

# George Odlum, The Ministry of Agriculture and ‘Farmer Hudson’

by John Martin

## *Abstract*

The direction of farming by the County War Agricultural Executive Committees in the Second World War, coupled with the dissemination of more progressive and productive methods of farming, has been widely hailed as an unqualified success story. This article evaluates the validity of this assertion by focusing on a case study of Manor Farm, Manningford, Wiltshire. From 1926 it was owned by George Odlum, a specialist dairy farmer, nationally and internationally acclaimed for his ‘Manningford’ herd of pedigree Friesians. In 1942 his farm was privately sold to R. S. Hudson, the Minister of Agriculture, who was, according to the local agriculture committee, treated as ‘Farmer Hudson’. Following press comment that the farm was in ‘poor condition’ prior to its sale, Odlum embarked upon a lengthy campaign to clear his name which culminated in a libel trial in 1946. The evidence presented at the trial provides a detailed insight into the way a progressive farm was managed during the war and suggests strongly that the Wiltshire CWAEC was not impartial in its dealings with either Odlum or Hudson.

The Second World War was arguably of greater significance for the development of British agriculture than any previous period. Within the space of five years the pre-war system of live-stock-dominated agriculture was replaced by farming with an emphasis on the production of cash crops, particularly wheat and potatoes. Livestock production was deliberately curtailed by the state, although milk production was prioritised and granted preferential treatment in terms of the allocation of scarce resources such as feedingstuffs.

The increases in domestic food production which were realised during wartime enabled Britain to cope with the diminution of imports caused by the German U boat campaign and allowed shipping to be switched to the transport of military materials. This success was particularly impressive given the country’s pre-war dependence on imported food. In 1938, 70 per cent of the cash value of the food consumed in Britain originated from overseas, which equated to 23 million tons of shipping space for food, fodder and fertilizer.<sup>1</sup> No other European county was anywhere as near reliant on food imports as Britain, its nearest rival being Switzerland, whose food imports amounted to 35 per cent of its total food consumption. Not only did British agriculture perform better than any of the other countries embroiled in the war but its achievements surpassed those of the First World War.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. S. Milward, *War, economy and society* (1977), p. 246. *history of British food supplies in the Napoleonic War and in World Wars I and II* (1963).

<sup>2</sup> M. Olson, *The economics of the wartime shortage*. A

It is not surprising that the contribution of home-based farming to Britain's survival during the Second World War period and its immediate aftermath was widely acclaimed by both officials and scholars. As the Ministry of Food noted, 'By 1944 there had been compared with pre-war production, a 90 per cent increase in wheat, 87 per cent increase in potatoes, 45 per cent increase in vegetables and 19 per cent increase in sugar beet'.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein the Editor of the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* noted 'farming's own share in this epic has been to increase food production for a surprising extent for man and beast ... Our efforts have not only kept the population supplied with 70 per cent of their food needs, but also saved shipping'.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary official accounts attributed a large part of this success to the wartime system of control, with the County War Agricultural Executive Committees (CWAECs) being eulogised as 'perhaps the most successful example of decentralisation and the most democratic form of control this war has produced'.<sup>5</sup>

The only minor blemish on the achievements was the possibility that wartime controls may have adversely affected a number of farmers, in particular those who were evicted from their holdings, and those landowners who had had land requisitioned for military purposes. Concerns about the legality of the wartime dispossession of farmers were raised by the Farmers and Smallholders Association and the Farmers Rights Association. But the FSA was looked upon as one of many phantom organisations. It operated with a small staff from three rooms in Austin Friars.<sup>6</sup> In contrast the FRA was numerically far more important in terms of its membership which, at peak, amounted to 5–6,000 farmers, although it was widely regarded as being of little political influence.<sup>7</sup>

According to the prevailing orthodoxy, the dispossessed farmers were unrepresentative and isolated individuals who had either been unwilling or incapable of meeting the state's commitment to the dissemination of progressive farming. In spite of significant regional and spatial variations in the incidence of dispossession, the relatively small number of farmers who were forced to vacate their holding was a tiny fraction of those actively involved in farming.<sup>8</sup> What remains unknown is how many more *voluntarily* withdrew from farming in the face of injunctions from their local CWAEC with which they disagreed or thought wrongheaded.

With the publication of K. A. H. (Lord) Murray's magisterial official history, *Agriculture*, in 1954, the wartime achievements of British agriculture rapidly became an integral part of the conventional wisdom of the period. Murray's analysis concluded that the wartime conversion of pasture to arable farming, directed at local level by the CWAECs, constituted 'an unqualified success story'.<sup>9</sup> His account stressed the 'crusading enthusiasm to bring about a renaissance in British farming' which had resulted from 'the progressive tenant farmers and farming landowners on the committees'.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein Edith Whetham eulogised the 'missionary zeal'

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Information, *How Britain was fed in wartime* (1946), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 5 Dec. 1944, p. 287.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Information, *Land at war* (1945), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> P. Self and P. Storing *The state and the farmer* (1962), p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> J. Martin, 'The impact of government intervention on agricultural productivity in England and Wales' (PhD

thesis, University of Reading, 1992), p. 273.

<sup>8</sup> B. Short, 'The dispossession of farmers in England and Wales during and after the Second World War', in B. Short, C. Watkins and J. Martin (eds), *The Frontline of Freedom* (2007), pp. 159–65.

<sup>9</sup> K. A. H. Murray, *Agriculture* (1954) p. 340.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

exhibited by the CWAECs.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the opposition which was engendered by directives issued from Whitehall in the food production campaign of the Great War, it was assumed that those emanating from the CWAECs in the Second World War met with harmonious cooperation from the farming community. According to Sir John Winnifrith, this illustrated the 'success of executing government policy through voluntary associations comprised of farmers'.<sup>12</sup>

This viewpoint remained largely unchallenged until the late 1990s, when significant reassessments of the wartime achievements were offered by a number of researchers. Important issues were raised about the role of the National Farm Survey's role in establishing the 'modernist surveillance culture'.<sup>13</sup> Revisionist challenges to the received account were also provided by Martin and Wilt. The former evaluated the wartime changes in terms of physical output, calorific value and monetary value, concluding that the official history 'has tended to exaggerate the achievements of the food production campaign'.<sup>14</sup> Wilt shared some of Martin's reservations about the magnitude of the wartime achievements in output, but he was considerably more equivocal in endorsing the criticisms, arguing that plans for the successful mobilisation of British agriculture could be traced back to the mid-1930s.<sup>15</sup> This revisionist school of thought was subsequently endorsed in principle by Brassley, subject to the very important and relevant caveat that 'much detailed work still needs to be done'.<sup>16</sup> Doubts were raised about the impartiality of some CWAECs when dealing with individual farmers, and about a number of dispossessions carried out under rather dubious circumstances.<sup>17</sup>

One of the problems of developing a revisionist critique has been the lack of detailed archival sources relating to how individual farmers were affected during the period of wartime controls. A potentially valuable source of information is the records of the CWAECs. Designated as MAF 80 in the National Archives, and containing 4,169 files and volumes of documents, they are open for public inspection, but subject to the proviso that readers sign an undertaking of confidentiality in respect of the personal details contained in the files. Autobiographical and biographical accounts of farmers are rare and often rather scant in terms of content. Most of those in existence focus on events that are very difficult to substantiate without reference to additional primary sources.<sup>18</sup> The most popular contemporary writer of this period was A. G. Street, a Wiltshire farmer, broadcaster and journalist, who produced numerous accounts of wartime farming including *Harvest by Lamplight* (1943) and *Hitler's Whistle* (1943).<sup>19</sup> However these were novelistic in approach, or cameos of rural life interspersed with reminiscences based on personal experiences. In a more practical vein was Clifton Reynold's tetralogy *Glory*

<sup>11</sup> E. H. Whetham, *British Farming, 1939-49* (1952), p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> Sir John Winnifrith, *The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food* (1962), p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> B. Short, C. Watkins, W. Foot and P. Kinsman, *The National Farm Survey 1941-43. State surveillance and the countryside in England and Wales in the Second World War* (2000), p. 232.

<sup>14</sup> J. Martin, *The development of modern agriculture. British Farming since 1931* (2000), pp. 47-58.

<sup>15</sup> A. F. Wilt, *Food for war. Agriculture and rearmament in Britain before the Second World War* (2001),

p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> P. Brassley, 'Wartime productivity and innovation', in Short *et al* (eds), *Frontline of Freedom*, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> Martin, *Development of modern agriculture*, pp. 63-6; Short, 'Dispossession of farmers', pp. 158-78.

<sup>18</sup> J. Martin, 'British agriculture archives in the Second World War: lying fallow', *Archives* 25 (2000), pp. 123-35, repr. in J. Black (ed.), *The Second World War* (6 vols, 2007), IV, p. 218.

<sup>19</sup> 'A. G. Street' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *ODNB*) (2004).

*Hill Farm* (1941–5), which gives an autobiographical account of an industrialist who went into farming.<sup>20</sup> Similarly Frances Donaldson's *Four Year's Harvest* is a detailed critique of the wartime management of her 400-acre Warwickshire farm,<sup>21</sup> while Tom Williamson's *The story of a Norfolk farm* (1941) describes his initial experiences of wartime farming tinged with his ruralist and neo-romantic Fascist vision.<sup>22</sup> The sequel, *Lucifer before Sunrise* (1944) which, in places, assumes an autobiographical approach, describes his wartime experiences interwoven with examples of Williamson's sympathy for Britain's enemy.<sup>23</sup> As David Reynolds reminds us, 'war memoirs are rarely transparent and sometimes decidedly opaque.'<sup>24</sup>

Reservations about the accuracy and validity of source material are less of an issue with respect to the present study of Manor Farm, Manningford which was owned by George Odlum, who compiled a comprehensive account of his dairy herd in *An analysis of the Manningford Herd of British Friesians*. The key source here is the verbatim transcript of the court case which he successfully pursued in 1946 against Richard Stratton, Chairman of the Wiltshire CWAEC, and which provides a unique account of the way in which Manor Farm was transformed during this period, not only under Odlum's ownership but also under his successor, Robert Hudson, the wartime Minister of Agriculture. The authenticity and accuracy of the evidence is beyond reproach. The two sides in the case were represented by leading barristers who carried out systematic and rigorous examination of the evidence presented by the witnesses, several of whom were recalled for cross-examination. The trial proceedings provide an invaluable insight into the wartime system of bureaucratic control, and of the actual mechanisms which were used to ensure the dissemination of more productive and progressive methods of farming.<sup>25</sup>

## I

During the Second World War the Ministry of Agriculture assumed responsibility for directing national policy on agriculture, whilst a decentralised system of administration undertaken by the CWAECs controlled production at local level. The Ministry was a complex, multi-layered system of administration with its own permanent staff of civil servants. In 1939 the most influential member of staff responsible for liaising with its Minister was the Permanent Secretary, Sir Donald Ferguson. Following the outbreak of war, these links were strengthened by the appointment of William Gavin as Agricultural Advisor to the Ministry.<sup>26</sup> Shortly after the establishment of the CWAECs, Cedric Drewe, MP for Honiton, and Anthony Hurd were appointed to assist William Gavin in liaising with them. Hurd was a respected farmer, tenant of the 480-acre Rainscombe farm, near Marlborough in Wiltshire.<sup>27</sup> He was well known to farmers through his regular radio talks and had also represented Wiltshire on the Council of the National Farmers Union.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> C. Reynolds, *Glory Hill Farm* (1943–5).

<sup>21</sup> F. Donaldson, *Four year's harvest* (1945).

<sup>22</sup> T. Williamson, *The story of a Norfolk farm* (1941).

<sup>23</sup> T. Williamson, *Lucifer before sunrise* (1944).

<sup>24</sup> D. Reynolds, *In command of History* (2005), p. 177.

<sup>25</sup> Odlum v. Stratton. *Verbatim report of proceedings*

(duplicated ts, 1946).

<sup>26</sup> In 1942 Gavin's services to agriculture were recognised by a knighthood.

<sup>27</sup> A. Hurd, *A farmer in Whitehall* (1951), p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 22 Sept. 1939.

The Minister of Agriculture at the outbreak of war was Sir Reginald Dorman Smith. Originating from farming stock and elected President of the National Farmers Union in 1936, his extensive first-hand knowledge of farming ensured widespread support from the farming community. In a broadcast made at the outbreak of war, Dorman Smith assured farmers that 'they would not be asked to do the impossible'.<sup>29</sup> Reflecting upon the lessons learnt from the food production campaign of the 'Great War', when there had been widespread allegations of 'farming from Whitehall', the government was determined not to repeat the same mistake.<sup>30</sup> As early as March 1939 officials had endorsed the establishment of local agricultural committees, because of the perceived 'innate conservatism' of the British farmer.<sup>31</sup> In the late 1930s it was widely assumed that this first food production campaign (1917–18) provided a blueprint for the wartime control of agriculture. Based on the official accounts compiled by Beveridge and Middleton, these assertions were deemed to be self-evident. Not only had the campaign ensured that the population had been adequately fed in spite of the country's abnormal dependence on imported food, but also there had been a significant increase in the area of arable land.<sup>32</sup>

Given the reluctance of some landowners to embrace the first ploughing up campaign in the First World War, it was rather naively assumed that all that was needed was a more coherent structure, and the extension and strengthening of earlier procedures. It was acknowledged that the state should be granted more draconian powers this time around to coerce farmers into carrying out directives, and that the campaign should be directed by committees of local farmers who knew what could and could not be done in their own localities. Unlike the Great War, therefore, farmers had no rights to use the courts of law as a mediating body to redress any grievances against the local agencies of the state. The official rationale for this lack of an appeals procedure was that a scheme of this kind 'would so delay matters as to seriously interfere with food production'.<sup>33</sup>

On the outbreak of war the CWAECs formally came into existence with extensive delegated powers.<sup>34</sup> One Committee was appointed for each county in England and Wales, consisting of about twelve members, together with a full-time salaried Executive Officer. In the absence of any democratically-elected assembly, the members of central committees derived their authority from the fact that they were 'personally appointed by the Minister of Agriculture'. In practice the task of selecting a Chairman was delegated to the local Lord-Lieutenant and the Land Commissioners. The principal criterion for selection was an individual's standing as an agriculturalist. Once nominated, the Chairman was given a free hand to choose the other members of the committee.

Executive Officers, on the other hand, were appointed directly by the Minister. Their role was similar to that of civil servants in that they were directly employed by the government but under the jurisdiction of a departmental head who, in the case of the CWAECs, was the chairman

<sup>29</sup> Broadcast made by Sir Reginald Dorman Smith, Minister of Agriculture, cited in *Farmers Weekly* (hereafter *FW*), 6 Oct. 1939, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> Winnifrith, *Ministry of Agriculture*, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> W. H. Beveridge, *British food control* (1928), pp. 182–247; T. H. Middleton, *Food production in war* (1923),

pp. 158–256.

<sup>33</sup> *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 22 Apr. 1941, p. 814.

<sup>34</sup> An informative summary of the powers of the CWAECs is contained in J. D. Cantwell, *The Second World War. A guide to the documents in the PRO* (1992), pp. 29–30.



of the local committee. Of the 63 appointments in England and Wales, 26 were filled by Land Agents and a further 24 by county organisers such as the agricultural staff of the County Council. They were responsible for coordinating the work of paid technical advisors.

The chairman of the Wiltshire WAEC was Richard Stratton, a well known farmer who had, for many years, been a prominent member of the Wiltshire County Council, as well as a leading figure in the Wiltshire branch of the National Farmers Union.<sup>35</sup> In 1937 he had featured in the *Farmers Weekly* 'Successful Farming' series. His 2,800 acre estate at Kingston Deverill, Warminster, had been inherited from his father who had purchased it in 1921, having previously been its tenant. At the time of its sale, more than 1,200 acres had been arable but, by 1937, there was less than 400 acres of arable crops including wheat, oats and barley, in addition to clover, leys, roots and kale grown for the cattle and sheep. Unlike many of his more impoverished fellow farmers who had much smaller acreages at their disposal, Stratton was able to focus on more conventional livestock farming which included the summer fattening of cattle, supplemented by a flock of more than 500 breeding ewes.<sup>36</sup> From 1925 onwards two Hosier milking bails were in use, with 120 cows being machine-milked and a further 30 were hand-milked in a dairy.

W. T. Price was appointed Executive Officer. Prior to the war Price had been County Agricultural Organiser, in charge of the County Council's agricultural department, coordinating the advisory services to farmers, landowners and farm workers, as well as having responsibility for ensuring that any statutory orders were carried out.<sup>37</sup> In this role his department had had contact with nearly all the farmers in Wiltshire.

For ease of administration by its CWAEC, each county was divided into districts, usually of four to six parishes, controlled by District Committees. Manningford was under the jurisdiction of the Marlborough and Pewsey District Committee, whose Chairman, Frank Swanton, also sat on the Executive Committee. He was the owner-occupier of a 4,000-acre estate at Overton and surrounding parishes, where he had 300 dairy shorthorns divided into five herds, four of which produced Grade A Tuberculin-Tested (TT) milk. Yields for his herds were officially recorded as averaging 750 gallons a head, an achievement which contributed to him being awarded the Deveses Agricultural Society Cup for the best large dairy herd four years in succession. His farming activities also included 1,000 acres of arable, 1,400 breeding ewes and a folding system for rearing young pigs, with a contract to sell 100 pigs each month to a bacon factory. He too featured in the *Farmers Weekly* 'Successful Farming' series in 1934.<sup>38</sup>

The decentralised organisational structure was intended to foster the impression that local farmers were administering the food production campaign at parish level. In practice, however, the real power was concentrated in the hands of the county Executive Committees and the Executive Officers. CWAECs were given a high degree of autonomy and discretion in the way they dealt with individual farmers. As Dorman Smith explained:

While I do retain some measure of control I have given the county committee as free as hand as possible to get on with the job, and as they are men with good local knowledge, I am confident that the machinery is the best which can be adopted to carry out this great task.

<sup>35</sup> *FW*, 15 Aug. 1934, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> *FW*, 13 Aug. 1937, p. 00.

<sup>37</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 260.

<sup>38</sup> *FW*, 5 Oct. 1934, p. 23.

The task of deciding which field should be ploughed and what should go into those fields is the business of these county war executive committees. These work through their local district committees.

He was even rash enough to speculate that 'when the history of this war does come to be written, the work of this great corps of volunteers will rank high in the national effort'.<sup>39</sup>

The work of the Committees could broadly be divided into three categories: general administration, technical advice and sanctions. The former occupied most of the committees' time and ranged from dealing with the impact of various wartime regulations to paying subsidies for ploughing and drainage.<sup>40</sup> Providing technical advice, although less time consuming, was regarded by the government and the members of the CWAEC as an important means of increasing agricultural output. Wartime officials considered it their duty not to question the official programme but merely to inform individual farmers as to how their cropping and farming methods could be amended in accordance with the national agricultural plan.

CWAECs were also responsible for the collection of information relating to the condition of, and production on, individual farms. Even at the outbreak of the Second World War, the Ministry of Agriculture had only a vague understanding of this, based primarily on the annual 4 June returns. There was scant information about levels of mechanisation, or of the condition of the land. In order to remedy this situation, the Ministry instructed CWAECs to undertake a national farm survey, which was the most comprehensive survey of land ownership by government since the Domesday survey. This was intended to ascertain the tenurial status of farms, their condition (i.e. soil type, condition of buildings, roads, fences, ditches, drainage, water and electricity) and, most controversially, an assessment of the managerial ability of the farmer.<sup>41</sup>

Farmers were graded into the three categories of A, B, or C according to levels of output. 'A' category farmers were deemed to be achieving levels of output over 85 per cent of the holding's potential, 'B' category farmers as having levels of output of between 70 and 85 per cent, while those in the 'C' category were regarded as less efficient. Usually grading was undertaken during a visit to the farm by a member of the District Committee who, in conjunction with the farmer, would inspect the crops and livestock on the holding. It was against these less efficient or 'failing' farmers that sanctions might be brought should they fail to implement the advice given them by the officials of the CWAEC as to how they should improve their productivity.

After the fall of the Chamberlain government, Dorman Smith was replaced as Minister of Agriculture by R. S. Hudson, who remained minister until the Labour landslide in the 1945 General Election. Hudson was the eldest son and family heir of a wealthy soap manufacturing dynasty. Educated at Eton and Magdalen College, Oxford, he had entered the diplomatic service in 1911, before being elected Conservative MP for Whitehaven in 1924. He lost Whitehaven in 1929 but was returned for Stockport in 1931 and held that seat until he was elevated to the Lords in 1952. In May 1940 he became Minister of Agriculture in Churchill's wartime coalition government.<sup>42</sup> Immediately following his appointment Hudson appointed a team of twelve

<sup>39</sup> Hurd, *Farmer in Whitehall*, p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> Murray, *Agriculture*, p. 339.

<sup>41</sup> For an analysis of its social and political context see Short *et al* (eds), *National Farm Survey*, pp. 15–40.

<sup>42</sup> For Hudson see the biography in *ODNB*. In the absence of private papers, there is no full length biography.

leading agriculturalists to act as his personal representatives, each with a group of counties to look after. Anthony Hurd, took responsibility for Wiltshire, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, Dorset and Somerset. In conjunction with his Parliamentary Secretaries, Tom Williams and the Duke of Norfolk, Hudson coordinated a massive organisational and publicity task. Hudson was widely acclaimed for ensuring that during the war farmers and landowners alike used every acre of soil to help keep the nation from starvation.<sup>43</sup>

Hudson became so absorbed in his job and interested in new farming practices that a few weeks after his appointment he established Fyfield Estates Ltd which bought Manor Farm, Manningford from George Odlum in 1942.<sup>44</sup> More land was subsequently acquired so that, by the end of the war, Hudson was farming in the region of 2,000 acres, in addition to a farm his wife owned in Oxfordshire. The fact that he was involved in the industry for which he was Minister marked a break with tradition. The prevailing consensus was that it was improper for any MP who was appointed to a ministerial position to continue to trade in businesses connected with office.<sup>45</sup> During the latter stages of the war, Hudson earned high accolade in official circles and in the press for having first-hand experience of farming but as we shall see, this came at some cost to his subsequent reputation.<sup>46</sup>

## II

George Odlum was not a typical British farmer.<sup>47</sup> Born in Canada in 1879 or 1880, he became an internationally renowned agricultural engineer and consultant, as well as a farmer in several countries.<sup>48</sup> At the age of fifteen he purchased his first farm, later going to Michigan College of Agriculture where he gained a BSc specialising in the scientific aspects of farming.<sup>49</sup> In 1900 he was appointed agricultural advisor to the British South African Company, and was responsible for the development of the Rhodesian tobacco industry.<sup>50</sup> He also played a key role in the management of banana and sugar estates on Honduras employing more than 8,000 employees and, later, of plantations in Kenya with 4,000 employees, acting as an agricultural consultant in 35 countries.<sup>51</sup>

Odlum spent six months touring farms in the southern part of England before deciding, in September 1926, to buy Manor Farm, Manningford, Wiltshire, from a Mr Wookey, who had run it as a mixed farm.<sup>52</sup> His choice of Wiltshire reflected the fact that the county's fertile vales were ideally suited to grass farming, for which the Manningford district was particularly renowned.<sup>53</sup> The existence of relatively good facilities for the daily transport of milk to London

<sup>43</sup> E. T. Winterton, *Orders of the Day* (1953), p. 272.

<sup>44</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 477.

<sup>45</sup> Farmers Rights Association, *The New Morality* (1948), p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> *FW*, 10 Dec. 1943, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed analysis of interwar farming see P. Brassley, 'British Farming between the wars', in P. Brassley, J. Burchardt and L. Thompson (eds), *The English countryside between the wars* (2006), pp. 187–99.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, MAF 48/587, letter from Chamberlain and Co to the editor, *The North Wiltshire Herald and Advertiser*,

8 Nov. 1943. The exact date of Odlum's birth is unknown, but he died on 28 July 1959 (*The Times*, 30 July 1959).

<sup>49</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 63.

<sup>50</sup> For a detailed account of his achievements see G. M. Odlum, *The culture of Tobacco* (1908).

<sup>51</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 63.

<sup>52</sup> TNA, MAF 48/487, Letter from Chamberlain and Co to the editor, *The North Wiltshire Herald and Advertiser*, 8 Nov. 1943

<sup>53</sup> TNA, MAF 48/487.



meant that the switch to dairy farming was considerably more pronounced in this county than in most other areas. Recognising the value of the monthly milk cheque, Odlum intended to run the farm as a specialist dairy unit producing milk for the liquid market, and to breed high quality, pedigree Friesian cattle which he could sell to other farmers. He formed a company, Manningford Estates Ltd.<sup>54</sup>

In terms of its geographical diversity, Manor Farm was a typical chalk land holding consisting of an area of downland, with arable land on the lower slopes, and water meadows and pasture running down to the River Avon. Wookey had stocked it with a large herd of rather nondescript dairy cattle which were formally regarded as Shorthorns. Retaining the cattle as a stopgap measure to generate an income, by 1928, Odlum had embarked on an ambitious plan to develop a pure bred herd of Friesians.

Unlike many of his peers, Odlum recognised the strong correlation between low cost per gallon and high yield per cow, and the need to focus on breeding high yielding cows which, with good feeding, could be exploited for their genetic potential. Difficulties in finding suitable cattle, particularly those which had been tuberculin tested, resulted in many animals not reaching his stringent requirements. Odlum soon realised that the existing information about pedigree animals did not meet his exacting standards and he sought to develop a more scientific approach to analyzing bloodlines and strains.

Although he was not the first person to develop the technique, Odlum pursued a rigorous policy of selecting bulls based on their offspring's merit as producers. Selection of the genotype was achieved by a rigorous process of progeny testing by milk recording, and then intensifying characteristics by line breeding. This entailed ensuring that only a few selected animals which had indicated transmissible merit occurred in the offsprings' ancestors for four and five generations back. In effect this policy meant the intervening animals were often cousins, with no outside blood being brought in to dilute their characteristics.<sup>55</sup>

Such a scientifically-based selection strategy was made possible by a systematic policy of milk recording, a process which, even the late 1930s, had been adopted by only a small proportion of Britain's dairy herds even though the Strutt family of Rayleigh, Essex, had been using these techniques since the mid-1890s on their highly acclaimed Terling Friesian Herd.<sup>56</sup> As Odlum surmised, but was not able to fully verify because the Strutt family tended not to publicise their methods, their success was the result of the rigid selection of both male and female lines as judged by a system of progeny testing the performance of their offspring.<sup>57</sup>

The approach of breeders such as Strutt and Odlum was exceptional. The prevailing preference of many cattle breeders was for the selection and mating together of parents of outstanding quality which, in practice, was the selection of the phenotype. It was commonly believed that this selection process would impart the necessary qualities in the offspring. However Odlum had little time for cattle shows and awards where cattle were judged in respect of external and

<sup>54</sup> The company had a paid up capital of £50,000, of which £49,999 was held by Odlum and £1 by his wife. Following her death this was transferred to his solicitor.

<sup>55</sup> G. Odlum, *An analysis of the Manningford herd of British Friesians* (1947 ed.), p. 108.

<sup>56</sup> G. E. Mingay, *British Friesians. An epic of progress* (1982), p. 59; W. Gavin, *Ninety years of family farming* (1967), pp. 161-4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-2.

intrinsically worthless characteristics such as colour markings, carriage of the tail and overall visual appearance. As he noted:

The physical perfection (to which may be added a bit of fat and grooming) called for in the show ring bears no relationship to milking merit or the transmission of milking qualities ... there is nothing to prevent an animal with outward physical perfection from being a great producer, or the ancestor of great producers, but also there is nothing in the outward appearance, or the winning of prizes that in any way indicates that the animal will be a great producer or the ancestor of great producers.<sup>58</sup>

His first bull, Newly Roseador, had been acquired on a temporary loan and, before he had fully appreciated its potential for enhancing milk production, it had been slaughtered.<sup>59</sup> This experience encouraged him to pursue a more systematic policy of improving the commercial attributes of his strain of Friesians through the use of comprehensive progeny testing records.<sup>60</sup> His own bulls were laid off after trial matings until their daughters had milked one lactation, allowing him to judge the sire's impact on milk production.

The instability of milk prices during the 1920s and early 1930s created difficult times for dairy farmers and pedigree breeders. Membership of the Friesian Cattle Society declined from a high point of 2,098 in 1924 to a low of 1,371 in 1935, after which time it slowly began to revive. Odlum registered the prefix Manningford with the Friesian Society and this rapidly became synonymous with the name of its owner, who established a reputation as a breeder of pedigree Friesians. By the late 1930s he had bred 52 cows which produced more than 2,000 gallons a year, with some exceeding 3,000 gallons, at a time when the national average was a mere 407 gallons.<sup>61</sup> Consequently his cows and bulls were widely sought after, and the famed Manningford bloodlines were dispersed throughout Britain, as well as other countries.

Odlum was one of the first breeders to pursue a strategy of developing a certified disease free herd. As he explained in his memoirs, 'my conscience would not permit me to produce milk for babies to drink that I would not drink myself'.<sup>62</sup> His cardinal principal initially was to take 'every possible measure to clear the farm of disease,<sup>63</sup> and then to make sure that it could be not recontaminated.<sup>64</sup> To this end he ensured that his cattle did not come into contact with those on neighbouring farms which might have been infected with Johnes disease or contagious abortion.<sup>65</sup> Recognising the importance of a pure and liberal supply of water, piped water was laid on to all his fields. More than thirty miles of fence was erected, and the boundaries abutting his neighbour's pasture fields were double-fenced. Rabbit-proof fencing was erected in a number of places, in particular where military land adjoined the southern section of his farm.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Odlum, *Analysis*, p. 86.

<sup>59</sup> Mingay, *British Friesians*, p. 124.

<sup>60</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> The average output per cow in terms of gallons per head per year sold off the farm was 407 for the period 1935–9. This did not take into account the amount of milk consumed on the farm. Nevertheless the output per animal was less than 500 gallons. See E. M. Ojala, *Agriculture and Economic Progress* (1952), p. 205.

<sup>62</sup> Odlum, *Analysis*, pp. 3–6.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> In 1934 the Gowland Hopkins Committee identified these two diseases, together with tuberculosis and mastitis, as the most important causes of loss in the dairy industry. See Mingay, *British Friesians*, p. 59.

<sup>66</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 44.

Certification of his cattle involved testing and retesting the milk for tuberculosis. In 1933 the number of farmers producing Certified or Grade A TT milk amounted to only a few hundred. By 1937 the figure had increased to 23,000, but this still amounted to less than one in five of all milk producers.<sup>67</sup> As early as 1929, the British Medical Council visited Manor Farm in order to see the 'best clean milk farm in the district', a visit arranged by the county advisor, W. T. Price.<sup>68</sup> Throughout the 1930s a succession of foreign dignitaries visited Odlum's farm.

Research by members of staff at the University of Oxford's Agricultural Economics Research Institute showed that the reluctance to switch to producing disease-free milk could be attributed to the fact that many farmers considered the additional costs involved in the provision of milking sheds and parlours as prohibitive.<sup>69</sup> The higher running costs entailed in meeting the more stringent regulations were only being undertaken by 'keen commercial farmers' who recognised the financial benefits which could be derived.<sup>70</sup> Odlum's progressive approach to farming was exemplified by the feeding of sprouted grains to his cattle and a focus on loose housing.<sup>71</sup> He spared no expense in reconstructing his existing cattle sheds, building new ones to house the cattle in winter, which were deemed to be 'among the finest in the country if not the finest'.<sup>72</sup> He was a keen advocate of the use of silage at a time when the vast majority of farmers remained committed to hay making.<sup>73</sup> In order to exploit the high yielding potential of his stock, Odlum purchased large quantities of cereals and oil seed cakes. These were the cheap by-products left over when oil seeds were crushed to extract the oil for margarine and soap, and readily available from overseas prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. Not all of Odlum's ideas were commercially viable or readily adopted by other farmers. This was particularly evident in terms of his installation of a hydro-electric plant in the river to generate electricity for the farm and house.

His concentration on high quality milk production differed significantly from many contemporary progressive farmers, including Frank and Joshua Hosier in Wiltshire. The Hosier brothers had pioneered the development of an outdoor system of machine milking based on the use of a portable bail which was moved from one field to another.<sup>74</sup> Under this system milk yields were adversely affected during inclement periods of weather, but this was more than compensated for by the economies derived from low labour requirements.<sup>75</sup> The Hosiers did not attempt to enhance the genetic potential of their animals through progeny testing; instead 90 per cent of herd replacements were imported Irish heifers, which were dual purpose utility cattle.<sup>76</sup> A cheap, outdoor, grass-based system of milk production was also developed by Rex Paterson, enabling him to rent more than 10,000 acres of land in Hampshire and Wiltshire.<sup>77</sup> Other notable Wiltshire farmers who pursued a similar approach included the renowned A. G. Street and Richard Stratton.<sup>78</sup> Unlike Odlum however, they concentrated their efforts on

<sup>67</sup> Martin, 'Impact of government intervention', ch. 11, 'The campaign for milk production'.

<sup>68</sup> Odlum v. Stratton, p. 304.

<sup>69</sup> F. R. G. N. Sherrard, 'Some costs of producing tuberculin-tested milk', *Farm Economist*, Apr. 1938, p. 187.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>71</sup> Mingay, *British Friesians*, p. 124.

<sup>72</sup> Odlum v. Stratton, p. 568.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> A. J. Hosier and F. H. Hosier, *Hosier's Farming System* (1951), pp. 12–21.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>77</sup> 'Rex Paterson' in *ODNB*.

<sup>78</sup> *FW*, 13 Aug. 1937, pp. 28–9.

adopting technical innovations, such as machine milking and outdoor bail milking, which enhanced labour productivity rather than on improving the quality of their stock.

All these farmers shared with Odlum high levels of organisational and administrative ability, combined with astute business acumen, enabling them to become specialist dairy producers able to exploit economies of scale. They were able to prosper at a time when many of their peers were having difficulty in remaining solvent. On the eve of the war, their large herds, which in Odlum's case amounted to 217 animals, contrasted sharply with the vast majority of Britain's 136,000 dairy farmers, who had an average herd size of 22 cows.<sup>79</sup>

Odlum was therefore a shining example of a progressive farmer according to the criteria identified by the eminent agriculturalists Viscount Astor and B. Seebom Rowntree. Such a farmer was described as 'a scientist, keeping records, always trying as far as possible to relate effects to its causes and occasionally venturing into field experiments of his own'. In the late 1930s an 'unfathomable gulf yawned between the progressive farmer and the run-of-the-road farmer, who muddled along with a rule-of thumb wisdom inherited from his father or picked over a glass of beer on market day'.<sup>80</sup>

In the years before the outbreak of the War, Odlum continued to work as an agricultural consultant during the winter months. During these absences Manor Farm was looked after by a farm manager, Douglas Mann.<sup>81</sup> From 1934 onwards Odlum suffered from what he called a 'germ infestation', which he had contacted during one of his many trips to West Africa. This required him to rest whenever possible in the afternoons.<sup>82</sup> The outbreak of the Second World War, coupled with the illness and eventual death of his wife in 1940, led to him curtailing his overseas consultancy.

### III

Following the outbreak of war in August 1939, the Ministry of Agriculture embarked upon an ambitious plan to increase the area of arable nationally by over 2 million acres, of which Wiltshire's share was 40,000 acres, or about 10 per cent of the existing grassland area.<sup>83</sup> Having only two arable fields, both of which were used for growing fodder for his cattle, Odlum recognised the need to increase his arable production in accordance with wartime policy. His plan was that for every two acres ploughed up for arable, he would plough up an additional acre for forage crops in order to ensure that his farm remained as self-sufficient as possible.<sup>84</sup> In this way he hoped to cope with reduced levels of feedingstuffs which could now only be obtained under an allocation system coordinated by the local CWAEC.

Opposition to Odlum's proposed strategy was strongly voiced by John Nichols, a member of his District Agricultural Committee.<sup>85</sup> Nichols had previous experience of Manningford, having farmed some of the rabbit-infested military land which adjoined the southern section of

<sup>79</sup> For Odlum's herd, *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 586; for the national herd, Martin, 'Impact of government intervention', p. 216.

<sup>80</sup> Viscount Astor and B. S. Rowntree, *Mixed farming and muddled thinking*, p. 10.

<sup>81</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 14.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>83</sup> *FW*, 31 May 1940, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 389.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Manor Farm. He refused to accept Odlum's plan of 'planting forage to replace grass' in order to maintain the dairy herd.<sup>86</sup> Instead, Nichols emphasized that livestock production should be subordinate to cereal farming, arguing 'that in the end all the farm would be ploughed and put to grain, even to possibly the bull pen and the lawns.'<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, Nichols was scathing of Odlum's pioneering initiatives, claiming that he did not like Friesian cattle because they were foreign.<sup>88</sup> He expressed serious doubts about the value of silage.<sup>89</sup> In addition he 'did not believe in too much talk about clean milk because it gave people the impression that other milk was not clean.'<sup>90</sup> These comments were not surprising, given that Nichols himself had no personal experience of producing certified Grade A milk.<sup>91</sup>

During the first year of the war, Wiltshire as a whole managed to plough up 42,610 acres.<sup>92</sup> Odlum's initial attempts to cope with the ploughing up directives were thwarted by shortages of plough parts as the Minister of Supply had diverted production to other needs. Nevertheless he managed to comply with virtually all the wartime directives issued by the local CWAEC, including increasing the area of arable to 418 acres in 1941 and growing potatoes.<sup>93</sup>

This rapid increase in the arable area resulted in Manor Farm being transformed into an arable farm growing cereals. The associated reduction in the area of grassland, and the fact that he was not allowed to produce his usual 450 tons of silage, coupled with difficulties in securing feedingstuffs for his cattle, necessitated a major reduction in the size of his dairy herd in 1940. In 1939 he had been able to purchase 238 tons of feedingstuffs for his cattle, whereas in the first ten months of 1940 he secured slightly over 75 tons.<sup>94</sup> As a result, Odlum held only 83 animals in the winter of 1941–2.

Perhaps recognising that he could no longer maintain the Manningford herd, Odlum decided to sell Manor Farm. On 24 April 1942 the Minister of Agriculture, R. S. Hudson, who lived a few miles away at Fyfield Manor, visited the farm and agreed that his private company, Fyfield Farms Ltd, should purchase it at the asking price of £41,000, paying an additional £19,000 for the fixtures and fittings which included the remaining 51 cattle and the farm machinery.<sup>95</sup> By this time, following the dispersal of the bulk of its milking herd, the farm had mainly young stock. Just before Hudson returned to finalise the deal, Frank Swanton, a member of the Wiltshire CWAEC, visited Odlum and instructed him to fill up his No. 1 shed with milking cows. Odlum was perplexed by this bizarre request and had asked Swanton 'Why was it necessary to part with my high-class, disease free herd, and now to be asked to stock with mongrel animals which will all have been in contact with disease?'. Swanton replied that he thought Odlum had had to sell the cows because they were diseased. It was subsequently revealed that the CWAEC were in the process of serving an order requiring Odlum to milk at least 30 cows by September 1942.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>87</sup> Odlum's account of his meeting with Nichols, *ibid.*, pp. 16, 70, 389.

<sup>88</sup> Strictly speaking none of the dairy breeds, including the British Friesian, Guernsey, Jersey or Ayrshire, are native English. Pure English breeds such as the Shorthorn would be classified as dual purpose or beef.

<sup>89</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 16.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>92</sup> *FW*, 31 May 1940, p. 17.

<sup>93</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, pp. 572–3.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 300.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 375.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.



## IV

In August 1943 W. T. Price, in his role as Agricultural Organiser and Chief Executive Officer for the Wiltshire Committee, was instructed to arrange a fact-finding tour of a selection of farms in his county for a party of about 26 journalists, including a BBC representative.<sup>97</sup> Price prepared a document providing technical details and timetabling the farms to be visited: '4.30 pm. Then to Mr R. Hudson's farm at Manningford. This farm was taken over by last summer by Mr Hudson and was in very poor condition but it is now showing excellent crops.'<sup>98</sup> Manningford was the only farm on the itinerary which was specified by name.<sup>99</sup>

After the tour, articles were published in a number of newspapers, including the *News Chronicle*, *Wiltshire Times*, *North Wilts Herald and Advertiser* and *Manchester Guardian*, and coverage was given by the BBC.<sup>100</sup> The wide dissemination of details about what might be regarded as an insignificant farm visit is not surprising given that, under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, a regular weekly news service was maintained through Britain's 350 national and provincial newspapers.<sup>101</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* noted that 'on the advice and requirements of the committee', Mr Hudson, 'an assiduous and weekend farmer in his own person, has had much problem land ploughed up which is giving this year a satisfactory barley yield. The water meadows have been reclaimed – some for corn and roots and others as pasture for the 170 head of Friesian and Ayrshire cattle which Mr Hudson hopes to increase to 200'.<sup>102</sup>

Comments about the poor standards of the farm prior to its sale infuriated Odlum who instructed his solicitors, Chamberlain and Co, to write to the newspapers asking them to identify the authors of these statements.<sup>103</sup> A reply from the editor of the *News Chronicle* confirmed that their statement had originated from the CWAEC. Odlum's solicitor wrote to Stratton asking that this statement, which cast a slur on his client, who was inextricably linked with the prestigious Manningford strain of Friesian cow, should be rescinded.<sup>104</sup> Stratton verified that he was not the author of the document but, in his capacity as Chairman of the Wiltshire CWAEC accepted full responsibility for it.<sup>105</sup> He explained that 'I cannot think that anyone would read this as libelling Mr Odlum but I am sorry that it has caused him offence.' In response to a further letter from Odlum's solicitor, Stratton acknowledged that the author of the document was W. T. Price.

Chamberlain and Co requested a 'written withdrawal' of the statement and 'an apology for having' made it in the first place. They affirmed that if this was acted upon, Odlum would not ask for damages, or seek a refund of the costs he had already incurred. If this was not forthcoming within seven days, Stratton was requested to provide the name of the solicitor who would act for him, stating that in the event of further legal proceedings his client would claim 'any damages to which he is entitled'. Eventually, in a belated attempt to defuse the escalating crisis, a member of Stratton's legal team met a representative of Chamberlain and Co, stressing that what they were dealing with what was a 'storm in a teacup'.<sup>106</sup> Responding to the solicitor's letter,

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 9, 575.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 9, 567.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 576.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 576.

<sup>101</sup> J. W. Day, *Harvest Adventure* (1946), p. 282.

<sup>102</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 183.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>106</sup> TNA, MAF 48/587, letter from A. D. Stocks to W. T. Price, 1 Feb. 1944.

Price's response was less conciliatory, he concluded that 'It is a pity that the case is to proceed but I take it we shall defend with all vigour and at least we do know we have got a good case.'<sup>107</sup> A writ was issued on 10 February 1944, but the case did not formally reach the law courts until June 1946. This lengthy procrastination can be partly explained by the directives accruing from the Attorney-General,<sup>108</sup> but further delays were caused by Price's extended lecture tour in America during the autumn of 1945. By the time the trial started, Hudson had been replaced by Tom Williams as the Minister of Agriculture.

The libel case formally opened on 21 June 1946. Odlum was represented by Mr G. J. Paull KC and Mr H. Heathcote-Williams, while Stratton was represented by Mr G. C. Slade KC and Mr W. J. K. Diplock. Stratton's solicitor was also the official solicitor to the Ministry of Agriculture. The highly regarded and experienced Mr Justice Atkinson presided over the proceedings. During the trial it was reiterated that, although Stratton was not the author of the document, in his capacity as Chairman of the Wiltshire War Agricultural Executive Committee, he accepted 'full responsibility for it.'<sup>109</sup> This was not, therefore, a libel trial concerned merely with Stratton's integrity, but an indictment of the committee system of wartime control. Thus the Ministry of Agriculture had a vested interest in securing the defendant's acquittal.

Witnesses were called on both sides, focusing on the quality of Odlum's management capabilities in 1942 immediately prior to the sale of his farm. The case for the prosecution was based on the view that the farm was not in a poor condition, contrary to the description in the press release. Considerable emphasis was placed on Odlum's reputation. According to one witness, the plaintiff had done more for Friesians in this county than any man of his generation.<sup>110</sup> A number of witnesses confirmed the high level of farming which had taken place at Manningford. The defendant's case was that in the spring of 1942 shortly before it was sold, the farm was in 'a very poor condition and a bad state.'<sup>111</sup> In their amended defence they argued that, in terms of the report which Odlum had objected to, 'the said words are fair and *bona fide* comment made without malice upon a matter of public interest, to wit, the condition of Manor Farm Manningford, in and between the months of March and July, 1942.'<sup>112</sup>

The defence case was shrouded in secrecy. The Ministry of Agriculture had decreed that the records relating to the District Committee were 'confidential and state documents and that it would be injurious to the public interest that they ... be disclosed.'<sup>113</sup> Stratton had been forbidden under a plea of privilege from revealing how Odlum's farm had been classified by the National Farm Survey.<sup>114</sup> That this information should remain secret contravened official policy, for the Ministry of Agriculture's *Notes on Agricultural Policy*, issued in the spring of 1942, stressed the benefits of informing individual farmers of the grade they had been allocated.<sup>115</sup>

This edict about privileged information had resulted initially from a letter drafted by Sir Donald Ferguson, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, which

<sup>107</sup> TNA, MAF 48/587, Letter from W. F. Price to A. D. Stocks, 9 Feb. 1944.

<sup>108</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 11.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 567.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 569.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 570.

<sup>114</sup> *Law J.*, 96, 13 Sept. 1946, p. 493.

<sup>115</sup> Ministry of Agriculture, *Notes on agricultural policy for those directing the food production campaign*, for which see Murray, *Agriculture*, p. 359; *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 529.

specified that it had been compiled on the instructions of the Minister of Agriculture, Hudson. However, proceedings in court revealed that it had been drafted in Hudson's absence, and without his knowledge, a procedure which was considered to be normal practice.<sup>116</sup> Consequently the Judge was allowed to see the minutes of CWAEC, but affidavits excluded him from seeing the District Committee's minutes, or from being informed that the National Farm Survey had allocated Odlum's farm an 'A' grading.<sup>117</sup> This embargo was endorsed by Williams who had succeeded Hudson as the Minister of Agriculture. The restrictions did not meet with the approval of Justice Atkinson who with a degree of exasperation exclaimed, 'If fifty Ministers swore on fifty bibles that it was contrary to the public interest that I should not be told how the farm was graded I should not believe them.'<sup>118</sup>

A key witness for the defence was John White, who managed Manor Farm for Fyfield Estates Ltd. He presented damaging evidence against Odlum, explaining that when he had first inspected the farm shortly before Hudson had purchased the holding, crops were in poor condition culminating, he argued, in low yields which were substantiated by the threshing returns he had collated. He stressed that that they had been compiled immediately after threshing had taken place, and that he could produce his original notes to collaborate this if required.<sup>119</sup> But when he was recalled for cross-examination, it was shown that the forms had been completed retrospectively, several months after threshing, and that all the details had been recorded using the same pen, suggesting that they had been filled in simultaneously. Moreover Hudson's secretary, Miss Lillian Hayman, gave evidence that between September 1942 and December 1943 'there were no farm diaries in existence, nor so far as I am aware any notebook or document recording the operations in any particular field'.<sup>120</sup> In addition the actual forms on which the data had been recorded had not been sent out from the Institute of Agricultural Economics until several months after threshing had taken place.<sup>121</sup>

The defence maintained that the crop failures of autumn sown wheat were the result of the plaintiff's low levels of husbandry. When giving evidence Stratton denied that these failures had anything to do with the inclement weather conditions, even suggesting that the winter of 1941–2 had not been particularly bad. His evidence was quickly undermined when the prosecution required him to read out an extract from an article that he had written in March 1942 in which he stated that 'We are having a succession of hard winters'.<sup>122</sup>

The Cultivations Officer for the Wiltshire Committee gave evidence that he had advised Odlum about the potential for potash deficiencies leading to crop failure. According to him this discussion had taken place immediately after a Young Farmers visit to Manor Farm. His views were challenged, therefore, on the grounds that inspections were organised primarily to promote progressive farming techniques and would not have included visits to failing farmers. More importantly, other independent witnesses stated that no such Young Farmers' visit to Manningford had taken place at the time the Cultivation Officer claimed he had engaged in the discussions with Odlum.

<sup>116</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 452.

<sup>117</sup> TNA, MAF 32/41 7085231 (National Farm Survey: Manor Farm Manningford, Wilts.).

<sup>118</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 454.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 376.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467; see also p. 210.

The defence made a number of assertions about the dilapidated state of Odlum's farm machinery, but it was revealed in court that they had been purchased at valuation by Hudson as a job lot when he bought the farm.<sup>123</sup> One allegation concerned a hay tedder, which was allegedly broken and had a part missing, but it was shown this had been removed to enable it to be transported. Other examples of broken or poorly maintained machinery were cited such as the threshing machine, which White described as 'useless'. But it was revealed that, at the direction of Fyfield Estates, auctioneers had arranged to sell the machines which had been described in the catalogue as a 'genuine sale of valuable farm implements taken with the farm now surplus to requirements' and that they had realised high prices at auction.<sup>124</sup> The threshing machine was said to be in 'excellent condition'.<sup>125</sup>

Further evidence of Odlum's incompetence included him having unthreshed wheat ricks on the farm in March 1942. Mr Swanton claimed to have told Odlum 'what a disgrace that was'.<sup>126</sup> But under cross examination the witness was forced to acknowledge that it was the 'policy of the Government ... to encourage farmers to hold wheat in stacks until required for flour milling'.<sup>127</sup>

One of the key witnesses for the defence was W. T. Price. In July 1942 he had written to Anthony Hurd, Agricultural Advisor to the Ministry of Agriculture explaining:

I have already explained to the Minister the reasons why Manningford was in such a deplorable state. I think ... that since Odlum lost his wife he has gone to pieces and his health has been particularly bad during the last 12 months. We did everything possible to try and get things put right but as you know Mr Odlum was particularly awkward and was a complete obstructionist. I think it is quite definite that if Odlum had not sold the farm the committee would have taken possession by now.<sup>128</sup>

Subsequently Price was subjected to rigorous cross-examination which revealed that his assertions were unsubstantiated.<sup>129</sup>

Hudson appeared in person for the defence, reinforcing the view that the farm was in a poor state at the time of the purchase, and that it was both under-grazed and lacked sufficient arable land. According to his evidence, when Odlum had shown him around the holding he had apologised for its poor condition. But this assertion was difficult to square with the fact that, according to Odlum, Hudson had complimented him on the holding and had agreed to pay – without demur – £19,000 for the remaining cattle, farm machinery and other fixtures and fittings. Hudson tried to escape this impasse by claiming that, as he continued to farm the land, he found more and more evidence to support his original view.<sup>130</sup> His 'great story in the witness box was that he had reclaimed the land and that it was now some of the best land on the farm'.<sup>131</sup> One of the interesting aspects of the trial was that, indirectly, it became an investigation of Hudson's own methods of farming. The transcript reveals that by the time of the trial, in the

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pp. 115–22.

<sup>125</sup> According to the court transcript, Hudson secured new implements for his farm; *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 49.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 586.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 466–7.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 173–4.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 379.

summer of 1946, there were 101 cattle on the holding, 51 of which were adults compared with the 227 that Odlum had maintained in the spring of 1940.<sup>132</sup>

Hudson was later recalled after his evidence was disputed by other witnesses. Stress was placed on the changes which had taken place in field U which extended to about 14 acres.<sup>133</sup> According to John White, this particular field was in a particularly poor state at the time of Hudson's purchase with a substantial area of rushes, whereas now it was 'practically all in potatoes.'<sup>134</sup> During an adjournment of the trial, Odlum, in conjunction with a Mr Cole, visited the field and confirmed that little more than seven acres were under potatoes, while more than six acres were 'just growing weeds.'<sup>135</sup> Photographs were taken to illustrate this point and shown to the judge, casting further doubts about the veracity of the defence's evidence.

## V

In his summing up the Judge stressed that it was agreed by all parties that Odlum's crops were not in good condition in 1940 and 1941.<sup>136</sup> He dismissed the defence's attempts to imply that the disposal of the dairy herd was the result of Odlum's obstinacy, rather than a response to the impending feed shortages which would result from the ploughing up programme. The Judge was particularly scathing about the evidence presented to the court by Price. In respect of the letter he had sent to Hurd, the Judge concluded 'there was scarcely a statement ... which was not an untruth and a deliberate untruth.'

Price had claimed that 'As far as we were concerned in Wiltshire, Mr Hudson was Farmer Hudson; the fact that he was also the Minister of Agriculture did not matter at all'. These assertions were dismissed by the judge as 'sheer humbug'. Hudson had undoubtedly received preferential treatment for, as the Judge concluded:

The moment Mr Hudson got the farm, the Catchment Board cleaned out the river, lowering the bed of it; the Agricultural Committee themselves cleaned out the drains and lowered them; they ploughed his land for him; they did everything they could for Mr Hudson – and they let him grow as much fodder as he wanted.<sup>137</sup>

By 1945 the arable area had been allowed to contract to 403 acres while the area of forage had increased to 139 acres, a trend not only out of line with the government's national policy but also with the targets of the Wiltshire Committee.<sup>138</sup>

Mr Justice Atkinson vindicated Odlum, awarding him £500 damages, an amount which reflected the seriousness of the accusations and was in stark contrast to the peppercorn awards often imposed in other defamation cases. More significantly Odlum's legal costs were awarded against Stratton which, when disclosed several months later, amounted to £4,965.<sup>139</sup> Indemnifying Stratton against the costs of his defence ensured that the Ministry of Agriculture was faced with a bill of over £8,000.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 581.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 476.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 573.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 583.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 583.

<sup>139</sup> *Law J.*, 97 (1947), p. 105.



The verdict was widely reported in the popular press. Not surprisingly the most critical account was in the *Daily Worker* with a headline of 'Down on Hudson's Farm it was All Too Easy'.<sup>140</sup> The *Daily Herald* exclaimed 'All Humbug about Farmer Hudson'.<sup>141</sup> The practical and down to earth *Farmer and Stockbreeder* hailed it as 'Lies and Humbug and £500 Damages'.<sup>142</sup> Even the more conservative pro-establishment *The Times* reported the Judge's surprise about the way the Ministry of Agriculture had indemnified the defendant against costs and damages.<sup>143</sup>

That the Ministry of Agriculture had agreed to this indemnity was not unusual. Existing legal convention was based on the premise that the Crown had immunity in tort and 'it was the usual practice for a Government Department to indemnify public officials who may be sued in respects of torts committed by them in the course of their official duty if, in the view of the Department at the time, they had acted in good faith'.<sup>144</sup> Technical legalities of this kind were lost on the public and on a number of MPs such as Mr N. Smith, who continued to ask questions about the issue in the House of Commons.<sup>145</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture's legal team did investigate the possibility of appealing against the judgement. A conference between the defence's legal team and Mr Valentine Holmes, a legal expert on appeals procedure, concluded that the 'chance of success were about fifty-fifty', and that even if it was successful it would 'not do away with the adverse strictures upon the various witnesses made by the Judge'.<sup>146</sup> C. W. Whately, a member of the Wiltshire CWAEC, wrote an impassioned letter to the *Spectator*, suggesting that defence witnesses had merely been 'slipping up over the language used in describing Mr Odlum's farming'.<sup>147</sup> But his comments were firmly rebutted in the following edition in a letter from a less partisan correspondent, Eric North.<sup>148</sup> Protracted negotiations between the BBC and Odlum's solicitors were resolved by the BBC agreeing to pay him 100 guineas inclusive of costs but, like the other costs in the case, this was ultimately paid by the Ministry of Agriculture. In addition, the Corporation agreed to broadcast an apology in the seven and eight o'clock news bulletins and to publish it in the *Radio Times* and *Listener*.<sup>149</sup>

## VI

Odlum did not return to farming: his contribution to the modernisation of dairy farming ended with the running down and sale of the Manningford herd. His book, *An analysis of the Manningford Herd of British Friesians*, was privately published in 1943, with Odlum intending only to distribute it to a few friends, but it was reprinted for wider circulation in 1944, 1945 and 1947.<sup>150</sup> The wisdom and perceptive comments which it contained ensured that the text rapidly became 'one of the best known works on cattle breeding in this country'.<sup>151</sup> The fact that progeny testing

<sup>140</sup> *Daily Worker*, 30 July 1946.

<sup>141</sup> *Daily Herald*, 30 July 1946.

<sup>142</sup> *The Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 6 Aug. 1946, p. 1454.

<sup>143</sup> *The Times*, 30 July 1946, p. 6.

<sup>144</sup> *Law J.*, 96, 13 Sept. 1945, p. 493.

<sup>145</sup> *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 427 (1945-6), col 114 (14 Oct. 1946).

<sup>146</sup> TNA, MAF 48/587, Report of conference between

Mr Slade and Mr Valentine Holmes, 1 Oct. 1946.

<sup>147</sup> *The Spectator*, 16 Aug. 1946, p. 16.

<sup>148</sup> *The Spectator*, 23 Aug. 1946, p. 17.

<sup>149</sup> TNA, MAF 48/587, letter from The BBC to Sir Denys Stocks, 5 Feb. 1947.

<sup>150</sup> Odlum, *Analysis*.

<sup>151</sup> *Odlum v. Stratton*, p. 11.

was eventually widely adopted by many leading dairy breeders, including the highly influential Milk Marketing Board, is testament to its significance.

The comments in the farming press testify made at the time of Odlum's death to his continuing influence. For *Farmers Weekly*, Odlum's writings had 'a profound effect on the average farmer's attitude to keeping better stock'.<sup>152</sup> *Farmer and Stockbreeder* remarked that

some of Mr Odlum's views were highly controversial and he challenged much of the accepted dogma of pedigree breeders. But even those who disagreed violently with his ideas benefitted from the serious thought they provoked. Above all George Odlum was a fearless individualist.<sup>152</sup>

The challenge he made to cattle breeding was referred to some twenty years later by J. Williams in a British Breeders Club discussion. 'All these great breeders like Boutflour and Odlum have made you think ... and thought inspires people to do better than they would otherwise'. To be ranked alongside Professor Robert Boutflour, Principal of the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, whose lectures were encapsulated in his seminal work *The high yielding dairy cow*, identifies him as an outstanding crusader for more progressive and productive methods and raises Odlum to an iconic figure in the history of dairy farming, or as *Farmer and Stockbreeder* had it, 'The Bakewell of our Century'.<sup>153</sup>

Of the others involved in the libel suit, Stratton resigned as Chairman of the Wiltshire CWAEC shortly after the publication of the verdict. In conjunction with his son, he continued to farm after the war, although there was some suggestion that he felt he had been made a scapegoat for the shenanigans of wartime officials. Unlike some of his fellow Chairmen, his contribution was not recognised by the award of a Knighthood or CBE.<sup>154</sup> Papers deposited by his family in the Wiltshire Record Office provide a detailed insight into the numerous and complex disputes on which he was required to adjudicate.<sup>155</sup>

W. T. Price managed to retain the confidence of Tom Williams, the Minister of Agriculture, who noted:

It is not for me to comment on the expression of a Judge, but it will perhaps suffice if I say that my confidence in Mr Price's integrity is in no way impaired by Mr Justice Atkinson's remarks, and if Mr Price were remaining in the Minister's services – he has recently been appointed Principal of the Harper Adams Agricultural College – I should have no hesitation in continuing his appointment in a responsible position. In the circumstances I see no reason for any enquiry into the work of the Wiltshire Committee.<sup>156</sup>

He continued his wartime role of presenting lectures for the BBC and remained Principal of Harper Adams Agricultural College until his retirement in 1962.

The Odlum case undermined Hudson's political credibility. Nevertheless the long term impact on his reputation was limited. He was widely acclaimed in contemporary accounts as an outstanding success. According to Lord Winterton he 'was by far the best of Ministers of

<sup>152</sup> *FW*, 14 Aug. 1959, p. 51; *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 18 Aug. 1959, p. 78.

<sup>153</sup> Mingay, *British Friesians*, p. 125; R. Boutflour, *The*

*high yielding dairy cow* (1967), p. 59.

<sup>154</sup> Hurd, *A farmer in Whitehall*, p. 34.

<sup>155</sup> Wiltshire and Swindon RO, 2865/1.

Agriculture in either war'.<sup>157</sup> Hudson continued to represent Southport until he was elevated to the Lords in the New Year Honours of 1952 as Viscount Hudson of Pewsey. He continued to farm in Wiltshire. Shortly after the end of the war, in conjunction with four of his friends, he acquired the Charter Estate in Southern Rhodesia of nearly 100,000 acres, where they farmed on an extensive scale.<sup>158</sup> He was also the director of a number of the Rhodesian companies. In 1954 he served as President of the British Friesian Society. When he died (whilst visiting Rhodesia) on 2 February 1957, his eldest son inherited the title but, following his death in 1963, it became extinct. Unlike many of his wartime contemporaries in the government, Hudson did not attempt to write his autobiography, nor did he ensure that his personal papers were preserved for posterity. Instead a small collection of his papers including press cuttings and a few personal family letters were retained by his sister who resided at Manningford after his death.<sup>159</sup>

## VII

Odlum's experience at Manningford provides an insight into the way that even progressive farmers were treated during the war. Another respected figure, Rex Patterson, was castigated by the Hampshire committee because of his unorthodox methods. This matter was only resolved following a lengthy official investigation which vindicated Patterson's claims that he was being victimised by local officials<sup>160</sup>

While recognising that making generalisations from an isolated instance is a risky gambit, the case study of Manor Farm nevertheless illustrates the complex and, at times, contradictory aims inherent in the wartime control of agriculture. More specifically it casts serious doubt on the conventional wisdom about the impartial way local committees operated during this crucial period. Odlum's case was unique in that he had sold his farm to the Minister of Agriculture, and that he went on to secure legal redress through the law courts for defamation. In a broader context he epitomised a significant body of farmers whose standards of farming were found lacking in an unspecified way by wartime officialdom. But where some of the category 'C' farmers were 'failing', or attempting to cope with undercapitalised and unpropitious farms on the urban fringe,<sup>161</sup> Odlum had been a highly successful and well-regarded dairy farmer in the 1930s. Moreover, he had been graded as a category 'A' farmer by the National Farm Survey, a fact which the Ministry went to some lengths to conceal from the libel action.

Odlum was confronted by a series of instructions to re-orientate his farm to meet the immediate demands of wartime production, demands which he seems to have accepted even though they made impossible the farming on which his reputation rested. Finally he seems to have preferred to sell up when it became necessary to disperse the Manningford herd. In this re-

<sup>156</sup> TNA, MAF 48/487, Letter from the Minister of Agriculture to H. S. Morrison MP, 26 Aug. 1945.

<sup>157</sup> Winterton, *Orders of the Day*, p. 272.

<sup>158</sup> *The Times*, 12 Feb. 1957.

<sup>159</sup> C. Hazlehurst, S. Whitehead and C. Woodland, *A guide to the papers of British cabinet ministers, 1900–1964* (1996), p. 197; C. Cook, *Sources in British political history* (1977), p. 234.

<sup>160</sup> 'Paterson, Rex Munro (1902–1978)' in *ODNB*; 'Rex Paterson and his farming empire', *FW*, 15 Dec. 1944; 'Settlement in Paterson case', *FW*, 10 Nov. 1944; 'Strong Exception to Minister's Statement', *FW*, 5 Jan. 1945.

<sup>161</sup> C. Rawding, 'The treatment of "failing" farmers in south-west Lancashire during the Second World War', in Short *et al* (eds), *Frontline of freedom*, pp. 179–93.

spect, Odlum and the Manningford herd were casualties of war. The wartime priority for bread and potatoes simply overwhelmed one of the most innovative agricultural developments of the inter-war years. In being instructed to plough, Odlum was being treated no differently from his neighbours, and yet there seems to be more than a hint of needle towards him, a settling of old scores. If this raises questions about how the CWAEC saw Odlum, then there are too questions about Hudson's role. Why, of all the farms available for purchase in 1942, did Hudson chose to buy Odlum's? How much did he know of Odlum's reputation before that date? How aware was he that he was being treated as a special case by the CWAEC and how complicit was he in securing privileges denied Odlum?

Finally, *Odlum v. Stratton* draws attention to the behaviour of the Wiltshire CWAEC. Even if Odlum, the specialist dairy farmer, was treated impartially in 1939–41, being given targets for arable production in line with those of his neighbours, Hudson seems to have been treated much more leniently and allowed to establish a farm which played to its natural strengths – precisely the strengths which Odlum was denied. The Wiltshire CWAEC could not have claimed to have dealt with both owners equally impartially. Odlum's experience therefore illustrates the fate of inter-war progressive farming in the rush to achieve wartime self-sufficiency: *Odlum v. Stratton* the seedier side of the behaviour of the CWAECs.