

Kids in the Corn: School Harvest Camps and farm labour supply in England, 1940–1950

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the contribution of schoolchildren towards the food production drive in England during the Second World War. After a consideration of the broader aspects of the farm labour problem between 1940 and 1950, the focus is directed towards the various official and semi-official schemes by which children were involved in summer and autumn harvest work. Logistical, operational and financial issues are reviewed in some detail along with various aspects of gender and attitudes of interested parties towards the scheme. While harvest camps generally seem to have been a positive and enjoyable experience for school children, there remains a great deal of scope for oral history studies to elucidate the finer details.

The singular contribution of home-based farming to the survival of the United Kingdom during the Second World War and the critical years immediately following the conflict was widely realized at the time and has subsequently been recognized by a variety of contemporary scholars.¹ If Lord Murray's magisterial official history occasionally exaggerates the achievements of the wartime food production campaign, the fact remains that by 1940–1 two million extra acres of grassland had been converted to arable so that the land area under wheat and potatoes advanced by 43,000 acres and 128,000 acres respectively, alongside an expansion of 1.48 million acres of other grains and 56,000 acres of forage crops. As more pasture land fell under the plough in 1941–4, the acreage of permanent grass declined by 34 per cent from that of 1938, while the area cropped to potatoes alone exceeded its pre-war level by some 92 per cent.² The dramatic and well-documented increases in output were, of course, orchestrated by the Ministry of Agriculture through its County War Agricultural Executive Committees (established under Regulation 66 of the Defence (General) Regulations of 1939), with the Ministry of Food being mandated to oversee the marketing and distribution of the produce. Agricultural production and marketing were, in effect, subject to the strictest of controls and surveillance as CWAECS attempted, sometimes controversially, to enforce orders and maintain standards.³

¹ R. J. Hammond, *Food and agriculture in Britain, 1939–45* (1954), p. 229; Ministry of Information, *How Britain was fed in wartime, 1939–45* (1946), pp. 5–6; J. Burnett, *Plenty and want. A social history of diet in England from 1815 to the present day* (1968), *passim*; J. Brown, *Agriculture in England. A survey of farming, 1870–1947*

(1987), pp. 125–30; J. Martin, *The development of modern agriculture. British farming since 1931* (2000), pp. 42–52.

² K. A. H. Murray, *History of the Second World War. Agriculture* (1955), p. 102.

³ B. Short, C. Watkins, W. Foot and P. Kinsman, *The National Farm Survey, 1941–1943* (2000), pp. 45–7.

Although Murray and, more recently, Armstrong, have discussed the overall labour situation in agriculture during the war years, the literature on the various labour sources available to farmers to deal with the expanded output remains sparse. It is the object of the present article to address this issue, at least in part.⁴ The first section considers the broader aspects of the labour problem between 1940 and 1950, before the focus shifts to a rather more detailed study of the role of schoolchildrens' labour in the drive to increase home food output.

I

At the outbreak of war, farmers in England and Wales were confronted with a potential labour crisis as many younger workers joined the armed services and others, attracted by higher wages and better working conditions, left their employment to join the thousands of labourers engaged in the building of the camps, aerodromes and other military institutions being constructed up and down the country.⁵ Concurrently the traditional annual seasonal inflow of migratory Irish labour ceased. Irish citizens working on British farms returned to the Republic after September 1939 only to reappear (in rather smaller numbers) when the war was at an end.

As men flocked to the Territorial Army or the National Service, alarm bells began to ring in official circles and the government's Food Production Committee concluded that measures were urgently required to reduce the flow of labour from the farming industry. Eventually, after lengthy discussion with the Trades Unions and an increase in the statutory minimum wage to 48s. weekly in June 1940, the Minister of Labour was empowered to prohibit employers in other trades from engaging male agricultural workers.⁶ While this was to some degree effective, it proved virtually impossible to stem the haemorrhage since agriculture was not yet a reserved occupation, and the question of how to secure the 1940 harvest (when it was reckoned that 100,000 additional hands would be required) still remained. At this stage the Women's Land Army was a modest force of 11,700 and although its membership was to reach 82,000 by August 1943, numbers subsequently declined as increasing cohorts of women were required for the aircraft and munitions industries (Table 1).

Prisoners of war were similarly in short supply in the first years of the war. A few thousand Italians and Germans, together with alien internees, were available in 1940 and some 20,000 additional prisoners by the summer of 1942, but it was not until after Wavell's successful campaign in Libya that this source of farm labour became relatively plentiful.

The official statistics for agricultural labour are set out in Table 2 which indicates both the growing importance of different forms of casual labour and the developing role of female workers as the war progressed. However, since no official records were kept of the large number of adults who volunteered harvest labour, or the help given to farmers by the armed forces, or the contribution of the Emergency Land Corps and the many Voluntary Land Clubs, Table 2 tells but part of the story.

⁴ A. Armstrong, *Farm Workers. A social and economic history, 1770-1980* (1988).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁶ Undertakings (Restriction on Engagements) Order, 1940.

TABLE 1. Women's Land Army Membership, 1940–1950

1940	11,700
1941	21,900
1942	53,200
1943	87,000
1944	47,861
1945	43,124
1946	23,017
1947	17,682
1948	16,942
1949	11,210
1950	6824

Sources: *Agricultural Statistics, 1939–51*; Brown, *Agriculture in England*, p. 138.

TABLE 2. Agricultural Labourers in England and Wales, 1938–1947

	<i>Total Regular Workers</i>	<i>Proportion of Females (%)</i>	<i>Total Casual Workers</i>	<i>Proportion of Females (%)</i>
1938	513431	8	79692	32
1939	511131	8	95998	34
1940	501537	9	106344	41
1941	508150	10	141434	43
1942	540791	16	167445	47
1943	542504	19	176712	48
1944	516074	22	151336	42
1945	515408	19	153387	41
1946	537097	13	103836	39
1947	548428	12	131895	36

Source: *Agricultural Statistics, 1938–1947*

Survival on the home front depended above all on the successful gathering of the cereal and root crop harvests by the regular workforce enhanced by a remarkable combination of local and urban volunteers, reservists, students, youth service volunteers, voluntary labour clubs, schoolchildren, and of course, the Womens Land Army, prisoners of war and displaced persons of varying nationalities. For urban volunteers in particular, wartime fieldwork was often their first genuine encounter with the countryside and for those of them who were also evacuees, contact with rural people and the rural way of life was something quite new. Whether it was an experience to be recalled with pleasure or erased from the memory in future years

depended on the relative preparedness of an individual to accept country ways and on the tolerance of rural hosts of the townspeople's different way of looking at things. The well-known suspicion of evacuees towards their hosts ('posh' country people, 'backward', 'snobbish') and of country people towards them ('dirty', 'verminous', 'painted-and-powdered women') might, it could be argued, have exacerbated the pre-existing rural-urban divide.⁷ The various tensions were noted by recorders for Mass Observation although, as Alun Howkins has observed, contact with country life may, in reality, have softened the divisions. As a result many urban people probably came to view the countryside both as a source of productivity and as a site of leisure which, of course, it was increasingly to become in the post-war world.⁸

In any event, evacuees and their families and a host of volunteers contributed massively to the harvests of 1940 and 1941 and with the call-up of 10,000 additional skilled workers following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Minister of Agriculture, R. S. Hudson appealed for further assistance in the summer and autumn of the next two years. As CWAECs drew up lists of volunteers (with the co-operation of the National Farmers Union, the Womens Voluntary Service and the National Federation of Womens Institutes), Hudson's speeches began to hint at the possibility of compulsion should the requisite voluntary labour not materialize.⁹ The 80,000 military personnel who had worked in the harvest fields in 1942 were no longer available the following year. Faced with the need to attract 150–200,000 adult volunteers and in excess of 300,000 children, Hudson repeatedly implored people to support the thousand or more harvest camps for adults which would be established in 1943 where volunteers would be paid at rates set by county Agricultural Wages Boards. Hudson fondly hoped that people would forgo their annual holiday for the opportunity of attending a harvest camp where they would enjoy the open air and ENSA concerts and eventually return home with money in their pockets. His appeal met with a massive response and, by April, recruiting centres in towns, factories, shops and offices were inundated with requests for places in harvest camps. Meanwhile the farmers began to mutter, with correspondents to *Farmers Weekly* stridently suggesting that however valuable volunteer farm labour may be, perhaps the thousands of prisoners-of-war eating their way through British harvests should be *compelled* to work on the land. After all, as a member of the West Riding CWAEC put it, the Germans had forced civilians in the occupied territories to labour on German soil, so why should not their captured soldiers sweat under an English sun? This point was echoed by the Kettering farmer Dennis Hutchinson who further observed that harvest holiday camps were all very well, but for the average munitions worker a holiday by the seaside was a rather more attractive proposition than a fortnight's labouring on a farm.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the volunteers continued to offer themselves and corn and potato harvests were duly gathered.

Early in 1944 the Ministry of Agriculture reorganized its system of coordinating the volunteer labour force by establishing six regional offices to serve as focal points for satisfying the labour requirements of farmers. Potential volunteers were advised to write to their regional

⁷ T. L. Crosby, *The impact of civilian evacuation in the Second World War* (1986), pp. 2–3.

⁸ A. Howkins, 'A country at war: Mass Observation and rural England, 1939–45', *Rural Hist.*, 9 (1998), p. 92.

⁹ *Farmer's Weekly* (hereafter *FW*), 28 Feb., 26 Sept. and 19 Dec. 1941.

¹⁰ *FW*, 13 Apr. 1943.

office whereupon they would be supplied with details of the CWAEC official responsible for harvest camps in the county of their choice. Given that land under cultivation increased by a further 700,000 acres in 1944, every available hand was required, and in issuing the now usual appeal for volunteers, Tom Williams, at the time Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, allied his call with a request to urban employers to stagger workers' holiday times so that instead of everyone holidaying in July and August, a significant proportion would take their vacations in September to November when the potato harvest was in full swing.¹¹ As it happened, the very wet weather of that year proved extremely problematic, particularly with the potato harvest when low yields and wretched picking conditions prompted something approaching a crisis. Hardly surprisingly volunteers seemed less than enthusiastic at the prospect of a fortnight of backache under rain-sodden skies and ankle-deep in mud. J. K. Knowles, President of the National Farmers Union, maintained in August that an extra 70,000 volunteers would be required throughout England and Wales to gather the all-important potato crop and that hitherto a mere 20,000 had come forward, leading to what he described as a 'desperate' situation.¹² But all was not lost. In Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire school-children were granted extra leave (in addition to the statutory exemptions discussed below) to assist with potato picking.¹³ In Yorkshire, several thousand liberated Russian prisoners bent their backs to the job, while in the east of England 35,000 German prisoners were made available after the War Office had carefully screened out the 'dangerous fanatics' among them.¹⁴

In the spring of 1945 farmers were being warned to expect little help from the armed forces in the forthcoming season and that despite their requests for a rapid demobilisation of agricultural workers, this source would provide the 'merest trickle' of labour. Moreover, as Womens Land Army membership declined, a sudden end to the war would more or less eliminate this element of the workforce, while the repatriation of thousands of Italian and German prisoners of war could be anticipated.¹⁵ Once again the Ministry of Agriculture appealed for volunteers, in so doing impressing upon people that the war may have been drawing to a close, yet the urgency of the farm labour situation remained. By mid-June, however, a mere 50,000 volunteers had registered with the Ministry, of whom 38,000 were prepared to work between June and August leaving only a small residue for the autumn period.¹⁶ Volunteer labour from this point was likely to prove insufficient and the National Farmers Union, supported by local education authorities keen to see the end of child labour in the fields, lobbied for the increased use of prisoners of war. Since El Alemein, four million Axis troops had been captured by British, American and other Allied forces, of whom 100,000 were immediately available in camps throughout Britain. Many thousands of Italians had already been repatriated by the allied military authorities, and camp commandants were instructed to collaborate with CWAECs to make immediate arrangements for the employment of all available German prisoners which, in the opinion of the Buckinghamshire branch of the National Farmers Union,

¹¹ *FW*, 10 Mar. 1944.

¹² *FW*, 25 Aug. 1944.

¹³ *FW*, 3 Nov. 1944.

¹⁴ *FW*, 8 Sept. 1944.

¹⁵ *FW*, 9 Mar. 1945.

¹⁶ *FW*, 22 June 1945.

was all to the good since a single German was worth ‘a dozen Italians’.¹⁷ The decision to maximize German labour led to one of many wartime inter-Departmental wrangles, in this case, over the issue of pay and hours of work. The Ministry of Agriculture was keen to see prisoners working the same hours as farmers and their regular workers, but the War Office, with some justification, was worried about the security implications of groups of potentially hostile men being away from their camps after sunset. Accordingly, they insisted that prisoners worked in the daylight for a maximum of 48 hours per week for which farmers would pay 1s. per hour, primarily to cover the cost of armed guards. Of this shilling, each prisoner would receive 4d.¹⁸ Eventually a compromise was reached whereby the War Office permitted individual prisoners to undertake overtime with the consent of their camp commandant, in some cases allowing suitably vetted prisoners to work without guards.¹⁹ The War Office was particularly insistent that farmers did not give prisoners any form of inducement, in cash or in kind, being convinced that this would provoke an ever-increasing spiral of bribes necessary to get the men to work at all. Indeed, after a case in Yorkshire when a farmer had been caught giving cigarettes and cigars to his prisoner-workers, the practice was formally declared illegal and defaulters faced the threat of the withdrawal of prisoners of war from their farms.²⁰

The National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) took a somewhat equivocal view of the employment of prisoners of war on the land. Aware of the national importance of securing sufficient labour for farming at appropriate seasons, they remained uneasy at what they saw as the threat of casualisation which might arise from the employment of German prisoners. Eventually, in 1945, they struck a compromise with the Ministry of Agriculture by which it was agreed that prison labour would be removed from any farm where it could be proved to have displaced indigenous workers, either on a regular or piece-work basis.²¹ The NFU, keen to promote the establishment of a skilled workforce, and only too aware that many farm-workers resented being seen as on a par with foreigners with little experience of farm work, were supportive of the compromise and objected strongly to the declaration in 1946 that prisoner-workers would receive the minimum agricultural wage. As they continued to press for the rapid demobilisation of former farm staff, they looked forward to the day when prisoners were no longer key figures in the labour force.²² Officialdom, though, saw things rather differently. To the Ministry of Agriculture in particular, the relative failure of the various armed services Farm Training Schemes – which aimed to attract demobilized soldiers to the land – and the continuing problem of recruitment to the WLA, meant that there remained a shortfall in labour supply. Some regular farm staff had returned to farms in 1946, but nevertheless Tom Williams estimated that an extra 100,000 workers would be required over the next few years even after the various emergency programmes were closed down.²³ The WLA and the

¹⁷ *FW*, 13 July 1945. This opinion was shared by my father who employed Italian, Polish, Russian and German prisoners during the war. Three Germans, whose homes were in the Russian zone, remained on the farm until 1952, two of them returning to Britain to attend my father’s funeral in 1994.

¹⁸ *FW*, 13 July 1945.

¹⁹ *FW*, 19 May 1945. This pleased farmers since they

no longer had to pay to feed the guard detail.

²⁰ *FW*, 10 Aug. 1945. In the event this rather silly restriction was withdrawn in 1946 after which farmers were permitted to give a free supply of cigarettes to ‘deserving’ prisoners.

²¹ *FW*, 25 July 1945.

²² *FW*, 8 Mar. 1946.

²³ *FW*, 3 May 1946.

volunteer harvest labour camps would continue to run for 'at least another year or two' while prisoners of war, European refugees and, in particular, the remnants of General Anders' Polish army (who were currently awaiting resettlement in Britain), would all take part in the food production effort.²⁴ By the mid-point of the potato harvest in 1946, some 890,000 people were engaged in potato picking, 70,000 of them volunteers, 30,000 WLA and a further 180,000 Polish and German personnel.²⁵ The fact that many of the latter would be repatriated within a matter of months raised the issue of how the next year's harvest would be gathered. Quite fortuitously, the government had learned from the Italian embassy early in 1946 that many repatriated Italians, faced with unemployment at home, were interested in returning to England '... to the farms where they were so happy'.²⁶ In the event, a small number returned to settle permanently in the United Kingdom. Other Italians meanwhile, yet to be repatriated, were invited to take part in a scheme under which they would temporarily forgo repatriation in favour of a twelve month contract allowing them to remain working on farms in the capacity of alien citizens. Needless to say this scheme was enthusiastically supported by the War Office, only too glad to cast off its responsibility for prisoners of war.²⁷ Despite the various retention schemes, repatriation was proceeding at the rate of 1500 men per week by January 1947 while WLA membership was shrinking by almost 400 women each month.²⁸ This being the case, the role of Italian returning prisoners (and those who had contracted to remain temporarily in England and Wales), Polish volunteers and displaced people from the British zones of Germany and Austria took on vital importance. Poles in particular, located at camps throughout Britain, were available to farmers who applied for their services through the local office of the Ministry of Labour. At the insistence of the NUAW, Poles (or, for that matter Germans who had chosen not to return to the Russian zone) could only be employed where there was no available British alternative, in which case they would enjoy the same pay and conditions as the former, subject to the restriction of informing the police of any change of address should they leave their original camp.²⁹

The balance of payments crisis of the first post-war decade demanded that every effort be directed towards dollar-saving. The Atlee government launched its ambitious proposal for the agricultural industry to produce extra output to the value of £100,000,000 by 1951-2, in effect an increase of some fifty per cent over wartime levels. Inevitably this would impose heavy demands on labour and throughout 1947 and 1948 the government continued to advertise for volunteers, promoted the various schemes for retaining prisoners on a civilian basis, and made arrangements for farm workers in the armed services to have three weeks extra leave to help with essential harvest work.³⁰ Yet the prospects for 1948 remained bleak. By midsummer only 16,000 prisoners of war remained in the country, 11,000 or so of them either billeted on farms or located in 'pools' in hostels from which they were available (through the renamed County Agricultural Executive Committees) for daily hire to farmers. Notwithstanding the argument that the Agriculture Act of 1947 would bring stability to farming and in turn attract more

²⁴ *FW*, 11 Oct. 1946.

²⁵ *FW*, 6 Sept. 1946.

²⁶ *FW*, 31 May 1946.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *FW*, 10 Jan. 1947.

²⁹ *FW*, 18 Apr. 1947.

³⁰ *FW*, 28 Mar. 1947; 23 June 1948.

workers to its service, the raising of the school leaving age in the same year effectively spelt the loss of some 18,000 new entrants to the industry. Thus the acute problem of labour supply remained, the situation being exacerbated by the poor summer weather and the heavy storms of the later months of the year. Ultimately it became a matter of 'muddling through' and the cereal and potato harvests were brought in by a miscellaneous workforce of regular labourers, displaced persons, former prisoners of war, urban volunteers, unemployed dockers, service personnel, Irish itinerant labourers, volunteers from Europe and the many schoolchildren whose role in wartime food production is considered in the remainder of this article.³¹

II

During the early phases of the war a variety of unofficial and semi-official schemes for the engagement of schoolchildren and undergraduates in agricultural work had been discussed and locally implemented. It had long been the practice (towards which education authorities had tended to turn a blind eye) for country children to take time off school to help with root-crop hoeing, haymaking and potato-picking, and after war broke out this became almost an informal element in the curriculum of rural schools. Concurrently children were taken by their teachers into the woods and fields to collect plant material of medicinal value, and countless bundles of foxglove, coltsfoot, centuary and yarrow, along with barrels of rose-hips, were gathered by youthful hands as a contribution to the war effort.³² Elsewhere, both public and secondary schools 'adopted' local farms, despatching groups of pupils to lend a hand at critical periods, or occupying their spare time in rat-catching at threshing time, plucking poultry and all manner of other necessary tasks.³³ Some schools contributed directly to food production by feeding a few pigs, cultivating spare ground on the school premises or, in the case of evacuees relocated at Market Rasen in Lincolnshire, establishing their own bee-keeping company.³⁴ Evacuees, in fact, played a vital role in wartime farming and various means were devised to provide teenage evacuees with basic training in agricultural practices. Typical of these was the Foster Parents Plan for War Children. Established with financial backing from the United States and located at Ashley House School near Worksop, the idea was for children from bombed-out urban homes to continue with their general education while simultaneously being trained on carefully-selected farms under the watchful eye of the local CWAEC.³⁵ Another project, involving both evacuees and country children, was devised by S. J. Wright, Director of the Oxford Institute for Research in Agricultural Engineering, and directed towards ensuring that the 100,000 tractors available for farm work in 1941 were used to full capacity. Under this arrangement, some two hundred Oxford undergraduates were instructed in the basics of tractor driving and mechanics before being despatched to schools and passing on their skills to older schoolchildren. In this way almost 4000 boys were enabled to be seconded to farms at appropriate times thereby to allow regular tractor drivers to attend to other essential tasks.³⁶

Early in 1941 in what on the face of it seemed to be an uncontroversial measure, the Board

³¹ *FW*, 8 Oct., 22 Oct. 1948; 28 Apr. 1950.

³² Armstrong, *Farm workers*, p. 211.

³³ *The Times*, 2 Mar. 1940.

³⁴ *FW*, 7 Mar. 1941.

³⁵ *FW*, 18 July 1941.

³⁶ *FW*, 4 July 1941.

of Education instructed local education authorities (LEA) to fix school holidays to coincide with times when seasonal demand for farm labour was at its peak.³⁷ Most LEAs found no difficulty with this arrangement as, for example, in Leicestershire where the summer vacation was curtailed so as to facilitate a three week holiday in October when children could help with the potato harvest.³⁸ Problems, however, arose when the Ministry of Labour proposed the idea of children working on farms *during* term time. This was not only illegal under the terms of the Education Act and the 1933 Children and Young Persons Act, but met with the fierce opposition of the Board of Education where it was held that absences from school would be damaging to children's education. The National Union of Teachers, The National Association of Headteachers and the National Union of Women Teachers concurred, declaring that whatever safeguards were put in place, education would suffer.³⁹ The NUAW went even further, opposing not only term-time work but even holiday-based farm work. Holidays, after all, were times for children to play and not to labour. While the Union admitted that the Ministry of Labour's proposal contained no element of compulsion and that under no circumstances would children be *forced* to work on farms during school time, they nonetheless claimed that pressure might be applied to parents to sanction their child's term-time labour.⁴⁰ Edwin Gooch, the NUAW President, stridently described the proposal as 'a pernicious form of class legislation', inaccurately claiming that it would only apply to working class children in urban schools. His claim prompted an avalanche of correspondence in *The Times*, the gist being that not only were many public schools sending their children to work on farms but that far from being a stressful and uncongenial task for children, '... farming is as pleasant from the average child's point of view as it is important from the nation's'.⁴¹ Yet the Board of Education and Ernest Bevin's Ministry of Labour continued to be bombarded with letters, memoranda and resolutions from the farm workers union, the Workers Education Association and other groups representative of organized labour.⁴² Bevin confronted the NUAW in March 1941, emphasized the lack of compulsion in the proposals, stressed that there would be no ill-effects on schooling and (perhaps ignorant of or indifferent to the miseries of potato picking) argued that children would gain 'enjoyment and health' from farm labour.⁴³ Apart from possible effects on the economic status of the workers themselves, the NUAW's principal worry was that of child exploitation. However much the prominent journalist and polemicist A. G. Street might deny that farmers would ever exploit children to the detriment of their health, the Union was not so sure.⁴⁴ Children might welcome the extra money brought in by their exertions they argued, yet farmers could nevertheless prove hard taskmasters who were likely to seek every opportunity to overwork this cheap and non-unionized source of labour. Teachers also tended to share this view, and while many came to understand the imperative for children to work the land, they utterly

³⁷ *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 369, 1940–1, 6 Mar. 1941.

³⁸ Armstrong, *Farm workers*, pp. 10–11.

³⁹ *The Times*, 14 Apr. 1941; *FW* 25 Apr., 1 May 1941.

⁴⁰ *The Times*, 31 Jan. 1942.

⁴¹ *The Times*, 16 June 1942. For Gooch's relationship with the NFU see Alun Howkins, *The death of rural England. The social history of the countryside since 1900*

(2003), pp. 84–5. In this excellent work Howkins devotes a complete chapter to agriculture during World War II with particular respect to labour, labour relations and wage levels.

⁴² PRO, ED 11/230.

⁴³ PRO, MAF 47/7 (42).

⁴⁴ A. G. Street, *Hitler's Whistle* (1943), p. 263.

condemned exploitation where it was shown to have occurred. A Durham headmaster told the 1950 conference of the National Association of Headteachers that during the previous year he had been confronted by an irate farmer complaining that eight boys working on his farm had gone on strike – merely because they had been given no time to rest during the day! This lack of compassion and understanding did little to endear the generality of farmers to teachers and the Board of Education.⁴⁵ Exploitation aside, teachers believed that once they had worked on farms away from the strict discipline of school, children would become difficult to handle; their sense of values challenged, their sense of duty eroded and the world turned upside-down. Indeed, ‘... for a child of twelve to earn 35s. or £2 per week is a dangerous experiment, leading not only to false values but to something approaching truculence among some children on their return to school’.⁴⁶

Bombarded on all sides by letters of objection from Labour party and union branches throughout the land, Bevin and Minister of Agriculture R. S. Hudson were united in their determination that schoolchildren should work the land in term-time in the interests of the nation as a whole. Against the opposition of the Board of Education, irritated by those numerous local authorities and justices of the peace already flouting the legal requirements of school attendance, Bevin and Hudson lobbied the War Cabinet.⁴⁷ The outcome was the legitimisation of children’s term-time labour under the terms of a Defence Regulation, confirmed by an Order in Council on 5 May 1942.⁴⁸ Drafted, somewhat ironically, under the direction of R. A. Butler, President of the Board of Education, the Order permitted children to be away from school doing farm work for a maximum of twenty half-days each year, and stipulated that under all circumstances their safety and health be safeguarded.⁴⁹ The *voluntary principle* was the key theme of the Order which also set out clear guidelines as to the need to seek permission from *either* the child’s father, a close relative *or*, in the case of an evacuee, a billeting householder, before he or she were exempted from school for farm work. Essentially the ‘school-release’ scheme would be operated by the CWAECs who would liaise closely with the Board of Education to prevent exploitation, would ensure that no child worked in excess of four hours daily, would guarantee that children receive the minimum agricultural wage for their efforts, and would offer assurances that no child under fourteen would be employed until all other sources of labour had been exhausted.⁵⁰ In the face of objection from the unions and the rather grudging cooperation of the Board of Education, the scheme worked with remarkable success throughout the war years and beyond. Without the term-time release of children it is doubtful whether the one million acres of potatoes grown annually between 1941 and 1944 would have

⁴⁵ *FW*, 2 June 1950. For other boys it was tremendous fun. Mr Ian Crisp of Letchworth spent as much time as possible at a whole range of farm tasks in his summer vacations during the war. He also took part in the ‘school-release’ scheme. Boys would assemble in the market square in Hitchin to be taken out by the CWAEC to various local farms for potato picking. This was the highlight of the week, especially when transport comprised six-wheeled canvas-topped Army lorries lent by the local US Air Base (information from Mr Ian Crisp,

27 July 2003).

⁴⁶ *The Times*, 15 June 1943.

⁴⁷ PRO, ED 11/230.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Education Circular 1388; *Order in Council Defence Regulations 1939*.

⁴⁹ *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 379, 1941–2, 7 May 1942.

⁵⁰ *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 381, 1941–2, 5 June 1942.

been planted, let alone harvested. Pressure on schoolchildren was reduced by 1944 as prisoners of war became increasingly available. By 1947, however, (when the school leaving age was raised to fifteen), the education authorities announced ‘with the greatest reluctance’ that children would once again be required in large numbers for farm work and for the next three years the scheme was resuscitated, only to be discontinued in 1950.⁵¹

III

As early as the closing months of 1939 the Headmasters Conference, if not the National Association of Headteachers, had come to sense the necessity of making full use of schoolboy work power. Several public schools were already involving their boys in harvest camps under the motivating influence of Canon Spencer Leeson, Headmaster of Winchester, Chairman of the Headmasters Conference and personal friend of R. S. Hudson.⁵² By the summer of 1940, indeed, no less than 249 camps for 8000 boys had been successfully operated both by public and secondary schools to the approval of collaborating farmers.⁵³ The Board of Education, responding to a report by its Senior Chief Inspector of Schools, expressed some reservations over the rather *ad hoc* organisation of camps, the lacklustre enthusiasm of CWAECs, and the hesitancy of *some* farmers to employ schoolboys whom they doubted were up to the physical demands of harvest work.⁵⁴ This apart, there was the problem of finance. Boys were expected to meet the cost of travel to a particular harvest camp and to contribute to their keep (some 11s. weekly), and with wage levels of between 6*d.* and 8*d.* per hour many were unable to earn sufficient to yield a surplus at the end of the two or three weeks. This, of course, would be a serious disincentive to children from poorer family backgrounds.⁵⁵ Of even greater importance, as far as some headmasters were concerned, was the issue of insurance and of the supervision of children both at the camps and on the farms where they travelled to work. The potential danger had been highlighted in 1940 when a boy from Warwick School harvest camp lost an eye after being struck with a clod of earth thrown by one of his fellows. In the ensuing legal action the headmaster of the school was deemed at fault for not ensuring adequate supervision and was personally obliged to pay damages and legal costs. Not surprisingly, headmasters and other teachers were seriously bothered, and many were unwilling to organize camps unless a formal structure embodying indemnification against legal action could be elaborated.⁵⁶ From the Ministry of Agriculture’s perspective, schoolboy harvest camps were likely to be a key feature of the wartime food production campaign and, as 1941 progressed, a series of Departmental Committees discussed means whereby the scheme could be established on a formal basis and organized in such a way that the supply of schoolboy labour could be matched to local demand.⁵⁷ To resolve these issues the Ministry established the Schoolboy Harvest Camps Advisory Committee (SHCAC) under the Chairmanship of Robert Hyde, Director of the Industrial Welfare Society.⁵⁸ Accepting his post ‘with some diffidence’, Hyde assembled a group

⁵¹ *The Times*, 7 Mar., 12 Dec. 1947; 21 Apr. 1950.

⁵² PRO, MAF 47/6 (204).

⁵³ *The Times*, 27 Mar. 1942.

⁵⁴ PRO, MAF 169/25.

⁵⁵ *The Times*, 6 Sept. 1941.

⁵⁶ PRO, MAF 47/7 (34).

⁵⁷ PRO, MAF 47/105 (42).

⁵⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 377, 1941–2, 22 Jan. 1942.

of representatives of the Board of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture, the CWAECs and the Headmasters and, in anticipation of the development of schoolgirl harvest camps, a member of the Association of Headmistresses in the shape of Miss M. F. Adams of Croydon High School.⁵⁹ The National Union of Agricultural Workers lobbied heavily for representation only to be rather sniffily rebuffed by Hudson who informed them that, since the Committee was concerned with organisational rather than policy issues, their involvement would be 'wasting their time'.⁶⁰

The SHCAC's principal duty was to advise the Minister on all issues pertaining to harvest camps. At the same time it functioned as a liaison body, maintaining contact between CWAECs and schools, issuing detailed practical guidance on the running of camps and engaging with organisational and administrative problems as and when they occurred. Hyde and his colleagues were firmly of the view that the harvest camping experience would offer tangible social and cultural benefits far beyond the economic value to the nation of the boys' work. When he reviewed a decade of camping in 1951, Hyde (now Sir Robert) emphasized the educational advantages for urban children to be gained from learning about country life, and pointed out the many friendships developing between campers (many of whom were evacuees) and village residents.⁶¹ As the Ministry of Agriculture's correspondents repeatedly urged, the camps had effectively re-established the link between town and country which had been eroded during the inter-war years.⁶² The Headmaster of Harrow, meanwhile, persuaded by the Ministry of Information to broadcast on the Home Service, noted (apparently without irony) the great virtues of the admixture of 'some industrial boys' with public school boys at harvest camps '... to their mutual advantage'.⁶³ Again, pupils of Winchester College, not generally expected to labour for a crust, found it 'a revelation' that five or six hours hard work in the harvest fields barely earned them their keep.⁶⁴ For many boys and young men of all backgrounds there were a variety of simple lessons to be learned. The necessity of eating plain food without complaint, of enduring the lack of privacy and minor discomforts of camp life, and the importance of understanding that communal success depended on mutual unselfishness and the consideration of others, were valuable learning experiences. Besides, proposed an enthusiastic headmaster of evangelical persuasion, the harvest camp enterprise taught the basic Christian truth that service to others was effectively the service of God.⁶⁵

Whether or not these various values were successfully inculcated depended in large measure on the quality of organisation of the camp. Well-organized and efficiently-conducted camps were popular with boys both at the time and in retrospect. Pupils from Westminster School (evacuated to Saltmarcbe Castle in Herefordshire) (Figure 1), Malvern College lads under canvas near Evesham, or Dulwich College boys encamped under the auspices of the Hampshire WAEC near Stockbridge in 1941, variously applauded the enthusiasm of the teachers and their wives who shouldered domestic tasks at the camps, usually without reward.⁶⁶ Both body and

⁵⁹ PRO, MAF 47/109.

⁶⁰ PRO, MAF 105/45 (68).

⁶¹ R. Hyde, 'School harvest camps', *Agriculture* 58 (1951), p. 470.

⁶² PRO, MAF 47/105.

⁶³ Ts of broadcast, 15 May 1941, PRO, MAF 47/7 (3).

⁶⁴ PRO, MAF 47/6 (200).

⁶⁵ W. Johnson, 'School harvest camps', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 52 (1945), p. 18.

⁶⁶ FW, 10 June 1941.



FIGURE 1. 'Boys from Westminster School taking tea in a Herefordshire harvest field'.
(photo courtesy of Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, PFW PH2/W13/26)

soul required refreshment, and if some campers had to be content with the ministrations of the local vicar on a Sunday morning, camps in Wiltshire in 1942 and 1943 enjoyed regular visits – for the purpose of conducting services – from no less a personage than the Bishop of Salisbury himself.⁶⁷ In the eyes of many, a good index of efficiency was the financial surplus remaining for the children when the camp was finally wound up. For a surplus to be earned, not only did the Labour Officers of CWAECs need to be on their mettle to ensure regular work for campers, but farmers needed to show generosity and open-handedness, besides being patient with the foibles of the urban schoolboy.⁶⁸ Chrichton Porteous, Labour Officer for Lancashire and a member of the SHCAC, was himself responsible for placing 12,300 boys in harvest camps between 1940 and 1943. He frequently exhorted farmers to generosity, imploring them to offer praise where it was due and to realize, in particular, that camps were run with the simple and sole objective of helping with the task of growing food for the nation.⁶⁹ In urging them to help where possible with the pitching and striking of camps, Porteous tried to impress upon farmers that beyond the inevitable office work, there were awesome logistical difficulties in camp organisation. In Lancashire alone he had had to deal with 50 marquees, 470 tents, 55 stoves, 47 boilers, 400 kettles, 2800 groundsheets, 2300 palliases (to be stuffed with straw), 6200 blankets,

⁶⁷ *FW*, 11 Sept. 1942.

⁶⁸ *The Times*, 29 June 1943.

⁶⁹ *FW*, 10 Sept. 1943.

160 camp beds, 120 latrine screens, 228 buckets, 85 food bins, 90 storm lamps and 90 trestle tables for the summer camps of 1942. Simply acquiring this equipment was difficult enough, but after each camp everything required cleaning and disinfecting, and then to be shifted around the county four times each season as camps moved from early potato crops to pea-picking districts and thence to grain harvest locations and in the autumn to main crop potato areas.⁷⁰

With or without the help of the SHCAC or the Board of Education's 24 page circular of guidance, the organisation of a harvest camp was a daunting task. To begin with it was essential to all and sundry to understand that the camp did not offer an opportunity for parents to hive off children for a cheap holiday; but rather to give those children a chance to contribute to the national interest through what was essentially a community project. This apart, sites had to be chosen (in liaison with local sanitary authorities, the CWAEC and the Medical Officer of Health), insurance cover secured, transport arranged, equipment hired or borrowed, and arrangements for work made with the local CWAEC. In the majority of cases boys were accommodated in suitably-camouflaged tents, although some headmasters took the view that a tent was a less than ideal place for a child to sleep after a hard day's work and they went to some trouble to secure barns, huts and other structures where these could be hired relatively cheaply.⁷¹ Considerations of comfort apart, solid buildings offered more protection from hostile aerial attack, and CWAECs persuaded many local authorities to sanction the use of school buildings as dormitories where the proximity of a camp site allowed.⁷² Attack from the air, in fact, was a major worry and CWAECs took care to make sure that schools camped in the safest possible locations. In the spring of 1944 when the Luftwaffe began to drop anti-personnel bombs designed to explode when touched or disturbed, CWAECs received a secret memorandum reminding them of the paramount importance of children's safety, and instructing them not to permit camps in the vicinity of areas where anti-personnel devices were known to have been dropped.⁷³ It was generally agreed that the optimum size of a harvest camp was 25–30 boys, requiring the presence of two masters, two cooks and (where boys themselves did not undertake them on a rota basis) up to three camp orderlies to attend to routine domestic tasks.⁷⁴ Thirty boys needed a great deal of equipment, which the SHCAC listed and enumerated in meticulous detail. Some schools with a camping tradition had their own sets of tents, paliasses, portable latrines and other paraphernalia, and where these were used the Ministry of Agriculture paid a *pro rata* sum for depreciation. In other cases kit would be borrowed from the CWAEC who indented from the Ministry of Labour at an agreed scale of hire charges.⁷⁵

In 1940, when most school harvest camp schemes got underway, it was presumed that they

⁷⁰ *FW*, 31 July 1942.

⁷¹ *PRO*, MAF 47/105 (13).

⁷² *PRO*, MAF 169/24. At Bolton School Agricultural Camp in 1941 and 1942, boys slept eight to a bell tent, using a wooden shippon on the farm as a mess hall (www.boys.boltonsch.uk). Boys from an inner London school, camping at Charlecote, near Stratford upon Avon, slept in tents near the local school playground and breakfasted and dined in the school classroom

(information from Mr Gerald Pendry, 28 July 2003).

⁷³ *PRO*, MAF 47/9.

⁷⁴ While economies of scale meant that bigger camps were cheaper to run, organisers were confronted with the problem of persuading farmers to offer work to large numbers of boys when bad weather intervened at harvest time.

⁷⁵ Memorandum, Mar. 1942; *PRO*, MAF 47/8.

would be self-financing. Thus the costs of food, fuel, domestic helpers, insurance premiums, cleaning materials and laundry would be offset by wages earned by the children. The latter, recorded on carefully-maintained timesheets provided by the CWAEC, would be pooled and divided between the camp participants when all costs had been met. But experience was soon to prove that when bad weather intervened and farmers were unable or unwilling to offer alternatives to harvest work, camps failed to yield a surplus and either the school or parents were faced with covering the deficit. This problem could be circumvented in some measure when an enterprising and diplomatic master-in-charge maintained daily contact with farmer clients to ensure continuity of work regardless of the weather. This was the case in the summer of 1940 when boys from Regents Park School attended a harvest camp in Hampshire where they worked for thirty hours per week, covered the cost of the camp, enjoyed the experience and went home each with a well-deserved nest egg.⁷⁶ Repeated losses, on the other hand, would be a deterrent to further effort, and the Ministry of Agriculture approached the Treasury to seek funds for some sort of guarantee against loss, at the same time lobbying for the right to hire camping equipment free of charge from the Office of Works.⁷⁷ Content to concede the second request, the Treasury pondered long and hard before grudgingly agreeing that where a CWAEC could vouch for a camp being well-conducted and organized, a maximum of £9000 could be made annually available to meet up to 50 per cent of camp costs ‘... where assistance is asked for’.⁷⁸ In the event, as the number of camps proliferated, £9000 proved woefully inadequate and in 1942 the Treasury was persuaded to allocate a block grant to allow CWAECs to guarantee a weekly minimum of thirty hours’ work for each boy attending a camp. By this means boys denied the chance of harvest work by the weather would receive payment for the equivalent of 30 hours weekly at rates laid down by the local County Agricultural Wages Board. Total Treasury expenditure on schoolboy harvest camps peaked at £56,000 in 1944, declining to £50,000 the following year, £19,000 in 1947 and £10,000 in 1949.⁷⁹ Of these sums, payments under the ‘guarantee of work’ accounted for 35 per cent, car allowances, domestic help and equipment hire 30 per cent, and subsidized transport costs a further 35 per cent. The latter involved the full cost of masters’ travel to and from the camp, an allowance of 7s. 6d. for boys’ return rail travel or, where they cycled to the camp, an allowance of 1s. weekly for depreciation together with ½d. per mile running cost. Bicycles were reckoned an essential item of camp equipment since farmers were not *obliged* to transport boys from camp to work site, buses were in short

⁷⁶ *The Times*, 1 Sept. 1940. The late Mr G. Hinchliffe taught for many years at Roundhay School in Leeds and, in a memoir made available to me by the good offices of his son Prof. J. R. Hinchliffe, he testifies to the enthusiasm of the children working at the eight harvest camps which he organised in the war and early post-war years. Located on a farm owned by the Chairman of the local CWAEC, campers were rarely short of work since local farmers, anxious to retain their services, ensured that jobs were available around the farmyard when inclement weather prevented harvesting. In 1943 boys from Roundhay worked a total of 9000 hours, often beginning

their day with breakfast served in darkness while the eastern sky was dotted with bombers returning to Dishforth aerodrome after their missions. In 1948, when most prisoners of war had been repatriated, each boy-harvester worked more than 40 hours weekly, the working day often extending so far into the evening that meals would be taken at 10.30pm after which boys washed in bowls of hot water from the cookhouse before tumbling exhausted into bed.

⁷⁷ PRO, MAF 47/7 (3).

⁷⁸ PRO, MAF 47/7 (4).

⁷⁹ PRO, MAF 47/9, 47/10, 47/142.

supply due to military requisitioning, and CWAECs found difficulty in securing petrol coupons in sufficient quantity to run vehicles beyond a strictly limited mileage.

With some reluctance the Treasury agreed that girls' harvest camps would be eligible for monies from the block grant. Advised by the SHCAC that female modesty would demand extra latrine screens and more sick-bay space since, as a lady member of the Committee put it, '... casual illness is much more likely in girls in our experience', the Treasury remained doubtful as to the appropriateness of girls' camps.⁸⁰ Nor, indeed, did the CWAECs or the SHCAC go out of their way to encourage schoolgirl participation on the rather dubious grounds that since they were physically incapable of the heavier farm tasks, their usefulness would be confined to districts where lighter work such as fruit picking and pea harvesting was available. As a matter of policy it was left to local CWAECs to determine whether or not girls' camps were promoted, although it is clear that where such camps were established the girls discharged their duties every bit as effectively as their male counterparts.⁸¹ Girls or boys, harvesters were expected to carry with them formidable amounts of personal equipment as they travelled to their camps. When the lads of High Storrs Grammar School in Sheffield set off on their bikes to camp in Lincolnshire in the summers of 1942 and 1943, they took along not only clothes and toilet requisites for three weeks, but sheets, cutlery and, in particular, their football boots which they were expected to use for farm work.⁸² The matter of footwear worried both teachers and administrators. Many urban children had no suitable working boots, and even if they had the necessary clothing coupons, poorer parents lacked the wherewithal to buy boots of sufficient quality. For all the efforts of CWAECs to assemble pools of clogs, it seemed that children's work output was likely to be limited where they were inadequately shod.⁸³ When Lord Cromwell, a prominent member of Leicestershire WAEC, visited the various harvest camps in the county in 1945, he was alarmed both at the condition of children's clothing and the fact that many lacked a decent pair of boots. Writing to Tom Williams the following March he suggested that the Minister might have a quiet word with Sir Stafford Cripps at the Board of Trade ('... to whom I am related by marriage') with the object of persuading him that school harvest volunteers should receive extra clothing coupons. Cripps, it appears, listened sympathetically only to conclude that since the children worked merely for short periods, extra coupons would not only be inappropriate, but their issue would prompt demands from regular farm workers.⁸⁴

Providing growing boys from urban homes with working clothes was one thing; satisfying their hunger after a day's labour in the open air quite another. In the early phases camps had relied largely upon the goodwill of teachers' wives, the local Girl Guides, the WVS, or the long-suffering school cook. But as time went by it became clear that unpaid volunteers would not come forward in sufficient numbers to cater for the increasing volume of school camps, and in 1943 the SHCAC encouraged the Board of Education to approach domestic science colleges

⁸⁰ PRO, MAF 47/109.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² S. Ward, *War in the Countryside* (1988), pp. 50–1.

⁸³ PRO, MAF 47/121.

⁸⁴ PRO, MAF 47/148. The issue of working boots became something of a *cause célèbre* during the war.

This was particularly so when regular farm workers learned that prisoners of war working on farms were *provided* with rubber boots by the War Office whereas they, the farm workers, had to save footwear coupons to secure suitable boots. The WLA complained similarly.

with the view of recruiting suitably trained students as camp cooks. Attracted by the incentive of free board and lodging and a cash payment of 30s. weekly, students volunteered in considerable numbers. Given the exacting nature of their work, the SHCAC took the view that rather than having to 'rough it' under canvas, student cooks should be billeted in local houses, for which CWAECs agreed to cover costs up to a maximum of 15s. weekly.⁸⁵ From these comfortable billets student cooks sallied forth each day to confront the challenging exercise of meeting the appetites of campers against the restrictions of strict wartime rationing. Guided by such edifying publications as the Ministry of Food's *Carried Meals and Snacks* and *Practical Canteen Cooking*, or the Board of Education's *Catering for Harvest Camps*, they strove to make the best use of increasingly limited resources.⁸⁶ These and kindred leaflets, memoranda and guidebooks reveal the bleakness of the food supply situation and the challenges open to an enterprising and creative cook. *Catering for Harvest Camps* offered daily menus, information about food storage and cooking routines, guidance on bulk purchase, details of the nutritional requirements of growing boys and girls and stern instructions as to the proper thickness of bread for sandwiches. But despite the seeming monotony of dietary ingredients, with much reference to dried egg, tinned salmon, cheese pasties and date and cabbage sandwiches, a surprising range of meals were on offer including the superficially unedifying 'Patriotic Pudding', a concoction of grated potato, flour, lard, dried egg, baking powder and syrup.⁸⁷ In 1941 the Ministry of Food produced a leaflet, *Catering Arrangements for Schoolboy Harvest Camps*, perhaps the very exemplar of dietary austerity. As a basic diet children were allowed 8oz of cheese, 2lbs of canned meat, 1lb of canned beans, ½lb of biscuits and 2oz of dried fruit weekly together with rice 'as required' and unspecified amounts of New Zealand honey. Camp organizers and cooks were encouraged to lay up local supplies of fruit, vegetables and rabbits and to liaise with the Regional Milk Marketing Officer so as to obtain sufficient milk. The Ministry of Food was convinced that plentiful amounts of unrationed food was available where camp organizers '... show reasonable initiative'.⁸⁸ All well and good, but the success or otherwise of such initiative depended on the goodwill of local Ministry officials of whose intransigence and lack of sympathy there were frequent complaints.⁸⁹ In 1944, to the irritation of the SHCAC, the Ministry of Food reduced the already miserly meat allowance. By marginally increasing the ration of cheese and dried eggs some compensation was offered and the ingenuity of camp cooks further taxed as they confronted the daily task of supplying two hot meals and a packed lunch against a strict budget. Their job would be made the easier where local farmers and growers offered staples like potatoes and vegetables either at discounted rates or even free of charge. This, of course, was largely a matter of luck. For every letter to the Ministry of Agriculture

⁸⁵ PRO, MAF 47/9.

⁸⁶ The Board of Education issued a variety of publications offering practical advice as to how schools could contribute to wartime food needs. *Schools and Food Production* (Memo 1) discusses the cultivation of derelict land and abandoned allotments; *Harvest in the Woodlands* (Memo 5) emphasises the value of collecting acorns and beechmast as pig feed; *Collection of leaves and roots of common plants* (Memo 25) reveals

the pharmaceutical use of a range of collectable vegetation, while other *Memoranda* cover poultry, pig and rabbit keeping together with details of work to be carried out in the school garden at various seasons of the year (PRO, ED 138/27).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ PRO, MAF 47/9.

⁸⁹ PRO, MAF 47/146.

complaining of the tight-fistedness of farmers and their unwillingness to provide milk and vegetables at other than retail prices, there were others reflecting more satisfactory experiences. The boys from High Storrs Grammar School in Sheffield certainly had few complaints. Thanks to the resourcefulness of the school cook who lodged in a nearby village, they were properly fed and watered, their daily diet being enhanced by ample supplies of cakes, custards and bakewell tarts sent to the fields by the farmer's wife together with '... canful upon canful of lovely, sweet, strong, milky tea'.⁹⁰

This sort of generosity would be doubly welcome by children who had been woken at 7.00 am, had their kit inspected and finished communal prayers by 7.55, breakfasted at 8.00 and cycled to the farm at 8.30 to work a full eight hour day. While the detailed regime varied between camps, in most cases campers returned to their site by 5.00 pm and after eating and enjoying a period of recreation, lights were extinguished between 9 and 10 pm. The strict regimentation of camp life, with its rigorously enforced rules and regulations, may have come naturally to the majority of public school boys, but it probably seemed a little strange and irksome to lads from inner-city state schools. To any boy or girl, however, the prospect of money in the pocket was both a potent spur to effort and a compensation for having to put up with two or three weeks of regimented living. Irrespective of whether they were engaged with the relatively pleasant business of corn harvesting or the autumnal fatigue of potato picking (Figure 2), in 1941 sixteen year olds were paid at 8*d.* per hour and younger children 6*d.* These levels of pay, the Ministry of Agriculture insisted, were the *absolute minima* and where conditions dictated, not only were camp organizers within their rights to demand higher hourly rates, but farmers duty bound to pay them.⁹¹ The same applied in 1946 when the hourly rate for all boys and girls from 14–19 was increased to 9*d.* to reflect increasing camp costs, by this time running at 26*s.* per person per week.⁹²

On New Year's Day 1946, Tom Williams, by now Minister of Agriculture, wrote to Ellen Wilkinson, his opposite number in the recently-established Ministry of Education, urging inter-departmental collaboration in his effort to retain school harvest camps 'on the greatest possible scale' in the early post-war years.⁹³ Aware that after six years of war many schools were beginning to tire of the annual harvest camp, that parental enthusiasm was waning with the passing of the immediate wartime urgency, and that teachers themselves were by now less willing to sacrifice their vacations, Williams knew that this was likely to prove an uphill struggle.⁹⁴ Under the terms of the 1944 Education Act, LEAs had been empowered to fix the timing and duration of school holidays on a local basis and whereas they had been asked to consider farm labour needs in their deliberations, they were under no legal obligation to do so. Some authorities were more cooperative in this respect than others. The Lincolnshire CWAEC, for example, persuaded the local LEA to extend the duration of the summer holidays of all schools involved

⁹⁰ Ward, *War in the countryside*. Pupils from Bolton School, camping at Mowbreck Hall Farm near Kirkham, in Lancashire, in 1941–2 received a hot midday meal from their farmer-employers. They enjoyed excellent relations with the farmers and each camp returned a

satisfactory profit (www.boys.boltonschuk).

⁹¹ PRO, MAF 47/8; memorandum, 1941.

⁹² PRO, MAF 47/146; memorandum, 1946.

⁹³ PRO, MAF 47/146.

⁹⁴ PRO, MAF 47/10.



FIGURE 2. 'London schoolboys gathering the potato harvest on Hampstead Heath'.
(photo courtesy of Museum of English Rural life, University of Reading, PFW PH2/W13/10)

with harvest camps, while in Northumberland the length of holidays had been so curtailed that all harvest camps had been discontinued by 1946.⁹⁵ Teachers who had previously given up three weeks or more of their holidays were angered both by the lack of official recognition of their efforts and by what appeared to them to be a cynical reduction in their summer vacation time. Williams' solution was to propose that LEAs be granted the discretion to offer time off *in lieu* where teachers had been involved in harvest camp organisation. But it was not enough and, as Table 3 shows, harvest camp numbers declined steeply after 1947.

The SHCAC, convinced of the broader educational benefits of the harvest camp scheme, discussed at length the feasibility of continuing it in the post-war decades as a form of youth service.⁹⁶ If run along the lines of agricultural/educational/holiday ventures, they argued, summer camps could become innovative learning experiences while simultaneously fostering interest in the countryside. Their enthusiasm, though, was not matched by that of officials in the Ministry of Education, uneasy about overburdening their hard-pressed teachers. Whilst prepared to listen to 'constructive proposals', the Ministry remained unconvinced as to the

⁹⁵ PRO, MAF 47/146.

⁹⁶ PRO, MAF 47/142.

TABLE 3. The School Harvest Camps Scheme, 1941–1950

	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950
No. of Camps	335	654	1068	997	774	450	308	298	171	112
No. of boys in single sex camps	12,000	26,425	41,372	45,968	28,130	13,250	9960	7500	5191	3538
No. of girls in single sex camps	–	3869	20,424	15,593	12,130	4840	2530	2400	566	294
No. girls and boys in mixed camps	–	848	6892	5679	4320	2960	1110	900	466	271
Total	12,000	31,142	68,688	67,240	44,580	21,050	13,600	10,800	6223	4103
Total Boy/Girl weeks of work		124,568	274,752	268,860	178,320	63,150	36,044	32,214	19,695	12,803

Source: PRO, MAF 105/45 (214).

educational value of dual or triple-purpose camps and the idea withered on the vine.⁹⁷ By the autumn of 1950 it was clear that the SHCAC had outlived its usefulness and Tom Williams attended the final meeting on 15 November of that year.⁹⁸ In providing guidance and direction to schools and performing a vital liaison role, the Committee had been a major player in a scheme contributing in the order of one million weeks of labour to the wartime farms of Britain.

IV

Farmers, the beneficiaries of this youthful workforce, were unstinting in their praise, sometimes favourably comparing the children's efforts with those of adult volunteers – '... crowds of casual holiday-makers' – who sometimes did more damage than work.⁹⁹ So delighted were growers in the Fylde district of Lancashire (where children from twenty schools picked 2000 tons of potatoes in 1943) that they provided camp participants with illuminated scrolls as expressions of gratitude.¹⁰⁰ Others received cash bonuses, as in the case of boys from St Clement Dane's Grammar School, Holborn who camped beside the River Windrush at Standlake, Oxfordshire for the harvest of 1941. Besides paying each boy a bonus, numerous local farmers wrote at length to the Labour Officer of the CWAEC expressing their appreciation and urging that the camp be repeated in subsequent years.¹⁰¹ 'They are willing to tackle anything', wrote an enthusiastic farmer who had employed thirty boys more or less continuously from July to September. Nothing was too much for them, be it pea-picking, singling turnips, cabbage planting, soft fruit picking, haymaking, corn harvesting, thistling, stone picking or road mending.¹⁰²

Although the sources are virtually silent on the issue, the very fact that over 20,000 girls

⁹⁷ PRO MAF 47/143.

⁹⁸ PRO, MAF 105/45 (215)

⁹⁹ C. A. Richards and W. S. Flack, 'Farming camp school', *J. Ministry of Agriculture* 52 (1945), p. 79.

¹⁰⁰ FW, 28 Jan. 1944.

¹⁰¹ PRO, MAF 47/146.

¹⁰² FW, 8 May 1942.

attended school harvest camps in 1943 and some 15,500 the following year, begs a variety of questions about gender which will probably only be effectively answered through carefully-conducted oral history studies. Evidence offered below suggests that where female camps were regularly run, notably in Lancashire, Gloucestershire, Kent, Sussex and Wiltshire, farmers responded positively and even enthusiastically to the girls' efforts. In Lancashire, for example, they worked with such enthusiasm that 'you could not drive them back to the camp', while a Gloucestershire CWAEC officer, visiting a camp at Slimbridge where 500 girls had picked 400 acres of potatoes, testified to the high quality of their achievements.¹⁰³

By analogy with the Womens Land Army towards whom initial prejudice also evaporated when it became clear that women were perfectly capable of undertaking a whole range of exacting farm tasks previously the purview of men, farmers probably accepted the working schoolgirl with growing enthusiasm as the labour situation became more critical. If WLA personnel could drive tractors (which the wisecracks had believed to be virtually impossible) and could plough, make hay, operate threshing tackle and other machinery, then their younger counterparts could readily cope with harvesting tasks. True, they might have found the heavier harvest jobs burdensome, yet when it came to work like stooking, pitching sheaves and building stacks, girls under appropriate supervision functioned every bit as effectively as boys. Where nimble fingers or meticulous detail was required, as in the case of pea-harvesting, they may even have proved superior to their male brethren (Figure 3). Again, farmers tended to take the view, after experiencing the inputs of voluntary workers of either gender or members of the WLA, that females were keener, more enthusiastic and more readily receptive to new ideas than many men.¹⁰⁴ When the war came to a close and many women returned to domestic life, their experience of working on the land, in munitions factories and other sectors of the economy doubtless coloured their approach towards both their home and social lives. It might also be suggested that younger girls, having enjoyed the fruits of harvest wages and gained substantially in self-worth after 'doing their bit', took a rather different view of the world as they grew to maturity in the 1950s. Perhaps those 'false values', so much the concern of teachers worried about the effects of harvest camps on the outlook of boys, applied equally to the girls? Perhaps those relatively brief periods in single sex or mixed harvest camps when the labour input of girls was every bit as important as that of boys, contributed in some small measure to that growing sense of independence and rejection of the cult of deference which characterized the post-war generation? This, of course, is pure supposition and requires careful examination through oral history and the study of personal documents.¹⁰⁵ In like manner, the role of parents of both girls and boys is deserving of closer investigation. On the whole the limited range of evidence offered in this article suggests that children thoroughly enjoyed the harvest camp experience and

¹⁰³ PRO, MAF 47/142.

¹⁰⁴ Howkins, *Death of rural England*, pp. 128–9; B. Powell and N. Westmacott, *The Womens Land Army, 1939–1950* (1997), pp. 43–67. Nevertheless a degree of gender prejudice continued into the post-war years. During the course of a major survey of manpower training needs in Wales conducted in the early 1970s, it became clear that farmers had rather scant regard for

womens' abilities on the land. Beyond feeding calves, milking and 'opening gates', their potential was perceived (by their partners) as being limited to domestic and secretarial tasks. (R. J. Moore-Colyer and J. L. Lees, *Hill farming in Wales. Manpower and training needs*, unpublished report, Agricultural Training Board, 1973).

¹⁰⁵ In itself a fitting subject for a doctoral thesis.



FIGURE 3. 'Schoolgirls, girl guides and members of the Girls Training Corps picking field beans'.
(photo courtesy of Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, PFW PH2/W13/24)

derived much benefit from it. Yet there remain unanswered questions concerning, in particular, the attitudes and approach of parents towards the harvest camp project. How far was it a matter of children freely volunteering or being persuaded to do so by harassed parents keen to cast off the shackles of parenthood for a few brief weeks? Conversely there may have been situations where children volunteered to work *against* parental wishes so to liberate themselves from the restrictions of home. In any event, the study of these and kindred questions may cast further light not only on the school harvest camp scheme but also on more general issues of child-parent relations in the wartime and early post-war years.

For most boys and girls from urban backgrounds, working in the countryside either in term time or as harvest campers, offered a variety of novel experiences. The simple matter of getting out onto the land was a new departure for many who had no more than the haziest notions of the source of their daily bread. Uniquely different from home, the farmers' world with its arcane language and obscure traditions (to say nothing of the unfamiliar animals, the thistles and the mud) was a fascinating, strange and sometimes even frightening place.¹⁰⁶ But

¹⁰⁶ My correspondent Mr B. N. Jackson, a retired vet living in Cambridge, writes of the terror of evacuees in Devon when told a 'thrashing' machine was visiting the farm. In preparing this article I wrote to the *Farmers Weekly* in June 2003 inviting readers to contact me with their experiences as child harvest workers. I received several responses of which details are included in the text and footnotes.

familiarity grew with increasing contact, and arduous though much of the work may have been, it was officially believed that the enterprise was a potent force for the good in the sense that it contributed to building a bridge between the urban and rural communities. In the absence of any detailed oral history studies beyond the casual reminiscences of individuals, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions as to the views of the children themselves. Where they lived in a well-organized camp and worked for sympathetic and generous farmers they would, of course, respond rather more favourably than their brethren shackled to a farmer ‘as mean as ditchwater’ and eating and sleeping at a poorly-managed site.¹⁰⁷ Yet the very fact that throughout the peak war years children continued to volunteer in their thousands suggests that on balance the experience was a positive one. This may be illustrated by the recollections of a number of harvest camp workers who accepted my invitation to write about their experiences. Mrs Jean Wakely, a wartime pupil of Maidenhead County Girls School, regularly attended her local harvest camp at Shurlock Row, and on the basis of this was later able to study at the Usk Institute of Agriculture in Monmouthshire.¹⁰⁸ Mr Ian Crisp, who worked in the potato fields of Hertfordshire under the school-release arrangements, testified to the responsibility, trust and freedom of action accorded to children labouring on the land in what were ‘... the best years of my life’.¹⁰⁹

Mr Gerald Pendry attended a harvest camp in Warwickshire in 1941 as a pupil of an inner London school and sent me a vivid account of his experiences, emphasising in particular his horror at the devastation of Coventry, far worse in his view than the London bombings. Mr Pendry and his fellow pupils travelled (with their bikes) by rail from Euston to Coventry and thence to Charlecote near Stratford-upon-Avon. Here they camped beside the village school and after briefing by the CWAEC representative found themselves stooking thistle-ridden sheaves of wheat and working with a flax-pulling machine. These rather ‘Heath Robinson’ devices, driven by the tractor power take-off, required constantly to be unblocked as the flax clogged the rubber pulling belts. Two boys were put to this exhausting and dangerous task under the supervision of a Polish tractor driver who spoke no English. The complete absence of any form of protection of drive shafts or belt guards ‘... would make any health and safety officers’ of today hair stand on end’. After various other agrarian adventures Mr Pendry was able to take up an agricultural course for ex-servicemen at Brinsbury Manor in West Sussex and thence to purchase the Wealden dairy farm where he lives to this day.¹¹⁰ Others too, no doubt, capitalized both on their working experience and the concomitant social encounters. As urban evacuees, children from metropolitan secondary schools and public schoolboys met in the harvest fields, they established an order of social contact which would have been

¹⁰⁷ As several of my respondents made clear.

¹⁰⁸ At Shurlock Row the local Scouts and Guides prepared the tents, cleaned the latrines, the younger girls being occupied with sandwich-making (information from Mrs J. Wakely, 28 July 2003).

¹⁰⁹ Information from Mr I. Crisp, 27 July 2003.

¹¹⁰ Information from Mr G. Pendry, 28 July 2003. Prior to attending Brinsbury Manor, Mr Pendry worked on a downland farm near Sevenoaks through the appalling

winter of 1947, accumulating experience of milking and the associated contemporary jobs of hand-cutting frozen kale, chopping mangolds and slithering around the downland slopes with a cabless and hydraulic-free Fordson Major. It came as a great relief in 1948 when his employer bought a Ferguson TE20, equipped with three-point linkage, ‘... the biggest mechanical enhancement since I first attended that farming camp sixty-two years ago!’

improbable in the normal course of events. To the extent that they helped to blur class divisions, the camps might then be seen as elements in the promotion of the social fluidity developing in the post-war era.

Neither the harvest-camp scheme, the school-release arrangements, nor the employment on farms of prisoners of war met with the approval of the Trades Unions. The NUAW, in particular, objected vehemently to the notion of childrens' employment primarily on the grounds that this would hamper their educational and social development. Besides, they held that both children and prisoners of war constituted a source of cheap labour, the use of which might act against their own longer-term interests. Suspicious of the 'voluntary' principle embodied in school-release and harvest-camp schemes, they fretted at the prospect of advancing casualisation of the farm labour force. Teachers too, while generally accepting the need for childrens' labour, became even more frustrated by the demands of the Ministry of Agriculture for more school harvest camps and correspondingly less vacation time, and equally irritated by the inter-departmental wrangling characteristic of the early phases of the various schemes. Those who enthusiastically took up the challenge of running harvest camps before 1942 were confronted by the labyrinthine task of negotiating with a variety of different agencies often less than cooperative each with the other. The establishment of the SHCAC removed most of the difficulties, while the convenient device of the Defence Regulation legalized school-release thereby eliminating at a stroke many of the objections of both teachers and farm workers. Henceforth the Board of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture (*via* the CWAECs) would work more or less harmoniously in the interests of promoting school labour. So, in a very British sort of fashion, common sense prevailed in the pursuit of the general good. One way or another the wartime cereal and potato harvests were gathered in, much of the effort being contributed by people with little previous contact with the land. This article has focussed on the role of children in a great enterprise; the detailed story of adult volunteers and prisoners of war has yet to be told.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ I shall be publishing an account of the role of prisoners of war as a contribution to the forthcoming volume under the editorship of Brian Short, Charles Watkins and John Martin. My article on the County War Agricultural Executive Committees (which touches the issues of wartime labour) will appear in a forthcoming number of *Welsh History Rev.* while I am currently working on voluntary adult labour in wartime England.