

# RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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Image above: Landscape with calf,  
Pieter Janson. Calf clubs – see page 4.

## Ruth Uzzell

### Campaigner & trailblazer

by Nicola Verdon



Bros. Blanchard (E.C.), Wagg (E.C.), Holness (Organiser), Pointing ("Land Worker"), Holmes (General Secretary), and Mrs. Uzzell (E.C.) at the Leicester Conference.

Landworker,  
November 1932.

The Museum of  
English Rural  
Life, University  
of Reading

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The movement of women into leadership roles of rural unions and societies has been a slow process, with gender barriers difficult to break down. We all stand on the shoulders of some earlier trailblazers. One such woman was Ruth Uzzell (1880–1945), who fought for the cause of the agricultural labourer all her life.

In *Sharpen the Sickle*, his 1949 history of the farm workers' trade union, Reg Groves claimed that she was: 'one of the many gifted working-class women who found in the Labour Movement a way to selfless and unswerving service to their class' (p. 230). Uzzell was a notable woman whose achievements deserve to be better known.

### Early influences

She was born Ruth Freeman in October 1880 in the Warwickshire village of Tysoe, the second daughter of Thomas and Mary Freeman. Although we know little of Ruth's early life, the environment into which she was born clearly had a lifelong influence. Tysoe, made famous by Kathleen Ashby's biography of her father Joseph, was only a few miles from Barford, home of Joseph Arch and headquarters of his nascent trade union. When Arch visited Tysoe in the summer of 1872, heralded by a brass band he: 'spoke of the misery of his fellows ... the workhouse future, the denial of manhood to labourers, the down-thrusting of their children' and pressed the audience to stand 'firm for their rights' (*Joseph Ashby of Tysoe 1859–1919*, p. 60).



British Agricultural  
History Society

Both Ruth's grandfather and father worked as agricultural labourers and were most likely members of Arch's union. Her father, branded a 'rebel' and 'radical', went on to work as a miller and carrier, and Ruth was said to have inherited her independent spirit from him. In a 1924 speech at the Biennial Conference in London, referring to her background as an agricultural labourer's daughter, Ruth pointed out she 'knew what it was to be one of six brought up on 12s a week', and with that insight, 'had given her service heartily to the Union'.

Ruth's early working life was typical of young, rural, working-class women in late Victorian England. With limited formal schooling and few economic opportunities, low paid domestic work was the path usually taken and by the turn of the twentieth century she was working as a general servant for a veterinary surgeon in Stratford-on-Avon. Two years later she married Harry Charles Uzzell, a boilermaker. They set up home in Harry's native Gloucestershire but soon moved to Didcot, Berkshire, and welcomed three children, Kenneth, Phylis and Doris, born between 1905 and 1910.

## A political partnership

The Uzzell partnership was highly political, with Ruth and Harry supportive of each other's ambitions. Both were active members of the Independent Labour Party before the First World War and served as secretaries for local and county agricultural trade union branches. In 1920, Harry represented the Appleford (Berkshire) branch at the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) Biannual Conference and two years later Ruth was sent to represent the Didcot branch. At that meeting, in June 1922, Ruth was elected to the NUAW Executive Committee (EC), beginning an association that lasted for the rest of her life.

She was not the first woman to claim a seat on the EC however. That distinction went to Catherine Flory, elected in 1920. Flory was cut from the same cloth as Uzzell. Born into an agricultural labourer's family in mid-1860s Suffolk, she married William, a horseman who worked his way up to the position of farm bailiff. By the time of her election to the EC, the Florys were settled in Somerset, where Catherine became a well-known figure on several local public boards; she served on the Organising and Political Committee of the EC and was granted

the use of the 'lady's cycle' for her work. In August 1922 she transferred to the Finance Committee, and for several months between September 1922 and January 1923 Ruth and Catherine served the EC simultaneously. The minutes of the February 1923 EC record Catherine's absence and she never returned, possibly pushed out due to some irregular expenses' claims, although there is no evidence of this noted in the accounts.

Although Ruth was the only woman on the EC for the remainder of the interwar years, she made a considerable impact. She was much in demand as a speaker, addressing meetings at local branches, assisting areas without branches to set them up and fronting special campaigns. She toured the country by rail and campaigned tirelessly at the local and national level. She told a meeting in Louth, Lincolnshire in 1932 that she had visited 12 to 14 counties in the past year, fighting proposed wage reductions and in 1936 she was described as 'easily the best woman outdoor speaker in the country'. She also represented the union in deputations to Ministers, MPs, and the Labour Party conference. She railed against the accusation that her popularity in the NUAW was based on sentiment. She argued that she had 'never asked for preferential treatment because she was a woman', and thought she 'could rightly claim, without fear of contradiction, that she had worked as hard as any man for the movement'.

## Fighting spirit

Her union campaigns centred on better educational provision for rural children, on decent wages and pensions for agricultural workers, and rural housing and social services. She also sat on the committees of Berkshire's and Oxfordshire's agricultural wages boards (one of only seven women who served on the 48 wages boards in the 1920s) where she fought to protect wage rates, for Bank Holiday pay, and for a shorter working week. In the late 1920s, now living with her family in Oxford, her attention turned to local politics. In 1928, she was elected on to the Headington Urban District Council and in 1935, after several unsuccessful attempts, was the first woman to be elected to Oxford City Council for Labour. Harry joined her on the Council and together they were credited with turning Cowley into a Labour ward. She told the 1940 Biennial Conference that she had gone into politics 'to try and clear

## Women in rural organisations

The participation and visibility of women at all levels of the UK agricultural industry is currently expanding. Female students outnumber men by almost 2:1 on agriculture and related higher education courses, and women make up 55 per cent of the farm workforce in England and Wales when unpaid and family labour is included. In 2021, 16 per cent of farmers (managers and landowners) were female. In 2018 Minette Batters, a Wiltshire tenant farmer, became President of the National Farmers' Union, the first woman to hold this post since the organisation's inception in 1908. The British Agricultural History Society also echoes this trend. With Karen Sayer as Chair of the Executive Committee and myself as President, this is the first time both posts have been held by women concurrently.

up some of the damnable mess the men had made' but had found that 'A lot of men were not yet prepared to let their women folk take up politics'.

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She recalled addressing a very large meeting in St Giles, Oxford, 'when a little insignificant man standing in the crowd said, "Don't you wish you were a man?". "Yes", she had replied. "Don't you?"'

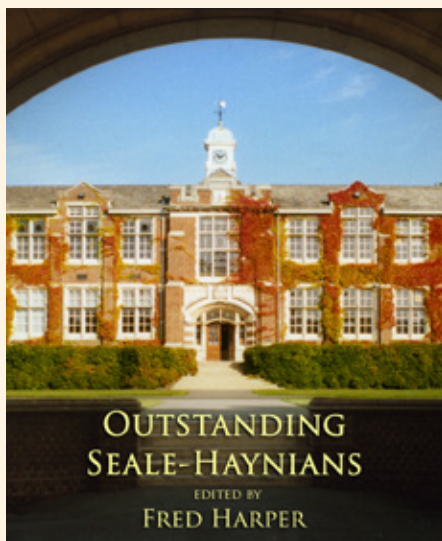
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Ruth's campaigning was curtailed in the early 1940s through ill health and she resigned from the EC in late 1944, after several years of continued absence. She died at home on 2nd November 1945, of cancer. Her death notices in both the local and national press affectionately remembered her wit, energy, eloquence, and unstinting work. Edwin Gooch, President of the NUAW, described her in 1946 as 'a truly remarkable woman' whose 'fine spirit of devotion to the agricultural workers permeated her whole character and career, and she gave of her best unstintingly to their cause. We shall hold her memory in admiration and affection'. Ruth Uzzell was a pioneer whose achievements serve as an inspirational model for all women in rural leadership roles today.



# The enduring legacy of Seale-Hayne

by Ian Goodwin



From its beginning in 1920 until closure in 2005, Seale-Hayne College in Devon held a reputation as arguably the premier agricultural college in the UK. It was established after a bequest from the Rt. Hon. Charles Seale-Hayne (1833–1903) a British businessman and Liberal politician who had left £100,000 in his will to found a college “for the promotion of technical education of artizans . . . in the neighbourhood of Newton Abbot”.

His executor, Viscount George Lambert, after meeting the Board of Agriculture in London in 1903, determined that this college should be for Agricultural and Technical Education. Construction was completed in 1914 but the building was requisitioned during World War One for Women’s Land-Army training and then as a hospital; it only became fully operational in 1920.

From the start, the college contributed widely to the scientific advancement of agriculture through research. As early as 1923, the first Principal, Lt Col. D R Edwardes-Ker, was releasing papers in subjects ranging from the feeding of dairy cows to the use of labour, or farm economics. This research continued throughout the following eighty years in diverse topics such as cropping, plant genetics and breeding, pig rearing, beef production, animal health, food technology and farm machinery. Seale-Hayne students were soon being posted across the globe to work for the UK Colonial Service as leaders in

agricultural institutions, providing education and training to developing nations, especially throughout Africa.

Many organisations migrated to Seale-Hayne for their own research, utilising the academic staff and/or the college’s farm and land. The National Institute for Agricultural Botany (NIAB) held field trials at the college for many years, no doubt encouraged by one of the first students, Frank Horne, who later became NIAB’s Director. Horne’s own research into plant breeding at Seale-Hayne was very productive, helping growers to improve yield and quality in the 1930s – a decade which saw the first women students admitted to the college.

At the start of World War Two, the buildings were again requisitioned for the training of the Women’s Land Army and by 1942 over 800 ‘land girls’ had been trained. Seale-Hayne then became a centre for research and development to help in the war effort, before returning to agricultural education.

The establishment of the National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAAS) in 1946 – later to become the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) – alongside the rapid growth of the Agricultural Department of the Overseas Civil Service, created huge demand for highly trained personnel. Students finishing Seale-Hayne courses found that they had plenty of options open to them. The British NAAS (and ADAS) almost became a Seale-Hayne ‘club’, with ex-student friends and contemporaries working alongside each other to advise and help farmers in the British Government’s post-war drive for productivity in farming. Demand was similar overseas.

Seale-Hayne’s reputation also straddled other industries. At one time in the 70s, it was rumoured that 65% of the management team at Massey Ferguson Tractors were ex-Seale-Hayne. Seale-Haynians have also excelled across the political arena, heading up agricultural organisations and farming trade unions, as well as representing the industry at government level and across regional councils. In many instances, Seale-Haynians established large farming businesses of their own, such as the international Velcourt

## Seale-Hayne alumni

**Adam Henson** – BBC Countryfile

**Richard Livesy** – Rt Hon Baron Livesy of Talgarth, Liberal MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Wales, Agriculture Select Committee, House of Lords (2001)

**Mary Quicke MBE** – President Devon Agricultural Association (2012), Director of Devon Grain, Founder of *Academy of Cheese*

**George Macpherson** – Producer of BBC *Farming World*, *Nature Notebook* and *Farming Today*, Editor of *Big Farm Weekly*. (The phrase ‘Mad Cow Disease’ was born out of an item on BSE that George reported on *Farming Today*)

**Caroline Drummond MBE** – CEO of the LEAF organisation (Linking Environment And Farming), she invented *Open Farm Sunday*, Director of the Oxford Farming Conference 2003–05

**John Don** – Chairman Scottish Landowners Association (2002–04)

**Tim Bennett** – NFU President 2004 (Media contact for farming through the BSE crisis)

**Jake Freestone** – Cotswold farmer, BBC’s ‘go-to’ interviewee for farming issues, manages very popular countryside social media channels

**Robin Hicks** – Presenter of BBC *Farming Today* programme 1968–77

**Mel Squires MBE** – Director South West NFU, honoured for her work during the flooding in the South West 2013–14

Group of companies. Or they were snapped up by the media to write and edit farming journals, or to broadcast on radio and television about farming and land-use issues. And, of course, the college also turned out highly trained practical farmers who either managed farms for others or ran their own family’s farms.

So even though it is now closed, the legacy of Seale-Hayne College will endure. Whether it’s the simple enjoyment of our countryside, the daffodils in Cornwall, the milk from the dairy farms of the South West, the meat and poultry from livestock farms or the fruit, vegetables and bread from the vegetable and grain producing farms, Seale-Hayne College has left its mark.

► *Outstanding Seale-Haynians*, edited by Fred Harper, details the biographies of thirty outstanding alumni. Published in 2020 to celebrate the centenary of the College. £12 including p&p from the merchandise page at: [www.seale-hayne.com](http://www.seale-hayne.com)

# When **Calf Clubs** came to Devon

by Penny Lawrence

‘You have chosen the worst place on God’s green earth to start anything of the kind’, was the reported response of one critic to Percy Brook Tustin’s proposal to form a calf club in Hemyock, Devon.



*First distribution of calves, 31st January 1921 (Book of Hemyock)*

Fortunately, Mr Tustin was undeterred, and he pressed ahead with his plan. It was based on the 4-H clubs (Head, Heart, Hands, Health) which Mr Tustin, of United Dairies (UD), had encountered in North America.

4-H clubs had started in 1902 in Clark County, Ohio and were intended to introduce young people to new agricultural technology – which they would in turn share with adults who were seen as reluctant to accept developments – as well as to teach leadership skills. The first club was for corn growing, but the rearing of animals followed and in 1914 the clubs became part of the Cooperative Extension System at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), using the clover pin as their emblem.

## From North America to Hemyock

Mr Tustin had been recruited by UD in 1919, from a post with the Milk Committee of the Canadian Food Board. His resignation was described as a ‘severe loss’ as he was considered one of ‘the outstanding men in Canada ... a recognised authority in matters pertaining to food and dairying throughout the country’.<sup>1</sup> UD wanted more – and cleaner – milk and he was given a wide-ranging brief to do ‘anything he could do to push things ahead’.<sup>2</sup>

Hemyock, at the head of the Culm Valley Light Railway, was the site of a butter factory which UD had acquired in 1916 and where they installed Tom Sandford as manager. He was well respected in the area and had already started a local milk recording society, soon extended to the rest of East Devon. I believe that Messrs

Tustin and Sandford had much in common; of a similar age, both married with one young daughter and both progressive. It is likely that they encouraged each other in the project.

## Practical calf care

Despite the naysayers (one newspaper reported that ‘farmers and their wives had a good laugh at the idea’) there was enthusiasm from Hemyock youngsters and a calf club was set up in October 1920 with a membership of seven girls and 13 boys, aged 12 to 18, plus an advisory committee of five: two from UD (one of whom was Tom Sandford), the local headmaster and two farmers.<sup>3</sup> The club was to be run by the members, with help from the advisors when necessary, and meetings were to be held fortnightly. Parents were welcome to attend: they and older siblings could become associate members. The first elected officers were boys: Bill Tucker as Chairman, Edgar Clist as Vice-Chairman and Wilf Ackland as Secretary; in each of the following two years, the officers were two girls and a boy.

Calf rearing and feeding for milk production were discussed at early meetings and arrangements were made to distribute calves to the members on 31st January 1921. UD sourced Shorthorn calves from milk-recorded dams giving over 600 gallons – contrasting with the local Devons which yielded 400 gallons. Calves were distributed by ballot and the members were to rear them at home (farm or smallholding) for a year; the calves were judged and given points at the start and members had a pre-printed booklet in which they kept monthly records of feed, including costs, and treatments. At the end of a year the calves were judged again. The members were ranked on the calves’ improvement and on the quality of their record keeping; Doris Fry from Westercombe, Churchstanton was placed first. The calves were supplied by UD on a promissory note; just before the second distribution an auction was held whereby the member could receive the difference between the original note and the final bid or redeem the note and keep the calf. All the calves were retained.

The first distribution was attended by five UD directors, the local MP, Professor Mackintosh of the National Institute for Research in Dairying, local

\* Author’s note: One of these was my grandfather Sam Lawrence.

All images supplied by the author, with permission.

dignitaries, and regional and national press. There were lengthy reports in the local press of the luncheon and speeches which followed. Mr Tustin said they had ‘made history in British agriculture’ and that members would be taken to see ‘farms where good dairying was carried out in the best possible way’ and ‘would learn everything of present-day methods of farming and dairying’.

One of the most important things was ‘the confidence the club would give to the members; they would not be afraid of getting up and speaking and in future years would become MPs and leaders of the farmers’ movement’.<sup>3</sup>

A further innovation was the introduction of Ayrshires in 1923; these included a bull calf and were believed to be the first of their breed in Devon.

## Lord Northcliffe’s influence

The 4-H movement had also caught the attention of Lord Northcliffe, the owner of the Daily Mail. Although widely credited with starting the Young Farmers’ movement in Devon, Northcliffe was not represented at the first distribution of calves and it appears more likely that his newspaper’s involvement commenced following the initial publicity. In May, the Chairman and Secretary of Hemyock Calf Club wrote to the Daily Mail congratulating them on their move to inaugurate similarly-organised poultry, bee-keeping and stock rearing clubs.

The Hemyock youngsters were invited to London by the Mail in July 1921; they toured the sights and then went to Welwyn Garden City (where the Mail happened to be sponsoring model housing) to have lunch with American young farmers and attend the first International Congress. Many of the speakers promoted the idea of



Judging the yearlings, 31st January 1922 (Book of Hemyock)

future international competitions. A further visit sponsored by the Mail was made in November to the Imperial Fruit Show and a conference of all the English Young Farmers’ Clubs: Kingsclere and Loughborough Calf Clubs, and the Welwyn Bee and Poultry Club.

Young Farmers’ Clubs were promoted at the Imperial Conference on Agricultural Co-operation at Wembley in 1924; this was attended by representatives from the Commonwealth who took the idea back to their own countries. Following the death of Lord Northcliffe in August 1922, the Mail’s sponsorship dwindled and although the Ministry of Agriculture took over funding in 1924, this was limited.



Trip to Canada 1923, Mr Tustin on the right © PPengelly

## Transatlantic travel

The transatlantic connection was strengthened when four Young Farmers (all boys) were sent to Canada for six months in 1923. The trip was the gift of Mr Beatty, President of the Canadian Pacific Railways; one member from each of the now 37 clubs was selected to take an examination at Olympia’s Ideal Home Exhibition, sponsored by the Mail. Canadian National Railways sponsored a similar trip for the girls. Gordon Salter and Mildred White from Hemyock, the only club to send two members, were among those chosen. The girls travelled as far as Manitoba, where they took a short course at the agricultural college and another at Guelph, Ontario. The boys took three-month courses in Alberta and toured as far as Vancouver.<sup>4</sup>

Hemyock Calf Club lapsed at some point between 1927 and 1932. It re-formed just after World War Two, with a larger catchment area and the name Culm Valley Young Farmers (CVYF). The early foundations of stock-judging and international visits continue.

- 1 Jones and Friesen, *Prairie Metropolis*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009: p123.
- 2 *Wellington Weekly News*. 02.02.1921 (reprint)
- 3 *Devon & Somerset News*. 03.02.1921 (reprint)
- 4 *Daily Mail*. Atlantic Edition 23.05.1923:3

Clist, B, and C Dracott. *The Book of Hemyock: The Heart of the Blackdowns*. Halsgrove, 2001.

Record for Month of *March 1921*

Date Weighed last *2-3-21* Weight *223 lbs*  
 Date Weighed this Month *11th Feb* Weight *223 lbs*  
 Gain for Month *0 lbs*

Daily Ration *3 1/2 pints milk 11 Linseed cake 2 lbs hay 4 lb sweet 2 lb barley meal*

Change in Ration *Change in milk from 3 quarts to 2 quarts 14th March*

Kind	No. lbs	Local Cost Price
<i>Raw milk</i>	<i>19 gallons</i>	<i>7-0</i>
<i>Meadow hay</i>	<i>1 1/4 lbs</i>	<i>6-0</i>
<i>Linseed cake</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>3-0</i>
<i>Sweets</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>2-6</i>
<i>Barley meal</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>2-6</i>

Troubles: Scours? *No* Lice? *No* Sickness? *No*  
 Accidents, etc. *Raw milk 1-6 per gallon*  
*Meadow hay 10-10-0 per ton*  
*Linseed cake 10-0 per ton*  
*Sweets 12-0 per ton, barley meal 24-0 per sack*

Does your Calf have exercise? *Yes*  
 Where do you keep it? *In a calf pen*  
 Estimated Labour in hours *14 hours*  
 Visites

Robert Churchill’s notebook © Churchill family



# Route of change on Anglesey

By Marc Collinson, Shaun Evans, Matthew Rowland, Mari Wiliam, and Catrin Williams

A research collaboration between the Bodorgan Estate, in the south-west of Anglesey, and the Institute for the Study of Welsh Estates (ISWE) at Bangor University, is shedding light on how the estate was put to a variety of uses during and after the Second World War.

The Bodorgan Estate is constructing a new footpath through its lands as part of a landscape restoration project funded through the EU's European Agricultural Fund for Regional Development, in association with the Welsh Government. This route is intended to incorporate heritage interpretation installations, designed to draw public attention to various aspects of landscape, social and cultural history associated with the route. For historians interested in rural society, any infrastructure project that affects the landscape provides an opportunity to consider how it has been shaped, used and experienced over time; wartime and post-war periods can be understood through the prism of the landed estate, during a period when their role and influence in society was quickly diminishing on a national scale. With this in mind, researchers from ISWE and two postgraduate interns, Matthew Rowland and Catrin Williams, were excited to join the project, and undertake archival and oral history research to discover the significance of two features in the economic, social, and military history of south-west Anglesey: the legacy of RAF Bodorgan, and the impact of the 'Llanverian Experiment'.

## RAF Bodorgan

RAF Bodorgan was a Second World War airbase located on the grounds of the estate. A satellite airfield constructed for the Royal Air Force from late 1940, it was known as RAF Aberffraw until 1941, and closed in September 1945. The airbase was initially home to radio-controlled target planes for use in the training of anti-aircraft gunners at the nearby Ty Croes firing range. It later provided camouflaged storage for RAF reserve aircraft, being located out of range from all but the most audacious Luftwaffe operations. Such ancillary sites demonstrate how large tracts of the British countryside, including landed estates, were occupied and used by the state for the duration of the war.



Site 1 of RAF Bodorgan taken 2008 by Eric Jones

The appropriation of sites for military purposes was often accompanied by major landscape change, including the construction of new buildings and adaptations to local infrastructure. This, in turn, affected the state and appearance of the land when it returned to its original owners or was put up for sale. Field boundaries were moved, and landscape was altered in places to improve the grassed runway. While the hangars at Bodorgan were dismantled after the war, other buildings remained intact for decades, utilised as storage facilities for agriculture and, in the case of Bodorgan, also providing much-needed accommodation for the growing rural workforce associated with the 'Llanverian experiment' that followed

between 1951 and 1965. In fact, archival evidence held by the Bodorgan Estate shows that it was these buildings, together with the nearby lake water supply, that had led the Ministry of Agriculture to consider the estate's potential for large-scale agricultural experimentation.

## The experiment at Llanfeirian

The 'Llanverian Experiment' was introduced in the post-war period. Named after an area of the Bodorgan estate (Llanverian being the anglicised form of Llanfeirian), this was a radical initiative that imagined how land within the estate boundaries might be managed after it was vacated by the Royal Air Force. It was led by Peter Scott under the auspices of Welsh Agriculture and Industries Limited. Scott had been a force in the ambitious interwar 'Brynmawr Experiment', based in a coal mining community in South Wales. The Brynmawr initiative developed in response to Quaker concerns over the impact of the Great Depression, transitioning into a practical assistance scheme which endeavoured to create employment through small enterprises and subsistence agriculture. This ended in 1939, after loans and grants dried up and prospective employees gained work elsewhere. What manifested at Llanfeirian was different in character but shared similar origins.

The post-war context is crucial to understanding how the 'Llanverian Experiment' came about. The project gained support from the Development Commission, a government body created by the Development and Road Improvement Funds Act (1909) to manage investment in the rural economy. The commission had

provided £143,700 in loans to the project by 1953. It followed the implementation of the Labour Government's 1947 Agriculture Act, which was designed to encourage greater agricultural efficiency and profitability, to aid the UK Government's attempts to alleviate its balance of payments' deficit. Furthermore, rural employment was scarce in the post-war period, and the experiment created employment in south-west Anglesey at a time when rural depopulation and lack of work opportunities were major problems across north-west Wales.

The project was, therefore, a direct state intervention into Anglesey's rural economy by the Labour Government and changed the relationship between the central government, county-level agricultural committees and farming communities. Sir George Meyrick, owner of the Bodorgan estate, had no choice but to lease land to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. There were even attempts to acquire his residence of Bodorgan Hall to serve as the administrative centre, but this was deemed as unnecessary and prohibitively expensive by the Ministry. Initially, Bodorgan estate staff expected the proposal to fail, with senior employees confident that the project would not even reach the stage of implementation, but this view was misplaced. Over 1,000 acres of the Bodorgan estate, including much of the former RAF site, were taken over to facilitate agricultural and horticultural experimentation. These included the farming of the whole site as a single unit, rather than as separate tenant farms, in order to grow crops that needed to be produced on a larger scale to be economic, including grass, carrots, corn, potatoes and



L-R: Katy Robinson (Archivist at the Bodorgan Estate); Matthew Rowland (Postgrad intern); Dave Bateson (Project Manager, Bodorgan Estate); Catrin Williams (Postgrad intern); Dr Marc Collinson (Lecturer, Bangor University). Photograph by Mari Wiliam.

kale. The innovation of the project was its attempt to develop a landscape designed for small scale agriculture, into one suitable for larger scale, industrialised farming. Sources consulted show that drastic changes had to be made to the landscape, including the destruction of banks, construction of roads, installation of water pipes, drainage, boundaries and electricity. It acted to transform the local landscape, which had developed to accommodate more traditional forms of land use.

## Our next steps

Fundamentally, our project aims to better understand these events and their impacts on a rural Welsh community which had long operated as part of the Bodorgan estate. With there being little existing academic research on the 'Llanverian Experiment', one key aim is to discern whether those leading it were influenced more by notions of utopian communities and subsistence farming, as at Brynmawr, or were more focused on issues of agricultural output and efficiency. Furthermore, we want to better understand whether their aim was achieved. This is of interest to the wider project, due to its apparent contrast with the landed estate system and because it heralded significant landscape change. Although the initiative only lasted about fifteen years, being closed and sold in 1965, it has clearly left a lasting impact on the landscape, as did RAF Bodorgan before it. The main thrust of the heritage interpretation, which is still under development, will be to articulate links between land, people, place and nature, including land use and management, farming

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In World War Two, the former field boundaries were painted over the air strip at RAF Bodorgan, in order to conceal it from enemy planes. The lines were removed in 1945, after the war in Europe had ended.

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practices and the historical operation of the Bodorgan estate.

With this project, we have started to construct a clearer understanding and analysis of the 'Llanverian Experiment' and its impacts, through archives which remain at the Bodorgan Estate Office and oral history interviews with members of the community who have recollections of the period. Alongside the detailed evidence of activities which took place on the land of the estate, we have gained more of a sense of how both examples of outside intervention impacted the locality, on hamlets, villages and the daily lives and experiences of residents, and in particular how the two episodes are remembered in the local community. Our initial findings will feed into heritage interpretation, which should be accessible by the summer. Longer term, our findings will inform a clearer social history of this landscape to better understand the role of outside interventions such as wartime requisition and post-war agricultural experimentation on the structures of land management of south-west Anglesey and beyond.

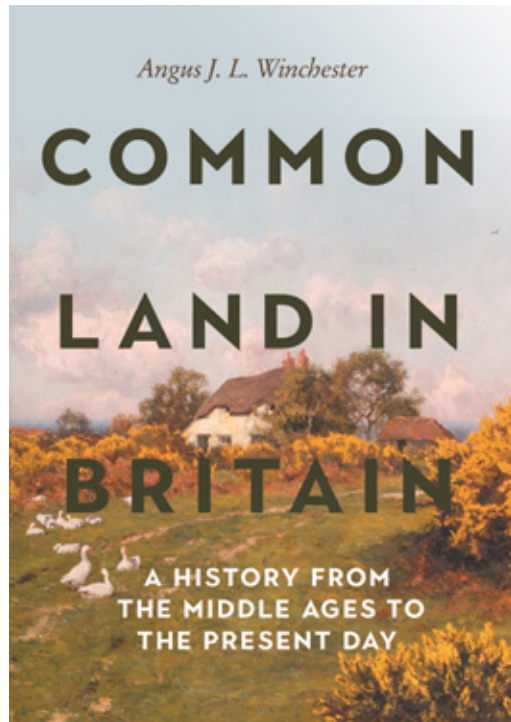


Along the proposed pathway, image Mari Wiliam.



# The many faces of **common land**

By Angus J L Winchester



Common land accounts for over one million hectares of Britain today, almost all of it 'half wild country' (to use the late Alan Everitt's evocative phrase): mountain, moorland, wetland, scrubby woodland or heath.

As well as being an integral part of the livestock farming system in northern and western Britain, commons are valued more widely by modern society, as open ground for recreation and for the richness of their semi-natural ecosystems. Common land thus carries multiple meanings which sometimes collide in current debates around managing the rural environment. Upland commons are seen by some – but not all – as land ready for re-wilding by reducing grazing levels and planting trees. Restoring moorland commons to secure their role in carbon capture and storage can conflict with other uses, such as grouse shooting or recreation. On some lowland commons, a desire to restore heathland or wetland ecosystems by clearing woodland and re-introducing grazing goes against the drive to increase woodland cover. These current debates and preoccupations are the latest incarnations of tussles over competing interests on common land which stretch back across the centuries.

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Perceptions of commons have evolved, the changing values assigned to them affecting how they were used, which has, in turn, contributed to their ecological character.

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One cannot fully appreciate commons today without understanding something of their history.

## Custom, community and conservation

At heart, common land was and remains shared land over which no single individual has a controlling interest. The legal frameworks which evolved in medieval times to structure patterns of shared use on commons grew out of custom. Deep-seated traditions lay behind the legal rights which allowed farmers and householders to graze livestock and to take fuel and other resources from a common, while the power of custom also enabled the poor and others on the margins of society to scrape a living from untamed land, even if they did not possess formal rights. Custom also underpinned an enduring perception of common land as community space, making it the location of communal activities as disparate as fairs, sports, military training, political dissent and religious preaching in late medieval and early modern Britain.

Perceptions of common land and its value to society have been transformed twice since the sixteenth century. During the 'age of improvement' commons were increasingly viewed as untamed waste, waiting to be reclaimed for more productive use. The bulk of common land which existed in 1700 was swept away during the tide of enclosure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being converted into private property and often converted to ploughland or improved pasture. By the 1860s, the meaning of common land was changing again. The amenity value of surviving commons became increasingly important, as their open spaces provided recreational 'lungs' for town dwellers. The protection of common land became a driving force, initially in the battles over commons surrounding London. Protecting nature was also one component of the early struggles over the metropolitan commons and the conservation value of commons became increasingly dominant across the twentieth century. The nation at large now claims an interest in common land, something seen when commons were requisitioned for military use or in the plough-up campaigns of the Second World War and also in the fact that a majority of common land is now protected by environmental designations. Attempting to reconcile multiple, and sometimes conflicting, interests in land which is both private and public property runs as a theme through the history of common land, bringing to the fore a perennial issue: how to balance private interests with the common good.

► Angus Winchester's new book *Common Land in Britain: A History from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* is published by Boydell & Brewer. For a 40% discount on this title, please use promo code BBo78 at [www.boydellandbrewer.com](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com) Offer valid until 31 March 2023..

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