

Feeding the war effort: agricultural experiences in First World War Devon, 1914–17

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Abstract:

Studies of British agriculture in the First World War have argued that the labour crisis was not as severe as contemporaries believed, suggesting instead that replacement labour and greater access to farm machinery helped to offset the loss of agricultural labourers to the military. However, labour reports for Devon show a shortage of both men and horses on the land by late 1915 and the County War Agricultural Committee expressed concern that the continued removal of men from the land was in conflict with the need to increase home grown food. Central to the issue was the farmers' belief that operating a farm required a set number of men and horses. Through district boards and the Devon Farmers' Union, local farmers negotiated manpower demands by refusing to cooperate with government agricultural directives until manpower and price guarantees could be assured. As such, this article argues that crucial changes to agriculture took place in 1916 when the pressing labour shortage forced the government to reconsider its agricultural policies.

The First World War placed tremendous strain on Britain's farming community. The declaration of war threatened to rob farms of their labour through enlistment and, from 1915 onward, concerns about the German submarine campaign and its threat to Britain's shipping and supply lines meant that the farming community had to increase home food production drastically. The war presented a dilemma for farmers: to increase production they would have to alter their farming practices, but because farming was an individual enterprise, what was in the best interests of one farm was not necessarily to the advantage of another. Government intervention in agriculture was minimal until 1916 and there was no state initiative for a new agricultural policy based on wartime needs until January 1917. In the first two years of the war, however, Devon's farmers faced innumerable challenges, the most pressing of which was how to increase output with dwindling labour supplies. Many farmers were reluctant to change their farming practices without price guarantees and were unwilling to turn over their labourers and sons without assurances that suitable replacement labour could be found.

The most pressing problem facing agriculture was manpower, but it is difficult to gauge the actual labour shortage between 1914 and 1918. Studies carried out by A. W. Ashby suggested that 243,000 men left agriculture during the war. A similar study by T. H. Middleton estimated that between August 1914 and April 1918 approximately 273,000 men between the ages of 18 and

41 left agriculture for military service or munitions work.¹ According to the Board of Trade's Z8 reports, approximately 816,667 men were employed in agriculture in 1914. The problem with calculating the exact loss of manpower to industry is that the government kept less than adequate records for the first year of the war and once restrictions were placed on the employment of skilled workmen, many lied about their occupations to escape agricultural work. The Z8 reports show agricultural losses at approximately 30 per cent or 245,000 men, on par with the estimates made by Ashby and Middleton.² One point of concern is that the Z8 reports did not take into consideration farm owners or their relatives, nor did they consider the use of replacement labour or the introduction of new farm machinery during the war. Through an examination of the country's military recruitment, G. E. Mingay has suggested that the labour shortage was only 11 per cent greater than in the pre-war period. Although Peter Dewey suggests a 22 per cent increase over pre-war numbers, he also argues that, due to the declining importance of agriculture before 1914, military recruitment did not affect the agricultural industry to the extent that it affected other industries.³

Although the importance of the labour shortage in wartime Britain has been appreciated by historians, Hilary Crowe has recently pointed out that 'national averages disguise important regional variations' and added that 'no attempt has been made to consider any regional variation in the labour problem.'⁴ Building on Crowe's argument that the labour shortage was more severe in the uplands than national figures for England and Wales suggest, this study demonstrates that a labour crisis was also prevalent in Devon, the largest agricultural county in south-west England. The value of a county study, and Devon in particular, is that it demonstrates how government directives that failed to take into consideration regional and local disparities in farming practices, particularly surrounding the use of labour, served to exacerbate existing divisions within the agricultural community, thereby undermining the farmers' ability to increase home food production in the first 30 months of the war to early 1917. Local responses to national policies were reflected in the relationship between farmers and the Board of Agriculture, and it was the temper of these which, in part, encouraged the Lloyd George government to introduce changes to agricultural policy early in 1917.

I

The fortunes of Devon's farming community were tied to the British government's agricultural policies. Despite Britain's reliance on imports, the outbreak of the war did not lead to immediate changes in food policy. On the eve of the First World War, British farmers produced enough grain to feed the population for approximately 125 days of the year.⁵ Four-

¹ Cited in P. Dewey, *British agriculture in the First World War* (1989), p. 40; T. H. Middleton, *Food production in war* (1923), p. 266.

² TNA, BT/Z8, pp. 42–6, War Enquiries Branch, 'Survey of agricultural employment', 1914–16.

³ G. E. Mingay, *A social history of the English countryside* (1990), p. 200; Dewey, *British agriculture*, p. 43; id., 'Military recruiting and the British labour force during

the First World War', *Historical J.* 27 (1984), p. 200.

⁴ H. Crowe, 'Keeping the wheels of the farm in motion: labour shortages in the uplands during the Great War', *Rural Hist.* 19 (2008), p. 201.

⁵ P. Dewey, 'Nutrition and living standards in wartime Britain', in R. Wall and J. Winter (eds), *The upheaval of war: family, work and welfare in Europe, 1914–18* (1988), p. 201.

fifths of all wheat and wheaten flour consumed in Britain came from overseas, and one-third of Britain's beef supplies and two-fifths of its sheep meat were imported.⁶ Although Britain relied extensively on imports to feed the population, in 1914 the weather was good, the harvest fruitful, and it was estimated that home supplies of grain would last for five months. The Board of Agriculture anticipated no immediate problem since the war was expected to be over by Christmas and British imports would remain largely unaffected.⁷ This lack of intervention was partly because initial concerns were not about supply, but rather prices, which reflected the inflationary nature of war finance, the high cost of imports, and rising shipping costs.

By the end of 1914, however, the state was directly responsible for buying and shipping the bulk of Britain's imported foodstuffs and, under Asquith, was considering the regulation of prices and the distribution of food items. Even with these provisions in place, throughout 1915 food prices continued to rise. There was also concern that the U-boat campaign would intensify as the war progressed, a problem that was compounded by the fact that the Royal Navy was slow to adopt convoy practices until there was no alternative in 1917. By the end of 1916, Asquith had appointed a Food Controller to control prices and later civilian rationing, and established the Food Production Department to increase home food production.⁸

The only way to make up for the shortfall of imports was to increase home food production by abandoning the livestock regime for one based on cereals and grains. The rationale behind the plough up policy was that livestock were 'wasteful converters of crops into food,' whereas consuming crops directly would maximize the nation's food supply.⁹ To assist, the Asquith government established the Agricultural Consultative Committee (ACC), the first of two groups created by the Board of Agriculture in 1914. Initially, this committee had little practical advice for farmers. In August 1914 the ACC encouraged farmers to increase the production of staple crops by breaking-up grasslands, but it offered no monetary incentives or price guarantees for future crops. Instead, it was content to offer suggestions that it hoped the farmers would take. The other group was the Cabinet Committee on Food Supply which was mainly concerned with imported supplies and ensuring that prices were not unreasonably inflated. In the first two months of the war, however, the levels of imports remained steady and the Committee had little advice in terms of future food policy.¹⁰

Meanwhile, Lord Selborne, President of the Board of Agriculture, was given the responsibility of managing the nation's food supply. In early 1915 he established the Milner Committee, comprised of three councils for England, Ireland, and Scotland, to consider solutions to a potential food shortage. The unanimous finding of the English Committee in December 1915

⁶ C. Orwin and E. Whetham, *History of British agriculture, 1846-1914* (1971), pp. 341-42; Dewey, *British agriculture*, pp. 15-17; id., *War and progress: Britain, 1914-45* (1997), p. 19; J. Sheail, 'Land improvement and reclamation: the experiences of the First World War in England and Wales', *AgHR* 24 (1976), p. 111; A. Offer, *The First World War: an agrarian interpretation* (1989), p. 93.

⁷ Dewey, 'Nutrition and living standards', p. 201.

⁸ M. Barnett, *British food policy during the First World War* (1985), pp. xviii-xix, 63-5.

⁹ Dewey, *War and progress*, p. 210.

¹⁰ Dewey, *British agriculture*, pp. 23-9. The reluctance of both committees to interfere in agriculture was part of the broader 'business as usual' approach adopted by the Asquith government at the beginning of the war, aiming at minimal disruption to the domestic life of the nation. A. F. Cooper, *British agricultural policy, 1912-36: a study in Conservative politics* (1989), pp. 22-3; Dewey, *British agriculture*, pp. 23-4; T. Wilson, *The myriad faces of war* (1986), pp. 163, 216.

TABLE 1. Food Production for the United Kingdom, 1913–17.

	<i>Wheat (quarters)</i>	<i>Barley (quarters)</i>	<i>Oats (quarters)</i>	<i>Beans (quarters)</i>	<i>Hay (tons)</i>
1913	7,087,050	8,204,066	20,660,279	950,309	15,395,088
1914	7,804,041	8,065,678	20,663,537	1,120,078	12,403,479
1915	9,239,355	5,862,244	22,308,395	892,572	15,197,872
1916	7,471,884	6,612,550	21,333,782	474,081	13,162,627
1917	8,041,000	7,190,000	27,550,000	N/A	N/A

Source: B. H. Hibbard, *Effects of the Great War upon agriculture in the United States and Great Britain* (1919), p. 220.

was that a ‘plough-up policy’ was the only way for England to increase substantially the gross production of food for the 1916 harvest. It recommended offering farmers a minimum price for wheat over the following several years. The Irish Committee, however, rejected the idea of guaranteeing prices for any longer than a year, and the Scottish Committee was opposed to definitive prices for cereals, believing that the 1916 harvest would be bountiful and price guarantees would be unnecessary.¹¹ Selborne’s scheme also received little support from the War Committee. Supporters of laissez-faire policies, Reginald McKenna and Arthur Balfour included, blocked all recommendations of regulation. The findings of the Milner Committee eventually formed the basis of the food policy adopted in 1917, but until then, intervention was rejected.¹²

Official statistics for the United Kingdom show that under the Asquith administration there was an increase in the production of wheat and oats, but that the production of barley and beans declined between 1914 and 1915, and wheat, oats, and hay declined between 1915 and 1916 (see Table 1). The Board of Agriculture determined that losses were in part due to poor land practices by farmers, but more importantly, they were also the result of indiscriminate recruiting in the first year of the war.¹³ From August 1914 to May 1915 agricultural labour was susceptible to the blandishments of the armed forces; enlistment was voluntary and until the first Military Service Act, there was no barrier to skilled workers joining the military. In August 1915 the government compiled a National Register to take account of the nation’s labour supply. Under this programme certain skilled workers ‘between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five [and] not already in the forces’ were to be ‘starred,’ meaning that they would be not be accepted or solicited for military service.¹⁴ A further attempt at the voluntary system was the Derby Scheme: announced on 21 October 1915, it aimed to find an additional 500,000 men to serve by 31 March 1916, but contained a provision for the protection of ‘certified occupations’ and sheltered the same skilled workmen from military service who were listed

¹¹ Dewey, *British agriculture*, pp. 24–27. TNA, MAF 42/9/3, Milner Committee report on home production of food, 28 Dec. 1915.

¹² Dewey, *British agriculture*, pp. 26–8; Devon RO [hereafter DRO], 1262M/L138, DWAC, 29 Dec. 1915; TNA, MAF 42/9/3, Milner Committee report.

¹³ Dewey, *British agriculture*, pp. 28, 38, 79–86, 91–103, 106, 138–42; K. Grieves, *The politics of manpower, 1914–18* (1988), pp. 54–5.

¹⁴ P. Horn, *Rural life in England in the First World War* (1984), p. 76.

under the National Register.¹⁵ The Board of Agriculture put further protective measures in place when it created the County War Agricultural Committees (CWACs) in the autumn of 1915. They were instructed to ascertain the needs of farmers, identify the best means of assisting them in cultivating their land and develop the agricultural resources within each county. Although they lacked the power to force change or implement policy, they were able to negotiate labour demands and served as a line of communication between the farmers and the Board of Agriculture. While these schemes were good in theory, they were not always implemented at the local level. The problem was that the issue of labour formed part of a larger argument within the Asquith coalition regarding the British commitment to the war effort. The failure of the Derby Scheme and growing signs of war weariness among the allies added to the pressures on the Asquith administration to take further action by abandoning the voluntary system in favour of conscription. Political infighting between conscriptionists and anti-conscriptionists delayed important decisions from being made until the spring of 1916 when the conscriptionists won a complete victory.¹⁶

With the introduction of conscription in January 1916, the starring system was discontinued and those who were previously protected were now reconsidered under the new measure.¹⁷ Although the second Military Service Act contained a provision that exempted skilled agriculturalists, such as bailiffs, horsemen, and tractor mechanics from military service, general labourers under the age of 25 remained unprotected. Exemptions only applied to skilled men who were in their position before 15 August 1916. Even with these new regulations in place, and taking into account the poor harvest of 1916, there were still not enough men available to bring in the harvest.¹⁸

In the light of the difficulties encountered in the harvest, Lord Selborne recommended offering the farmers financial incentives along with better assistance from agricultural experts in an attempt to improve production. His plan was rejected in March 1916, but it was revisited in November when the Board of Agriculture recommended that the government offer price guarantees for the following year's corn harvest. The Board criticized the War Office for overlooking the strategic value of food and stated that disputes between the two had placed considerable pressure on the nation's farmers: 'In the larger producing counties of the south-west, labour supplies have been neglected to the point where it is no longer the question of maintaining adequate labour standards, but whether cultivation will cease completely'. It was recommended that local military tribunals be instructed to ensure labour supplies in the counties, as so far there had been considerable disparity in the treatment of labour for the land.¹⁹ The Board of Agriculture also recognized that the current wheat and potato crises were the result of the inadequate number of skilled ploughmen and horsemen on Britain's farms.

¹⁵ TNA, CAB 17/158/14, Army Recruiting: Derby Scheme, 27 Sept. 1916.

¹⁶ R. J. Q. Adams and P. Poirier, *The conscription controversy in Great Britain, 1900–18* (1987), pp. 145–52; D. French, *British strategy and war aims, 1914–16* (1986), pp. 169–76.

¹⁷ DRO, 1262M/L/OD/138, DWAC Report: Regulations for starred occupations, Jan. 1916.

¹⁸ Adams and Poirier, *Conscription controversy*, pp. 139–40.

¹⁹ TNA, MAF 60/105, Home food supplies report printed for the Cabinet, 16 Nov. 1916.

The removal of Asquith from power and the appointment of Lloyd George as Prime Minister on 6 December 1916 led to the implementation of agricultural policies that had first been proposed earlier in the war. In January 1917 the Prime Minister and R. E. Prothero, President of the Board of Agriculture, outlined a new plan for government intervention in the nation's food supply. On 1 January 1917 the Board of Agriculture established the Food Production Department, and T. H. Middleton, its first director, was given the job of stimulating arable cultivation. The Food Production Department immediately put into effect the 'plough policy' that sought to increase the arable land by three million acres, a return to the 1870 position when British agriculture fed twenty-six million people compared to the sixteen million fed under the livestock regime of 1914. To assist the plough policy, the Food Production Department, under Regulation 2L of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), was granted permission to seize unoccupied land. Under Regulation 2M, it had the power to take possession of land already in use, commandeer horses and equipment or take any action that would secure higher food production. The final plank of the new agricultural policy was the founding of County War Agricultural Executive Committees to ensure that the Board's policies were carried out. The continued decentralization of agriculture, as seen through the formation of the Executive Committees, was important. It demonstrated the government's awareness of the regional variations that afflicted Britain's agricultural industry and showed a willingness on the part of policy makers to approach problems with the necessary flexibility. These committees, comprised of farmers and landowners, had the power to advance cultivation by demanding improvements in husbandry on any farm or even any field, or by prohibiting the growing of non-essential crops. They could also negotiate with the military authorities to secure necessary labour by the temporary release of men from the armed forces. The Executive Committees possessed more authority than the County War Agricultural Committees and in theory could ensure that the farmers had the necessary labour, horses, supplies, and fertilizer. Members could also serve as arbitrators between the farmers, individually or collectively, and the Board of Agriculture on questions such as crop rotations, quotas, and prices.²⁰

The goodwill to agriculture shown by the Lloyd George administration and its willingness to compromise on the labour issue was largely undone in January 1917 when the government announced the decision of the War Office to remove an additional 30,000 men from agriculture. And in April all exemptions for men aged 18 to 35 in category A1 were withdrawn. To provide an incentive to farmers and to alleviate the pressure created by the removal of more men from agriculture, the Ministry of Food introduced the Corn Production Act in 1917. The Act guaranteed wheat and oat prices, increased wages for agricultural workers, and established a more comprehensive plough policy, all of which were designed to increase crop outputs and reduce the nation's reliance on food imports.²¹ Further, in May 1917 the government introduced the tractor scheme, which provided \$3.29 million for the purchase of tractors from the United States.²² The new tractor scheme was intended to reduce the number of horses required for

²⁰ DRO, 1262M/L113, Board of Agriculture Report issued by Mr. Prothero, 18 Jan. 1917.

²¹ Maurice Kirby, 'Industry, agriculture and trade unions', in S. Constantine, M. Kirby and M. Rose (eds),

The First World War in British history (1995), pp. 63, 64; Dewey, *War and progress*, p. 210.

²² Dewey, *British agriculture*, p. 150.

farm work, which were in short supply due to requisitioning from the army, and to help farmers plough more efficiently. Ultimately, the Corn Production Act, and to a lesser extent the tractor scheme, were successful. Home food production increased by the end of the year, shortages were limited, and food queues were controlled and eventually reduced through the redistribution of food and supplies.

The issue of government management of the agricultural industry was, however, much more complex than reorganizing and centralizing Britain's food production programme.²³ It took considerable time for an agricultural plan to be implemented, the success of which was dependent on the participation of Britain's farmers. Action taken by Lloyd George was successful in that it both saved shipping space and provided substantial increases in food production before the war's end, but the crucial shift in agriculture took place in 1916 when the desperate labour shortage forced farmers to modify farming practices to suit wartime conditions. Within this context, historians have overstated the importance of the adoption of a new agricultural policy by the Lloyd George government in December 1916–January 1917.²⁴ As the remainder of this article will show, the role played by farmers in the management and production of Britain's food supply was crucial to avoiding a more damaging food crisis. It was, in part, their willingness to resist potentially damaging directives issued by the Board of Agriculture, as well as to hold out for price and labour guarantees, that finally forced the government to reconsider, and eventually change, its food policies.

II

From the mid-nineteenth century Devon experienced an overall decline in its agricultural labour force. In 1862 male labourers in Devon earned on average 7s. per week compared to 10s. per week in Herefordshire and 11s. per week in England's northern regions.²⁵ The result was that from 1866 to 1872 between 400 and 500 families employed in agriculture left Devon for farms in northern England and this exodus continued throughout the remainder of the century. Although in 1914 Devon remained the largest agricultural county in the south-west, its skilled and semi-skilled workforce was still in decline, and farmers had to rely more on unskilled labourers. According to the 1911 occupational census, 42,609 men were employed in agriculture in Devon.²⁶ During the war, the Labour Officer's Reports indicate that 10,204 were classified as 'farmers', the rest made up the agricultural workforce (Table 2).²⁷ Most of Devon's farms were small, under 250 acres, family run, and employed only a small labour force.²⁸

²³ Kirby, 'Industry, agriculture and trade unions', p. 63; Barnett, *British food policy*, pp. 63–5; Cooper, *British agricultural policy*, pp. 2–3, 22–3, 42, 59.

²⁴ Dewey, *British agriculture*, pp. 2–6, 242.

²⁵ In mid-century the average wage for an agricultural labourer was 10s. G. E. Mingay, 'Rural England in the industrial age', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian countryside* (2 vols, 1981), I, p. 6.

²⁶ BPP, 1913, lxxviii, 321, Part I, Census of England and Wales 1911, Vol 11, Occupations and Industries,

pp. 160–3.

²⁷ The 'agricultural workforce' also included small hobby farmers who did not own enough land to be classified as farmers. It also includes approximately 5,000 women. Labour Officer's report, 17 Apr. 1918, DRO, 1262M/L140.

²⁸ Farm sizes in Devon differed considerably between regions. Farms in the north tended to be small, whereas farms in the south of the county could be much larger, up to 1000 acres.

TABLE 2. Agricultural workforce for Devon, 1914–18.

	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
Farmers	10,204	9,726	8,592	7,994	7,833
Farmers' sons	5,598	4,532	4,461	3,397	2,261
Skilled	10,229	9,795	9,001	8,337	7,020
Unskilled	12,277	11,748	11,442	11,013	8,832
Gardeners	3,509	2,678	1,552	1,212	989
Agricultural volunteers	123	316	456	516	505
Soldiers		2,500	1,786	2,433	2,593
Women's Land Army				176	122
Prisoners of war		150	225	375	1,175
Plough horses	2,500	1,811	1,701	1,325	707
Other	501	419	381	254	176
Total					

Source: Labour Officer's Report, 17 Apr. 1918, DRO, 1262M/L140.

Note: The numbers presented for the skilled and unskilled rows are open to interpretation. It was left up to the individual farmers to provide a list of workers and occupations.

Given the nature of farming in Devon, the ACC's suggestion in August 1914 that farmers break up grassland to increase the production of staple crops made many farmers nervous. In response to the ACC's recommendation, the Devon Farmers' Union (DFU) and other farmers' unions throughout the country brought up the question of guarantees.²⁹ The National Farmers' Union (NFU), created in 1908 to protect farmers against exploitation and to promote the prosperity of the agricultural industry, took up the issue. During the war, farmers' unions played a central role in organizing and protecting members' rights, but their efforts were initially unsuccessful. The main concern of Devon's farmers was that, following the agricultural depression of the 1870s and 1880s, numerous farms in Devon had returned to grassland (see Table 3). Livestock farms required a substantially smaller workforce than crops. Farmers were reluctant to plough up their fields because they wanted government assurances that, once they converted their farmland back into arable, prices would be adequate and demand for their crops would be maintained. They also worried about finding the labour necessary for such an undertaking. Farmers also sought improved wages for their labourers in the hopes of preventing further losses of manpower to manufacturing and other industries where wages were considerably higher.³⁰ In October 1914 the NFU's organizing secretary reported that the Union had 'absolutely failed to get a guarantee' of government support in return for increasing the acreage of grain.³¹

²⁹ DRO, 1262M/114, Report of the Devon Farmers' Union, 22 Dec. 1917.

³⁰ DRO, 1262M/L/OD/13, 8 Report of farm holdings for the County of Devon, 21 Aug. 1914.

³¹ J. Brown, 'Agricultural policy and the National Farmers' Union, 1908–39', in J. R. Wordie (ed.), *Agriculture and politics in England, 1815–1939* (2000), p. 182.

TABLE 3. General trend in land usage, Devon, 1870–1930 ('000 acres).

<i>Year</i>	<i>Arable</i>	<i>Permanent grass</i>	<i>Rough grazing</i>
1870	642	372	N/A
1880	641	510	N/A
1890	593	615	N/A
1900	576	634	157
1910	521	690	161
1920	522	640	197
1930	436	701	302

Source: W. G. Hoskins, *A new survey of England: Devon* (1954), p. 102.

Upon the outbreak of war, the labour issue was of concern to farmers. Early enlistments threatened to deplete the rural labour supply. Based on studies of enlistment numbers, historians have generally accepted the notion that farm workers enlisted in very high numbers during the first years of the war. Hilary Crowe's study of Westmorland, for example, shows that numerous farmers' sons enlisted in the first two years of the war and that after 1916 exemptions were no guarantee against conscription. Peter Dewey's study, however, suggests that certain industries, including agriculture, experienced low enlistment numbers in the initial stages of the war.³² The situation in Devon seems to support Dewey more than Crowe as Devon's farms were largely spared the initial rush of young men joining the colours, although they were not necessarily protected against conscription after 1916.³³ One reason for low enlistment among agricultural labourers was that farmers were willing to offer monetary inducements to skilled men to stay until the winter.³⁴ Many believed that they could stave off labour shortages until the war was over.³⁵

At the same time, however, farm labourers found themselves in a precarious situation. Some men remained on the land in the hope that the heightened importance of agriculture during the war would bring much needed changes to the industry, specifically that wages would improve or that the incentives offered to skilled men would be accorded to other groups as well, a focus that emphasized the local experience over the national one. Another explanation was that some labourers were bound to the land by annual contracts and could not enlist without the permission of the estate owner, the estate manager, or the tenant farmer, depending on the

³² Crowe, 'Keeping the wheels of the farm in motion', p. 208; P. E. Dewey, 'Military recruiting and the British labour force during the First World War', *Historical J.*, 27 (1984), p. 200.

³³ DRO, 1262M/L144, Report of recruitment numbers for the County of Devon, 27 Oct. 1914. DRO, 1262M/L144, Report of recruitment in the West Country, 30 Oct. 1914.

³⁴ DRO, 1262M/O/LD/144, Labour on the land, 1 Oct. 1914.

³⁵ The labour officer's reports give no indication as to whether or not the 'labour shortage' refers to both men and women. Female agricultural labourers were included in the labour calculations in 1914, but how they were counted is unclear. Sometimes they are referred to in the 'other' column and sometimes in the volunteer column, but in 1917 the Women's Land Army was added as a separate column. The DFU, however, appears to have been referring to men when discussing the labour shortage.

nature of the contract. Still others were tied to the land due to their cottage rental agreements. If a man left to join the army, his wife and family would have to vacate their cottage, and given the severe housing shortage in Devon, this was not an attractive option. It is also likely that farmers negotiated with their labourers to prevent them from enlisting. The promise of continued or permanent employment once the war ended could have been a powerful incentive to keep men at home. In instances such as these, low recruitment numbers may have said more about the desire of farm employers or managers to protect their own interests than it did about any lack of 'patriotism' of the agricultural labour force.³⁶ The men from agriculture who enlisted early in the war were most often casual labourers or those who were not bound by contractual or familial obligations. Although some farm labourers enlisted to escape poor pay and working conditions, agricultural labourers experienced a considerable range of pay and conditions, which helps to explain why many were unwilling or unable to leave the land.

The effectiveness of monetary incentives and bribery was, however, temporary and, with no end to the war in sight, by the end of February 1915 voluntary enlistment numbers for Devon were on the rise, resulting in the labour shortages that had been avoided the previous autumn.³⁷ Farmers initially attempted to resolve the labour problems by negotiating with the government through their local representatives. When this proved ineffective, the DFU protested that more attention had to be paid to the problems facing the agricultural community. The DFU stated that:

Yes we want more men, but we also want organization and organizing minds. The plan by Lord Selborne [the one previously rejected by Cabinet] offers some protection. Instead of depleting the countryside and asking the farmers to make unreasonable sacrifices he understands that the policies of this government require drastic revision or we are to pass through this terrible experience in vain.³⁸

While WACs were established to take account of the labour problem and to offer solutions, the immediate problem was to meet recruiting expectations while retaining enough men to satisfy the food production demands of the county. Once formed, the local committees reported in April to Hugh Fortescue, the fourth Earl Fortescue and Lord Lieutenant of Devon, that there was a shortage of farm labour owing to the drastic improvement in recruitment numbers, as well as the increased number of labourers required to make the change from livestock to crops, but that the shortage could largely be met by employing men who were not eligible for military service or who had been rejected as medically unfit, and carpenters and bricklayers (since all building projects had been suspended until after the war).³⁹

In May 1915 the Devon County Council, in conjunction with military authorities, put forward a plan to use soldiers on the land temporarily, but the plan required sacrifices that most farmers

³⁶ DRO, 1037M-O/4, Enlistment records by name, age, and occupation, 1914-18; 1037M-O/1, Voluntary enlistment of men category B, army reserve, 1914-15; 1262M/O/LD/144, Labour on the land, 1 Oct. 1914.

³⁷ DRO, 1262M/O/LD/144, Voluntary recruitment for Devon, 18 May 1915.

³⁸ *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 13 Mar. 1915.

³⁹ DRO, 1262M/O/LD/146, Agricultural Committee Report, 15 Apr. 1915; DRO, 1262M/L153, Labour report for 1915, 27 Apr. 1915; DRO, 2165A/PX, Drewsteignton Council minute book, 16 Apr. 1915.

were unwilling to make. In the spring of 1915 there were 27 volunteer training corps in the county with approximately 2,500 men. These men were not likely to be used in the impending spring offensives and it was suggested, as a way to both solve the labour shortage and promote recruitment in the smaller parishes, that they should be released from service to give assistance to the farmers for the harvest. This option would not be made available to farmers who still had sons at home or if the parish had few men of military age under arms.⁴⁰ But most farmers, particularly owner-occupiers who were dependent on their sons' labour, were not willing to accept the county council's offer and allow their sons to enlist for only fleeting promises that replacement labourers would be found.

In mid-1915 the launch of the National Register further divided the agricultural community. Farmers who were reliant on a hired workforce (this would mostly apply to tenant farmers or owner-occupiers with sizable farms) considered the starring of certain occupations to be a partial victory. The programme covered most of the skilled labour needed on a farm, but it did not include ancillary machine operators or general labourers. The exclusion of the latter group was particularly problematic for smaller farmers. To some extent, small farms could share skilled labourers, but general farm labours were necessary for the daily operation of the farm. In essence, the starring programme divided the agricultural community into two groups: 'official', skilled labourers in protected industries, and 'unofficial', unskilled labourers who were afforded no government protection. In May 1915 this was an important division. The starring programme created divisions not only between skilled and unskilled workers, but also within the working classes. Unskilled labourers were increasingly taken from the land and replaced with women, soldiers, and prisoners of war who, the Board of Agriculture believed, were adequate replacements, while skilled men remained at home.⁴¹

With fewer labourers and no price or supply guarantees, by the autumn the DFU was encouraging its members to refuse to comply with the government's suggestions for replacement labour and improved productivity.⁴² Alfred Loram, a small tenant farmer from South Tawton, believed that the new starring programme showed the:

serious discrepancy between the statements of the Minister for Agriculture and the doings of the local authorities. Lord Selborne tells us Lord Kitchener will allow men to leave from the trenches for a few months ploughing and corn sowing. Yet, men are taken from the land weekly and this week the recruiting sergeant in this district is making visits to men, married and single, with half veiled threats that if they don't join now their brothers, sons and neighbours will soon be compelled.⁴³

Likewise, 'A Tenant Farmer' believed that the government only:

seeks to take advantage of the poor position of the farmer under these present conditions. The Farmers' Union is in existence to protect our interest and so far it has prevented the

⁴⁰ DRO, 1262M/L138, Letter from Lord Fortescue to the recruiting office, 26 May 1915.

⁴¹ See Dewey, *British agriculture*, pp. 106–41.

⁴² DRO, 317/M/26, Report of the DFU, 17 Nov. 1915.

⁴³ *Western Times*, 15 Oct. 1915. See also *Illustrated Western Weekly News*, 14 June 1915; *Western Times*, 15 Oct. 1915; *Hartland and West Country Chronicle*, 27 Oct. 1915; *Totnes Times*, 20 Nov. 1915.

government from walking over us and forcing action that may be harmful. It is the position of the Farmers' Union to give us lead on matters affecting agriculture.⁴⁴

Others also believed that government actions were detrimental to the interests of the farmers and called on the DFU to draw attention to the problems facing agriculture. J. Coaker, the Secretary of the Dartmouth Branch of the DFU, relied on the Union to protect his interests, and encouraged Devon's farmers to protest against government procedures.⁴⁵ Others still took it upon themselves to shelter their men from military service by putting unskilled labourers down as bailiffs or cowmen.⁴⁶ In October 1915 James Hubbard, an owner-occupier from Tiverton, had tried to do this by registering one of his general farm labourers as a tractor driver, but when the man was called before the military tribunal, it was discovered that he was 'a fraud and [his] employer a liar'.⁴⁷ Other discoveries of fraudulent behaviour on the part of farmers were reported in Devon's newspapers.⁴⁸ Although the actions of individual farmers were not always honourable and many were frustrated by the limitations of the starring programme, they had to be careful in their actions; they wanted some government intervention, but they did not want conscription.

IV

The extension of government powers under the Derby Scheme (October 1915) offered hope to farmers. The continued protection of 'certified occupations' and the addition of ancillary machine operators to their number suggested that the farmers' concerns were, in part, finally being addressed. Further, the DFU took the extension of the CWAC's powers in the autumn of 1915 as a sign of further improvement. The Dartmouth Farmers' Union applauded the government's efforts to regulate the agricultural labour supply and believed that 'the negotiating powers granted to the ACs will no doubt benefit us all'.⁴⁹

Such collegiality was quickly undone, however, with the introduction of conscription in January 1916. Although Lord Selborne did arrange for agricultural representatives to appear at local tribunals to prevent the further depletion of labour on the land, this did not prevent skilled men from being conscripted, and Selborne's actions were heavily criticized by the DFU.⁵⁰ From April to July 1916 the tribunal records for the county reveal that many of the men under consideration for exemptions worked in the agricultural sector. But, cases that were disallowed far exceeded those approved. Among the men rejected for exemption were general farm labourers, thatchers, woodmen, rabbit trappers, tractor drivers, and dairymen. Although some of these

⁴⁴ *Totnes Times*, 13 Sept. 1916.

⁴⁵ DRO, 48/13/3/2/17.

⁴⁶ DRO, 1262M/L141, Tiverton tribunal report for Earl Fortescue, 10 Mar. 1915.

⁴⁷ *Western Morning News*, 29 Oct. 1915. The relationship between agricultural labourers and the military tribunals was a difficult one and grievances persisted throughout the war. See, for example, *Western Express and Torrington Chronicle*, 10 June 1916; *Dawlish Gazette*, 17 June 1916; *Western Guardian*, 8 June 1916; *Western*

Guardian, 26 Oct. 1916; *Weekly News*, 12 Feb. 1916; *Express and Echo*, 25 May 1918; *Cornish and Devon Post*, 24 Mar. 1917.

⁴⁸ *Express and Echo*, 10 Feb. 1917; *Western Daily Mercury*, 2 June 1916; *Crediton Chronicle*, 15 Apr. 1916; *Western Morning News*, 12 May 1917.

⁴⁹ DRO, 1262M/L138, Letter from DFU to Labour Officer, Jan. 1916.

⁵⁰ DRO, 1262M/L/OD/138, DWAC Report, 19 May 1916.

men were skilled labourers, they continued to be called up by the military authorities.⁵¹ Pamela Horn argued that skilled labourers were called up because the labour crisis was not as dire as the Board of Agriculture suggested and that the press exacerbated stories about shortages, thereby embellishing the extent of labour and supply problems. The percentage of enlistees for agriculture was based on pre-war employment numbers in the industry, which Horn argued was not an adequate reflection of the labour supply, and so she concluded that the labour crisis was less severe than was assumed at the time.⁵² The Labour Officer's report for Devon shows that there was a shortage of skilled men on the land, even after taking replacements into consideration. The problem was that most of the replacement labour was unskilled and Devon farms were in need of ploughmen, mechanics, and skilled horsemen. In addition, cottages and homes were in serious disrepair and the few remaining agricultural smiths could not keep up with the demands of local farmers.

In response to the introduction of conscription, Richard Denning, a Union representative, accused Lord Selborne of 'disgraceful behaviour' by encouraging support for the farmer's position, while pushing for conscription.⁵³ J. H. Roberts, a farm owner from Clovelly, cautioned Lord Selborne that 'you may think you are being lenient and aiding the position of the farmers with offers of price guarantees, but with the other hand you seek to rob the farmer of his labour. What our farms in Devonshire could produce if they were left to be properly run.'⁵⁴ Lord Selborne had been part of the Cabinet faction pushing for the immediate introduction of conscription in 1915, but in April 1916 he appears to have been trying to meet the military needs of the country without placing the nation's food supply in jeopardy. His position was complicated; he wanted to meet the manpower needs of both the military and agriculture, but to the farmers, his actions appeared to be contradictory. His earlier proposals for the protection of agricultural production did not mesh with his pro-conscription actions.

Asquith, however, was still unwilling to offer labour guarantees and the DFU believed that the Military Service Acts undermined the little progress that had been made in terms of labour supplies.⁵⁵ Some farmers felt betrayed and believed that the government was unreasonable in its demands. J. Fowler, an owner-occupier from Salcombe, noted:

at the rate horses are being commandeered and men enlisted, What Will Happen? The farms will become vacant. Already through a lack of labour we are unable to produce as much as we ought. You say all the able-bodied men must enlist and the farming be carried on by the old men, women and boys. Now we contend that these are unable to carry on the work on an average farm. I have already lost 150 acres of my land because it has not been tilled and the government does little but threaten to take it from me if I don't produce more food. I ask this government, trade unions and committees aside, to consider the plight of the farmer.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Crediton Rural District Local Tribunal, 17 June 1916, DRO, 317M/D1; Enlistment Report: Totnes, 10 June 1916, Totnes Rural District Local Tribunal, 1262 M/L140, bdlc 29; Teignmouth Enlistment Report for July 1916, 21 July 1916, Teignmouth Rural District Local Tribunal 1262M/L140. See also, Crowe, 'Keeping the wheels of the

farm in motion', pp. 208–9.

⁵² Horn, *Rural Life*, pp. 73–4.

⁵³ *Western Daily Mercury*, 2 June 1916.

⁵⁴ *Western Daily Mercury*, 2 June 1916.

⁵⁵ *Launceston Weekly News*, 18 Nov. 1916.

⁵⁶ *Salcombe Gazette*, 19 Jan. 1916.

Likewise, Christopher Turnor, a dairy farmer before the war, was forced to:

give up my dairy cows entirely and [was] obliged to plant crops. Many of us are holding the best we can, largely from patriotic motives. People's memories are short. Prior to the war nobody cared where the food came from so long as it was cheap. Now prices are rising, supplies harder to come by and rather than thank the farmer for his hard work, you rob his fields, take his men and horses and demand pre-war prices and quantities. With our hands tied what do you expect the farmer to do?⁵⁷

Following the introduction of conscription, the complaints voiced by farmers were given additional weight by the fall in agricultural production in the West Country. In 1916 the Dartmouth branch of the DFU reported a decline in production values on farms in south Devon.⁵⁸ Food production reports for south Devon show a reduction of 9,000 acres farmed between 1915 and 1916 and slight reductions in corn, wheat, and barley for the county overall.⁵⁹ The decline in production for 1915–16 was primarily due to the failure of many crops following the harsh winter, but farmers also reported that some crops were rotting in the fields because of the difficulties of transport.⁶⁰

Adding to the labour shortage was a reduction in the number of horses for use on the land, and a shortfall in the number of tractors suitable for farming in Devon. Under the Defence of the Realm Acts, the Board of Agriculture had the power to requisition horses, machinery, and supplies in order to improve the food situation. Large numbers of horses were required for the army, leaving insufficient animals to reclaim the grasslands.⁶¹ Farms of less than 250 acres, typical in Devon, had a small workforce, usually only a few men and horses, and consequently shortages were felt more immediately than on larger farms. In 1916 the Devon War Agricultural Committee reported substantial shortages in horsepower to the Board of Agriculture.⁶² The complaint was based on earlier reports from farmers that when horses did become available they were often of substandard quality for farm work. Many were old or sick, or they were light vanners that were not of the proper weight and size to pull a plough. Ploughman F. Goldman explained that 'the poor horses are now being overworked to an awful extent. They are laden and fatigued almost to death. This is a terrible way to farm.'⁶³ Cecil Doidge, an owner-occupier from Holsworthy, explained that 'We cannot be expected to increase production with limited manpower, short of horses, and ploughs that have proven useless. Besides, what should we use to pull the ploughs? What should we do with tractors that are unsuited for the land in Devon?'.⁶⁴ At the end of 1916 an inadequate supply of horse harnesses and a deficiency of skilled ploughmen made the problems in Devon even more acute. It was not until June 1917 that the Board of Agriculture took steps to protect the supply of horses for agricultural use when, under

⁵⁷ *Western Daily Mercury*, 13 Oct. 1916. See also, *Western Times*, 16 Dec. 1916; *Weekly News*, 21 Oct. 1916; *Western Guardian*, 11 May 1916; *Weekly News*, 21 Oct. 1916; *Weekly News*, 13 Oct. 1916; *Exeter Flying Post*, 18 Nov. 1916.

⁵⁸ *Dartmouth & South Hams Chronicle*, 17 Mar. 1916.

⁵⁹ Food production returns, Nov. 1915 to Nov. 1919, DRO, 1262M/L140.

⁶⁰ DRO, 1262M/L139, Report for agricultural representative at Dartmouth, 12 Sept. 1916.

⁶¹ DRO, 1262M/L140, Minutes of the meeting of the Devon Agricultural Committee, 16 July 1918.

⁶² DRO, 1262M/L140, Report from DFU to CWAC, June 1916.

⁶³ *Western Morning News*, 6 Aug. 1915.

⁶⁴ *Weekly News*, 14 Apr. 1917.

Regulation 2T of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), the sale of farm horses was prohibited without a license from the local agricultural board.⁶⁵

With horses in short supply, farmers had to rely more on machinery. Until 1917, however, farm machinery was in short supply, often shared between several farms, and primarily confined to larger farms in southern and eastern Devon.⁶⁶ Though limited, the practice of borrowing machines remained in place until May 1917 when the 'government tractor scheme' was introduced. Each county had its own committee to supervise supplies and local agricultural engineers were appointed to supply fuel and spare parts. Devon's farmers, however, complained about the substandard machines provided by the government and argued that the tractors spent more time being repaired than ploughing fields.⁶⁷ The government cautioned that the new machines were still in the experimental stages and urged farmers to use them only for ploughing new pastures where the roots were less densely matted. But the problem with the scheme was that in late 1916 the government had made requests for farmers to increase the acreage of arable land, which could only be done by ploughing land long laid down to pasture.

The government's initial decision to leave the fate of the nation's homegrown food supply to the farmers, with little direction from the Board of Agriculture, proved to be a mistake. In 1915 the county of Devon was divided into four sections based on landholdings. Men, horses, and farming equipment were distributed based on the production portfolios of each region. Table 4 shows the breakdown of farmland under crop in Devon between 1915 and 1919. As can be seen, the total amount of land farmed in Devon declined during 1916, but saw some growth in 1917, but a slight dip again in 1918. National statistics show similar patterns with a minor decline in tillage and land under permanent grass between 1915 and 1916 and improvements overall in 1917.⁶⁸ The total farming acreage for the county was 1,638,000 acres, including 50,000 acres in Dartmoor which were hardly farmable. This total also includes 328,000 acres of pastureland and additional land that lay fallow on four-year rotations. In December 1915 the DWAC was asked to increase tillage in Devon by 60,000 acres for 1916. An increase of 60,000 acres would require a workforce of 1,200 men and 2,400 horses given that each additional fifty acres required one man and two horses. The Committee concluded that neither the men nor the horses were readily available. There was a plan to use soldiers on the land for the 1916 harvest and for general farm labour, but soldiers were most effectively used on the land in the eastern counties where they could be called back quickly for service. In Devon the only soldiers available for work on the land were those in training camps waiting to be transferred east. In June 1915 a plan was put in place that allowed for the release of soldiers from the Territorial battalions between 11 July and 15 October. The conditions of work were left up to private contracts between soldiers and farmers, and because call-ups could come at any time, 'only about half of the soldiers applied for by agriculturists were actually supplied'.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the DWAC estimated that if it could secure enough horses and make the most of available labour, the county could increase tillage by 30,000 acres, half the amount required by the Board of Agriculture.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ DRO, 1262M/L140, Minutes of the meeting of the Devon Agricultural Committee, 16 July 1918.

⁶⁶ DRO, 1262M/L139, Report of the DWAC, 6 June 1917.

1916.

⁶⁷ DRO, 1262M/L139, Report of the DWAC, 4 June

TABLE 4. Total acreage under crop in Devon, 1915–19.

	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919
North	314,000	303,000	316,000	300,000	310,000
South	135,000	126,000	131,000	128,000	130,000
East	293,000	290,000	294,000	295,000	290,000
West	196,000	190,000	190,000	185,000	185,000
Total	938,000	909,000	931,000	908,000	915,000

Source: DRO, 1262M/L140, Food production returns, Nov. 1915–Nov. 1919.

The DWAC was not, however, able to acquire the necessary horses or manpower and without replacement labour the county experienced a *loss* of 29,000 acres farmed in 1916 (see Table 4). The decline cannot be explained entirely by the insufficiency of men and horses on the land: it was also due to a tractor shortage and a decline in the number of skilled labourers, including tractor mechanics. The county experienced a decline in the production of cereals and potatoes (although root vegetables increased overall), as well as a decline in milk, cheese, pigs, horses, and fruit for the 1916 growing season.

Just when the DFU thought that their efforts to protect the agricultural labour force had failed, the Board of Agriculture in November 1916 announced a new agricultural policy based on Lord Selborne's earlier recommendations. The proposed changes suggested by the Board of Agriculture were reported on in local newspapers where the Board admitted that 'recruiting had in some districts depleted the land of the labour necessary to produce sufficient food' and stressed that 'everything will be done to stimulate production in the upcoming season. The War Office will not deplete the farms of labour necessary for the spring sowing'. The DFU, which found validation for its efforts in the government's admission of its previous poor management of the agricultural sector, welcomed the suggested changes. However, the DFU remained critical of past government policy and was sceptical that the labour problem had been solved. Shortly after the Board of Agriculture's report appeared in local newspapers, the Council of the DFU responded:

We have been asking to be governed ever since the war broke upon us, but we haven't seen any signs of it yet! Had we been governed properly two years ago the cost of wheat would not be what it is today at market. The Government couldn't guarantee prices because of the existing fiscal policy which cannot be altered. OH, NO! Had we been governed we should have had plenty of wheat in store and we should have retained the ploughmen to grow more ... What a farce it is to say that people want to be governed! That is what we elect members of Parliament to do and then we are told that they have been driven to things against their will!⁷¹

⁶⁸ Dewey, *British agriculture*, p. 201.

⁶⁹ Horn, *Rural life*, p. 93.

⁷⁰ TNA, MAF 80/4998, County agricultural records

for Devon: Report for Jan. 1917, 8 Jan. 1917.

⁷¹ *Exeter Flying Post*, 25 Nov. 1916.

This statement gives no credence to the view that Devon's farmers were unpatriotic or unaware of Britain's food problems. On the contrary, most farmers supported the war effort and worked to increase agricultural production. The complaint was to reassert the Unions' position that elected representatives were not properly caring for the interests of the farming community. What the Farmers' Union wanted was increased government controls beyond those in place by November 1916. Rather than the Board of Agriculture simply affirming that mistakes had been made, the DFU wanted tighter controls placed on manpower, supplies, and equipment, but they also wanted government recognition of the farmers' efforts and the sacrifices they had made.⁷² The County War Agricultural Committee supported the grievances outlined by the DFU and encouraged further action by the agricultural representatives to protect the county's labour supplies.⁷³

The DFU's scepticism was justified when in January 1917 the War Office removed an additional 30,000 men from agriculture. With the support of the DFU, the DWAC protested against the move and sent a letter to the Board of Agriculture stating: 'This Committee views with most serious alarm the recent decision of the War Office to call from Agriculture 30,000 of the most valuable workers on the land and urge that the order be at once revoked and the men already called up be returned to their civil occupations.'⁷⁴ The War Agricultural Committee was assured that replacement labour in the form of 800 German prisoners of war was being sent to the western counties.⁷⁵ In the meantime, the DFU called an emergency meeting to address the new demands made by the government and reported that their 'efforts have not been taken seriously, nor have our sacrifices in this war. The Government made promises that it had no intention to keep and now the military authorities are calling up more men from agriculture.'⁷⁶ Attempts by the farmers to negotiate labour supplies proved to be ineffective and the County War Agricultural Committees were powerless to defend the position of the farmers.

V

Although the farmers did not succeed in preventing the government from removing more men from the land, they could claim a number of successes. Prior to the declaration of war, the agricultural sector in Devon had experienced a decline in its labour force due to low wages and its hierarchical nature. With the introduction of the Corn Production Act in 1917, farmers hoped that the new wage scheme, which guaranteed a minimum wage for agricultural workers and established the Agricultural Wages Board, would prevent further losses in the post-war period. The war drew attention to the deficiencies of farm equipment in the county, and the new tractor scheme was intended to boost production in future years. Depending on the post-war economy and the stability of land ownership and land prices, the tractor scheme could

⁷² DRO, 1262M/L146, Letter from the C. R. Beatly of the Devon Farmers' Union to R. Searle of the DWAC, 17 Nov. 1917.

⁷³ DRO, 1262M/L146, DWAC Report to Lord Fortescue, 21 Nov. 1916.

⁷⁴ TNA, MAF 80/4998, Report by the DWAC sent to

the Board of Agriculture, 16 Jan. 1917.

⁷⁵ DRO, 1262M/L113, Letter for the Board of Agriculture, 24 Jan. 1917.

⁷⁶ DRO, 1262M/7/0/145, Report of the DFU to DCC, 3 Feb. 1917.

have had significant benefits for the farming community. Further, the interaction between local and national boards, particularly throughout 1916, conveyed to the government the problems facing local farmers and the need for greater cooperation between the two groups. It was the government's willingness to compromise that encouraged Devon's farmers to do the same.

While the conditions of war eventually necessitated the coordination of local and national efforts, such cooperation was slow to materialize in Devon. Part of the reason was that at the county level farmers were divided over land practices as well as labour and supply needs. While some accepted the government's suggestion to plough up their fields, others refused. With the assistance of the DFU and the DCC, farmers attempted to negotiate labour supplies with the Board of Agriculture. Their attempts were partly successful in that the starring programme introduced in 1915 protected skilled labourers by preventing them from being enlisted in the armed forces. While the starring programme offered a partial and temporary solution to the labour problem, it created further divisions within the agricultural labour force, further separating the skilled from the unskilled.

Given the diversity of experience at the local level, it is not surprising that Devon's farming community never fully agreed on how to respond to the labour crisis, but they did recognize the need for some degree of solidarity and cooperation if they were going to increase home food production while minimizing personal losses. Despite mistakes and the vacillation of policy, the success of Britain's food programme was assisted by the ability of Devon's farmers, tenuously united under the DFU, to negotiate the demands placed on them by the Board of Agriculture prior to the introduction of a new agricultural policy in early 1917.