

“RURAL LIFE: PAST PROBLEMS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES”

The 2019 Sir George Edwards Memorial Event

Recent public concerns about high suicide and divorce rates amongst farmers and farm workers provide a sharp reminder that rural life has never been the bucolic idyll envisaged by many townfolk. Although now refurbished and put to gentler uses, workhouses such as those at Aylsham, Docking and Gressenhall still stand bearing witness to the poverty in which many of our forebears ended their days. Thankfully, such dire times are unlikely ever to return - but one wonders what new demographic and social challenges an uncertain future may hold for our Norfolk countryside.

Every year the East Anglia District of the Methodist Church, with the support of the Rural Section of UNITE and the Gressenhall Museum of Rural Life, arranges a meeting to commemorate the life and work of Sir George Edwards O.B.E., the Methodist lay preacher who, in 1906, founded what was to become the National Union of Agricultural and Rural Workers..

Born in 1850 Sir George, the youngest child of a Norfolk farm worker, was obliged by his family's poverty to start work (scaring crows) before his 6th birthday. He never received any formal education and when he was first accepted as a chapel preacher he could neither read nor write and his young wife had to teach him the hymns and scripture lessons by rote! He nevertheless went on to achieve national acclaim as a union leader and social reformer and was twice elected to Parliament as Labour MP. for South Norfolk. The annual Memorial Meetings normally feature an historical exploration of an issue affecting rural workers in Sir George's time and a talk considering similar issues in the rapidly changing agricultural industry of the 21st century. .

George Edwards and the union he founded met with considerable success in opposing the exploitation of rural workers. Recent years have, however, seen some erosion of these achievements. Agricultural employment is changing very quickly. Few family farms can afford to employ full time workers and for any work they are unable to do “in house” they turn to specialist contractors, cooperative groups or larger neighbours. The former way of life of general farm workers is disappearing. In the past, though they were certainly not highly paid, their wage rates were at least safeguarded by the Agricultural Wages Board, their hours of work were more regular and the tied cottage system, though often criticized open to abuse, at least provided accommodation in areas where the sale of Council Housing had helped to push house prices out of their reach. Today's workers are generally highly skilled and qualified, and well able to keep abreast of modern technology. Employment, however, is no longer as secure or as regular as once it was, seldom includes a house and frequently requires working ridiculously long hours to maximise the productivity of complex and extremely expensive machinery used only for brief periods during the year (7 day, 100 hour weeks are not uncommon at peak seasons such as the cereal harvest).

Although their incomes have improved in recent years, farm workers are still at a disadvantage compared to those in most other industries. Moreover the tensions and risks incurred during long hours of solitary work often lead to mental stress and marital breakdowns. Family farmers, of course, face the same problems - often exacerbated by financial contingencies. Agriculture remains a physically and mentally hazardous occupation. Though long hours of overtime have helped to boost workers' incomes other, and in some ways even greater challenges still remain.

Since the Sir George Edwards Memorial Event was started in 2002 many of the above mentioned issues have been explored in them . This year **Stephen Pope**, *Methodist Archivist and head of Gressenhall Museum's Volunteer Research Team* will speak on **“George Edwards; Workhouse Inmate to Workhouse Guardian”**, and **Peter Medhurst**; former UNITE Agricultural Regional Officer (1978 to 2004) and ,from their beginning, an organiser of the George Edwards meetings, will ask **“Is there a role for Farm Workers and Small Farmers in the countryside?”** The meeting will be chaired by **Barry Salmon** a retired farm worker with many years of experience in Union affairs in the County Wages Committee & Agricultural Wage Board and, as a proficiency tester, in the Proficiency Awards Scheme.

The meeting will be held on **Saturday 29th June** (2.00 – 4.00 p.m.) in the old Workhouse Chapel at **Gressenahl Farm and Workhouse Museum of Norfolk Life** near Dereham. Entrance fee (**after 12.00 noon**) **£2.50**.