

Extracts from Arthur Shering's memoir.

Arthur was born in 1933, at Drove End Farm, and grew up there. His memoir can be read elsewhere in the archive. In these extracts he remembers the Bath family who ran The Coote Arms and working on Coote Farm....

Grimsditch camp was built in 1939-1940. We would see the troops on manoeuvres and also the troops coming to the pub. Two things I remember very well was that one time Mother took Mabel, Les, Myself and Pamela Bath (whose parents owned the Coote Arms) to Hut farm to pick mushrooms. It was a good area for mushrooms, because it had not seen the plough, but unfortunately a load of gypsies came along and kicked the basket of mushrooms out of my mother's arm. The gypsies said it was theirs and they had the right to them; in the end we did not get the mushrooms. As children we were very upset.

The second thing was when Mr Ted Bath, the owner of the Coote Arms, at harvest time had two corn ricks on the right going down past the Coote Arms and a tramp came up from Martin, stole a piece of rope from there and went up to Vernditch bottom and hung himself there. We did not actually see the body, but the shepherd, Dick Jeans and Ted Bath went up with the horse and cart and brought the body down. They laid the body out in the granary for the police to deal with.

I went over to work for Mr Ted Bath as and when required. Which meant that for the next five years I worked most evenings, weekends and eventually I had to help in the mornings milking the cows. For about four years I milked three cows before I went to school and when I come back. On the first Monday I went there I had to lead a horse to hoe cabbages in about a three-acre field. All hoeing had to be done by hand or by a horse pulling a horse hoe. That was not always as pleasant as it sounded because the ground can be knobbly or stony and if you were not careful the horse could step on your foot. Hoeing by hand was a rather boring backbreaking job but we all had to do that. The only time when I did not work was Sunday afternoon. I worked mornings, evenings, weekends and school holidays until I left school at the age of 15.

On the Coote Farm, which was about 200-250 acres, he had two horses, one Allis Chalmer tractor and one Fordson Tractor. That was in the latter 1940s. He milked between 15 and 20 cows; he also had a flock of about 200 sheep. It was mixed farming and organic as all farms were in those days. The farm workers that I most remember was Dick Jeans, the shepherd, he had served in the 1914-1918 war and went through the battle of the Somme. He had seen something. Then there was Harry Stacey who joined the army at the age of 16 and served in France until the end of the war. Bill Kerley was in his forties, he was the carter and had not served in the services, but was in the home guard.

There was also a lot of casual labour, doing hoeing, haymaking, harvest and then of course potato picking. Potatoes and mangels were put into clamps and covered with straw. During harvest time, when I was about 10 or 12, I would be leading a horse and soon learned to drive the Allis Chalmer tractor. There were converted wagons with a draw bar instead of shafts. During harvest time there would be a tractor with a two-wheel trailer and converted wagon. If I were lucky I would drive the tractor or lead the horse, but also help load the sheaves on the wagon or trailer. By the time I was 13 I was doing a man's work.

After I come back from Gran's in 1943, I started to work for Ted Bath leading the horse and milking cows, so my morning would start about 6:30 going over to the Coote Arms and I pulled the three wheel trolley taking the milk churns from the bottom to the top and then go to help in the cowshed. Milking would be done by Ted Bath himself, Bill Kerley, Harry Stacey and myself. We would milk between 15-20 cows and finish by 8 AM. Afterwards school until 4 PM. Then more work either hoeing or helping with the harvest. The hoeing of mangels or kale was done by hand, also leading the horse up and down between the rows. It was a battle to keep the weeds down. In May-June time grass would be cut, initially using two horses pulling the grass cutter, which had two blades reciprocating and cut a swathe 4-foot wide. Later they got a tractor and put a draw bar on to pull. After they cut the grass it was left to wilt for a day or two in the sun; then it would be put into rows by a horse and side rake and then manually put into pooks (small heaps) after which it was picked up by horse and wagon or tractor and wagon. Usually I would start loading it on the wagon and when there was a load, it was taken to be stacked in a rick.

After haymaking there would be a break until harvest; but not completely, other things had to be done. Mangles had to be cut out by hoe, leaving them 10 inches apart. Potatoes had to be planted by hand initially but later became more mechanised.

Harvest was a big event; part time employees coming in to help would back up the farm staff. It could be factory workers that came and helped at night, or casual workers. At harvest Bill Kerley had the work with the scythe; I would sometimes help him. He cut the field's corners out, because there was no way the tractor could get in to a corner. As the binder cut the corn into sheaves workers would follow to put the sheaves in to piles of about 8-12 sheaves to dry out, and then be collected and put into ricks; usually in the same field. Most ricks were put in pairs, so that the threshing machines could come between and thresh the two ricks without moving.

There were two threshing machines in Martin; one owned by Fred Dibben, with sons Bert and Monty. The other by George and Jesse Poore and Steve Poore. My father would go on a few farms to help with threshing two or three times a week. Steam engines going about with threshing tackle were always a big event for us. They would go from farm to farm. Life for all of us in winter was mostly cold and wet, the house was cold and draughty and we would put blankets up behind both doors and go to bed in pyjamas and socks plus overcoats on top of the bedclothes.

All the cows would live outside and the cow-shed would tie up 8 x cows, with a small lean-to shed which held 2 x cows which was where I had milked 3 or 4 cows every morning and evening. At least in cold weather we would get some body heat from the cows when milking.

In frosty weather there was no concrete yard, so the frozen ground was awful for the cows and humans to walk on. Anywhere that animals walk to feed or wait for milking was over 6in of mud and when it froze it became all jagged with peaks and dips so walking became dangerous for all. Feeding the sheep and cattle outside was a cold and hard job; I would go with one of the men with a horse and cart to cut and gather kale which would be about 5 foot high, first to cut with a chopping hook, load on the cart and feed to the cows in the grass fields. I still remember the extreme cold and wet as the icicles fell on you when cutting the kale and our hands would be freezing as we had no rubber gloves for protection. If there was no kale we would load up some mangolds from the clamp, along with some hay which had to be cut from the hayrick with a big cutting knife. The hay ricks were thatched so to get the hay we could start from the top and cut out about a quarter of the rick from top to bottom. The quarter would last our 20 cows about 3 weeks, we would cut and load out every day what was required.

Besides cows, there were sheep on the farm. Dick Jeans was the shepherd. Martin Down was very well grazed in those days. I was the last person living to take sheep on Martin Down and also took 'Judy' the sheep dog along. I did that during my summer holidays, because Dick Jeans, being a man, was needed to help with the harvest. I very much enjoyed that, mum would put sandwiches in for me plus a bottle of water. The sheep would also have to be fed hay as and when required during winter. Lambing time was around February and as they were all in 'Folds and Hurdles', shelter was provided by straw bales or four hurdles topped with hurdles and sheeting and straw to give the ewe and her lamb some protection from the weather. The shepherd would have his 'Shepherd's hut' nearby, with his woodstove going as he would stay with them night and day during the 3-4 weeks period. Often weak lambs would be given heat and hot milk to avoid mortalities. Sometimes I would help out with lambing and from 13 years old I would help out with delivering the lambs and later on with cows calving.

Keeping warm in the cold weather was a problem, I had a US army jacket along with a jumper and two pairs of socks and rubber boots. Knitted gloves helped but not when it was wet and freezing, however hard work kept us all going.

Mr Ernie Flemington was another Coote Farm part time helper. He had a few acres. I was friends with his son, Peter. I often helped Ernie doing hedge cutting for Ted Bath. Hedge cutting in those days was very difficult, they were allowed to grow wild for 2-3 years and then you had to lay it. You had to cut out the big wood, which could be as big as your arm. Then it was axe job, saw job and hook job. You had to burn the debris; the bigger wood you would keep for firewood and the smaller stuff you would burn. The thorns were the biggest problem. After that you would lay the hedge, if it were less than 4 years old it was relatively easy, but after that it could be a problem. Sometimes the hedges were not laid and allowed to grow wild. This could be lack of time and money, but the hedges also gave shelter for the cattle.

Then there were the Rhunyards. Arian Rhunyard used to keep the Roe Buck pub during the early part of the war; he then came to live at Martin with his brother Frank. They were casual labourers for Ted Bath at hoeing and harvest time.

Quite a few people would come by bus to the Coote Arms. From the Woodyates direction: Again Charlie Newman who came by bus until he got his motorbike, the Peach family; Jim Peach served in the war, Bing, Jack. The Isaacs family from Pentridge; Reg and Jack Isaacs and others. From Hut Hill there were the Pritchards and a few others. From New Farm way come quite a few; the Stevens family and Ernie Gulliver who worked at Jervois Farm.
