

'The Art and Craft of Chicken Cramming': Poultry in the Weald of Sussex 1850–1950

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THE poultry industry of Sussex, while perhaps not as widely-known as that of South Lancashire or Eastern Norfolk, serves to illustrate several facets of agrarian life. It demonstrates the inter-relationship of the social and physical environment; it shows the importance of environmental and spatial factors in the development of an innovation; and it shows how, by the development of a relatively minor aspect of agrarian economy, small undercapitalized farmers and labourers could weather severe economic fluctuations. Above all, it illustrates how an industry could develop in rural England based on peasant traditions and with little of the encouragement afforded to other branches of agriculture by the gentry, nobility and landowners.

I. *The Wealden Environment*

The Weald constitutes a clearly-defined region in south-eastern England. Fine-grained silts and silty sandstones alternated with heavy 'bottomless' clays to produce a landscape of diversified relief and poorly drained soil. In the Kentish High Weald and in the Western High Weald, relatively flat dissected plateaux surfaces contrasted strongly with a series of sharply-incised, darkly-wooded ghylls — the headwaters of the rivers Ouse, Cuckmere, Rother, and Medway — on the edge of Ashdown Forest and along the Forest Ridge which forms the central, highest section of the Weald. The deep clay of the Low Weald forms a horseshoe-shaped depression stretching into Kent, Surrey and Sussex, and presenting agriculturalist and traveller alike with problems which were indelibly described in contemporary literature. Neither High nor

Low Weald offered good farmland in abundance; problems of soil acidity and drainage were common to both heavy clay and the fine compacted sandstones; and podsolization was a feature of the higher altitudes of the Ashdown and Broadwater Down Forests. A great diversity of relief, soil, drainage, vegetation, and micro climate thus provided the background to Wealden society and economy.

II. *The Social Environment of the Chicken Industry*

The Weald was for long a dependency of the areas around it. As an area containing much waste used for common grazing of swine and latterly cattle, its settlement pattern was younger and less definable than that of the neighbouring downland and areas of Tertiary rocks around the coasts of south-east England. Late settlement in the outliers of coastal manors took the form of scattered, isolated farmsteads and small hamlets. A common pattern therefore by the nineteenth century was for poly-nuclear settlement with few centralized villages and no single family or squirearchy to control parish affairs. Much of the heathland was marginal, and squatters had been common in the medieval period with the consent of the manorial lords, and again in the eighteenth century when much of the upland and strictly marginal soils of Heathfield were settled. Today areas such as Watkins Down (Punnetts Town) still bear the signs of this later development, with small rectangular fields on poor soils which are now reverting to scrub and gorse, and on which horses rather than cattle or crops are to be found. The Wealden commons were often

loosely defined areas, and as a consequence disputes over common rights and boundaries were fairly frequent. During the eighteenth century disputes in the Forest Ridge area between the Chichester family and the Ashburnhams were long and protracted, probably originating in the purchase of the manor of Burwash by Ashburnham from the Chichesters (Pelhams) in 1767.¹ The lack of control over supposedly lawless and uncontrollable people was a point noted by many. Anglican parsons, anxious at the spread of non-conformity and the lack of large congregations in the area, inveighed against the Wealden 'heathens' whilst the open nature of the parish vestry meetings, with no strong squirearchical presence, could do nothing to stop a constant influx of settlers. By 1850, therefore, there had been a long tradition of independent settlement in the area.²

Nevertheless the Weald was a strongly-endowed area in resource terms and did have the ability to offer a living for those prepared, and able, to look outside the traditional structure of agriculture. Water, fuel, and raw materials were abundant, and there was a diversity of craft industry and manufactures. In the parish of Heathfield in the mid-nineteenth century there was employment in tanning, brickmaking, gloving, spinning and weaving, milling, rope-making, quarrying, and wood cutting. Hemp and flax were spun, and although the iron industry which had brought prosperity to the area was now dead, the poultry industry could latterly provide employment for all members of the family. Heathfield, therefore, offered a potential multiplicity of employment and had many craftsmen who were also smallholders. Labourers here moved between agriculture and non-agricultural occupations and travelled from place to place in Sussex at the particular harvest periods concerned with hay, cereals,

hops, fruit, tanning, and work in the woods in the winter months.³

However, Heathfield, like many of its Wealden neighbours, actually suffered severe problems of poverty and lack of employment. The resources were abundant but they could not be stretched effectively to provide a decent living for more than a few. Without even the wealth of charities which one might expect in the closed downland parishes the poor rates soared during the nineteenth century. Between 1801 and 1851 the population of Heathfield nearly doubled from just over 1200 to just over 2200. Landownership in the parish was diverse. In 1842 Sir Charles Blunt, MP for Lewes, held more than 1000 acres, and Augustus Fuller owned 800 acres, but the remainder of the parish was divided among over 130 separate landowners. A select vestry was said to exist in 1820, comprising sixteen leading figures of the parish and headed by Blunt, but by 1831 vestry meetings comprised all the inhabitants of Heathfield paying poor rates. The overseer reported in 1834 that there was no select vestry, decisions being made by the 'majority of the Parish in vestry assembled'. Although even the later nineteenth-century inhabitants of small hamlets in the Heathfield area, such as Rushlake Green, might look up to leading families such as the Darbys or the Dunns, this could not in any way match the strong patterns of patronage and deference exhibited in the downland to the South.⁴

III. *The Beginnings of the Poultry Industry*

It is against this social and environmental background that the poultry industry developed. By its very nature the origins are obscure, for poultry have long been a common-place feature of farming; and additionally have long been regarded as a pre-

¹P Lucas, *Heathfield Memorials*, 1910, p 10.

²R. Heath, *The English Peasant*, 1893 (reprinted 1978), ch XI, 'Wealden Life and Character', pp 189-206.

³Lucas, *op cit*, pp 96-103.

⁴BPP, Poor Law Commissioners 1834 (10), Appendix B: Answers to questions circulated by the Commissioners in Rural Districts; *East Sussex Record Office* (ESRO), TD/E 16, Heathfield Tithe Map and Schedule.

quisite of the farmer's wife and family, rather than an essential and integral part of the farming economy. The ancient practice of fattening chickens is described in detail in Heresbach's *Booke of Husbandry* (B Googe's translation of 1557).⁵

The early centre of the poultry industry in Sussex appears to have been around Horsham, 'the great emporium of capons', where by 1673 a flourishing trade had already been established with London. However, at this time and in this area of West Sussex, poultry reckoned at 6d per bird, never amounted to more than about £2 in any inventory so far examined. By 1800 there were still 'great stores of poultry' accumulating weekly from places such as North Chappell and Kirdford, where the 'Dorking fowls', fattened on barley flour, milk, pot-liquor, and molasses, were conveyed by carrier from Horsham to London.⁶

Although poultry were no doubt ubiquitous by the nineteenth century, interest in fattening and rearing spread gradually eastwards across the High Weald to finally become located around Heathfield. It is said that the idea of sending chickens to London via the carrier, to benefit from the higher prices, occurred in 1788 to Mrs Kezia Collins of Cade Street, Heathfield. Her husband began collecting chickens (higglings) from the neighbourhood, and fattening for the market then began in the area. However, the industry was also noted around Hastings, where a rudimentary localized trade had been built up, although not as yet extending to London. Hastings fowls were still extremely cheap, and by 1837 Lord Ashburnham, the fourth Earl, was attempting to introduce the black cock of Scotland into the High Weald, building on

the established local interest in this part of Sussex.⁷

There are many conflicting accounts of the origins of artificial fattening (cramming) but certainly fattening in Heathfield can be dated to about 1830–34, and S C Sharpe's book *The Sussex Fowl* (1920) includes drawings made of prizewinning Sussex fowls in 1847. The 1832 edition of Baxter's *Library of Agricultural and Horticultural Knowledge* includes a description of cramming and fattening as 'kindly furnished us by one of the first higgler in Sussex, as practised by him for many years with the greatest success'.⁸ Interestingly there was no reference made to what must have been a very thriving local activity in the report of James Farncombe in his prize essay on the agriculture of Sussex in 1850; the writing of James Caird in his tour of England in 1850–51; nor in the critical review of Wealden agriculture by Léonce De Lavergne in 1855.⁹ It would seem that these writers concentrated only on agriculture as demonstrated by the larger tenant-farmers and landowners. Few writers ventured into the depths of the High Weald around Heathfield and so were unable to describe this exception to an otherwise largely unprofitable agriculture.

IV. Location and Expansion 1850–1914

The industry was firmly established around Heathfield by the 1860's and certainly did not rely on the late nineteenth-century depression for its popularity in the area. Higgler were noted in the 1861 census where James Honeysett from Dallington was returned as a 'higgler and farmer of 3 acres', obviously

⁵ Lucas, op cit, p 97.

⁶ A Young, A tour in Sussex, *Annals of Agriculture*, XI, 1789, p 255; R Blome, *Britannia*, 1673, p 225; W Albery, *A millenium of facts in the history of Horsham and Sussex*, 947–1947, 1947, pp 113, 115; Rev A Young, *General view of the agriculture of Sussex*, 1813, pp 391–2.

⁷ Lucas, op cit, p 96; The Skinner Journals (*B Lib*, Add MS 33,649); B M Short, 'Agriculture in the High Weald of Kent and Sussex 1850–1953 (unpub PhD thesis, Univ of London, 1973) p 189.

⁸ J. Baxter (Printer, Lewes), *The Library of agricultural and horticultural knowledge*, 1832, p 498.

⁹ J Farncombe, 'On the farming of Sussex', *J RASE*, XI, 1850; J Caird, *English Agriculture in 1850–51*, 1852; L de Lavergne, *The rural economy of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 1855.

combining a smallholding with the carrying of poultry between rearer and fatterer and on to the point of departure for the London or South coastal market.¹⁰ In this area a large number of labourers and small farmers were noted in 1871 as keeping from eight to sixteen brood-chickens to supply fatteners and living:

In remote places away from the villages and hamlets, their favourite spots being the light dry soil of the commons, and the higher grounds clothed with heather and short grass.¹¹

In 1864 over 163 tons of fatted chickens were dispatched from Heathfield to London by one carrier, and by 1871 the figure was estimated at 200 tons, although this figure should be doubled to include chickens reaching London through other channels, and those destined for the south coast. By the mid-1870's the well-established Heathfield carrier was conveying about 224 tons of produce to market. This was fully ten years before costs of grain began to fall and was at the height of the price boom in cereals. By 1879 small parcels of land had been taken in for chicken runs around the Ashdown Forest, and in 1895 the industry was said to have been established in Heathfield from 'time immemorial'. By the 1880s the concentration in Heathfield was very marked, with a rather uniform distribution elsewhere throughout the High Weald (Fig 1). The focal area of the industry was defined in 1895 as stretching from Rotherfield in the north to Hellingly in the south; and from Buxted in the west to Brightling in the east; all were within easy reach of the railway stations at Heathfield, Uckfield and Ticehurst.¹²

The locational factors accounting for the fowl industry at Heathfield have never been adequately discussed. Maintenance of a relatively large rural population on small

farms had always relied greatly on the availability of non-agricultural resources, and an early fostering of 'enterprise and commercial spirit'¹³ was attributed to the iron works and the supplying of timber. But probably more important was the agricultural poverty of the area; the soils, largely derived from Ashdown beds here, were difficult to work; and headward erosion by the Rother, Ouse and Cuckmere combined to form a very dissected terrain hampering arable farming. The area therefore concentrated on the fattening of livestock, and had then moved into dairying by the 1870s. By 1877 the Rose Hill estate, Brightling, had been used 'to a considerable extent for dairying' although railway access from here was poor and there was only one general carrier per week to Hastings and none to Tunbridge Wells as late as 1889.¹⁴ However, skim milk and animal fats were thus available for chicken fattening, together with quantities of oats, grown for both cattle and poultry. In return the poultry industry contributed large amounts of manure, and many fatteners kept a few acres of grassland to utilize this valuable by-product. Fowls therefore fitted rather well into a loosely integrated agricultural system in this area. Here, too, there was adequate shelter provided by ghylls and luxuriant shaws and roadside verges, no longer large enough for the commoning of cattle, but ample for chicken coops situated so that the birds could obtain grit from the roads and insects from the hedgerows and grass. In the small Heathfield hamlets such as Cross-in-Hand, Punnetts Town and Rushlake Green much available grassland was utilized for this purpose, and the green at Rushlake Green was often covered with the coops belonging to individual families. One can disregard older theories that the 'dry sandy soils' of the areas suited the 'scraping Persian bird', as suggested by Wolff in 1880, but the poor physical environment containing small farms

¹⁰ PRO. RG9/Dallington Census enumerators schedule 1861; Heath, *op cit*, p 182.

¹¹ Heath, *op cit*, p 182.

¹² Heath, *op cit*, p 182; H W Wolff, *Sussex Industries*, c1883, pp 29-44; Short, *op cit*, pp 177, 190; R H Rew, Report of the Royal Commission for investigation into the agricultural depression, BPP, 1895, XVI, pp 3-4.

¹³ Rew, *op cit*, p 4.

¹⁴ B Lib, Maps 137 b 10 (6), Rosehill Estate sale catalogue; Short, *op cit*, pp 132, 190.

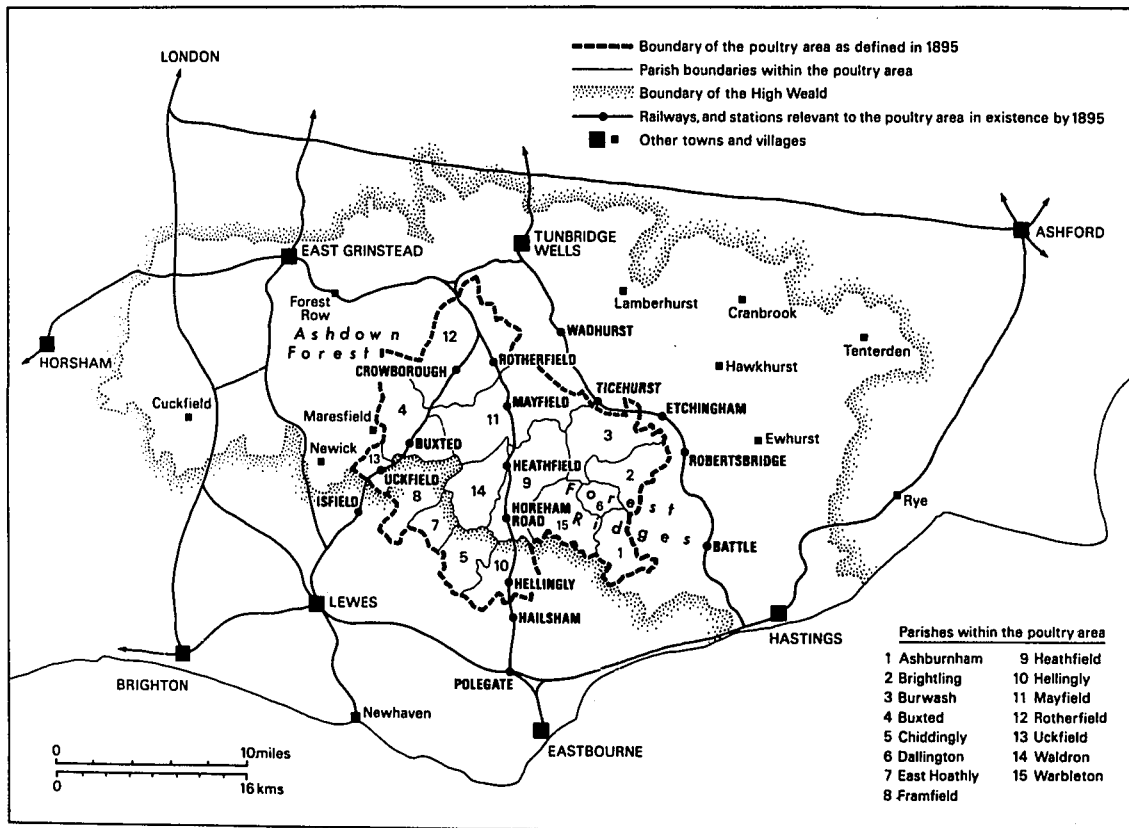


FIGURE 1
Poultry in the High Weald in the 1880's.

operating at an intensive level, and an agricultural system that could benefit by the inclusion of poultry, were factors leading to the establishment of this industry in this area.¹⁵

Once established the location was reinforced by the carrier services which, by 1889, were in the hands of only two men. One firm, that of Mr Bournier, operated from Uckfield; and another by Mr Bean, from Heathfield; but it existed only by the carriage of poultry from farm to railway station and returning imported poultry from Ireland or Kent to the fatteners. In 1876 Bean's firm carried over £24,000 worth of chickens to market.¹⁶ However, the railway became the

key to success; markets were immediately more accessible, and the local trade bolstered by the influx of residents. Rider Haggard went so far as to say that:

were it not for the fowl industry and for the fact that many rich men from London occupy large houses, which absorb much produce at a good price, it would go very hardly with both tenant and landlord.¹⁷

The London & Brighton Railway Company attached a special van to passenger trains three times a week, more efficient than the old carrier service, but insufficient in the height of the season in July to October, before the game season began on the wealthy tables of London. In 1885 £60,000 worth of dead poultry was sent from Heathfield station, rising to £140,000 in 1895 and £150,000 in about 1900. The period after 1892 witnessed a

¹⁵ Taped interview with Mr Oliver Atkinson, kindly supplied by Mr C Ravilious, University of Sussex Library. Wolff, op cit, p 182.

¹⁶ Rew, op cit, p 10; Wolff, op cit, p 41; Heath, op cit, pp 34-5.

¹⁷ H Rider Haggard, *Rural England*, 1902, p 135.

particularly large increase, and at a time when the price of wheat in Sussex was at its lowest over 1840 tons were leaving Uckfield and Heathfield constituting at least a ten-fold increase in output since 1864. By 1913 1200 tons were leaving the area.¹⁸

The onset of the depression acted as a stimulant to the industry since many were 'bound to find something beyond corn and stock to make . . . farming pay in these times'.¹⁹ The numbers of fowls kept were therefore increased, or perhaps taken over by the farmer himself rather than being left as a sideline for his wife. Investment in machinery was a necessity; the fattener's cramming device was a variant of the sausage-machine, with an attached gutta-percha tube for forced feeding, which was manipulated by one or two men. Coops and incubators were purchased by rearers, together with large quantities of feeding stuffs. Higher wages were paid to lure men away from agriculture; and the skilled 'crammer' commanded a good wage. With these initial investments made, the industry grew by a cumulative causation process.

There were no specialist poultry farms in this period, although for many farmers fowls were the most remunerative branch of agriculture. Many different people turned to the trade. Small traders and labourers kept a few coops by the roadside; small farmers reared perhaps 60 head per year; while larger farmers could dispatch up to 8000 fowls each year. Mr Kenward of Waldron supplied this number from his 200-acre farm and the fatteners handled much larger numbers, although the figure of 2000 dozen a quarter quoted from Mr Joseph Olliver of Warbleton seems excessive, if possible. In a taped interview with his nephew, aged 99 in 1980, Joseph Olliver was remembered as continually collecting chickens by cart from Kent with his brother Jack and other members of the family. They would set out on Sunday nights and

return on Wednesday afternoons. No attempt was made to maintain a particular breed here; the old Sussex 'barn door' or 'dung hill' type had proved a ready fattener, and possibly constituted another broad location factor. But by the later nineteenth century the preferred chickens were mainly Dorkings, Brahma-Dorking crosses and Buff Orpingtons. A reputation was gradually built up for the Heathfield 'Surrey' fowl, and once established, served also to increase the momentum of growth. The Sussex Poultry Club was formed in 1903.²⁰

The industry had grown by a series of distinct movements. The diffusion from Horsham to Heathfield had taken place by the 1840s, and centralization resulted from the construction of railway stations at Ticehurst (in use by the mid-1850s), Uckfield (by 1868) and Heathfield (built in 1880). Many tried to maintain a 'close borough',²¹ but the secrets of production spread rapidly throughout the Heathfield area during the depression, bringing still more people into the trade.

The keynote in the organization of industry was horizontal integration, for each stage represented a change in location (Fig 2). Rearing and fattening were distinct branches, although many people changed from one to the other; and a few could combine higgling with either of the two branches, often being larger farmers or those dependent on family labour.

I brought up five girls and four boys . . . we used to fat chickens all the year round, so as to average the good and bad pay. We bought the chicks, giving 1/8d to 3/9d each according to the time of year. We used to go round with crates collecting 2 or 3 evenings in the week.²²

Rearing took place on farms of all sizes; the larger ones growing their own oats and milk, and the small all-grass farms buying in grain. By the 1890's the demand for chickens from

¹⁸ Rew, op cit, p 4; A D Hall, *A Pilgrimage of British Farming 1910-1912*, 1913, p 47.

¹⁹ Rew, op cit, p 6.

²⁰ Short, op cit, p 193; C Whitehead, *A sketch of the agriculture of Kent*, J RASE, 3rd ser, X, 1899, p 474, S C Sharpe, *The Sussex Fowl*, 1920, pp 19-23.

²¹ Haggard, op cit, p 116.

²² A Day, *Glimpses of rural life in Sussex*, 1927, p 17.

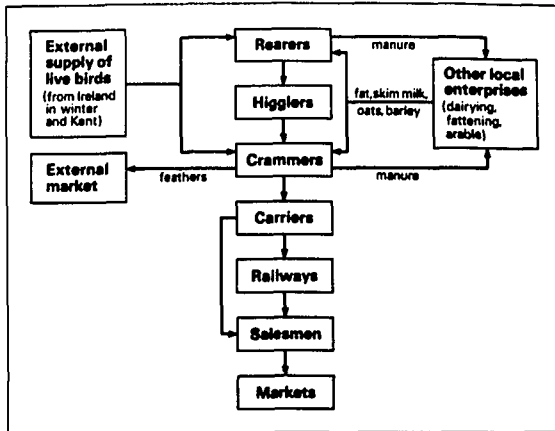


FIGURE 2

The structure of the Heathfield poultry industry before 1914.

fatteners exceeded the supply, and rearing was considered the better proposition, especially since initial costs were lower. Some labourers in the Heathfield district were said to make as much as £10 profit per annum by breeding chicks. But there was little organization in the industry at this time, and in the hatching season between October and May, strong Irish competition was experienced. Although inferior and slower to fatten, birds from central and southern Ireland were arriving by the late 1890's at the rate of up to 300,000 per annum, and consignments of Welsh fowls were also noted as arriving in Uckfield. Birds came too from the Kentish High Weald where the industry, started in imitation of Heathfield, had proved largely unsuccessful and was now confining itself to supplying Buff Orpingtons to the Sussex Crammers. Production in Kent centred on the parishes of Benenden, Goudhurst, Headcorn, Marden, Cranbrook, and Biddenden. But even allowing for this competition, and for investing in coops, incubators and food, profits could be between 8d and 1s 4d a bird. The selling of eggs was justly considered unprofitable in the area.²³

²³ ESRO, Add MS 3416; E Brown, 'The marketing of poultry', *J RASE*, 3rd ser, IX, 1898, pp 275-7; W Hurst, *All about Sussex fowls and the chicken fattening industry*, c1904, p 38; Haggard, op cit, p 121.

While some rearers supplied live fowls to the London market, most traded with the higgler, roving in a 10-mile radius, although sometimes travelling much further — 50 miles was not exceptional — in search of birds to sell to the Heathfield fatteners. They were supposed to 'run over one another' to get the custom, operating at a commission of about 2s a dozen and travelling in light carts or with wicker baskets strapped to their backs; but more often they had their own customers, each being visited once a fortnight. Higgler were said to operate two or three times a week, implying a ratio of four to six rearers to each fatter, but great variation must have existed.²⁴ The fatteners received the birds at between 2 to 4 months of age from a higgler, keeping the birds until ready for cramming at 4 to 7 months. Initially kept in pens and fed on oats and water, they were then crammed by machine for 2 weeks twice a day, with a mixture of ground oats, milk and fat, 100 birds being fed in 20 minutes. The scale of enterprise varied from those who fattened by the dozen when the market was favourable to those such as Joseph Olliver, with a labour force of 6 men and 20 women casual workers.²⁵ Mr Olliver's nephew claimed that his uncle was the first man in Sussex to fatten chickens using the cramming machine, and before that he fattened by hand.

and the method that he adopted was, they had long rows of pens on stilts, long rows in a shed, a covered shed, . . . more a roof over. And the runs were about level with the man's waistcoat, the machines were on wheels and they pushed them along, and the birds came level with the tube. They pushed the tube down their throat and fed them. It was very quick. It was six birds in each pen, and probably five or six pens in one coop, a long coop that was sub-divided. I can see them now.

²⁴ Haggard, op cit, pp 120-1; E M Bell-Irving, *Mayfield, the story of an old Weald village*, 1903, p 182; Hurst, op cit, pp 36-7, Rew, op cit, p 5; Day, op cit, p 17. The poultry-fattening districts were, by the 1880s, often loosely referred to as the 'higgling districts', but the stricter sense of the term is reserved for an alternative to those who were chicken 'carriers' (Wolff, op cit, p 30).

²⁵ W Fream, 'Some minor rural industries', *J RASE*, 3rd ser, V, 1894, p 298; Rew, op cit, p 5; Wolff, op cit, p 33.

Killing, picking and stubbing followed; the latter provided piece work for local families.

... and the chicken were brought home from Kent and put into coops and fattened by cramming, and after perhaps two or three weeks they were ready for ... the London market. When they were ready ... on about Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday there was the killing. Men went and did the killing, and the women sat around and stubbed the birds, that's pulled the feathers out. The men pulled the feathers out when they wrung their necks. When they wrung their necks the thing would be often sort of jumping about, and they would throw them down. Sometimes they would jump up and start running, but they would pull all the wing feathers, the main the big feathers. The women did the finishing and that was called stubbing. And I think they got about a penny a chick. What the men got for killing I don't know.²⁶

A contemporary estimate of this process was that a man could kill and pick between 2 and 3 dozen per day, and that 4d a dozen was paid for 'stubbing', although a 'dextrous higgler' could deal with as many as 15 fowls per hour.²⁷ After pressing into a 'nice and appetizing' shape and packing, 1s a dozen was charged by the carriers for collecting and delivering to the station, their roles having shrunk proportionally to the extension of the railway network through the area. Fowls were conveyed to Leadenhall and occasionally Smithfield, where a salesman could gain as good a price as possible, with subsequent extraction of his middle-man's profits. Although the lack of contact between producer and salesman was a disadvantage, the middleman's charges were generally thought fair.

The cost of fattening was 8s to 9s a dozen, while market prices ranged from 1s 8d in summer to 3s 6d or 4s in May; the latter being early chickens following after the 'game season'.²⁸

Poultry was by far the biggest money earner in the Heathfield area. Vertical integration was unknown, and the rather loose

organization tended to depress profits of the fatterer especially when a scarcity of reared birds increased the costs. Complaints of foreign competition, not only in chickens but also in geese and turkey, were made; while other grievances included fear of distemper in tightly-packed communities, and the Agricultural Holdings Act, which omitted corn fed to chickens as qualifying for compensation.²⁹ There is little doubt, however, that the growth of the industry before 1914, together with increased urbanization and improved communications, mitigated the severities of the depression felt elsewhere in Sussex and throughout the country. Indeed, in the report of the Royal Commission of 1895 it is stated by Henry Rew that:

The 'ladder' from weekly wages and prospective work-house to occupation or ownership of land and independence, which it is so desirable to set up for the industrious rural labourer, is provided by means of poultry.³⁰

V. *Decline and Recovery 1914-21*

The period 1914-21 comprised two conflicting trends, since between 1914 and 1918 poultry numbers were reduced owing to the lack of imported food; but from 1919 onwards the development of smallholdings and the land settlement schemes reinstated poultry so that by the time of the Corn Production (Repeal) Act of 1921 their numbers had once more increased. After 1914 'the backyarder became a new manifestation of patriotism', and as one of the 'three P's' (Pigs, Potatoes and Poultry), poultry were increasingly important to the allotment holder.³¹ Newspaper columns such as that by S C Sharpe, poultry inspector and an instructor with the East Sussex County Council, were printed to encourage the small producer. Nevertheless, the decision was

²⁶ Taped interview supplied by Mr C Ravilious.

²⁷ Wolff, op cit, p 41; *The library of agricultural and horticultural knowledge*, 1832, p 498.

²⁸ Haggard, op cit, p 120.

²⁹ *The Crowborough Weekly*, 19 Dec 1903, p 2; Rew, op cit, pp 16-17.

³⁰ Rew, op cit, p 15.

³¹ *The Sussex Express*, 15 Feb 1918, p 4.

taken to fix the prices of damaged grain and horse and poultry mixtures to prevent diversion of cereal from human to animal consumption. Oats and barley therefore could no longer be fed to poultry without serious financial losses, and while the 'backyarder' could continue by feeding domestic scraps, larger producers were badly hit. In Sussex poultry numbers fell from 965,132 in 1913 to 692,810 by 1919, and in the Heathfield area production fell by nearly 50 per cent between 1913 and 1915, being negligible by 1918. Increased fixed costs of feed, fixed prices for the sale of poultry, and increased prices for eggs, all contributed to the decline of the Heathfield industry. A slight benefit to the Heathfield area from the production of pit-props, 30 to 40 train loads being dispatched periodically, together with charcoal and munitions, did little to offset this decline.³²

The war killed it. They couldn't get food and the things to do it with. It killed the industry for the time being, and it never survived to be as it was. There probably were 100 dozen went up everyday from Heathfield station.³³

During the war more eggs were sold, rather than hatched — a move encouraged by the establishment of County Council Egg Stations for selected breeds, and by the activities of co-operatives such as the Buxted Agricultural Society, registered in 1916, which by 1919 handled milk, eggs and feed, and sought expansion into neighbouring Mayfield, Heathfield and Hailsham. At the operator level such general factors as good drainage, a southerly aspect, a small stream and the provision of shelter (either woodland or hazel wattles) were contributory to the development of small poultry enterprises all over the High Weald. Such factors were further enhanced by egg-laying competitions, newspaper articles, and the work of poultry inspectors in the favourable post-war economic environment. Typical of the area were the ex-servicemen, combining poultry

farming with fruit at Battle and Heathfield, and the Bungalow Egg Farm at Horeham Road begun by two women in 1918, and Heaselands Farm, Cuckfield, where one of the first large-scale brooder houses was introduced.³⁴

By 1921 Heathfield parish was still dominant in terms of poultry numbers, although since the 1880's there had been considerable change elsewhere. In 1921 there were 327,965 head of poultry in the High Weald, of which 90.5 per cent were fowls and 9.5 per cent ducks, geese and turkeys. Most areas of the High Weald showed gains in poultry numbers during this period. By 1921 the war had popularized the 'backyarder', promoted small poultry units, and encouraged greater use of the motorized lorry as opposed to the former reliance on the railway. There had therefore been some dispersal of interest away from the original centre of production. Urbanized areas around Cuckfield and Tunbridge Wells, and the more eastern Forest Ridge groups of hamlets and farms around Battle and Burwash, now became significant. Overall, a more uniform distribution of poultry numbers could be discerned by this period.³⁵

Reflecting the slight eastward shift in emphasis, a poultry food manufacturer from Rye had begun in 1920 to use lorries to deliver the supplies 'with a view of overcoming the recent increased heavy railway transit and delivery charges particularly on small consignments, and for the convenience of our many customers in outlying districts'. Delivery was restricted to the eastern High Weald in Sussex, and penetrating as far as Lamberhurst in Kent. The fact that the firm could afford to send lorries to Lamberhurst from Rye and yet not touch parts of Mayfield, Heathfield and Battle well within the same radius, indicated the eastward dispersal as well as anything else could have done.³⁶

³² R H B Jesse, *A survey of the agriculture of Sussex*, 1960, p 106; *Sussex Express*, 27 Dec 1918, p 4.

³³ Atkinson, op cit.

³⁴ *Sussex Express*, 20 June 1919, p 3; 21 Nov 1919, p 4; 23 Jan 1920, p 4; Jesse, op cit, p 70.

³⁵ Short, op cit, pp 262-5.

³⁶ *Sussex Express*, 7 May 1920, p 9.

With the passing of the Corn Production (Repeal) Act in 1921 the price of cereals again sank to the level at which they could economically be fed to poultry. Both egg and table bird production increased, though with the Heathfield centre less dominant than formerly. With increased use of local advertisers and co-operative marketing schemes, and with the advent of broilers imminent, the beginning of a poultry 'agribusiness' can be envisaged.³⁷

VI. *Structural Change in the Inter-War Industry 1921-39*

The peak of inter-war poultry production was obtained in the Weald in 1933, with over 895,000 birds being returned in the June Census, since the depression in farming had once again pushed more farmers into the keeping of poultry.³⁸

A locational change occurred at this time. In 1924 over half the total poultry production registered in the Weald was accounted for in the parishes to the south and east of the Ashdown Forest and on the Forest Ridge, and with the Heathfield area alone accounting for 25 per cent of the total Wealden production. Between 1924 and 1928 numbers of poultry in the High Weald increased by over 80 per cent and at the height of the inter-war period a movement eastwards began. The Tenterden and Wadhurst areas gained in significance, together with Ewhurst and Cranbrook by 1938. Increases in the north and east had by 1938 split the original nucleus around Heathfield into two unequal portions; the Heathfield-Battle and Maresfield area accounted for one-third of the total, while the Tenterden-Ewhurst and Cranbrook area accounted for just over one-fifth. Peripheral growth had thus occurred during this time of

expansion. By 1933 there were 2876 poultry keepers in the region, ranging from 100 at Forest Row to 349 at Heathfield, with the number of keepers being more evenly distributed than the poultry themselves were in that year. Generally the established production centres possessed more birds per keeper, but the scales of production at this time varied more than at any previous time since farmers' wives and 'backyarders' were contrasted with farmers beginning to use battery farming systems. In 1925 it was stated that 'Artificial incubation is fast gaining its hold on the poultry industry', and by 1929 a battery system was operating at Furnace Farm (Cowden) and '... must be regarded as something more than a freak'. At Ticehurst battery production was used for Light Sussex breeds or crosses, and in 1931 Heydown Poultry Farm (Heathfield) had been modernized by the installation of a battery system. At another Heathfield Farm a 'Giant Incubator' hatched out 9600 eggs at a time, but most operators still only envisaged poultry as a branch of the general mixed farming economy.³⁹

One writer in 1929 enumerated the facts behind buying an ideal poultry farm. These included a southerly or south-easterly aspect; a gravel or light soil; hard road; proximity to a railway station; water supply; and wood — preferably fruit trees — for shelter. In addition there were several advantages to be gained from beginning in an established poultry community: transport facilities; ready availability of food at more competitive prices; advice; co-operation; and the probable existence of an auction market.⁴⁰

Marketing methods had also changed since the pre-war period. Even before the war greater individual mobility had begun to edge the higgler from his last intermediate position, carrying between farm and station,

³⁷ See G Sykes, *Poultry: A modern agribusiness*, 1963, p 1.

³⁸ Short, *op cit*, p 329, From 1926 the numbers of poultry were recorded more accurately since poultry returns were made a compulsory part of the June returns. In 1884-86 and in 1924 questions on poultry in England and Wales were asked in connection with the census on production, but were often over-looked and therefore inaccurate.

³⁹ Short, *op cit*, pp 329-31; *Sussex Express*, 6 Feb 1925, p 2; W M Elkington, 'Poultry in agriculture', *J RASE*, XC, 1929, p 155; *Sussex Express*, 30 Jan 1931, p 13; 29 May 1931, p 13; 27 Dec 1929, p 2.

⁴⁰ E Bostock-Smith column in *Sussex Express*, 16 Aug 1929, p 3.

and by the 1920's very few were still operating.⁴¹ Instead producers dealt directly with fatteners and there was a consequent increase in Sussex markets for poultry. Heathfield market was still pre-eminent, being controlled by a firm of auctioneers in conjunction with a small livestock auction.

The Watsons had a market every Tuesday at the Crown Hotel in the yard, outside the Crown Hotel. That draws a lot of people in Heathfield. They sold there by auction every Tuesday morning chicken, and produce and some pigs and some cattle, probably half a dozen cattle and perhaps ten or twelve pigs. But any amount of eggs and other produce. You could buy such things as early potatoes, veg, fruit as it came into the market would be sold and they were very cheap as a rule. You could buy them cheaper than you could . . . privately, really. I may have sometimes bought apples there at 9d per half a bushel. . . .⁴²

There was room for 3000 to 4000 birds in the wooden crates, sold together with butter, fruit, vegetables, dead poultry, and rabbits. But most of the trade was in store chickens received from a wide radius. Trade doubled between 1925 and 1929, although finished chickens were not sold here but direct to salesmen in London. The haul to Smithfield, Leadenhall or Billingsgate was by 1926 nearly always made by road. Messrs Routh and Stevens began in 1921, using two lorries to convey chickens between Heathfield and London. By 1925 they had ten lorries collecting peds (wooden cages for transporting poultry) and eggs from individual farmers at 1d per bird, and these were conveyed to London on each evening of the working week. There was less handling and bruising of the birds than when higglers and railways were used, and one important feature of this particular firm's service was the backhaul of chicken feed and empty peds.⁴³

Facing such competition the services offered by the Southern Railway 'chicken train' improved. A flat rate of 1d per bird was

charged for door to door collection and delivery to salesmen, the old additional collection charge deleted, thereby attempting to undercut road services which often levied pre-war rates plus collection charges. The advantages of reliability, punctuality, suitable vans, and speed, were advertised; trains arriving in London by mid-day. The return of peds was also a feature of this revised service. During the 1930's two main co-operative societies competed for the collection and marketing of farmers produce. The Heathfield Poultry Keepers Association doubled both membership and orders between 1922 and 1925, and by 1931 the annual general meeting received a very satisfactory report indeed.⁴⁴

Competition came from the Stonegate and East Sussex Farmers' Cooperative Society, founded in 1926 for the door to door collection and marketing of eggs from the Hawkhurst and Etchingham areas for sale in Tunbridge Wells. Originally centred on Eatonden Manor Farm, branches were established at Newick in 1932 and Wye in 1933. The former branch was a bold venture, outflanking the Heathfield poultry keepers' sphere of activity which also just included Newick. By 1935 Stonegate was recognized as the largest national mark egg packing station in the country, achieving a throughput of 21 million eggs in 1934, in spite of overproduction and a drop in egg prices between 1926 and 1934. In the far western High Weald the Horsham Poultry Association was conceived in 1932, but confined its activities to Horsham and the surrounding Weald clay area, later becoming the South-Eastern Poultry Producers Association.⁴⁵

Structural changes had occurred in the Wealden Poultry industry since the war. In some ways it had become more complex. The addition of many small producers and fatteners among ex-servicemen, aided by improved transportation, increased the number of small fatteners in the district; and

⁴¹ Ministry of Agriculture, fisheries and food, Economics Series 11, *Report on the marketing of poultry in England and Wales*, 1926, p 65.

⁴² Atkinson, op cit.

⁴³ *Sussex Express*, 22 May 1925, p 16; 25 July 1930, p 13.

⁴⁴ *Sussex Express*, 16 March 1925, p 3; 5 June 1931, p 8.

⁴⁵ *Sussex Express*, 11 Jan 1935, p 2; Jesse, op cit, p 74.

road transport firms claimed that their services had also enhanced this trend. Secondly, the pre-war dependence on fowls had been diversified by a greater post-war reliance on egg production. The latter had actually caused many to fear for the physique of the Sussex bird, and therefore these were often replaced by more utilitarian breeds, kept for work rather than showing. The Sussex fowls were therefore dropping out of shows by about 1935. County egg stations had been established in the 1920's to disseminate information, and by 1925 there were six in the Weald. Finally the rise of co-operative marketing schemes, perceived to be essential among so many small producers, had also changed the structure of the industry. Schemes guaranteeing to take all the produce of individual farmers were particularly popular in an industry vulnerable to over-production.⁴⁶

Conversely some simplification of the industry had been introduced by the streamlining of the horizontal integration of the industry (Fig 3). Motor transport had rendered the higgler unnecessary, produce now going directly to London or being transferred to the nearest railway station for the 'chicken train'. The Heathfield-Polegate railway was still, therefore, a magnet for farmers of all sizes. But no vertical integration was attempted and no-one produced and marketed their own eggs or birds. Few farmers even grew any cereal food on their all-grass holdings, relying instead on imported grain for fattening.⁴⁷

VII. *The end of Heathfield Dominance* 1939-50

The industry having prospered in the inter-war period, 639,922 poultry were recorded in the High Weald in 1939. The largest poultry

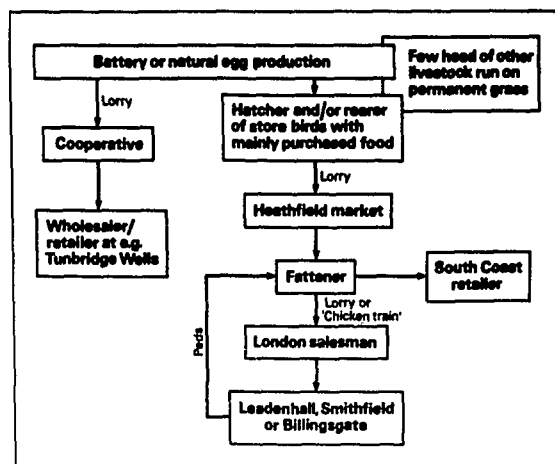


FIGURE 3

The structure of the Heathfield poultry industry in the interwar period.

concern, the Stonegate and South Eastern Farmers' Cooperative Society, registered record profits in 1938 with a turnover ten times that of 1926, and a new packing station was opened at Heathfield. Ten vans now supplied the area between Margate in the east and the Thames in the north.⁴⁸

The industry's pre-war problems had been the threat of foreign imports, disease and a maintenance of constant standards of grading and packing. Now, in addition, pigs and poultry became a war-time low priority issue, since their needs for cereals and by-product concentrates coincided directly with those of humans. Difficulty was experienced in obtaining food and this entailed problems in rearing home replacements; and with restricted internal movement and imports, flock numbers fell rapidly, with attempts to maintain large numbers sometimes leading to disease and thus indirect diminution. By 1943 there had been a decline of over 60 per cent in High Wealden poultry numbers, with owners instructed to reduce flocks by two-thirds. Losses were smaller at Tunbridge Wells and Hastings than in the rural areas, owing to the prevalence of the 'backyarder' with very small numbers of birds. Numbers

⁴⁶ Ministry of Agriculture, Economics Series, op cit, pp 76-7; *Sussex Express*, 16 Jan 1925, p 11.

⁴⁷ Short, op cit, pp 335-7; Jesse, op cit, p 68; E W H Briault, *The Land of Britain: Sussex (East and West)*, LXXXIII, 1942, p 539.

⁴⁸ *Kent and Sussex Courier*, 27 Jan 1939, p 9; 10 March 1939, p 9.

of poultry in urban areas were undoubtedly understated in the agricultural returns since many were kept on holdings of under a quarter acre. Large conurbation local authorities allowed tenants to keep poultry at this time, and Tunbridge Wells was criticized by the 'National Utility Poultry Society' for refusing to do likewise. At Heathfield the loss was over 76 per cent and its superiority was now quite markedly reduced.⁴⁹ While food shortage and other problems have been detailed, there were others to be faced. Petrol rationing adversely affected the heavy distribution undertakings from Stonegate; and although free collection boxes and packing materials were still advertised, the profits were depressed, particularly since eggs were also subject to government price manipulation. Eggs were subject to retail and wholesale price fixing. Maximum prices were lifted but reimposed after the loss of Danish and Dutch imports, with a profit margin set after 1942 by the government. From 1941 a distribution zoning scheme operated with hinterlands around major packing stations, such as Stonegate. Unfortunately many members of the co-operative were 'zoned out', thereby again disrupting production. The Stonegate zone consisted of an L-shaped catchment area between Robertsbridge, Crawley, Newick, Brighton, and Newhaven which entailed unnecessary travelling, since no attempt was made to minimize movement and costs. However, one advantage gained at this time was an increased interest in product quality, since to gain more reliable stock the East Sussex Agricultural Committee began to organize Poultry Accredited Breeding Stations. By December 1942 there were 23 in East Sussex, and therefore when poultry numbers increased again after the war there was a parallel increase in quality.⁵⁰

Nationally, poultry numbers fell from 60 million to 32 million between 1939 and 1943, rising again to 73 million by 1951; and in the High Weald the period 1943-53 witnessed an increase from 254,153 to 792,670. Changes in numbers of poultry were accompanied by changes in the composition of the flocks. In 1939 over 95 per cent were fowls, but the distribution varied such that ducks, turkeys and geese were commoner away from Heathfield. By 1943 fowls constituted under 90 per cent of the total since ducks and geese, kept on poor grass or common forest land, were affected less than the intensive battery hens or turkeys. In both years the greatest diversity was to be found in and around urban Haywards Heath, Hastings and Tunbridge Wells. By the 1950's the advent of the broiler industry meant that fowls once more assumed their prominence and accounted for 90 per cent of total numbers.⁵¹

Although the wartime disruption had cut flocks by about two-thirds in 4 years, the demand by the early 1950's resulted in an increase of nearly 24 per cent over 1939 by 1953. However, the gains were spatially uneven since there had been large urban increases compared with losses in the areas around Cranbrook, Heathfield, Wadhurst, and Burwash. The failure of Heathfield to regain its previous dominance was one aspect of the pre-war locational trend to the east, hastened by the war, in an industry now more than ever almost completely divorced from its natural environment, and more dependent on road than rail transport.

VIII. *Change in the Poultry Industry of the Weald 1850-1950*

The factors which had encouraged the concentration of poultry in the Heathfield area by 1850 had nearly all vanished by 1950. The physical environment, so unfavourable for agriculture, yet so useful for the rearing of

⁴⁹ *Sussex Express*, 4 Dec 1942, p 7; *Kent and Sussex Courier*, 10 March 1939, p 9; 24 May 1940, p 7; Short, op cit, pp 415-21.

⁵⁰ K A H Murray, *Agriculture*, 1955, p 133; *Kent and Sussex Courier*, 27 Sept 1940, p 5; 27 Dec 1940, p 3; 12 Feb 1943, p 2; 27 Oct 1944, p 4; *Sussex Express*, 18 Dec 1942, p 7.

⁵¹ Short, op cit, p 420.

small numbers of poultry, had become a factor of less importance with the advent of broilers and artificial environments. The social structure of the Heathfield area — heir to the open parish of the early nineteenth century and an area known for its fierce independence in religion and trade — had quite changed. The late-Victorian colonization and the twentieth-century suburbanization and settlement by ex-servicemen and urbanites had quite transformed the character of the region. The railway, taking over the role of the higgler, was itself superseded by

motorized transport, and this effectively freed the producers of poultry and eggs from their nineteenth-century locations. As the spheres of contact, knowledge and expertise widened, so too did the spread of poultry and egg producers.

By 1950 therefore the Heathfield industry had virtually vanished. The wartime periods had battered its pre-eminence, but over a longer period it was a changing society, economy, and above all, technology which finally displaced this quite remarkable rural nineteenth-century peasant industry.

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