

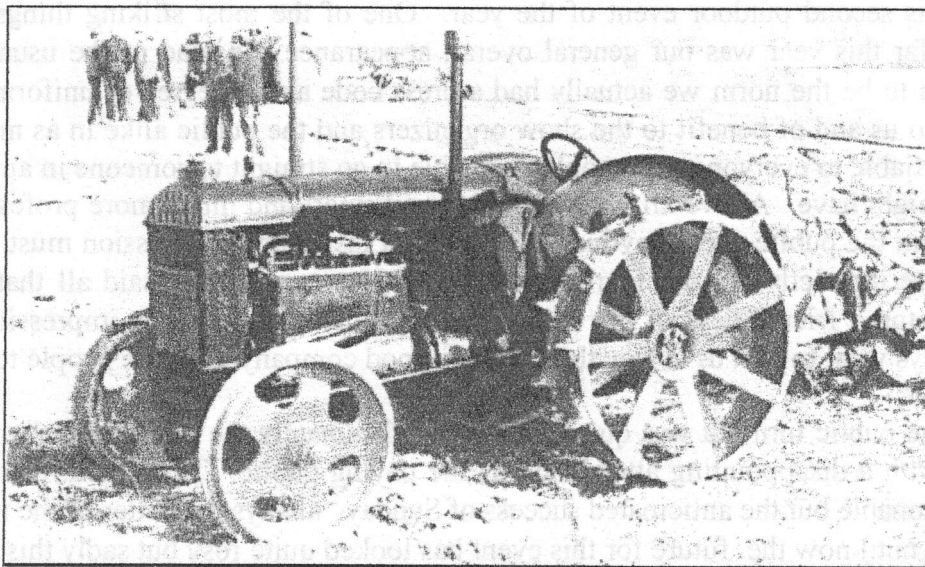
Old Knotty's Country Lore

An article by **Old Knotty**

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I am fortunate enough to be numbered among the generation that remembers that extraordinary transitional period in British agriculture when the internal combustion engine was the new kid on the block. This was a time when the shire-horse was, if not exactly still King, often remained the mainstay of the Yeoman farmer, and was only begrudgingly giving way to other sources of power.

In those days most small farmers didn't have a tractor and therefore cultivated the land with their faithful old companion the heavy-horse. On the larger acreages farmers would have to resort to hiring in a pair of steam ploughing engines in the same way that he would utilize the agricultural contractor's threshing machine at harvest time and his modern counterpart employs the combine harvester.



A 12 hp Fowler Ploughing Engine in the Contractors Yard. It's massive winding drum for dragging the plough can be seen mounted under the boiler.

When I was a boy my whole family would annually engage in the seasonal harvesting of fruit, vegetables, cereal crops and hay. From a child's point of view the cereals and hay harvests were like a holiday as there was little for us youngsters to do but run wild and enjoy ourselves.

Vegetables however were another matter as we were expected to pull our weight and assist in the picking of potatoes, sprouts, peas and beans etc. I hated sprout picking as it always seemed to be conducted in the most inclement weather. There was of course a good reason for this but it cut no ice with me at the time.

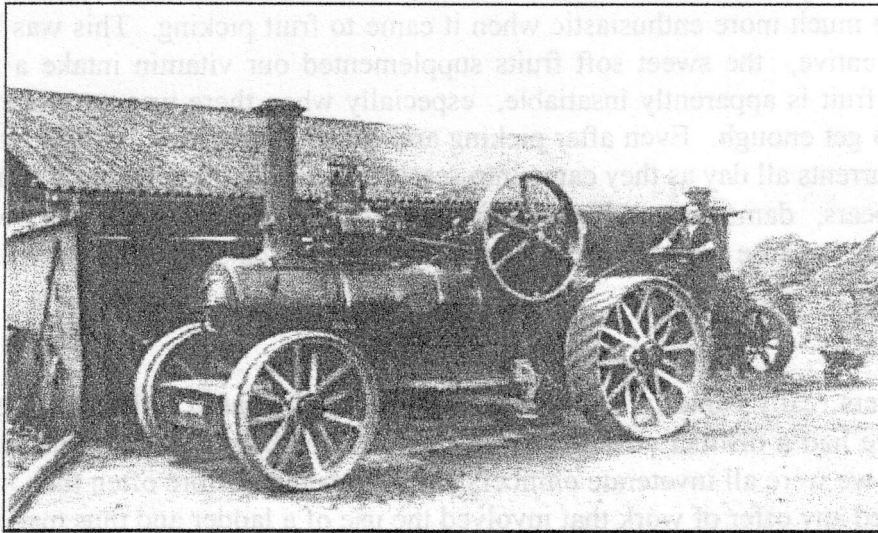
We youngsters were much more enthusiastic when it came to fruit picking. This was heaven to us kids, here we had an incentive as the sweet soft fruits supplemented our vitamin intake a thousand-fold. A child's appetite for fruit is apparently insatiable, especially when there was no money for sweets. We could never seem to get enough. Even after picking and eating raspberries, gooseberries, strawberries, and red and black currants all day as they came into season, we more often than not went in search of crab apples, wild pears, damsons and black berries after work. We also picked a wide variety of wild mushrooms, but only because we could sell them, none of us kids seemed to have a taste for them in those days.

The village youngsters really came into their own when the time came to harvest the apple, pear and plum crop. Here we had a distinct advantage over the adult pickers. No cumbersome ladders or long pokey poles for us, we were all inveterate climbers and clamberers. More often than not the female side of the family declined any offer of work that involved the use of a ladder and thus made it a something of a lad's day out. There were of course always a few women who attended but they always elected to remain firmly on the ground. Another bonus of the absence of general females such as mothers, grandmothers, and various aunts and sisters was that this often meant that most of us lads could manage to obtain a discreet swig from the ever present cider jug at some stage during the day. This however was invariably accompanied by the strict instruction from some male member of the family, "*Whatever you do don't tell your mother*". Ever since those happy days I've always had an affinity with cider and Laurie Lee.

The best thing about a day in the fields, even better than being allowed to climb trees with parental approval, was that we sometimes got a ride on the carts or a chance to lead the horses, and very occasionally a benevolent Carter might actually let us take the reins and drive one of these great leviathans. Then this mighty animal, whose majestic head seemed half a cricket pitch away from your seat on the cart, was yours to command. The feeling of power and control that I felt as a child simply from sitting behind the massive rolling rump of that magnificent creature hauling some staggering load of farm produce has remained with me to this day.

Quite naturally the latest technology of the day has always held a fatal fascination for youngsters, and I was no exception. So perhaps the highlight of any day in the fields was a ride on the super modern motor driven tractor. If Jack the tractor driver was in a good humour he would leave the field at the end of the day with his Fordson Model "N" literally festooned with excited children. I clearly remember the first occasion on which I was allowed on the tractor. Jack sat me on his lap and allowed me to steer. I was the envy of my friends, and all because I was the youngest and he didn't want me to fall off. No Health and Safety nonsense back then. Since those far off days the closest thing I've seen to Jack's overloaded tractor was in India, where every form of public transport seemed to be awash with humanity.

In the field itself during the day the Fordson was equipped with steel wheels, the rear pair being armed with gigantic spikes which to my young fertile imagination always conjured up visions of Bodiccia's chariot for some reason. These steel wheels obviously had to be changed for road work and when returning to the yard in the evening. This changeover took a considerable amount of time, or so it seemed to the waiting throng of young passengers. Though the wait sometimes appeared to be endless I can't ever recall an occasion when it was in fact too long, at any rate nobody ever became impatient and left early if they had been promised a ride.



A Dagenham built Fordson Model "N" tractor equipped with it's steel wheels for field work.

The other strange thing was that despite the return journey to the farm being in precisely the opposite direction to the village no-one ever declined a lift. Undeterred they happily walked the extra distance home just to ride on that miracle of modern technology.

What I wasn't aware of all those years ago was just how privileged I was to be witnessing this unique period in agricultural history when those magnificent shire horses and their early mechanized descendants were working in earnest. Without realising it at the time, I was actually playing a minor role and participating in the events about which books are now being written. Their significance was lost upon me, how could I know that one day all this would be gone. I have lost count of the youthful good-hidings I've suffered for arriving home late after pausing for a few minutes to watch the whirling belts and the shuffling motion of a threshing box driven by a mighty steam traction engine. The problem was that those few minutes always mysteriously turned into hours and it was only the lighting of the lamps and the fading light that served to remind me of the lateness of the hour.

Only now when I look back do I fully appreciate what a magical time it was and how lucky I was to have experienced it all. I still go to modern steam fairs vainly attempting to recapture something of those bygone days. The sounds and the smells are still the same but a genuine working atmosphere is lacking and however hard the preservationists try they can never quite recreate the magic. Although this absence of atmosphere saddens me a little, I have no real cause for complaint because I have seen the real thing and can still just about remember what a proper rural working day was really like.