

## **‘FARMING AND FAMILY LIFE’**

Supermarket rivalry in reducing prices is good for their customers – but certainly not for their suppliers who have to accept consequential cuts in the prices paid for their products. Primary producers such as farmers are obliged substantially to reduce their production costs including the cost of labour - and this at a time when increasingly sophisticated mechanisation continues to reduce the numbers of workers needed on our farms. . Economically inevitable though this may be it has led to problems not only for those made redundant but also for those who remain in the industry. Both farmers and workers are increasingly obliged to work ever longer hours in order to optimise the use of very expensive machinery to meet the husbandry deadlines imposed by season, climate and crop development. On some farms job applicants are expected to be willing to work hundred-hour weeks when required. While such hours are most necessary during the six to eight weeks of the cereal harvest, labour peaks also occur at many other times during the farming year – as is shown by information provided by a worker on a large Norfolk farm – a well-run enterprise with a good reputation for staff relations but which has been obliged to make significant reductions in its labour force in recent years. Apart from the very long hours inevitable at harvest, my informant gives the following hours which he expects to work at other times of the year.:-

i) ploughing, spraying or lifting sugar beet : 7.30 a.m. till up to 9.00 p.m. depending on conditions

ii) drilling (i.e. sowing) cereals and other crops : 7.30 a.m. until between 10.00 p.m. and midnight;

iii) harvesting maize for bio-digestion (to produce bio-fuel) : 7.30 a.m. till 7.00 p.m. - in this case the hours worked each day are restricted but 7 day weeks are necessary (in fact, even on farms with no livestock to tend) 7-day-weeks are frequently worked throughout the farming year).

The grain-dryer operator on the same estate says that at harvest time he works from 7.30 / 8.00 a.m. until grain stops arriving at the dryer when combining stops at between 1.00 and 2.30 the following morning! He gets a half hour lunch break, and when he has to work after 9.00 p.m. the efarm provides a greatly appreciated meal for a tea break. He told me one harvest that he hadn't spoken to his wife for some days as she was still asleep when he left for work in the morning and was back in bed and asleep when he got home at night!

There are obvious health and safety concerns when tired men are obliged to operate very large and complex equipment late into the nights of seven day weeks. The long hours of working can also have disastrous effects on family life (divorce rates and suicides are worryingly high in the farming community). Wives and children are naturally disadvantaged and distressed by their husbands/fathers being able to spend so little time with them. I have heard of one estate where out of ten tractor drivers, seven were divorced and of another where good pay and conditions made it easy for them to attract young workers, but wifely pressure led to many of them leaving the farm once they were married! Moreover if (in one of our 'sought-after' rural areas') a worker in 'tied' accommodation is made redundant or wishes to change his or her employment for some other reason he or she faces another problem – that of finding somewhere else to live!

The fall in the numbers employed in agriculture has been going on for many years and has had a very marked effects on village life. Workers' cottages falling vacant have been bought up as by affluent townfolk to such an extent that , especially in coastal areas, many villages have almost as many 'second homes' as permanently occupied houses – and property prices in these areas have been pushed so high that they are beyond the reach most local first-time buyers. To be fair, some 'second-homers' do make valuable contributions to village life. Many, however, come to Norfolk only occasionally and take little or no interest in village life.

We desperately need more affordable homes in the countryside but, as Archbishop Justin Welby has wisely said, .we don't need just to build houses but to build communities,. Wise words - but It is difficult to sustain active and supportive village communities when the younger members of the local families which were once the bedrocks of such communities, are now forced to live elsewhere while houses in their home villages stand empty for most of the year.

Over the past few years The Gressenhall Farm & Workhouse Museum of Rural Life near Dereham has hosted an annual meeting, arranged jointly by local Methodists and Trades-unionists, to commemorate the Life and Work of Sir George Edwards the Norfolk-born Methodist preacher who in 1906 founded what was to become the National Union of Agricultural Workers. In this year, when women's rights have been much to the fore, the meeting will focus on 'Women in Agriculture'. It will look back at the problems faced by women in Sir George's day and consider how issues such as those mentioned above present fresh challenges to family life in the farming community today.

The 2018 George Edwards Memorial Meeting will be held on **Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> July** (2.00 – 4.00 p.m.). **Rev Dr Jill Barber** of the Englesea Brook Museum of Primitive Methodism, will give a talk on the influence of women in early rural trade unionism, and former Agricultural Chaplain **Rev. Eleanor Reddington** will lead a discussion on Family Life in the Countryside today. The meeting will be chaired by Sir George's granddaughter, **June Seymour**.

For those attending the meeting entrance to the museum will available at the reduced price of **£2.50** after 12.00 noon.