



# RURAL HISTORY TODAY

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Environments of identity and the agricultural transition – see pages 2–3.  
Photo: Billy McCrorie

## Art, life and landscape: the diaries of Violet Dickinson

by Jeremy Burchardt

Although scarcely a household name, Violet Dickinson (1886–1953) warrants attention from rural historians on many counts.

Among other things, she was a smallholder, weaver, landscape painter, rural community organiser, counter urban migrant, and member of the Women's Land Army. Coming from a wealthy background, she was also downwardly socially mobile, an experience caused partly by financial exigency, and partly from a desire to escape a pressurising upper middle-class, urban lifestyle. Somerset Archives holds a rich collection of her diaries, letters and paintings, along with several numbers of the beautifully illustrated, handwritten magazine she co-produced with her sister Gladys and a large circle of mainly female friends.<sup>1</sup>

The Dickinsons' wealth derived largely from the acumen of Violet's father, Frank, a noted oriental art dealer. He and his wife Betsey embraced the Arts and Crafts movement, an enthusiasm reflected both in the furnishing of their fashionable Bedford Park house and their increasingly ruralist predilections.

### Recording the rural

Violet began keeping a diary in 1899 at the age of twelve. Its pages reveal that the Dickinsons were early and enthusiastic adopters of both the car and the camera. They drove extensively through southern England, especially Surrey and the Isle of Wight (where they had a holiday home) taking photos wherever they went:

*Then we went to Thursley, and spent some time at that beautiful spot – just a lovely old corner with the church, and two fine old houses – one, Hill farm, where the Rain Walkers<sup>2</sup> stay, and the old farmer got quite excited when he heard we knew them, and let us take photos all round the place. (9th April 1912)*

Violet also records, with great excitement, that they had been told they were the first to take a car down a particular lane. The Dickinsons perceived no



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Violet Dickinson as a Land Girl, c.1915.

contradiction between flaunting their technological modernity and identifying with an Arts and Crafts aesthetic since both, in their eyes, were markers of avant-garde taste.

Though prosperous, the family business was neither large nor secure enough to provide employment for more than one of the Dickinson siblings. Conventionally enough, Frank decided to train up his elder son Leslie as his successor but was anxious to establish his remaining children (Violet, Gladys and Cedric) in congenial occupations. In May 1912, he took the rather startling step of enrolling all three on a training course at the Midland Dairy and Agricultural College at Kingston on Soar (Nottinghamshire), one of the first indications that the family's assertive display of ruralism was evolving

*Article continues on back page, also find footnotes.*

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# Environments of identity and the agricultural transition

Jane Rowling reflects on applying the lessons of oral history to environmental land management today.

Recent British agricultural history is inextricably bound up with histories of the environment and the environmental movement, public health, personal identity, and policy changes. The priorities of successive governments, with regard to food production and the environment, can be traced through the incentives which have been offered to farmers to manage their land in accordance with the latest guidelines, and the penalties applied to those who have not made the required changes. For environmental charities working with farmers and landowners, the history of this group's relationships with funding and regulatory bodies is a determining factor in the success of landholder engagement efforts. Understanding how the history of agricultural legislation and environmental history has interacted with personal and local environmental histories can illuminate the reasons behind levels of uptake of new agri-environment schemes, and the likelihood of engagement with future schemes. These histories, and their impacts on future environmental land management are best understood by applying aspects of



*New hedgerows planted under Natural Flood Management funding as part of wider farm management plan (CCRT)*

oral history methodologies to farm advice, and fully appreciating the relationship between land and landowner, and to situate management planning as the next step in the land's longer history.

## Stewardship schemes

Following the Second World War, the focus of agricultural policy in Britain remained on production. In many ways, this was the age of 'tidy farming', as farmers and policymakers strove to exert greater control over the natural environment, and its management. Interventions into agricultural land management on behalf of environmental protection were largely scattered and local or regional until the late 1980s. While the Countryside Act 1968 introduced Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), and a series of regionally targeted schemes followed over the next three decades, it wasn't until 1991 that the first Countryside Stewardship scheme offered a funded land management programme which sought to protect and enhance the natural environment, and was, theoretically, available nationwide.

Countryside Stewardship and Environmental Stewardship programmes have generally targeted large scale, monoculture, arable farming, primarily because this 'tidy' land management has created the most urgent environmental issues. However, this has left upland farmers, managing the land for grazing, feeling somewhat disenfranchised. Upland farming continues land management by grazing, which has preserved and protected ancient grasslands and the specific ecologies they support, for example waxcap mushrooms, which thrive on highly acidic, low-input grasslands, and rely on grazing to continue, unbroken, over several centuries. There has been little in stewardship schemes to incentivise farmers to continue to manage uplands in an environmentally beneficial way, while tree planting schemes, which would have a deleterious effect on ancient acid grassland ecosystems, are far more lucrative.



*Natural Flood Management Works completed under Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council funding (CCRT)*

Past schemes have operated on a punitive basis, in which farmers would forfeit payments and even be required to repay funding for not achieving the aims of their agreed options. Against a backdrop of a perceived lack of support for British farming and farmers in, for example, the disastrous effects of Foot and Mouth, many farmers, particularly in the livestock sector, found themselves unable to trust the motives or understanding of those in power when it came to agriculture. Post-2020, a raft of schemes became available, the latest being the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), about which similar complaints have emerged. The feeling that upland farming is being ignored in large-scale funding schemes is a result of past relationships between farmers and funders, and the perception that current offers are not the 'revolution' that was promised, but simply a rehash of previous schemes.

In Calderdale, West Yorkshire, conversations with farmers reveal a need for those working with the agricultural community to understand the sense of place and identity which farmers derive from their connection with their own piece of land.

Farmers speak about the beauty of their stone land drains, and the sense of their own place in a long line of custodians of the land which they feel when they clear the ditches to reveal the outfalls: for example, one farmer who pointed out a functioning stone drain and said, 'It makes you think, doesn't it, how



much effort those people put into doing it properly. It's still running now, so it doesn't want to be interfered with!

Others talk about the changes their predecessors have made to the land, and almost all use their familiarity with their own parcels, based on their own lived experience, and on information passed down from previous generations, to fine-tune proposed farm management plans, for example explaining where water always runs, as opposed to where computer modelling says it should run (not always the same thing!).

Still others express cynicism at the punitive approach previous administrations have taken towards unsuccessful environmental interventions. A recent correspondent to the *Farmers Guardian* described Red Tractor, the UK's biggest farm and food assurance scheme, as having lost all credibility: 'Family farms take great pride in their work and their animals. It is an insult to have them subjected to the hours of inept questioning.'<sup>1</sup> This echoes the words of interviewees



T. H. Rowling with livestock. Listening to farmers' understandings of how their own farm's environmental and management history can ensure the success of funded interventions (J. Rowling)

about feelings during previous interactions with government representatives. A common complaint is that 'experts', both individuals and larger bodies, do not listen to information about farmers' lived experiences, nor understand local agricultural and environmental histories which have the potential to yield locally specific nuances which can severely impact the success of an environmental intervention.

## Lessons from history

My own role at Calder and Colne Rivers Trust has allowed me to apply the lessons of oral history to land management change. As the leader of the Farm Advice Team, and the current Facilitator of the South Pennines Farmers' Group, my role is to bring farmers and land managers together, and to facilitate access to the latest funds and information to benefit both agriculture and the environment in the Calder catchment. I have found building trust, understanding the longer-term history of land management, and treating spoken information as a resource are essential to providing good farm advice.

Speaking to upland farmers reveals a deep frustration with the available funding mechanisms, and a lack of confidence in the ability of 'public money for public goods' to make up the shortfall for farm businesses as the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) is withdrawn. While farming advice from a variety of sources is more accessible than ever before, one farmer explained that he and his neighbours struggled to find advisors who would listen to farmers and value their first-hand knowledge of their land and its

goods,' i.e. clean air; clean and plentiful water; thriving plants and wildlife; reduction in and protection from environmental hazards; mitigation of and adaptation to climate change; enhanced beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment. Over the period of the Agricultural Transition, BPS payments have been reduced year on year, finally ending at the end of 2023 (to be temporarily replaced by 'delinked payments' until 2027). This has left many farmers having to find an alternative source of farm income to make up the shortfall. In practice, the farming community in upland areas have found themselves battling to keep up with continued writing and rewriting of agri-environment schemes, which appear less and less revolutionary, and more and more like previous schemes, as time has gone on.



J. B. Liddle with sheep. Understanding personal histories of land management and identities based around the land is crucial to engagement with agri-environment schemes (M. Verity)

capabilities. This cemented negative feelings on historical interactions with experts and legislative bodies, and experiences of previous agri-environment schemes, and reduced farmers' willingness to engage.

A farmer who recently attended a meeting on agri-environment grants noted the number of filled chairs in the large venue, and expressed that, 'each of those chairs represents uncertainty.' Uptake of new schemes in upland areas remains tentative despite Defra ambitions for 'co-design' on new schemes. Defra's call for farmers to sign up to the SFI Pilot in 2021, which aimed to recruit 1000 farmers, achieved a total of 938 applications, losing 1240 between expression of interest and application. There remains, therefore, a significant opportunity for local advisors and regional and national policymakers to draw upon oral histories to understand the historical tensions at work in rural spaces, to build trust, and to address the legacy of this knotty history.

The period 2021 to 2027 is one of extreme uncertainty and change for British farmers, as agricultural policy goes through the 'Agricultural Transition', which has been described as 'the biggest change in 70 years.'<sup>2</sup> As a result of Britain's exit from the EU, and, by extension, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), funding for farming and environmental improvements has had to be restructured, without the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) which has, since its inception in 2015, been the foundation of agricultural support in Britain under the EU. The aim of the current agricultural transition is to move British farming towards a more environmentally sustainable business model, emphasising animal welfare, reductions to carbon emissions, and environmental improvements. Funding is available for farmers who supply 'public

- 1 E. Horn, 'Red Tractor "lost all credibility and should be scrapped"', Letters, *Farmers Guardian* (22 November 2023), [www.farmersguardian.com/blog/4149231/letters-red-tractor-lost-credibility-scrapped](http://www.farmersguardian.com/blog/4149231/letters-red-tractor-lost-credibility-scrapped)
- 2 House of Commons, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, *Oral Evidence: Environmental land management and the agricultural transition*, HC 78 (22 June 2021), Q127.

► Jane Rowling's new book *Environments of Identity* (White Horse Press) has been awarded (jointly with Christopher Dyer's *Peasants Making History. Living in an English Region 1200-1540*) the British Agricultural History Society's Joan Thirsk prize for 2022

# Rural resistance in the Western Isles: the fight for Galson Farm

by Juliette Desportes

The land struggles in the Western Isles have been well documented by historians. In the 1880s and 1920s, crofters demanded access to land they saw as rightfully theirs following decades of clearance and dispossession.

Although the 1886 Crofters' Act granted crofting tenants security of tenure, it made no provision for new land. Only after the passing of the 1911 and 1919 Land Acts were additional townships finally created. This hard-fought victory was the direct result of large-scale protest and individual acts of rural resistance in places such as Gress, Bernera, and Vatersay. Monuments designed by artist Will Maclean now stand as reminders of the crofters' fight for the land.

The story of the fight for Galson farm is less well-known. The farm was, and still is, situated in the township of *Gabhsann bho Dheas* (South Galson), in the north-west of the Isle of Lewis. The tale is typical of the fate of so many other Highland and Island townships. Starting in the 1840s, South Galson, alongside the surrounding villages of *Gabhsann bho Tuath* (North Galson) and *Mealabost* (Melbost), was gradually cleared by Lewis proprietor Sir James Matheson to make way for sheep and grouse. In 1863, the majority of tenants departed for Canada on the ship *The Elizabeth*, while the remainder were relocated in neighbouring villages so that only the farm remained. Land agitation in Galson was thus the direct consequence

of the clearances which had taken place only two decades prior.

## From trespass to raid

In the 1880s, crofters turned to daily acts of resistance to oppose what they saw as an historical injustice. Over the years, Galson farm was leased by Lewis estate management to a number of tenant-farmers: Hugh Macpherson from Cumbernauld, Andrew Smith from Thurso, and Dundas Helm from Wigtonshire. Dundas was then replaced by his nephew, James Paul Helm. Many of the farm's neighbours had been born in Galson and had witnessed the clearances only two decades prior. Animals, usually cattle and horses, were encouraged to trespass, meaning the animals regularly grazed on the farm illegally. Trespass turned protest into a performance by pointing out the illegitimacy of the sheep farmer's presence. In retaliation, James Paul Helm allegedly poisoned cattle he had poinded (the legal term for seizing movable property) from the crofters and, in 1885, was charged in Stornoway Sheriff Court for castrating four tups that had strayed on his farm.

Alongside trespass, crofters regularly destroyed Helm's fences. These acts were highly symbolic; Lewis crofters had been forced to build fences for the newly established sheep farms, thus depriving them of essential grazing land. The irony was not lost on Malcom MacPhail, a crofter from South Shawbost, who reported to the 1883 royal commission appointed to look into the conditions of crofters and cottars in the Highlands and Islands, that crofters had been 'obliged to put a fence between us and ourselves, so that we, by our own action, were made to separate ourselves from our own pasture'.<sup>1</sup>

In December 1887, dozens of men and women marched on Galson farm and warned Helm that he was to vacate the farm. Shortly after, a crowd of 300 tenants descended on Stornoway to present a petition to Lady Mary Jane Matheson, the widow of Sir James, which was promptly read and refused. In January 1888, crofters gathered to discuss next steps. An old man reported that he would not be content 'till every hoof of [Helm's cheviot sheep] was out of the island'. This was typical of the hostility displayed by crofters towards large-scale sheep farming for over a century.



In what is arguably the most famous example of ‘Clearance poetry’, Alan MacDougall expressed his disdain for the sheep farmer as early as 1798:

*A-mach luchd-cràgairt na h-olainn  
Masa h-àill leibh comman ceart!  
Druidibh orra suas a-chòmla,  
'S na leigibh an sròn a-steach,  
Bho nach cluinnear aca stòiridh,  
Ach craicinn agus clòimh ga creic,  
Cunntas na h-aimsir, 's gach uair  
Ceannach uan mun tèid am breith.*

Away with the handlers of wool  
If you wish right company!  
Close the door up on them,  
And do not let their nose in;  
Since no story will be heard from them  
But talk of skins and wool being sold,  
And account of the season, and every sort of weather,  
Of buying lambs before they are born.<sup>2</sup>

On the night of 17 January 1888, between 50 and 80 crofters pulled down the turf dyke that lay between Galson farm and the neighbouring township of Borve. The raid and the trial which ensued were widely recounted in newspapers and captured the national imagination. *The Scotsman* reported that the men were armed with ‘sticks, bludgeons, spades, scythes, pitchforks, and other weapons (...) and assaulted with the weapons a body of police’.<sup>3</sup> Four men were arrested and taken to Edinburgh, where they were found not guilty by the jury. The same month, a group of crofters stole a large number of Helm’s sheep nets, cut them into pieces, and threw them into the sea.

## The fight continues

Despite their concerted effort, crofters had to wait another thirty years for significant change. The Small Landholders (Scotland) Act was passed in 1911 and enabled the Board of Agriculture to create new holdings and enlarge others in the Highlands and Islands. Between 1911 and 1915, 163 applications were lodged with the Board for land in the Barvas

parish alone, out of 800 for Lewis as a whole. Nevertheless, Lewis proprietor Duncan Matheson refused to part with Galson. Men and women resorted to daily acts of resistance once more. Since Galson farm had been turned into a shooting preserve, any hunting by crofters was thereafter characterised as ‘poaching’ by estate management. In 1916, a number of crofters from Dell, a nearby village, were sighted on the farm with their dogs in search of game and verbally assaulted the gamekeeper when he confronted them. The reply of the Dell crofters is telling of the crofters’ increased confidence in their right to protest, following the passing of legislation:

*You should remember that gamekeepers, landlords, and factors have not the power that they had forty years ago and their power is growing less every day. (...) There were boys and dogs going to the moor after hares and rabbit before you ever saw Galson and will be after you are in your grave so we will advise you to stop.<sup>4</sup>*

The 1919 Land Act offered a turning point by enabling the compulsory purchase of farms by the Board of Agriculture, thus bypassing

the ownership rights of proprietors. Across the Isle of Lewis, crofters pledged to seize the land if the Board did not act. Many of the raiders had served in the First World War and considered that land was owed to them in return for service. The Galson resettlement scheme was finally advertised in the newspapers at the end of June 1923. Applicants all resided on the Island, and the Board preferred married applicants with families and ex-servicemen. A ballot was eventually held, and 52 families entered their new holdings in the villages of Melbost Borve, South Galson, and North Galson in the spring of 1924.

A hundred years on, the estate is now under community ownership and managed by the *Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn* (Galson Estate Trust). The 2007 purchase in more ways than one the outcome of a long communal fight for the land. The *Urras* has recently commissioned Will Maclean to design a monument to commemorate the Galson land struggles and the centenary of the resettlement. The monument is intended as a celebration of the unshakeable sense of legitimate belonging which drove people, then and now, to assert their claims to the land.

1 The Napier Commission, Vol. 2, p.960.

2 Donald Meek, *Tuath is Tighearna: Tenants and Landlords, An Anthology of Gaelic Poetry of Social and Political Protest from the Clearances to the Land Agitation* (Edinburgh, 1995)

3 *The Scotsman*, 6 March 1888.

4 Highland Archive Centre, D1399/2/55.

### Further reading

Frank Rennie, *The Changing Outer Hebrides: Galson and the Meaning of Place* (Stornoway, 2020)

Iain Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest in the Scottish Highlands after 1914: The Later Highland Land Wars* (Farnham, 2013)



Galson today. Photo by the author.

# The country life of county magazines

by Andrew Hobbs

► County magazines and other regional magazines from around the world will be discussed at an international conference, 'Place and the Periodical', at the University of Chester, 25-26 June 2024.

Call for papers: [www.chester.ac.uk/english/research/cestrian-english/place-and-periodical-international-conference-regional-magazine](http://www.chester.ac.uk/english/research/cestrian-english/place-and-periodical-international-conference-regional-magazine)

County magazines are found in every dentist's waiting room, and while the name of the genre may be unfamiliar, individual titles such as *Cheshire Life*, *Essex Focus*, *Cotswold Life*, *Dorset Magazine*, *Hampshire Living*, and *Lincolnshire Today* are more well known. There were 65 such titles published in England in 2022, with a combined readership in the millions.

They are easily dismissed as lightweight and have a low status in the cultural hierarchies of journalism and academic history, yet their readers love them. My aim here is to convince you that they are valuable sources for the histories of agriculture and the countryside from the 1920s onwards.

There had been a few county magazines in the nineteenth century, such as the *North Devon Magazine* (from 1824) and the *Cornish Magazine* (1898-99), with a narrow literary and historical focus. The first twentieth-century example was the *Sussex County Magazine*, launched in 1926, followed in 1931 by *Derbyshire Countryside*, *Gloucestershire Countryside*, *Somerset Countryman* and *Leicestershire*. Many were associated with rural community councils – part of a post-First World War movement to revive life in the countryside, which co-ordinated activities such as Women's Institutes, working men's clubs, the Workers' Educational Association, the English Folk Dance Society, village halls and county libraries.

A few months after the *Sussex County Magazine* was launched, a more ambitious title with a national remit was published in 1927 from Idbury Manor, in Oxfordshire: *Countryman*. Produced until 2023, it was an important influence on county magazines, as was *Country Life* (1897-), as seen in the features on country houses and gardening. Although aimed partly at the 'county set' – aristocrats, gentry, gentlemen farmers and the upper middle class – the bulk of the readership has always been those who aspire to at least some aspects of the county lifestyle.

The 1926 numbers of the *Sussex County Magazine* are typical of the inter-war magazines, with an emphasis on the literary and historical: archaeological finds; a selection of old Sussex inn signs; a poem, "Out! Out! A Sussex Tocsin", against advertising hoardings; the decline of the village blacksmith as he takes up motor repairs (with photo of a blacksmith at his smithy door), and how Steyning watermill is diversifying into pet food production. The contents reflect an uneasy awareness of change in the countryside, alongside fears of decline and some nostalgia.

## The pursuit of the pastoral

*Cheshire Life*, launched in 1934, soon established a pattern that was gradually adopted by most other magazines, featuring pages of society weddings, hunt balls, fashion, and motoring – the latter an example of David Matless's 'motoring pastoral', in which 'motoring became styled as a modern practice in pursuit of an older England'.<sup>1</sup> These monthly drivers' guides built a catalogue of the beauty spots of Cheshire, illustrated by photographs of landscapes and empty villages, with cars strangely absent. The magazine also looked positively on the conversion of ancient halls into upmarket country clubs.

Other county magazines were more resistant to modernity, despite their adverts for electric power in the home. This conflict makes them fascinating reading, as they grapple with romantic notions of the countryside as unchanging, whilst sometimes acknowledging (but usually ignoring) the pylons, tractors, factory farms, bypasses, petrol stations, and ribbon development of suburban villas.

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The Somerset Representative on the Windmill Committee of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings mourned the passing of the windmill, in a 1932 *Somerset Countryman* article: 'Now poles and wires carry force everywhere but entirely ruin the beauty of the country, the men of which seem utterly careless of its worth'.

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Agriculture is usually seen through the eyes of the gentleman farmer or the landowner, such as Major Basil Carr, agent for the Duke of Westminster, interviewed in a feature about the duke's livestock at Eaton near Chester, although some of the earlier magazines report on the meetings of Young Farmers' clubs. Publications associated with rural community councils often featured 'how-to' articles written by experts such as Thomas Hacking (MSc), Leicestershire County Council agricultural organiser, who wrote for

<sup>1</sup> Matless, D (1998) *Landscape and Englishness*, Reaktion: London.

### Further reading

Hobbs, Andrew. 'Lancashire Life Magazine, 1947-73: A Middle-Class Sense of Place'. *Twentieth Century British History* 24:3: 398-423

Hobbs, Andrew. 'Cheshire Life, 1934-39: The Birth of the Modern County Magazine'. *Manchester Region History Review* 2 (new series) (2023): 51-68.





*Leicestershire* magazine in the early 1930s, and Laura Cornelius Wheeler, principal of a private horticultural college at Aldersey Hall near Chester, who wrote on gardening and horticulture for *Cheshire Life*.

The magazines reflected interwar, rural community council concerns: declining rural crafts; activities such as choirs, village theatre and the arts; features on rural industries such as poultry rearing, and natural history. There is a tone of deference and small 'c' conservatism, with agricultural workers largely invisible and a focus on the picturesque, rather than the working, countryside.

## Lifestyle aspirations

After the war, the more highbrow titles such as the *Sussex County Magazine* faded away (it closed in 1956), while a new generation of county magazines appeared in their place, most aimed at aspirants to the county set. The January 1966 issue of *Sussex Life* is typical, with its colour cover of a hunter in deerstalker and tweed jacket, rifle on shoulder, with two spaniels at his side. Inside are articles about the Duke of Norfolk's new horse trainer at Arundel, the Brighton Beagles' hunt ball, picturesque villages and countryside, and articles such as 'the rancher on the Downs' (a farmer who has introduced a new type of lamb and beef production to Sussex), and the memories of a traditional roadmender. Farmers were more likely to appear when they were diversifying into novel activities such as alpaca rearing.

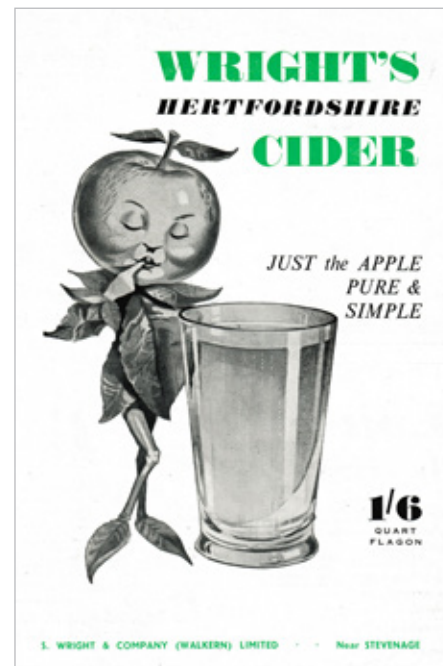


By June 1984, *Cheshire Life* has more pages of property advertising, including a fifteenth-century rectory and the 'principal wing' of a Restoration-period country house overlooking the Dee estuary, not untypical of the type of properties featured. A new readers' photographic competition is themed around Cheshire's rivers, while there is an interview with Lord Woolley, president of the Cheshire Show and former president of the National Farmers' Union. Other articles on the countryside cover a shire horse stud and hardship in rural south Cheshire (a rare negative article). The formula has stayed more or less the same ever since, with the emphasis on positive stories; climate change, for instance, might appear if a local business is making money out of it, or if a river has been cleaned up.

## Distinguished contributors

County magazines have always been integrated into the media ecology of their times, with contributors also writing books, working for national, regional, and local newspapers and broadcasting on BBC radio. Many distinguished authors, poets, photographers, and artists used these magazines to pay the rent, but the low status of the genre, in journalistic and literary circles, means that these publications rarely appear in bibliographies, obituaries or biographies.

*Gloucestershire Countryside* magazine



(1931–95) had more famous contributors than most, including HJ Massingham, the countryside and agriculture writer, WH Davies (author of *Autobiography of a Super Tramp*), poet and art expert Laurence Binyon, and Graham H Castle ('Our Country Correspondent' for the BBC Midland Region). *Cheshire Life's* roster included J Fairfax-Blakeborough (1883–1976), who contributed articles on hunting and racing and published more than 50 books, mainly on horses and country life; novelists Arthur Behrend (author of *The House of the Spaniard*) and Beatrice Tunstall (author of *The Long Day Closes*); Norman Ellison ("Nomad" of the BBC's *Children's Hour*), and the distinguished landscape photographer, Edward Fitzmaurice Chambre Hardman (1898–1988). There were also local agricultural photographers such as Gilbert H Parsons of Alsager or Gerald McCann of Uttoxeter, whose works typically depicted prize-winning beasts.

As historical sources, magazines are more responsive to changing trends than book publishing, and more open to the voices of their readers, including readers who advertised their businesses. They are also more visual than books. Few of the contributors to county magazines were as accomplished as those who produced articles, photographs and illustrations for *Country Life* (Gertrude Jekyll, GM Trevelyan), *Countryman* (Stanley Baldwin, HE Bates) or the *Shell Guides* (John Betjeman, Paul Nash). But this makes them more valuable, as they were probably closer to the views of readers, and more 'of their time'.

Continued from front page

into something more than an aesthetic posture.

Unsurprisingly, the Dickinsons found it a little difficult at first to fit in with the other students, most of whom came from much humbler social backgrounds. This paled into insignificance, however, by comparison with the challenges of learning to churn butter:

*... before I could look round me, I was given a bucket of cream, a churn and a worker,<sup>3</sup> and set to work, before I even knew how to take the lid off! – however, I did as I was told, and was astounded at the numbers of buckets of water I had to pour in with the butter! – and I churned till I ached!!! .... I made my butter – worked it, and finally made it up into pats (4½ lbs) ready for sale! – I was never more surprised than when I saw it was really butter!* (23<sup>rd</sup> May 1912)

Nevertheless, the three of them stuck to it gamely, despite sore hands and aching arms. Violet's diary records interesting details about her teachers and fellow students, and of the wide-ranging if rather arduous instruction on offer at the college at the time:

*At 6.45 we went off on our bikes to College, and had a 10 hrs day there! – cheese making all morning – 2 lectures in afternoon, and bee keeping from 6–7.15! (30<sup>th</sup> May 1912)*

There are also photographs of dairy and poultry equipment taken by Violet and Gladys. This would be useful material for historians wanting to build on studies by Paul Brassley and others, of agricultural education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## Life on the land

Within a month of completing their course at the College, Violet, Gladys and Cedric were installed at Little Bower Farm near Molash in Kent, bought for them by Frank. There was a small dairy herd and the diaries indicate that they lost little time in putting their hard-won butter-making skills into effect. Little Bower also had beautiful cherry orchards, where a flock of Campine chickens was allowed to roam. There were sheep too, and some arable; Violet and Gladys did not confine themselves to the 'lighter branches of agriculture'.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, some of the most vivid diary entries from this time register the pleasure Violet took in heavy physical work like threshing:

*We worked in the barn, feeding the machine with bundles of wheat which we had to drag up on pitchforks until we got right down to the ground. It was very picturesque in the half flight with the girls in sunbonnets, baize aprons on blue overalls.... At 5, we went home [to tea] – very dusty, hot and dirty!!! (2<sup>nd</sup> Nov 1915)*

Among other physically demanding tasks she enjoyed at Little Bower were cutting down a hedge ('great sport!'), hay-raking, sheep-dipping and, in February 1916, dragging hay to feed the sheep during a snowstorm ('it was beautiful').

Molash was only a few miles from Wye College and Violet, Gladys and Cedric continued their agricultural education by cycling down there to attend evening classes. They made good friends at Wye, who provided a valuable social network as well as advice on how to farm. When the First World War broke out, Violet joined the Women's Land Army and a succession of Land Girls came to work alongside her and Gladys on the farm (Cedric had enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps). Violet's diaries testify to the intensity of the affective bonds that could be formed between women through shared agricultural labour.

After the war, Frank sold Little Bower but bought another farm, Heronswood, near Peasmarsh in Sussex. The decisive advantage of Heronswood was, from Violet's perspective, not so much its agricultural potential as its picturesque half-timbering and oast house. The farm ran down to the marshes beside the River Tillingham and seems to have been mainly a beef and sheep enterprise. The setting, with woods, marshes and the farmhouse itself, was idyllic but the farming was difficult at times: they had bad luck with animal diseases like lymphangitis and dropsy.

## Selling the rural dream

Frank's death in 1921 forced them to sell Heronswood, partly because Gladys wanted to take her share of the assets in cash. Violet, Cedric and their friend Elsa Stuttaford moved to the Quantocks, initially to Kilve and then to nearby Higher Pardlestone, where they took up craft weaving, keeping Angora rabbits for the wool, and poultry as a side line. This was not quite enough to keep them afloat financially, however, and in the early 1930s they took advantage of the popularity of rambling, cycling, hostelling and, for those who could afford it, car touring by setting up a sign offering 'teas, fruit and cream, coffee, guests'. By the early 1950s the Pardlestone Weavers, as they called themselves, had become well known, attracting visitors from far and wide. In 1951, a photographer from the local newspaper called on them, representing them as picturesque survivors of an ancient rural craft ('Spinning in the sun, Miss V. Dickinson of Holford, Somerset, keeps an old craft in the public eye'). By a strange irony, the Dickinsons were now objects of the same 'tourist gaze' through which they themselves had once apprehended, even appropriated, rural life and labour. Yet they were complicit in this: indeed, the economic viability of their weaving enterprise depended on it. Elsa had by now gone her own way, but Violet continued to weave, and keep her diary, until her health declined in the autumn of 1952. She died at the Mount Royal Nursing Home in Minehead on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1953.

▶ Violet is among the principal protagonists of Jeremy Burchardt's book *Lifescapes: The Experience of Landscape in Britain, 1870–1960* (CUP, 2023) based on eight remarkable unpublished diaries.

- 1 The magazine ran from 1903 to 1914 and bore the curious title the Invalids Magazine Album. See also London Metropolitan Archives, LMA/4292.
- 2 Thomas Rain Walker was a British diplomat.
- 3 A wooden board for squeezing out buttermilk and adding salt.
- 4 On women smallholders, see Anne Meredith, 'From ideals to reality: The women's smallholding colony at Lingfield, 1920–39', *Agricultural History Review* 54.1 (2006) 105–21 and Nicola Verdon, 'Business and Pleasure: Middle-Class Women's Work and the Professionalization of Farming in England, 1890–1939', *Journal of British Studies* 51.2 (2012) 393–415.

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