shepherd and flockmaster develop almost psychic powers in the care and protection of their charges. Once on a still and sultry night my employer woke me at one o'clock, and told me I must move the sheep from the lower ground. I was out in a few minutes, but could

not detect any reason for his decision. A storm might be threatening, but as yet there was no rain. However, orders were given to be obeyed. Calling the dogs I set off; and got my first surprise at the river running through the valley. It was brimful and beginning to sweep over the wooden footbridge. Setting the dogs to their task I no sooner had the flock moving than I could hear the river roaring in spate, yet still not a drop of rain had fallen. Then as we mounted higher, continuous lightning began to flicker and flash in the sky on the other side of the range, and I realized that a great storm was raging on the other side and the whole watershed was feeding the torrent which now overflowed the banks.

Then with my sheep safe, I became anxious; what of the shepherd below? I had cleared my section, the flock below would be in greater danger. Running hard for half a mile, being above the rocks and on heather, it was a great relief to find the next flock coming steadily up under the masterly control of the shepherd's dogs. But where was the man himself? With the continuous lightning the whole landscape was illuminated, yet not a sign or a signal, although the dogs co-operated under perfect control, compared with the ragged work mine had put in at an unaccustomed task. Normally they were used to bringing sheep down the hillside to be penned, and never up, as when turned loose the flock find their

own way to the higher ground. Then the storm broke, and dashing for shelter under the rocks, for a thunderstorm is no joke at fourteen hundred feet, I thought no more about the shepherd, a man well able to look after himself under any circumstances when his sheep were safe.

At dawn the storm was spent and down through the rising mist which shrouded the mountainside, I slowly made my way. Reaching the river, I found it still a hundred yards wide, although subsiding, and the bridge swept away. On the other side stood the shepherd. The moment he saw me came the hail, 'Have you seen my sheep?'

This surprised me. 'They are where you put them.'

'Are they safe?' he shouted again.

'Yes,' I replied, 'you know very well.'

'Thank God! Where was my faith? I could no' cross, the bridge was awa'. I prayed for yon to be guided.' His two dogs, hearing his voice, came trotting along the bank on my side of the river looking for a place to cross. I was left to wonder at the prescience which warned my employer of the approaching danger which woke him after midnight; and the telepathic communication between the collies and the shepherd in response to the intensity of thought and concentration called prayer.

Then one day the master had a stroke and collapsed completely, and for seven whole weeks I had complete control of the farm. It so happened that with the exception of the shepherd we had all new labour at the time, and so they accepted my authority without question, although I was only eighteen at the time.

How we worked during those weeks! I learned to trust and rely on the best type of labour, who toiled unselfishly without thought of reward and at considerable personal risk simply to do their job.

Snow is the greatest danger, and at one time all worked for fifty hours straight off, driving the flock in a raging blizzard, at 1,400 feet above sea-level, with the snow in their faces, to save them from the great drifts which trapped many hundreds of sheep on other farms in the district.

All day long, one Sunday, as we rested before the fire, or looked out of the window, the weather steadily deteriorated, until by seven o'clock it was obvious that the sheep would have to be driven from the deep corries in which they would shelter from the rising wind and falling snow.

The shepherd, two men, and myself, set out, heavily clad and with scarves tied over our mouths as the horizontally driven snow made it impossible to breathe without them. Each with the long

northern crook, or cromac, as it is called, made from seven foot of ash, and two dogs at heel, we toiled up the mountainside.

On the top the gale raged at seventy to eighty miles an hour, but in deathly silence as the great plume of snow muffled every sound. So strong it came that we could not stand against it, but crawled over the ridge, the faithful collies keeping close to our sides. Then we went diagonally down till each found the deep, wide, riven gully into which the sheep were already gathering for shelter. These were hustled out, and would move along to the next in the hope of finding shelter, so on each of us depended the whole safety of the flock. As no man could move along except with the greatest difficulty, each would have to guard his own, or have the whole flock smothered under perhaps twenty feet of snow. Sheep can of course live for some days under snow; the record is about six weeks, but they catch cold when released and develop what is called snow fever.

Although on the farm I was now accepted as the foreman—having passed all the orders from the farmer to the men and, now he was ill, making my own decisions—on the open moor when there was work to be done, it was the shepherd who took charge.

There were four open corries to be guarded, so leaving me at the first, he led the other two men on to their places and finally battled

to the most difficult of all, where the full blast of the wind drove the snow in great drifts which would remain all winter.

Rough, roofless stone shelters, rather like grouse butts, had been set up at some time. These had now filled with snow, but by scraping it out it was possible to get a few minutes’ respite from the wind, which in spite of the cold, or because of it, felt like the breath from a blast furnace and driven sand the moment you faced it.

The collies too would bury themselves in the snow, and had to be routed out every time the sheep came silently along like bundles of cotton-wool as their fleeces trailed in the snow, travelling before the wind on the open mountainside which was swept free, but getting deeper and deeper in the places where they sought shelter. A Blackface mountain sheep is almost helpless in even a two-foot drift and has to be dragged out by brute force, or have a track trodden for it to enable it to get out.

And so in the bitter cold and darkness of a long winter’s night we exercised unceasing vigilance until dawn. Then the shepherd moved back with the wind to his first man, who went on to take the shepherd’s place. And then to the next, changing over again, and finally to me. In this way one could go back to the farm for a meal, report all was well on the hill, and return with food and drink for the others.

At midday the weather moderated; but in the late afternoon renewed its onslaught with unabating fury, and the wind went back from east to north, always a bad sign. So we were then faced with another night on the mountainside, as the sheep started to come again to the hill. They had grazed on whin and gorse all day on the lower slopes, which were only partially covered with snow, the drifts forming only in the deep valleys in the bottom, and the sheltering places on the top. For a mountain sheep farm, or hirsel, is selected in such a manner that food and shelter can be obtained by the stock; but no protection can be devised from snowdrifts, as sheep seem to have no self-preserving instinct in regard to them; which is strange in such intelligent and self-reliant creatures.

On the Tuesday morning the flock was still safe, but the shepherd was suffering from exposure and exhaustion, and it was agreed that the other two men should take him back to the farm, the old man first exacting a promise from me to continue minding the sheep until dark, when I would be relieved if the weather did not improve.

With the resilience of youth, fortified by rum and milk, from which the greatest benefit is derived by one who normally never touches alcohol—proving it can be a good friend, if sometimes a bad master—I was able to continue slowly moving backwards and

forwards on the mile-long stretch; though with a falling wind, going round with the sun, the danger to the flock became less every hour. At dark they were safe, and I slowly picked my way home, very, very tired but truly thankful that I was equal to the hardest physical task that might come the way of any farmer, and compared with which the hardest day's threshing is but child's play, because it does not go on all night. Reaching the house at nine o'clock, exactly fifty hours from when I left it, I went to sleep immediately I sat down in the warm kitchen.

The next day we rested, all ordinary work being at a standstill, but then we had to be hard at work again helping neighbours to dig out their sheep trapped in drifts; for nowhere do you find such genuine co-operation as between the best type of sheep farmers.

Many hundreds of sheep were lost, and many more sadly reduced in condition, which involves a whole cycle of troubles: weak lambs, no milk, and later in the season ravages from the green-bottle maggot-fly.

The shepherd made little progress towards recovery, so that at lambing time I found myself shepherd as well as foreman. I went each evening to his cottage for advice and then followed it as well as I was able; it proved an invaluable experience.

The shepherd was a man who will always remain in my memory: a simple Galloway shepherd, who had strayed a little from his native heath, who in the true sense of the word gave his life to the sheep. An ignorant fool to some, a morose old man to others, but finding that I never spared myself in looking after the flock, he opened his heart to me and taught much that has added pleasure, interest, and enlightenment to my life. From him I learned much of the age-old wisdom of the hills. Almost unlettered, yet with a mathematical mind worthy of a senior wrangler or famous astronomer, his calculations and observations of celestial phenomena, based on Celtic folklore (of which he had a great stock) held me spellbound. His simple laws, passed on *en bloc* twenty years later to an instructor in astro-navigation, may yet revolutionize the teaching of one of the most difficult branches of practical science.

Whole books have been written on standing stone circles by great and learned archaeologists without coming to any conclusions, yet this untutored peasant could demonstrate them for what they are, calendrical observatories. From his teaching I can calculate the time within a quarter of an hour at any season of the year by a glance at the stars, or the age of the moon in days for any date.

Marking the positions of Deneb, in the constellation of the Swan, at dawn on the day the rams were turned in with the flock, the shepherd expected the arrival of the first lambs when Vega occupied the same position at sunset. While other people, using gestation tables, roamed the hillside night after night looking for lambs, our man would remain tranquilly in his cottage, saving his energy until the stars showed that the lambs were due.

With the decline of physical strength his mental faculty became more acute. At no time did he confuse astronomy with astrology or other pseudonymous science, but his intuition was uncanny. One day the farmer's wife told me that as he could no longer look after himself he would have to be sent to an institution. Knowing it would kill him, I threatened to leave on the day he was sent, which compelled her to drop the project. The same evening, as I approached his cottage, I saw him standing on a little hillock before the door, leaning on his long crook and with a plaid over his shoulder. From here he could survey the valley and the heights beyond. As he turned to me, his long beard and his piercing eyes, burning bright with fever, gave him a druidical appearance. The setting sun shining through the clouds and throwing a halo round the great riven peak of Black Law behind him, completed the illusion. Before I could speak a word, he held up his hand.

‘My son,’ he said, ‘for what you have done to-day you will receive your reward. All that on which you set your heart will be achieved. Those that work with you will prosper, and any who work against you will be cast down. You will spend the best years of your life in a fat and sinful land, yet whenever you set foot upon the hills my spirit will guide and comfort you.’

What could I say? Two years before I had been confirmed in a fashionable London church. A well-fed and comfortable-looking bishop, exuding wellbeing from every pore, had laid his hands upon my head and intoned his apostolic blessing; and in my heart I had felt what a farce it was. Yet here in the shadow of the great hills, from this unwashed, half-starved, but utterly sincere ascetic, who dwelling in the solitary places of the earth had found for himself many of the eternal truths, I seemed to receive something concrete: a real and driving force that would make his words come true.

Cheered and fortified by the old man’s prophecy, I threw myself more wholeheartedly than ever into my work. The future might be foretold, but it could only be achieved by constant application and study, unremitting care and attention to detail.

We had a wonderful lambing season that year, the weather having relented after playing havoc with so many flocks in the district during the great blizzard. As the days lengthened I was

working eighteen hours a day, directing the work on the enclosed land and shepherding the hill. I was completely happy and contented in my work, experiencing a sense of divine vocation which I have never lost in doing anything in connection with farming.

At last my employer made a partial recovery from his serious illness. We rode together round the farm and up on to the hill, now white with ewes and lambs in the spring sunlight. For once he found fault with nothing, being deeply moved to be out again and on his own mountainside, always known as 'the Hill'. I seized the opportunity of pressing the shepherd's case; and he quite agreed with me that the old man should be allowed to die where he had lived, if someone could be found to look after him. Contentedly we rode on. Suddenly, he said, 'George, how much money have you got?'

Wondering, I replied, 'About £60, sir.'

'Well,' said he quietly, 'I am prepared to take you into partnership without capital. I, like my shepherd, am finished on the hill, but your youth and strength, and the ability you have shown, convinces me that you can manage it for me.'

'You are very generous, sir, and I have done nothing to deserve it.'

‘Maybe not,’ came the reply, ‘but you have been looking after this place as if it was your own, and I realize that you will not stop long in any paid position. For the little time I have left, money means very little to me, but the flock is my life’s work. I can only give you half of all I’ve got, my wife must have the other when the time comes. But her share will be no good without someone who can show—has shown—the sheep come first, last, and all the time. Think it over and tell me on Sunday.’

A very tempting offer, this. No books were kept and no valuation made. Hill farmers are often so superstitious that they do not even count their sheep for fear there should be less next time. The bank book is the only record. If the balance is better than the previous year at the same date, all is well. If not, it cannot be remedied, except by work and prayer during the following year. A file of newspaper clippings giving the numbers and prices of ewes and lambs sold at the annual sales is the only indication of the value of the farm, the produce from the enclosed land being consumed on the spot, sufficient cattle and wool being sold to pay the rent and wages. If the farm changes hands the stock is valued by the neighbours, at considerably more than the market price, as an open hill farm is valueless without the stock which have become acclimatized over many generations to the particular mountainside.

As near as could be calculated the share offered would be worth about £2,100. £300 a week for doing what was only my duty by my employer and the flock during the seven weeks I had complete charge. On the other hand, so small is the gross return from this type of farming, my share would only bring in about £140 per annum. Also I could see no real future for improvement: the hill was steadily deteriorating for lack of cattle and wethers, which are no longer kept owing to the changing demand for young mutton and beef. To attempt reseeding is to attract other flocks from the open sheep-walk and the poisoning of the fresh grazing, for a sheep's worst enemy is another sheep.

I could put up with the farmer, who since his illness had given up drinking, but I disliked his wife, and had in any case set my heart on going into partnership with my younger brother; and so in due course I turned the offer down.

Then for a few more months I carried on as usual. The great annual sheep sale came; it was my responsibility to get the flock safely to market. The master and shepherd would come later—it was their last sale. Our stock made a higher average and for a larger number than ever before. Congratulations poured in on every side, the other shepherds accepted me as one of themselves, and I felt it was one of the greatest days of my life.

On the strength of such a good sale, a neighbouring flock-master made an offer to take over the farm to run with an adjoining property, and on pressure from his wife, and the assurance that the old shepherd could keep his cottage, my employer agreed to sell. So once more I was free, and with many expressions of goodwill, we parted.

After a short holiday, during which I endeavoured to catch up on my studies in the theory and science of farming, which I had neglected for want of even a spare half-hour at night, I obtained a situation in Oxfordshire. Here again I went for a month on trial. The job seemed too good to be true, as I was to be allowed to have a little land of my own on which I could keep some stock. Only the customary hours were worked, so that it would be possible to look after my animals early and late, and in the winter I would be permitted to fit it in with my ordinary work when the days were short. I felt I had learned how to *farm* in Derbyshire, with good stock and modern methods; how to do many odd jobs and make profits out of sidelines in Essex; how to work and take responsibility amongst the rocks and heather of the north; but here I was taught how to *live.* Mine was a kindly and a considerate employer who ordered his life on Christian principles, a very great change from the hard-driving, hard-swearing, and hard-drinking

farmers I had found elsewhere. Never seeking to take advantage of anyone, he was true and just in all his dealings; an excellent example to any young man who has to make his way in the world. His sound advice, and kind recommendations to merchants, auctioneers, and traders proved invaluable when we took Oathill Farm. From his wife too I received many kindnesses for which I wish to place on record my appreciation.

It was a typical Cotswold farm, mostly arable, and with a hurdle flock to maintain fertility. Milking cows had replaced fattening bullocks, but otherwise it was the old traditional system which had served English farming so well for many generations, but was breaking down under changing economic conditions. The old test that a farmer should get a 'rent' off his sheep, another off the corn, and a third off cattle, with which to pay one each to the landlord and labour, having the other for himself, no longer applied. Labour alone wanted two 'rents', and if the landlord had the other there was nothing left for the farmer. The only remedy would be to increase production with, say, pigs and poultry, as an extra section to balance increasing costs, and not to sacrifice a fine system which had proved its worth. The paltry expedients by which many farmers tried to meet the situation were exposed by an old labourer when he said to me, 'If it don't pay to do well, master, it can't pay to do bad.' I saw

quite clearly the good qualities of the system, by which fertility is maintained, and the remedy for the faults, which I hoped to incorporate in our own methods when we were able to take a farm. Meanwhile, I spent a very happy and enjoyable year, learning to love the Cotswold country, which like its people was poor but honest and would respond to good treatment. The land was cheap to rent or buy compared with other districts, and so I asked a local auctioneer to find us something within our means, and with ample scope for youth and energy.

During the years I was learning farming my brother had not been idle. For two years after he left school he helped an elder brother, who was starting a new business in what was then a completely new industry with a great future. Building their own factory, designing new and wonderful machines, training labour, organizing an office system, and creating a demand, he had unique opportunities to develop his talents and earn money. Yet in spite of all the thrills of business building and a comfortable and assured future, the call of THE LAND was too strong, and so George and Frank Henderson, FARMERS! entered into partnership on the 4th day of March 1924.

CHAPTER TWO

The Plan

In the few weeks between singing the agreement and taking possession of the farm, our complete plan for farming the land and stocking it was carefully drawn up, the financial aspect also being carefully budgeted. It is interesting to look back now and see that through all the changing fortunes of agriculture it has never been necessary to change more than a few details of it. Working on the assumption that we would be able to live on the income from stock, using the return from corn sales for debt repayment and improvements, it was calculated that we could establish ourselves as tenant farmers in seven years and then buy the farm freehold in a similar period. The first step was achieved in five years and the second in another five, which indicates that our plan was not too ambitious.

We believed then, as we do now, that the greatest tragedy which had overtaken agriculture was not the repeal of the Corn Production Act, under which prices were to be maintained and linked to wages, but the Agricultural Holdings Act under which tenant farmers were

given freedom of cropping, or in other words, freedom to rob their holdings, incidentally and inevitably robbing themselves in the long run, for the preservation of fertility is the first duty of all that live by the land. One hears a lot about the rules of good husbandry; there is only one—leave the land far better than you found it. In the soil lies all that remains of the work of countless generations of the dead. We hold this sacred trust, to maintain the fertility and pass it on unimpaired to the unborn generations to come. The farmer above all must have faith in the future, even the narrow demands of national extremity must not outweigh his judgement and justify the exhaustion of his farm, for a civilization lasts but a thousand years, while in his hands lies the destiny of all mankind.

In the most difficult years of depression a really good crop would clear expenses and cashed through stock would show a reasonable profit. Yet so many farmers tried to remedy the situation in which they found themselves by growing a bigger and bigger acreage of corn, with an inevitable smaller and smaller yield, to be sold at lower and lower prices as the years rolled by, until they were as insolvent as their land was impoverished; and in many cases farms became derelict. The solution, which appealed to some, of tumbling the land down to grass and farming with the proverbial ‘sheep dog and a roll of netting’, was also doomed to failure, because profit

depends on intensity of production, and the stock they could carry was no more, and in many cases a great deal less, than could easily have been maintained on arable land. However, this system had the saving grace that if left Nature to preserve the inherent fertility of the soil, which the farmer showed himself incompetent to manage.

Even the National Farmers' Union at that time advocated a subsidy on arable land as a remedy on one hand, and advised their members to reduce wages on the other—which resulted in the Agricultural Wages Act—without any subsidy. In more recent years a subsidy has been advocated on wages—yet never once did they say, 'Make your farm so productive that you can afford to pay good wages, or teach your men to be so efficient that they can earn them'.

For us the wisdom of the ages was available. A hundred and fifty years of British farming had proved the value of rotational cropping, whereby fertility can be indefinitely maintained by the return in proper order of the manurial residues of the crops grown; and who were we to change it? A five-course rotation, fallow crop, corn, corn, ley, corn, had been common on the Cotswolds, and was well suited to our requirements and the layout of the fields.

In view of the dirty and neglected state of the arable a thorough cleaning of the fallow would have to be the basis of our farming. The destruction of couch grass, one of the most difficult and

expensive weeds to eradicate, would be our chief problem. To follow the usual method of working out with many cultivations, collecting and burning, we believe to be the greatest mistake a farmer can make. This robs the land of fertility to a greater extent than the taking of a heavy crop of wheat, and leaves behind tiny pieces of root ready to grow again and befoul the field with this obnoxious weed. Ploughing in the weed every month from February to August will thoroughly exhaust and destroy it, and fertilize the land as to the equivalent of mustard grown for green manure. Our method, still believed by many farmers in the district to be wasteful and risky, was the basis of our rotation, yet on their farms we see the 'squitch' fires burning year after year, yet we have never had to destroy a handful by this slow and uncertain means. One-fifth of our land was to be cleaned each year by continuous ploughing. Coltsfoot, another troublesome weed in our early years, was easily overcome by deep ploughing, or as deep as the nature of the soil would permit. Thistles, another bugbear of farming, were overcome by the same means and by planting winter corn. Docks are the only weed which continue to be a nuisance; a field will appear free from them for years, until a deeper ploughing germinates a full crop which can only be laboriously removed by pulling.

Once cleaned a field would grow two good crops of corn if generously helped with artificial manure. The use of artificials is only justified by the intention of making a bigger and bigger manure heap. To sell off corn and straw grown by chemical manures should be made an indictable offence.

'Seeds', the common term by which farmers describe the mixture of clover and temporary grasses, and the basis of fertility in rotational farming, was very difficult to establish in our early years; but heavy manuring with farmyard dung has brought about such an improvement that a good crop of self-sown clover can be depended upon to appear on any stubble in a wet autumn.

After clover, penned off or dunged, a fair crop could be grown, but here again artificial manure justified its use to provide more corn and straw to be consumed on the holding.

Yields have been carefully checked and tabulated over the years, and have justified our belief in the proper use of every source of available manure. Superphosphate and sulphate of ammonia have given satisfactory results every year except one. Potash has not justified its use, from the point of view of increased yield (though may be useful in maintaining a balance), once a field has been heavily dunged in the rotation.

Wise and thoughtful people in recent years have drawn attention to the misuse of artificial manures. In our experience they do no permanent harm if used in conjunction with farmyard manure and ploughed-in green crops. The health and stamina of stock and crops is not affected as long as the balance is maintained and the cycle continued of—better crops—more stock—more manure—more humus—and more corn to be consumed on the holding.

Once a field had been cleaned of couch by thorough bare fallowing then roots could take their place in rotation and add to the stock-carrying capacity of the farm. It is hopeless to plant even potatoes, which are considered a cleaning crop, where couch abounds, for its spreading roots will penetrate right through the tubers themselves (and also, as an old gardener told me when I was very young, right through a man's heart, but perhaps he was speaking metaphorically).

Our livestock scheme was more ambitious, if on a modest scale. After paying the small ingoing of tenant right valuation, and taking over the dead stock and machinery which was sufficient to work the farm, only £200 was available, and this at a high rate of interest. Yet nevertheless we determined to have nothing but pedigree stock. For others, the risks, dangers, and disappointments of the open market; in which one as often buys disease, vice, and trouble as healthy and

profitable stock. For us, only the best would be good enough. We could not buy it, so we would have to breed it. We therefore allotted £50 for each section, poultry, cattle, sheep, and pigs. Each branch would have to develop out of profits. In this way our experience would always be equal to the stock we had to manage, without the temptation to invest capital too heavily on a boom in one section, and lose it in the next slump.

Hedge-laying and tree felling were also carefully considered. There were a hundred chains on the farm, and all except seven were badly neglected. We sold £60 worth of firewood out of them in the first year, which indicates the state in which we took them over. Surface roots spread a chain into the fields, robbing the crops and breaking the implements.

The buildings would be reconstructed to accommodate the stock, and a road built, when time and money were available.

Labour presented little difficulty. We decided to employ one man for the first year, to help with the hedging and ditching, until the younger partner had gained practical experience. The man's wages could be more than half met by the sale of firewood.

For ourselves, we adopted the principle 'the world forgetting, by the world forgot'. We intended to work about eighty hours a week, or twice the output of the ordinary labourer, allowing for the fact

that twenty per cent of their time is wasted for want of careful planning and real interest in the job. If it were not, they would not be labourers very long. On the other hand we proposed to live on half a labourer's wage, which is quite easy if a good part of one's food is produced on the farm. This method can be recommended to anyone who cares to try it. One acquires the serenity of outlook only usually found in a monastery. One is not troubled with second-hand opinions absorbed from the daily paper. In fact for the first five years we did not buy one.

It may be that man is intended for higher things than looking after lower animals, but we were happy and contented, with simple living, the health and vitality of youth, our plans and dreams, being our own masters, and serving the LAND. In the hours when other young men of our class were shooting, playing cards and tennis, or taking a girl to the pictures or on the river, we were working. For everything one has in this world a price has to be paid. The hours we put in then have paid substantial dividends ever since, even if we missed some of the love, light, and laughter which is the prerogative of youth.

To some this book will appear egoistical and boastful, and the writer regrets he cannot strike the modest note that characterizes the work of the best farmer-authors. But it should be remembered that

we have always lacked the courage to launch out on anything that was not backed by sound principles of which we had a thorough grasp. It is said that even a fool can learn by experience; we have always preferred to learn from others. Once when I was a pupil and helping to cut in half a very hot hay-rick, which had heated almost to the point of spontaneous combustion, and sweat was blinding me and soaking my clothes, a farmer came along. After watching for a few minutes, he said, ‘You are a very lucky young man’. ‘Why, sir?’ I inquired. ‘Because you are getting this experience for nothing; someone else is paying for it.’ How true. Needless to say we have never had a hot rick on our farm. It is the same with almost everything; we studied, compared, and observed before attempting it. Somewhere there is always someone who is doing a job a little better and there are many who are doing it a great deal worse; from either a lot can be learned. Now if we were to set up in business as art critics or designers of ladies’ underwear, only then could a book be written on our ludicrous adventures in a business of which we know nothing at all. To us farming is a very serious occupation, and successful farmers, like millionaires, seldom smile. The lighthearted manner in which authors describe being thrown at every jump, or funking it altogether, speaks well for their courage. I was taught by an expert how to present a sound, trained, balanced, and collected

horse knowing exactly what it could do, otherwise I would never have had the intestinal fortitude, spelled with a capital G, to attempt it. It is very much the same with our farming.

CHAPTER THREE

The Poultry

The poultry section, the most important branch of our farming both from the point of view of profit and of the maintenance of fertility, has been built up from the very smallest beginnings.

In the autumn of 1914 we were asked to look after a small pen of Light Sussex for a gentleman who wished to go and help clear up an odd spot of trouble on the Continent. He expected, in common with many thousands of his fellow countrymen at that time, that it would all be over in a few weeks or months.

This we were quite happy to do, without also realizing that we would continue day by day for nearly five years before our trust would be completed. Every day we fed and watered the birds, collected the eggs, entering the number in a book, selling them each week. The cash account showed the sales of eggs, and in the opposite column the expenditure on feeding-stuffs. Thus at the early age of eight and ten respectively we started a system of bookkeeping which in the course of time would grow into the carefully analysed accounts which to-day enable us to show the cost

of producing anything on our farm from a day-old chicken to a fully trained farmer over a period of twenty years.

By the spring of 1915 it was disclosed that Lord Kitchener had prepared for three years' war, so to maintain our trust we set two broody hens, reared the chickens, sold the surplus birds, and banked the profits.

It is interesting now to look at the old record, in which childish handwriting made such entries as '19 May 1918, Poultry not cleaned out till afternoon, daylight raid preventing in morning.'

Apparently we took our work very seriously, regretting that the birds were not cleaned out on Saturday morning. Another entry: 'Eggs 7d. each. Retailed by shop at 9d. same evening. Profiteers! Retail our own in future.'

Cockerels made twenty-five shillings each at the top of the market. A striking contrast from the controlled prices in the Greater War of 1939.

And so month by month and year by year we carried out our trust until 1919, when a somewhat battle-scarred warrior returned to civil life, and we expected to return the stock and hand over the profits. The accounts were duly presented, and carefully scrutinized by the owner.

'You haven't charged anything for labour,' he said.

‘No,’ said the junior partner, ‘it was a pleasure to look after them for you.’

Did the senior partner detect a tear in the eye of the man who had faced death, disease, and disaster, in carrying out his duty for over four years? Strange, but true. Somewhat huskily, he made over the birds and profits for our trouble.

Never was youth so richly endowed! The stock had grown from six birds to twenty-seven, a good strain of real old-fashioned Light Sussex, originally obtained from one of the founders of the Light Sussex Club in 1904. They had been very closely interbred, but any lethal mutants must have been bred out, as no serious fault ever appeared. Big, fine birds, not very good layers as judged by modern standards, but with health, vigour, and longevity, for which in recent years many poultry breeders have searched in vain, after breeding for egg production and laying-test winners. It is our carefully considered opinion that more harm has been done to the poultry industry by misuse of the trap-nest than by any other modern innovation.

The junior partner looked after the flock, while the elder was away learning farming. And then, when we took the farm, the birds were brought down with the furniture, to lay the foundation of the stock, which in later years has been sold by the thousand, some

birds going as far north as Leningrad, and others as far south as Ceylon.

In 1925 two sittings of eggs were brought from the strains of two of the most successful breeders of their day, Mr. Marcus Slade, and Mr. Rossal-Sandford. This blood incorporated with our own stock increased egg production, without loss of size or stamina, by nearly 50 per cent. Only once since have we introduced new blood, and that from the original Rothschild strain, kept pure by that very capable and successful breeder over a great many years, Captain Coates, of Kilworth, Leicestershire, grandson of the founder of the first Herd Book; and who could know more of the value of pedigree breeding? His birds matched ours in every point we value. Over the years, of course, we have tried stock from other breeders, but in no case have we found fresh blood worthy of incorporation in our strain. It may be interesting to note that after thirty years of line breeding, the chickens rear and thrive as well from the pure pens as the sex-linked cross with Rhode Island Reds from which one would expect hybrid vigour.

As from 1926 we have had as many as ten separate pens, the cockerels used never being closely related to the hens, although of the same strain. How often have we noticed the poultry farmer buying trouble who thinks he must have fresh blood. Breed close

and cull hard is a sound principle in practice, and is supported now by the findings of the leading scientists in the field of Mendelism and genetics. In our experience you can breed anything you like in five generations by careful selection, and ruin it in one by haphazard mating, or careless management.

For the first year at Oathill we reared as many chickens in the spring as our limited resources would permit, and the number of broody hens available. One hundred and ninety-nine out of two hundred and one hatched. How they revelled in the sunshine and enjoyed the fresh grass and insect life. What a change from how we had reared their mothers and grandmothers, cooped up on a tiny space polluted by the smoke and grime of London. In that year too we were free from the depredations of ground and winged vermin, which are the most annoying of all losses because it is the finest and best birds which are always taken.

Of the two, ground vermin are the worst, because they kill simply for the sake of killing, whereas birds of prey only kill what they can eat or carry away. Poultry are never safe, even at night, from foxes, rats, stoats, and weasels, unless suitable precautions are taken to protect them from these pests.

Good houses, which are closed regularly as soon as the birds have gone to roost in the evening, are essential. Before all our large

poultry houses we have an ordinary steel door-scraper mat, made from flat bars on edge, up which no fox has ever ventured; it even puzzles the farm cats or dog to negotiate them until they learn to jump right over. It also keeps out lambs or pigs, who are tempted to enter for shelter or in search of food.

Small-mesh wire netting or shutters are fitted to all open-fronted houses, because rats, stoats and weasels will sometimes manage to squeeze through ordinary two-inch mesh netting which is often fitted to poultry houses. Although they seldom attack adult birds, they will kill scores of young chickens, which may have just been moved from the brooder houses, if they are able to gain entry through the smallest hole. Occasionally we get a rat which will kill hens at night; it is one which has invariably taken up its quarters somewhere inside the house, and it has to be found and destroyed at all costs. If a rat only tears a hen badly, the other birds will resort to cannibalism and finish it off.

In guarding against stoats and weasels it must always be remembered that it is possible to pull a dead stoat through your thumb and finger when the tips are pressed together, and it will be realized through what an incredibly small hole these destructive animals can squeeze.

There are many well-known methods of killing rats, all of which should be employed where possible; well-trained cats usually prove to be the most effective and persistent means of destruction. The stock at Oathill usually consists of about a dozen, all descendants of a cat we brought with us twenty years ago. Poisoning, in places where the cats cannot reach, together with trapping and snaring, has kept us reasonably free, although we occasionally get a plague of them, if the larger arable farmers in the district leave their corn ricks too long and breed a few hundred to be let loose when the corn is threshed. We have seen them running across the fields in droves.

With stoats and weasels cats are unsatisfactory, as they object to the offensive odour, and seldom attack. If chickens are killed in the open by these animals a little patience will usually be rewarded if one waits with a gun, as they soon return to the scene of their kill, and appear to have little fear of human beings, apart from actual movement. If there are several stoats and weasels about (and the appearance of one of these animals is usually a sign that there are others in the vicinity), a dead chicken, suspended over a carefully set trap, will usually prove an effective bait. Unlike rats, stoats and weasels are nearly always on the move, so that if no losses are experienced for three days, it is fairly certain that the marauder has passed on.

Foxes are the most serious menace with adult birds, and what is most annoying to the poultry-keeper is the fact that if there were no hunts there would be no foxes. In countries like Holland, where the farmers will not tolerate them, the appearance of a single specimen is reported in the newspapers. But I do think that the majority of losses are due to the neglect and carelessness of a few farmers who teach foxes to take poultry by failing to shut their birds up directly they have gone to roost. The fox renders some service to agriculture by destroying rabbits, and we always regret having to kill one out of the way. We have lost about forty birds in thirty years, but to maintain such an average means that every fox that takes a fowl signs his death warrant. If he only runs through the poultry he is left alone. They are not nearly so difficult to destroy as is generally supposed; their proverbial cunning is ill matched against the patience and knowledge of man. But with these supersensitive animals it is a sound rule never to attempt to shoot, trap, poison, or snare as a single remedy, but to employ every possible method from the first and at the same time.

It is a remarkable fact that a fox, especially a vixen hunting for her cubs, will inspect a dead fowl suspended over a trap set in a deep ditch and pass on to a poisoned bird, examine it carefully from every direction, and finding no trap take the bait without suspicion.

Or going the other way and suspecting poison in the first will go on and blunder into a trap in an attempt to pull down the bird in which no poison can be detected. On the other hand, if both trap and bait are avoided, a wire loop set six inches above the ground in a suitable hole in the hedge may prove that many methods justify the trouble taken.

That we have been able to observe this many times is due to our waiting in a suitable position with a gun; and the fox having been detected while still out of range, has had the incentive to take a hurried meal which has been so thoughtfully provided elsewhere.

At the same time, while employing all the methods which can be devised, I have shot foxes at less than forty yards' range, with no more cover than lying down in a patch of rough grass in the middle of a large field.

In many cases a rabbit is a more suitable bait than a dead fowl for trapping. For poisoning a rook can be recommended, as the strong smell tends to disguise the preparation used. A few grains of cyanide of potassium is all that is necessary, and domestic animals do not tend to eat these birds, even if given the opportunity, while foxes frequently do under natural conditions.

Farmers who are reluctant to use drastic methods, or who find that poison is not safe, would find a two- or three-section poultry

coop or fattening crate a satisfactory trap. Place a suitable bait in the end section and close the slide. The middle sliding bar should be made to run very freely, weighted, and supported by a light twig which will be brushed out as the fox enters, dropping the sliding bar on the trap-nest principle.

A log of wood supported on a Y-shaped stick has been used successfully, where entry has been made under wire-netting, but it is rather on the hit-and-miss principle. A better means, but requiring a little more ingenuity, is a bent-down sapling with a wire loop, the springing of which pulls the foe right off the ground when the trap is sprung. Sufficient to lift eighteen pounds is necessary. If it is only desired to scare foxes away from poultry pens, tin cans fixed to the wire-netting in such a way that they rattle in the wind, or at the slightest touch, will often prove effective. Probably the finest deterrent of all is an electric fence, fixed six inches off the ground in a narrow track cut through the grass. These highly strung, sensitive animals do not come back for a second shock. I have been told they jump six feet off the ground when they touch the wire, and it is certain that a fox carrying away a hen cannot negotiate it without getting direct contact if this method is used, although it is not applicable to all circumstances.

With hawks and crows, shooting is the best method. Rooks are sometimes blamed, but in our experience they do not kill chickens although they will clear up a carcase left by a carrion crow. They are easily distinguished; a rook has a bare patch on each side of its face, while a crow is feathered to the beak. It is not everyone who can spare time in a busy season for bird scaring, so other methods have to be adopted. One or two broody hens running loose will drive off hawks. Also it should be remembered that carrions only take chickens for their young, so that if the day on which the first chicken is taken is noted, and the location of the crow's nest determined, one has only to go there twenty-one days later, which is the day when the young climb out of the nest, and they can be shot without difficulty. The nest itself is shot-proof, being lined with a foot of sheep's wool, so that it is no use shooting at it. The belief that carrions only build in unclimbable trees is erroneous; my brother has destroyed a number by climbing, although he has always maintained that no tree is unclimbable that will bear his weight, thereby justifying the Darwinian theory from his earliest youth. Those who favour the Lamarckian or the orthogenesis theory of evolution will contend that it is better to wait three weeks and shoot the young crows! In passing, it might be mentioned that we regard rooks as entirely beneficial birds; like poultry they have to be

kept off freshly sown corn and the matured crop at harvest; for the rest of the year they render a valuable service in maintaining the balance of nature.

In our first year also we were able to buy Indian Runner duck eggs very cheaply and reared a nice stock, with our ever-running stream, and two or three acres of swampy ground proved ideal for them. When they came into lay we regularly got forty-nine eggs from fifty birds, and the worse the weather the better they laid. Mated with drakes obtained from Mr. Reginald Appleyard of Ixworth, Suffolk, one of the most successful breeders in the country, we did very well with them indeed, and only gave them up when an aerodrome was re-established a few miles away. Low-flying planes terrified them and, causing them to moult out of season, stopped them laying. Unlike hens, which quickly adapt themselves, even the second or third generation of ducks would be put off laying by a single plane hedge-hopping, which was a favourite occupation of the R.A.F. in those days.

With geese we were even more successful. With a lot of rough grass and weeds for them to graze, the small quantities of concentrated feeding-stuffs required, and the low initial cost of the breeding stock, they were ideal for a semi-derelict farm and our limited financial resources. A goose egg for sixpence in April, and a

fattened goose at fifteen shillings to a pound at Christmas, gives the quick turnover of capital which is essential when one has to farm, live, and earn capital at the same time. Yet few farmers seemed to recognize their possibilities. Three geese and one gander will, with good luck, produce one hundred goslings. The initial cost of the stock birds will be less than that of a yearling beast; but, at the end of the season, the hundred goslings would sell for £50 over and above the cost of the meal and grain they require. But in the case of geese it must not be forgotten that the stock birds remain at the end of the year ready for another season. With good management they continue to lay fertile eggs for many years; some we sold in 1926 were still giving satisfactory results fifteen years later.

The most common breeds kept in this country are the Emden and the Toulouse, the latter being the most suitable for our purpose in producing large numbers to consume surplus grass, and as we were prepared to hatch in incubators and rear with hens. The Emdens do not lay so many eggs, although they are better sitters. Both breeds, however, are equal for table purposes.

Any airy shed is suitable for housing the birds, providing it is fox- and weather-proof, and well littered down with dry straw. Dummy eggs should be placed in the shed, or the geese will lay their eggs about the farm. Swimming water is desirable or the eggs

may be infertile. As they are immune to all the common poultry diseases, it is extremely unusual to lose any geese, other than by accident, provided the birds have sufficient exercise, and this they will always find on free range.

We hatched them in ordinary hot-air incubators, run at two degrees lower than for hens' eggs, spraying the eggs daily with warm water. Our large Light Sussex broody hens could rear six goslings apiece, because they require very little heat after the first ten days. The period over which they require brooding at all varies from a fortnight to three weeks according to the season of the year.

Soft food is essential for the first month, after which they can find their own living, providing there is plenty of fresh young grass. Some shelter in very hot weather may be necessary. From the beginning of November we fattened them generously on barley meal and skimmed milk, and they never failed to leave a useful profit when sold at the Christmas markets, realizing far more per pound than the finest fat cattle at that time.

What a lovely sight it is to see a flock of, say, a hundred geese come flying in from the stubbles when called for their evening meal. They used to turn into the wind, or downhill, run a few paces, take off, and sweep into the farm, on more than one occasion taking down the wireless aerial as they came over the house. When I went

to plough they would trail out in a long line behind me; as they could not walk far or on the turned furrows, they would sit along the unploughed land, draw back as the horses passed and then drag out the long couch-grass roots and worms, each goose on its own little stretch of perhaps a couple of yards.

In those early days, too, we planted mustard for green manuring, and drilled a couple of pounds of trefoil clover with each bushel of oats in the spring, so that after harvest the geese had masses of green food, and any surplus could be ploughed in.

After a few years geese were replaced by sheep and then by cattle, which leave a better margin of profit per acre once the capital is available; but for cheap stocking and land reclamation geese have much to recommend them; in fact we would prefer them to ordinary commercial cattle rearing. But even four geese to the acre, leaving a net profit of £3, cannot compare with well-managed sheep or pedigree cattle. While geese could clear up clover, mustard, or stubble, they cannot consume roots or tread straw into manure, which is so desirable if the land is to be brought into good heart; and for that reason we regarded them merely as an expedient for the times and not as an integral part of our farming system, useful and attractive as they undoubtedly were as a sideline until we had drained the swamps and cleaned the land.

No other branch of our farming compared with the pure Light Sussex poultry. From our 199 chickens we reared 100 good pullets, which together with our adult birds numbered 123. By November they were in full lay, and with eggs generally scarce and dear, were clearing over £4 a week after the food had been paid for. This seemed too good to last, when one thought of the meagre returns from ordinary farming at that time, or compared with the ten shillings a week over and above the cost of board and lodging which I had been earning the previous year working on a farm. But my brother was not impressed. He pointed out that this was only equal to a shilling per acre per week over the farm, and we would need a thousand good birds before the farm was a real business proposition. With his training in London in modern methods of business, he could not agree that a farmer must be prepared to accept small returns and a low standard of living for the privilege of working on the land. He regarded us as potential £l,000-a-year men, having studied those who earn it in the cities, and if my knowledge and technical efficiency was such that we could produce eggs, when others obviously could not or eggs would not be so dear, then all would be well.

Unfortunately it requires £1 a head to capitalize a thousand head poultry farm, while we were building from £50, and some of our

profits would have to help keep the farm and us, besides building up the stock. However, time and youth was on our side, and all comes to him who waits.

In the second year we again reared as many chickens as possible, the numbers being dependent on our limited resources and the number of broody hens available. Later in the spring we reared more ducklings and geese, so by autumn we had a nice stock of birds, and made a contract with a London shop for selling eggs, as at this stage we were not in a position to claim to be poultry breeders, and to do better by selling hatching eggs and stock birds.

Late in the year we bought a very old second-hand Ford lorry for a ten-pound note, and this rattled the seventy-odd miles to London every week, and continued to do so for nearly two years without ever letting us down. By starting before 5 a.m. my brother was back by midday, and we thought the half-day was well justified in maintaining the personal touch, which is so important in business, besides saving the heavy railway carriage, and enabling us to sell surplus cockerels, ducks, and geese to the best advantage. At that time the difference in price between the local markets and in the metropolis for eggs was 4d. to 6d. a dozen, and cockerels 8d. to 10d. a pound. The lorry also enabled us to sell produce for our friends and neighbours at good prices while also earning carriage.

Occasionally small return loads were found in London for Oxford and district, for which we could quote cheap rates, when every shilling was welcome.

Then the shopkeeper with whom we had been doing business every week to our mutual satisfaction sold out to a large combine, the contract being taken over. What a difference we found! Every week there were deductions for cracks, blood-spots, and grading. Careful checking and candling at this end brought about no improvement. So waiting our opportunity when eggs were scarce and dear in the autumn, we held up delivery for two days and then took them and said we wanted to see the eggs tested and graded. No facilities were available on the premises, but the eggs were put straight into bags, first and second grade the same, and sent straight out to the waiting delivery vans. Our cheque, from which the usual deductions were made, about 10 per cent, came along in a few days. We thereupon refused to continue delivery and broke the contract. The firm were very indignant and even threatened to sue us for breach of contract and libel, but nothing came of it. So much for Big Business—give us the small, honest trader every time. At that time of the year we could sell all our produce without difficulty and we had other plans for the spring.

During the great General Strike in May 1926 we had a good stroke of luck. We went to a large poultry farm sale, and as the printing trade was on strike no catalogues were available, and the auctioneer was compelled to describe each lot as he came to it and sell it accordingly. We bought several small items, and then they came to the poultry. Sex-linking, the method of mating a red cockerel on a silver pullet or hen giving in the progeny white cockerels and red pullets when hatched and providing a simple means of detecting the sexes, was not then well understood. We had read Professor Punnet's book on the subject and were familiar with the process; but the auctioneer proceeded to give a lecture on sex-linkage, Mendelism, and genetics, which was largely wasted on the assembled farmers, and then he proceeded to offer the cockerels as pullets and the pullets as cockerels. This was our opportunity. We bought three hundred so-called cockerels, actually pullets, for an average of 1s. 8d. each, leaving alone the so-called 'pullets', which realized six or seven shillings each. What the poor buyers must have said when they all grew into cockerels can only be left to the imagination. The auctioneer's conditions of sale covered 'all errors and descriptions' so there would be no comeback. We had a customer in view for our three hundred pullets at home, and they were duly delivered and we netted a modest £50 for our day's work.

Take a hint, gentle reader, always be well up with the latest scientific developments in farming! It was perhaps a little mean on our part to take advantage in this way, but earlier in the sale I had respectfully drawn the auctioneer's attention to some other point in both the buyer's and seller's interest, and was sharply told that if I had come to crab the sale, I had better go away. So it is unlikely that I would have been believed. On the other hand, if it is thought we took too big a profit from our customer, it may be said he sold them again at a substantial increase immediately.

Our profit we invested in three large second-hand incubators and six hovers for rearing chickens, as we had decided to give up selling eating eggs and to concentrate on hatching and rearing for stock and table. As Light Sussex was the premier breed for fattening, and in demand all the year round, it was a practical proposition.

At the same time it was a very decisive step in view of our very limited financial resources; and we would sadly miss our small but regular income from the eating eggs. If we were unable to sell the day-old chickens when hatched, we would be unable to afford the food they required and thus make a double loss. The only method open to us was skilfully worked credit, because our bank manager had very definitely declined to assist us in any way.

This little problem I could safely leave to our tame economist, while I devoted my attention to plough, for it must be remembered that at all times we also had our other work to attend to—the land, with its weeds and chain-wide hedges, our few sheep, cattle, pigs, and horses. But by this time my brother had become quite a skilful poultryman, besides compiling some very valuable data showing percentages of eggs we could expect to hatch, quantity of food required up to any given age or weight. But more important of all, he had made very valuable contacts with two or three corn merchants, who not only liked, but trusted him. Looking back over the years, I am inclined to think that although my four years' training enabled me to bring technical knowledge and skill to our partnership, it was his business acumen and organization which enabled us to start on a sound foundation. I think he would give me full marks for the general outline of our plans and principles on which the farm was to be stocked and worked, which I had so laboriously acquired from the wisdom of old and experienced farmers and the study of agricultural science, and which he accepted without question; but he so adapted, adopted, and improved them, it would be like comparing an uncut diamond with the polished stone.

This was his plan. First we advertised hatching eggs, charging double the price of eating eggs, and accepting orders up to half our

output. So that for all intents and purposes we had the eggs we retained free, apart from packing and carriage. Then we advertised day-old chickens at £5 a hundred, and booked orders up to half the number we anticipated hatching, so that for every chicken sold one could be retained for rearing. The price realized for the chickens sold, enabled us to pay for the food to rear the chickens we kept until they were eight weeks old. After that age comes the expensive time for running on and fattening. At this stage we were careful to order the feeding-stuffs so that they would be delivered on the first of the month; thus with a monthly account with the corn merchant the statement would not be received until early in the next month, and so by selling the birds in the third week of that month, when they were fifteen weeks old, we had the money to settle the account and take the discount by the last day. In this way the merchant financed the business to the extent of two shillings per bird—or about £12 per week on 120 chickens, which represented twice the capital we ourselves had invested in this section. Had we ordered the food haphazard or late in the month, with the result that the account would be received within a few days, we would lose half the credit and also the discount. The whole system was of course dependent on hatching on the right date and knowing the exact quantity of food which would be consumed over each monthly

period, different-aged chickens requiring varying amounts as they grew.

From our experience, we would say, few farmers work credit to the best advantage. It has been described as ‘the life-blood of industry’; if it is, then regular payments are the heart-beats. Merchants do not mind a slow payer, providing he is a regular one. It is a great mistake to pay a little on account when pressed, it is far better to clear an account month by month, even several months in arrears if necessary. At the same time it is very bad business to lose a discount. Five per cent lost monthly on £100 worth of business represents £60 per annum. Though we lived on the edge of a financial precipice for the first five years we were farming, we always had a balance at the bank, if only a few shillings ; at the same time we never lost a discount.

In theory it is not the merchant’s business to finance farming, but the bank’s. Unfortunately in the days of depression they were very reluctant to do so, or so they told ‘young and inexperienced boys’, while losing vast sums on the old and experienced farmers, who were waiting for the Government to do something and thinking in terms of 1913 fifteen years later.

However, I digress. Profits in poultry fattening were small, about one shilling per bird nett, but the numbers handled and the quick

turnover made it well worth while. Soon our old Ford was trundling five hundredweight of fattened poultry to London every week. As we had skimmed milk available from the cows we could finish the birds to the best advantage and made a valuable contract with a famous restaurant in Bond Street. While other poultry farmers were dumping poultry in glutting markets, or getting lower and lower returns from the commission salesmen in Smithfield, we were sure of our price even before the chickens were hatched, providing we could rear them.

With a good contract running we were able to sell day-old chickens which were surplus to our own brooder capacity and buy them back from our customers at a fair price to fatten, which was to our mutual advantage. The customer had a fair profit on the rearing, we had two, one on the day-old, and another on the fattened bird.

The low prices in the local markets tempted us to buy these second-class birds, for nothing could turn badly bred and half-starved, stubble-running cockerels into the best quality, and these we sold to ordinary retail shopkeepers on the route into London, whose customers could not afford prime chickens. There was, of course, considerable risk of introducing disease from stock which was offered by auction, but this we felt could be minimized by keeping special crates for them, and arranging our journeys so that

they were not unpacked or fed on the farm, but went straight into town. In practice this system proved sound and we did not experience any trouble.

But first we had to teach ourselves to judge weights accurately. As we packed our own birds from the fattening crates, one would estimate the weight of each bird handled and the other would check it on the scale. In this way we soon learned to value any bird within a penny, which was approximately the price we could realize per ounce.

Then we went to market. There the trade was largely in the hands of a ring of buyers from the East End, who robbed the farmers of their just return by a pernicious system of one man buying the lot, loading them up and going to a public-house yard and then holding a knock-out auction, in which the difference between cost and price paid by members of the ring was shared among them. Any strange buyer in the open market would be run up to such a price that he could not come again. We, of course, were quite familiar with this, and laid our plans accordingly.

We arrived early, and went carefully round the pens and valued each lot. When the sale was due to start we returned.

The real value of perhaps the first lot would be four shillings. The auctioneer, from bitter experience, would ask, say, half a

crown, and be offered one-and-six by the leader of the ring, all the others crowding round so that no one else could see what was being sold. The auctioneer would then ask one-and-sevenpence, the owner of the birds would perhaps bid in the hopes of helping up the price. The ring would all jeer in unison, but the auctioneer would take it, and then my brother or I would start and run up the price, stopping at our limit. If the East End traders went any further it was left to them at a price they could not afford. If they stopped in time, we had it at a price at which we could make a profit. This shook them badly. If they crowded me away from the pens, the birds would be knocked down to my brother or vice versa. It did not matter whether we saw any particular lot or not, providing the auctioneer announced the number, as we had valued them before. Sometimes we confused the issue by bidding loudly against each other, but always stopping at our limit, so that the auctioneer said 'Henderson', from whichever side of the crowd the bid came. This was too much for the ring, and we helped ourselves to quite a lot of pens at far below our price.

By the next week they had thought out a good plan to get rid of 'Henderson'. They located my brother by the name on the lorry when he arrived at the market, and offered him ten shillings to go down to the station and meet the one o'clock train to see if there

were any crates for them, which would mean he would be away when the auction was in progress. He wanted a pound cash down, and this they paid. Meanwhile I had arranged with the auctioneer that I was bidding whenever I stood with my hands on the lapels of my coat. By these means I bought pen after pen without removing my hands. The ring ran up the price a little way, and cheered each time the auctioneer said 'Sold', thinking of course the birds were being bought in by the owners at a reserved price, as no name was announced. Never was business so brisk, and by the time my brother returned to announce that there were no crates on the train, the auction was finished, and we proceeded to pack the birds under the eyes of the astonished ring.

'Oi, Oi, Oi,' said the leader, 'vot's this?' 'Just a little carting job for this chap', cheerfully replied my brother, indicating me.

We amused ourselves thinking out new tactics each week, but soon came to the conclusion that we were wasting our time, for the little we could earn. The quality of the birds deteriorated week by week. General farmers never feed them well enough, thinking they can find all they need on the stubbles, and some weeks there would be so few on offer that the journey was not justified. We grudged also the time spent, although it made a pleasant break for an hour or two once a week, especially if it was too wet to be working on the

land. It was nice too when the first pen was knocked down to us, to hear someone in the crowd of farmers say, 'Thank goodness! Henderson is buying', which ensured that something approaching a fair price would be obtained. The ring system was thoroughly bad, and was rapidly dying out in poultry auctions by the time Lord Darling's Act was passed making it illegal. Every little buyer was forced into it, and would perhaps travel all the way from London, riding on the step of a lorry in bitter weather, to draw perhaps ten shillings in the knock-out auction. We felt sorry for many of them individually, and may say in passing that we have found the Jews as straight and honest to do business with as any other race or creed with whom we have come in contact.

For about eight months of the year pullets were fattened the same as cockerels. They do not make the same weight for age, but the food consumed per live weight gained is identical. Pullets hatched in the spring could be sold for laying, and we steadily built up a good connection among general farmers, who had not the time or convenience for rearing their own, or realized that it is far cheaper in the long run to buy well-reared stock at an age when they required no special attention.

Each year we kept back sufficient good pullets to enable us to increase our breeding stock by a hundred birds. At no time were we

tempted to rush into poultry farming on a large scale, but intended to build it into our system of general farming, and avoid the pitfalls of the specialized farm, with its unbalanced labour, unnatural conditions, and the body of disease ever present through overstocking of the land. Never more than one hundred birds to the acre has been our rule for breeding stock, and for part of the year these have a run on stubble. With the pullets being reared they move steadily over fresh grass land or leys in fold units day by day, which confers the greatest possible benefit to the land from the manure they leave behind, while ensuring the health of the birds. This system has enabled us to increase the grazing capacity of our grass by three times, as judged by the sheep and cattle which can now be carried.

It is perhaps interesting that with all the new innovations in poultry-keeping we have never found it necessary or desirable to change a detail in our methods of management, housing, or feeding. True, slight variations have been made in the composition of poultry mashes from time to time, but this has only been for economy when certain feeding-stuffs were cheap, or too dear in comparison with others of equal feeding value. Our original mixtures give as good results to-day as they did thirty years ago.

Someone might say, what about cod liver oil, and intensive rearing which has only come about this last ten or twelve years? The answer is that we have always used intensive rearing for the first few weeks, even before it was recognized as a system, and we used cod liver oil meal, prepared as such under a trade name, empirically it is true, without knowing the scientific reasons for its value in combating the disorders arising from lack of sunlight and vitamin D.

It is only the scale of our operations which has changed. We have always reared in small units of fifty to seventy chickens under Hannaford 'Pioneer' hovers, under which the chickens do not come in contact with the lamp, its fumes, or its brightness. Quite a lot of care is necessary during the first few days, teaching the chickens that it is warm under the hover and cold outside; once they have learned they are no more trouble, and rear far better than by any other system we have seen, with their attendant dangers of fumes and fire, to say nothing of freezing or baking the chickens, or undermining their health in the even temperature of the battery brooder. In our early days these hovers were used in small, well-built nine feet by five feet houses, but once the value of the system was proved we built a large insulated brooder house, to hold two thousand chickens, but still using the same hovers in similar-sized

pens within the house. With vita-glass front, which can open right up, and roof lighting, it was so planned that every pen can receive direct sunlight every day and at all seasons of the year, when the sun is shining. With a high roof, double insulated floors and walls, air-extracting ventilators, and other devices, it is possible to rear good chickens with thirty degrees of frost, or in a heat wave. In this house the hover temperatures are kept at 85° and the floor temperature at 50°.

The chickens in this house are fed four times a day, and have the bucket type water fountains which are filled every morning. This chicken rearing has become the most factory-like of all our farming processes. With everything standardized in each pen, one has only to glance down the house to see if anything is amiss. The birds are regularly culled and graded as they grow, and are moved out in even numbers to the rearing ground at six to eight weeks old. Here they are in fold units consisting of slatted-floored night arks with pens attached, moved every day to fresh ground, until the laying stage for pullets or fattening weight for cockerels, if they are not sold off the run. While this system was started primarily for the sole benefit of the health and wellbeing of the chickens, it is this moving of the units daily over all the land not used for breeding stock, which has trebled the stock-carrying capacity of the grass for grazing animals.

Although the pens will not be on the same strip of land more than one day in the year, so valuable are poultry for reclamation, in scratching out moss, treading down rough broom grass, and leaving their rich manure behind, that on this poor light land it is now possible to carry a beast to the acre, grazing before and after the pens, where before three acres was insufficient, and had to be supplemented. Considered as a crop, allowing for the difference between their value at eight weeks and at five months, chickens are worth £100 an acre. Penning on stubble and fallow when available never fails to leave its mark in the following crops. Poultry manure shows for two years, nitrogenous effect the first year, phosphatic the second. It has been calculated that fold units leave behind the equivalent of four hundredweight of sulphate of ammonia, two hundredweight of superphosphate, and one and a half hundredweight of potash, and in a far more valuable form, for every acre penned or two tons of food consumed. So highly do we value poultry for fertility purposes that we would consider their retention justified even if they did not leave a profit in their produce; though in actual fact, with good management, they seem absolutely foolproof in this respect, and we have never failed to show better figures year by year.

We have had our setbacks, mostly on the business side, but in the long run they have proved the old proverb ‘When one door shuts another opens’. After a few years another enterprising poultry farmer undercut our price for table poultry and we lost our contract. A blow at the time, but we soon found we could do as well selling our birds in Oxford, or retail to big houses in our own locality, which saved us the long run to London.

Early in the 1930’s Mr. W. D. Evans founded the Kibworth Hatchery, and introduced to this country as a commercial proposition the sale of pure-bred sexed chickens, so that farmers would no longer have to rear the birds to eight or ten weeks old before the sex could be detected, or resort to sex-linkage, in which case the birds are useless for breeding. The subject and knowledge had been only a matter of scientific curiosity at the World Poultry Conference, when the methods used were described from the finding of two Japanese research workers at Edinburgh. But Mr. Evans, who incidentally introduced sex-linkage as a practical aspect in poultry farming some years previously, saw its great possibilities, and arranged with the Japanese Government to send an expert, thus being the first hatchery to offer pure-bred, sexed, day-old chickens.

Now, it has always been our rule, ‘If you can’t compete, cooperate’. So the day his first advertisement appeared we offered

him regular supplies of Light Sussex hatching eggs. We with an output of a thousand chickens a week could not afford to employ a full-time sexer, and therefore could not compete with the latest novelty in poultry farming. Other big hatcheries soon took up the idea and it has become an established practice in the industry.

Selling our eggs, with the proviso that we could have back any chickens we required of our own breeding, proved a blessing in the long run, as hatching chickens is really a specialized branch of the business, and our change of policy enabled us to give more time to rearing. We could now raise twice the number of pullets in the spring, as space would not be taken up by surplus cockerels, while in the autumn we could rear double the number of cockerels for table and not have to run on the pullets with their slower growth which was always retarded by competition with the male birds.

Thus we started a long and happy association with the Kibworth Hatchery, and must now have sold them well over a million hatching eggs. Not only was this hatchery the first to introduce the sexing of chickens, but it maintained a strict health control scheme for the flocks from which its supplies were drawn. Nearly everyone must have heard how disease wrought havoc throughout the poultry industry in the middle ‘thirties, when even Laying Tests, with the pick of the finest birds from the leading breeders in the country, had

to report an average mortality in laying pullets of twenty and in some cases up to forty per cent. We ourselves used to look very anxiously at our birds every day, half expecting some fell symptoms to appear, but our stock was spared, and looking back we are inclined to think that it was very largely due to the untiring efforts of the Poultry Pathological Research Laboratory in whose hands Mr. Evans had placed his scheme. We believe in giving credit where it is due, and in our opinion the disease control measures under the Ministry of Agriculture's Accredited Poultry Scheme are but a pale shadow of those rigidly enforced by the Kibworth Hatchery thirty years ago. It was a matter of great regret to us, when in 1953, a change of policy at the Hatchery severed our connection with it; although being compelled to hatch and market all our own day-old chicks has been to our financial benefit.

Before the war we tended to concentrate on two main lines, the sale of hatching eggs and reared pullets, selling 120,000 of the former and 5,000 of the latter, eating eggs and table poultry being of minor importance.

Wartime conditions brought many new problems to be faced, but we were much more happily placed than the majority of poultry farmers, and with our intensively farmed arable could at least produce our own grain; and we were determined to hold on to our

stock, which represented to us a life's work, even if the Minister of Agriculture in conference with the farmers' leaders could throw the whole industry overboard in one short conference. A little thought would have shown them that the vast resources of British agriculture with proper organization could have maintained at least a bird to the acre without any dependence on imported food, and ensure at least one egg per person per week throughout the war.

Until the rationing system was introduced we had to maintain our birds by fair means and foul, as described in the chapter on wartime farming. By the autumn of 1941, when a new system of calculation was introduced, we had sufficient coupons to provide our 1,600 laying birds with half an ounce each per day, or one-eighth of their requirements.

As we were not permitted to retain our wheat, and our other corn, after allowing for cattle and pigs, was only sufficient for one and a half ounces per head daily, we had to find the equivalent of one and a half ounces of mash and half an ounce of grain to prove the usual four ounces for each bird. Being too far from a source of prepared swill, we had to look elsewhere for supplementary feeding-stuffs. Fresh vegetable products, carrots, mangolds, rape, kale, etc., can only be used in small quantities owing to their bulkiness. One to three pounds may be necessary to replace two ounces of a cereal

mash. As the capacity of a fowl's crop is four fluid ounces, normally half-filled twice a day, it is a physical impossibility for the bird to digest enough of these foods for maintenance and production.

Unrationed by-products of the milling and seed-cleaning industries are more useful, their only disadvantage being high fibre content. Supply is variable, but they store well and can be kept for twelve months in ratproof bins. Nearly all can be improved by grinding into a fine meal, and even such unpromising material as barley awns, oat husks, trefoil cob, and flax chives can be used.

Pig potatoes were our great standby, with their ratio of four to one compared with meal. Easily stored all winter, and ensiled in late spring for summer feeding, when steamed and mixed hot with other foods they go well with the more fibrous low-grade meals. Potato silage is easy to make: as many as can be steamed in a day are dumped into a pit or suitable container (a spare pig pen will do), thoroughly trodden down and allowed to cool. This is continued day by day and finally sealed off with bales of straw. On opening for use, a suitable section can be cut down daily with a shovel by removing two bales as required. A green mould forms on the cut exposed surface but is quite harmless. Nothing is added to potato silage to preserve them, they keep well for at least two years if well

sealed. There is a slightly sour, but not unpleasant, smell from this product when well made.

We were also fortunate in getting enough semi-solid buttermilk and whey, in barrels, to balance other foods which are deficient in protein. Malt bran and wheat germ were also available, and unrationed, to anyone who could take several tons.

The mash we used usually consisted of 40 per cent potatoes, 20 per cent wheatings, 10 per cent wheat germ or malt bran, and 20 per cent ground husks, weeds, acorns, horse chestnuts, dried grass, and similar substances in as great a variety as possible, to counteract any harmful properties any one may have had; the mixture was completed by the addition of 5 per cent fish or meat meal, and 5 per cent semi-solid whey.

This ‘austerity’ mash, compared with the average analysis of a good poultry meal, required two ounces to replace one and a half ounces. We overcame this drawback by feeding two feeds of mash per day, half at dawn and the rest at midday. With the grain feed as late as possible in the evening, too great a strain is not put upon the digestive capacity of the birds.

Production was maintained within 10 per cent of our monthly average over a period of seventeen years and mortality and culls 2 per cent lower. Fertility averaged 92 per cent over the whole winter.

Then with the introduction of the Government's new accredited scheme and the granting of food based on the actual number of birds mated, the food position became much easier, and we were in a strong position to take advantage of the Domestic Poultry Keepers' Scheme, under which general farmers were to rear for the backyarders, which was introduced in the following spring. One year we were being told to scrap our birds, the next that they could render a very valuable service to the war effort.

The response to the Ministry's appeal for rearing the replacements was poor, and many missed the greatest opportunity that had presented itself to the hardest-hit section of the farming industry from the outbreak of war.

On our large stock of hens we were granted sufficient food to rear eight thousand, or twice the number we normally reared in pre-war days. This we could undertake without neglecting our trade in hatching eggs and disappointing old customers who might also wish to rear their share. We therefore reserved 900 eggs per week, to give us 600 chickens, 300 pullets, and 250 reared, to allow a fair margin for culling and mortality. If the early hatches did well, we should be able by the flexibility of the system in obtaining food to rear them, to stop a week or two before the end of the season.

Hatching and rearing was a simple matter of ordinary routine. Attention to detail had long since become almost automatic, so that the smallest water trough left unscrubbed or a brooder house window left open never escaped attention.

Office organization proved a bigger problem. We had not needed to advertise our stock for many years in selling to general farmers, but to obtain a different class of customer we inserted a series of small advertisements in a local city paper, resulting in a dozen telephone calls a day and twice that number of inquiries and orders by post; in all we handled just over a thousand orders, many hundreds had to be turned away, and only once did we fail to execute on the date promised.

The simple method devised was to have a sheet for each week, enter each order with the number of chickens required in a column, and as soon as the total of 250 was reached that week was closed. Forward bookings were entered on the appropriate sheet if a date was specified or at the earliest possible to ensure clearing the pullets at eight weeks old. In this way each week's delivery was together and the route could be planned.

Labour was the next problem. There were only four of us, instead of the usual five in past seasons. On top of the work of an

ordinary mixed farm, we intended to rear twice as many pullets again as normal.

Greater efficiency and longer hours were the only solution. As will be explained in the chapter on labour, it had always been our rule that everyone should learn to do every job on the farm, and as a profit-sharing system was working no one need fear that he would not get his reward.

To see incubators and brooders filled to capacity again, was to us, in itself, a great consolation. For two years we had seemed to be attending to the obsequies of a dying industry, just rearing sufficient to maintain the breeding stock.

Delivery, although requiring a lot of time and patience, was easily arranged. Shortage of crates and delay in returning empties by rail in the first few weeks necessitated delivery by road, and so, except for a few old customers, we refused distant orders, and we were very glad we did when we found we could sell our entire output locally. All the birds being the same age at the time of delivery, crates could be filled to capacity, and the small numbers counted out to each customer. Routes were arranged with the aid of a large-scale street map, which incidentally could only be obtained after satisfying the Chief Constable of our bona fides. How necessary a map is will be appreciated from the fact that although

the return journey to Oxford is only thirty miles, twenty deliveries within the city boundaries may double the distance covered in spite of careful planning.

The time and petrol used in making personal deliveries was well justified. Many newcomers to poultry-keeping required help and guidance to make the best of their birds. Generally speaking we were very impressed by the ingenuity and resource of the back-yarder in devising a suitable pen and run; and as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles with which to supplement his meagre rations he was unsurpassed. In only a few cases was human food being wasted, and it is hoped that these people realized the error of their ways when it was pointed out how easy it was to obtain the balancer meal and more economical to beg scraps from the neighbours. There were always a few who wanted to put eight-week-old pullets in with some old ducks, but found they would first have to find a suitable pen, as we would not allow them to spoil good pullets, even if they had paid for them; we hope they blessed us in the end. The odd customer who disclosed that he was only buying pullets to fatten for the table, learned that he could have cockerels cheaper, and good pullets would be found a home elsewhere. There is no doubt that the personal touch means a great deal to the domestic poultry-keeper, and any bread we cast upon the waters came back plum cake in their

recommendations, so much so that we cleared every bird we reared, even when the Ministry suddenly changed their mind again and reduced the rations of the backyarder, although many poultry farmers were caught with birds on their hands owing to the inevitable cancellations.

The maximum prices suggested by the founders of the scheme were accepted without question, as it was generally realized that the old birds they replaced were worth nearly as much to kill. We calculated a margin of threepence per bird sold would be sufficient for replacements should any customer meet with misfortune in the first few weeks, for which, of course, we were not legally responsible, but with a fair margin in the price charged were prepared to meet. The actual cost of replacements was less than a farthing per bird sold, which is a great tribute to the care and attention which the backyarders must have given to their birds.

We had been specially warned against supplying poultry clubs, because if one member should be dissatisfied through any cause all the others would hear about it; but we did not find it so in practice and we prefer these bulk orders where there is an efficient poultry club secretary, who does quite a lot of our work for us, while saving members paying the full retail price, as we can make an allowance of sixpence a head in lots of a hundred or more.

In our opinion, it was a good sound scheme, well planned and thought out, carefully supervised by the county officials, and leaving a good margin of profit for efficient rearers. Without the scheme, the backyarders have been tempted into trying to rear chickens on good human food, and losing nine-tenths of them for one cause and another, and what they do rear cannot be compared with those raised under ideal conditions by poultry farmers who have specialized in the business for many years. This may sound like vested interests, but I do think that local education officials who have the melancholy job of advising the small poultry-keepers would agree that if chickens are to be reared it should be done by the specialists.

For the future prospects of poultry farming we are as optimistic as ever, but as there are many ex-service men who have taken up this branch, a few words of warning based on our experience, which covers two wars and the period between, and after, may not be out of place.

We do not believe that we could have made a success of poultry farming as a specialized business, but only in conjunction with a general farm. Fresh land and extensive methods are essential, if disease is to be avoided and production maintained. On this farm, the difference between one egg more per bird, each month, and one

egg less per bird over the same period amounts to £800 per annum. A farthing per dozen more, or a farthing per dozen less, made a difference in normal times of £50, while five shillings a ton in feeding-stuffs made the same difference. So it will be seen how closely poised is the balance between profit and loss in poultry farming, and that a very high standard in management and efficiency is necessary. Full production, well-sold produce, and carefully bought feeding-stuffs, might leave a profit of £1,000 a year on a thousand birds; in fact we have made it, but this is only achieved by long experience, built up year by year as our stock increased, and unremitting care and attention to detail. Carelessly mixed poultry mash or running the birds short of water for a few days at one time of the year and putting the birds into a moult might easily cut the profit in half. An outbreak of disease might so undermine the health of the flock and reduce the numbers that there was no possibility of a living being obtained; so we do most strongly advise any prospective poultry farmers to learn their job thoroughly before investing any capital, and then start in a small way with sound stock, so that their experience is always equal to the stock they have to manage. But without some sort of general farming the man who starts in a small way to breed up his stock is not fully occupied, and nothing degenerates quicker than the mind

and body that is not fully occupied, so that we do not recommend poultry farming as a branch in which to specialize, rather as the most valuable adjunct of all to general farming. And herein lies the easiest source of profit to the man who is master of his job.

While health and production have been maintained over a period of nearly thirty years, we have a system by which costs and production can be checked week by week and only on three occasions have our birds failed to pay their way. It should not, however, be thought that our poultry section is the model on which other farms should be based. A casual walk round by the Ministry of Agriculture's inspectors enables them to point out a dozen faults in our stock and management, which makes us wonder why they accept appointments in the Civil Service rising at the most to £950 per annum, when such omniscience should enable them to earn £10,000 a year as poultry farmers. But we have long since realized our limitations, and perfection is something we may never attain. It suffices that we retain the confidence of our customers, for it is on them that our business depends, and not on any official approval. Though with the Accredited Scheme as such we find no fault, it is simply recognition of a reasonable standard which any reputable breeder would maintain for himself, and we would like to see it extended to all classes of stock.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Cattle

It is perhaps a little ambitious to found a herd of pedigree Jersey cattle on £50, but as we had no more capital available there was no alternative.

In the four years while the writer was learning farming he had had practical experience with six breeds: Jersey, Shorthorn, Friesian, Aberdeen Angus, Ayrshire, and Devon cattle. But the first was without doubt the most suitable for our requirements. The most economic producers of rich milk, in our opinion the most healthy and hardy of all dairy breeds, and with greater freedom from disease, Jerseys are ideally suited to the small farmer. As the demand for them was small—a country gentleman will buy one or two for household requirements—it was easier for us to obtain recognition as cattle breeders, for the grazier or fattener of other breeds will only buy in large even bunches, and a small farm, however suitable for stock rearing, cannot supply what they require. So the Jersey was our choice, and one we have never for a moment regretted.

We needed two cows to maintain a milk and butter supply all round the year for our own requirements, preferably an autumn and a spring calver, to bridge over the period in which each would be dry in turn. The financial position put a limit of £25 a head on what we could buy. How easy it is to go to a sale and pick out the best animal, but how difficult to decide which is the best that can be obtained for a certain sum. We went to sale after sale without buying. Mother used to laugh at us, and say, ‘When you go to a sale you never buy anything’. However, we finally got what we wanted.

I bid to our limit for cow after cow, then one was knocked down to me. The keen-eyed auctioneer had missed nothing, for he smiled across the ring to me. ‘You deserve to have that one’, he said. ‘You have been trying hard for a long time.’

A little later we were again lucky and bought another first-class animal for twenty-four guineas. Once more came the quick smile from the representative of the famous firm who have since sold many thousands of pounds’ worth of cattle for us, but on that day he seemed as pleased to be selling me good animals at a price we could afford, as to be piling up the death duties for the famous millionaire for whom he was selling. Though I may say I have never known these people to fail in their duty to a vendor, while holding the balance fairly between buyer and seller, in striking contrast to some

auctioneers who reduce their profession to the level of the cheapjack bellowing in the market-place.

How anxious we were that they should travel home safely, for to us they were irreplaceable! How carefully we unloaded them, cleaned and fed them! Neither had given more than 700 gallons, but with modern rationing and three-times-a-day milking, both went over the 1,000-gallon mark, besides breeding us several good calves. Josephine bred and milked till she was fourteen years of age, and Evelyn until she was eleven. From their milk we sold an average of twenty pounds of butter a week, which in those days was sufficient to pay the tradesmen's bills, and we had the separated milk on which to rear calves, pigs, and chickens. For our care and trouble they repaid us many times; so quiet were they that we could take a bucket and stool out into the field and milk them anywhere, so docile that we could tether them on arable crops of clover, vetches, or kale.

Josephine and Evelyn; how we loved those two cows, and how well they served us. They cost perhaps twice the price of ordinary commercial cattle at that time, but probably only half their pedigree value, for one was in poor condition through heavy milking and the other a long way off calving; and being old did not catch the buyer's eye. But to us they were invaluable, for they were the foundation

stock of the ‘Enstone’ herd (‘Enstone’ being the prefix which every animal born here bears before its name).

Through the kindness of a great landowner we were able to put our cows to a first-class bull, but how slowly a herd grows for those who rear their own stock. It took ten years to increase to ten animals. Our system, then as now, was to sell calved heifers, retaining their calves to maintain the herd. However, in our early years we bought and fattened for veal a few beef-types calves of other breeds as a sideline. These calves were always carefully isolated from the Jerseys for fear of disease, for we were determined to have a disease-free herd right from the start. These beef calves would take up to three gallons of Jersey milk a day and increase their weight by as many pounds, and with veal at one shilling and threepence a pound, we could sell them at ten weeks old for a ten-pound note. At that time many farmers were bemoaning their fate in having to sell surplus milk to the milk factories at fourpence to sixpence a gallon. We were cashing ours through calves at one shilling and threepence. Also in making ten pounds on a calf at ten weeks, we were realizing as much as the same animal would be worth run on to fifteen months old and sold for a store beast for fattening; and even then would lose money when sold for beef at fifty shillings a hundredweight.

However difficult the times were, we always believed in looking for an opportunity in every difficulty, and never for the difficulty in any opportunity. If we had to wait for our Jerseys to grow into a herd, we could snatch a profit from the depressed beef industry, though it was always our rule never to buy at a price that would lose the vendor money. If we could not bid a fair price for a calf, we would not buy it at all. The best veal is a luxury trade, the calves must have a lot of milk, no cake or hay, and be sold just before their horns come through. Leave them a week too long, and their value is reduced by 50 per cent. On one occasion we were shut up by foot-and-mouth disease in the district and had to run some calves on; we fed them well throughout, yet as baby beef at six or seven hundredweight they realized no more than they would have been worth for veal a year previously.

At about that time we were approached by a well-known breeder of Jerseys, who had heard that we were very successful calf rearers; she offered us a fair price to rear all her calves and return them as heifers. The reason was that she was experiencing very heavy mortality, nine out of ten, for no cause which could be determined. We accepted, took most stringent precautions in isolating them from our own stock, and reared 99 per cent. Any heifers that were not required back in the herd we could sell, and share the profit over

and above the agreed price for rearing. The whole system proved a very happy and successful venture on both sides.

We were then able to concentrate our whole attention on rearing pedigree Jerseys, and did not fatten any more calves of other breeds for veal.

In a few years we were able to buy good bulls of our own, which was justified by our herd of forty to fifty animals, and we no longer had to take calves for rearing, though we continued to buy from the herd for which we had had the pleasure of rearing many fine and famous animals.

With our herd established, our system was, and is, to rear thirty to thirty-four heifer calves each year, selling them calved at two years old, retaining their calves to maintain the herd. Four of these first-calf heifers are kept back to rear the next lot of calves, and sold when calving for the second time. In this way we never have an old cow to dispose of. If extra calves are required to maintain the herd, these are usually obtained from producer-retailers of milk who buy our heifers but do not wish to rear calves, although they sometimes reserve the option of buying back, when reared, the calves they sell us. This we are quite happy to do, for our job is calf rearing, the farm being unsuited by soil and location for milk production.

In recent years the importance of animal health has been stressed by many eminent authorities. The writer realized it while still a pupil, when seeing the heavy toll which disease levied from all classes of stock. It is our proud boast that every animal sold has been offered always subject to any health test the customer may desire. Starting with tuberculin-tested animals in the first place, in the days of the old thermometer test, we had our first intradermal tests made in 1927, continued with it, and in due course were accepted for the Attested Herds Scheme under the Ministry of Agriculture, when it was introduced. We cannot pay too high tribute to the veterinary inspectors administering this service to the industry, whereby farmers can buy sound stock under what is tantamount to a guarantee that it is free from tuberculosis. We would like to see it extended to cover contagious abortion, mastitis, and trichomonas.

Bloodtesting for abortion here has long been a matter of routine. No reactors having been found, we do not intend to take up the new immunization method introduced by the Ministry in 1943. Mastitis and trichomonas we believe to be the result of mismanagement and unlikely to occur with efficient supervision, unless they have become endemic in a district; and we are fortunate in that we farm in arable country and not in a dairying area, where the strictest

precautions are necessary to avoid infection. It has been our experience, and is backed by the opinion of our local veterinary surgeon, that a system which can keep stock clear from the more dreaded diseases ensures freedom from the lesser complaints to which cattle are liable. In the thirty years in which nearly eight hundred Jerseys have passed through our hands we have only lost four calves and one cow, the latter by a post-parturition infection, which indicates that Jerseys are not so delicate as some would contend.

For economic rearing and production the Jersey must be unsurpassed. From birth to calving a heifer requires fifty gallons of milk, a ton of hay, two tons of roots, and six hundredweight of concentrated food, or its equivalent in silage, and half an acre of good grazing. This is less than half the food required by any of the heavier breeds, allowing for the fact that they go another nine months before calving. Fifty gallons of milk may seem a generous start to give a calf, in view of the campaign by the Milk Marketing Board and the Ministry to persuade farmers to rear on substitutes, but we believe this to be the most short-sighted policy ever evolved by the bureaucratic mind. How much wiser it would have been to ensure the future wellbeing of the bovine population by advising better feeding of calves on milk produced by more efficient

management. One good calf is required to replace four cows, and there can hardly be a cow in the country whose yield could not be increased by ten gallons per annum by careful management, and this in addition to the normal allowance would be sufficient to ensure the health and wellbeing of well-bred calves, on whom the future prosperity of the industry, and the health of the nation, depend. I once had the pleasure of studying some records kept by a farmer in Northern Ireland over many years, which showed conclusively that for production and longevity the cows which had been reared on two outlying small farms, with ample milk available, had far surpassed those reared under the farmer's own careful supervision on calf meal, where he was in a position to retail every pint of milk produced, and had therefore been misled into believing that calf rearing with meal was more economical. It is useful in changing over from milk, and we use it, but we still believe that the cow will return a hundredfold the milk she received as a calf, or will withhold in proportion that part of her birthright of which she has been robbed, through the reduction in health and vitality resulting from it. It is not what a calf looks like at six months old that matters, it is how much milk she will be giving at six years old or later.

For milk production a well-bred, well-reared Jersey would be hard to beat. We have had them giving forty pounds of milk per day

on thirty pounds of food, and their own weight in milk in seventeen days, their own weight in butter in a year. So highly bred are they for milk production that some will come into milk three months before having their first calf, at twenty-one months old, without apparently suffering in health; while we have one at the moment which has been milking for four years without going dry, has had two sets of twins in that time, and is still in full production. We do not normally keep a cow for so long a period under our system, but on one occasion when she would have been sold, she knocked a horn off on the day she was due to go to the sale, and on another the sale was cancelled by foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks.

While these are perhaps abnormal examples, the yield of milk from the average heifer, now in the ninth generation, has been increased by 50 per cent by careful breeding and modern methods of feeding. Sterility, a common fault in highly bred cattle in bygone years, has disappeared thanks to the resources of science and the more natural methods of feeding under war conditions.

The buildings on the farm, of which more will be said later, have been designed and built to accommodate the herd. Having made our plan and calculated the numbers the farm should be able to support, the building programme was dependent on increase and profits the stock could earn, owing to our rule that each department can only

extend out of profits; and while it may involve a little overcrowding in the early days, if the cattle have to pay for their buildings before they can occupy them it is very comfortable and convenient when the herd is established.

Concrete, wood, and galvanized iron are cheap and efficient; and can be pleasing to the eye, if painted green outside, white inside, with creosoted posts, rails, and gates. The criticism has been made by visitors to the farm that there is nothing permanent with these materials, compared with brick, slate, and stone. But why should we inflict our architectural ideals on someone who may farm the land in a hundred years' time? There has been far too much of this in agriculture, especially if it saddles the land with a heavy charge, or alternatively is never paid for. We have the satisfaction also that if our buildings were bombed or burnt they have already paid for themselves many times over. Also with our own construction in these cheap materials, we can have substantial covered yards, while the farm with its old-fashioned buildings wastes in the open yards half the value of the manure produced, and sometimes a great deal more in a wet winter. How pleasant it is to have properly arranged feeding passages, hygienic calf pens, tubular cow stalls, safe bull boxes, in which the animals can be caught and handled without

entering, and convenient water taps and hoses exactly where they are needed.

From the financial point of view the herd has never failed to bring in a steady income, and increased in value from £50 to perhaps £3,000 at current values. Who can say that pedigree breeding is only a hobby for the wealthy man? True, it has taken us half a lifetime to establish, but how worth while! Every heifer sold with her name, registered number, and prefix, is a free advertisement wherever she goes. The rearer of commercial cattle may make a profit or loss according to the state of the market when each bunch is sold, but then has to start all over again, while the pedigree breeder builds a name and a reputation if his stock is worthy of the breed he believes in. How thrilled the writer was, when over a thousand miles from home, and in reply to a question, he said that he came from a little place of no importance called Enstone. 'Enstone?' said the stranger. 'Is not that the place where the lovely cows come from?' This person had been a governess in a ducal household in England, and having been told the name of two cows, 'Enstone Golden Mist', and 'Enstone Early Dawn', had remembered the name, without suspecting for one instant that she was talking to the man who had named them. Such is fame, when

your stock is better known than you are yourself, and for a farmer it is as it should be.

Over the years we have made many good friends in the Jersey world. How pleasant it is to show people our stock, or to visit and inspect their herds. How we enjoy helping a new breeder to select his stock, and somehow the financial aspect seldom seems to influence us. There is obviously a good margin of profit in this type of stock, and it is very nice to show better figures when the books are balanced at the end of the year, but in the long run it seems certain that they who covet profit least, profit most.

I remember once a wealthy farmer coming to try to buy a milking heifer. I showed him two; one at thirty guineas and the other at forty, which was then the current price and good honest value at the money. He found fault with both, where faults did not exist, but did not mind which he had providing he could beat down the price a couple of pounds; not that he could value either within a fiver, but he was going on the old-fashioned farming principle, that you cannot do business without a haggle. Unfortunately for him, it is our strict rule that we never drive a bargain, but offer or ask the true value; and so he did not buy.

The next day, a young couple came to look at the same heifers. The man knew his job. He studied the animals very carefully and

then went aside and talked to his wife. Then he came back and said, ‘I think they are worth every penny you are asking, and would have made it at the pedigree sale at Reading last month, but we are only just starting and have not the money available to buy the best, so we will have the thirty-guinea one.’ ‘No,’ said I, ‘you will not, nor will I insult you with an offer of deferred terms or hire purchase. You will have the forty-guinea heifer for thirty, and may she start a herd which will serve you as well as ours has done for us.’

We do not of course always do this; normally our price is the same to prince or pauper, but it is nice to help an honest man when you find him. Whether this action was quixotic, bread cast upon the waters, or ground bait, I will not pretend to say, but it has come back a hundredfold in the recommendations these people have given us, and the stock we have sold them since.

Whether pedigree stock breeding can be considered a democratic institution we do not know, but it is very agreeable to simple farmers like ourselves to be treated as equals by real gentlefolk, whose interests coincide with ours in breeding finer and better stock. The little jumped-up profiteer comes sailing in, ‘Ah! I am Mr. Blank, and this is my daughter Miss Blank!’ The bearer of a famous name with a dozen titles says, ‘I'm A——, this is my son Henry’. The latter of course may be a marquis or an earl, but at the moment