

# MEMORIES OF PENSURST DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

David Martin

## Chapter 2

### FARMING

Farming was an extremely important wartime activity of great strategic economic significance because of the need to maximise national food production. Britain had become dependent on importing much of its food, especially cereal grains, meat, dairy products, fruit, tea and coffee. But with the advent of war, this became a dangerous and highly risky business. Merchant shipping, bringing vital supplies, even when grouped in escorted convoys for greater protection, was highly vulnerable to attacks by enemy U-boats and suffered heavy losses.

#### The 'War Ag'

To help boost farming and food production, the war-time coalition government's Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food established the War Agriculture Executive Committee. Better known for short as the 'War Ag', it operated through a network of local committees on which, in addition to civil servants, prominent and experienced local farmers were strongly represented. In pursuit of their brief to maximise agricultural output, the 'War Ag' had considerable powers to direct, help and stimulate the activities of individual farms which they considered to be under-producing. In extreme cases the committee had the ultimate authority to direct the planning and management of an inefficient farm or, as a last resort, even dispossess the farmer. But this was extremely difficult to do, causing great and lasting resentment and rarely happened.

A lot of what was previously regarded as marginal land was brought into production as a result of the activities of the 'War Ag'. Place Barn, the home farm on the Penshurst Place Estate, was probably one of the worst-run and least productive farming enterprises in the district. Large areas of the former deer park were badly neglected and overgrown by bracken. On the directions of the 'War Ag', steam tackle was hired to plough and bring under cultivation the main parkland area. This was a spectacular operation. Two powerful steam engines driving pulleys and cables pulled a massive eight-furrow plough with at least two men in attendance to guide it, up and down what became one enormous field. Having cleared the bracken, the land was re-seeded to become productive pasture. Later a new tenant sorted out the farm, reclaimed the remaining bracken-infested areas of the park, repaired the fences and established a large flock of 'Kents' or Romney Marsh sheep.

#### Penshurst's Farms

The farms on the Penshurst Place estate were all tenanted. Elliott's Farm, already mentioned, had a specialised commercial milk-producing operation with a large herd of Guernsey cows. Milk was cooled, bottled and delivered round the village in one pint and half-pint glass bottles marked with the distinctive logo 'W. Gordon Goodwin Elliott's Farm Dairy'. When bottled milk was in short supply sometimes a little goat's milk was available. Two sisters, the Misses Black, ran a smallholding called The Nunnery, at the top of Smarts Hill. They kept goats for milking and, with a pony and trap,

delivered goats-milk on request or sold it through Miss Lavender's 'Green Tea Rooms', next to Chapman's in the main village street.



All the other estate farms, Well Place, Ford Place, Warren Farm and Nashes Farm were mixed farms. Apart from Well Place, in addition to corn they all grew hops and fruit. These were labour-intensive crops requiring a lot of casual labour. Some of this was provided by the locals but families of travellers, proper gypsies with horse-drawn caravans, were also regular visitors. For the hop-picking, all done by hand at that time, traditional 'hoppers' came

#### *South Park Farm, Penshurst*

down on trains from London and lived in 'hopper huts' on the farms. This was fairly primitive housing as the buildings normally reverted to regular farm storage for the rest of the year. Some came out daily on chartered buses from Tunbridge Wells.

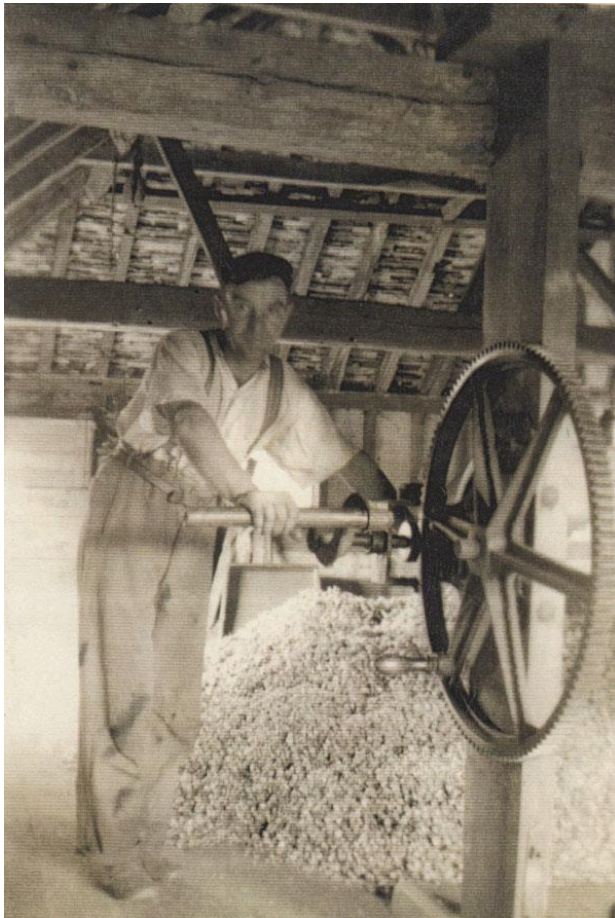
The hop gardens were semi-permanent, each farm having its own quota. The hop plant root-stocks or 'hills' were perennials and could last for around 20 years. The strong supporting overhead wirework was complicated to erect and built to last. The hop-picking season usually lasted for the first three weeks of September.



#### *Hop-picking at Penshurst*

George Davison at Ford Place ran his hop picking with military precision. He had an impressively powerful voice that carried his commands all over the hop garden. "All to work" was the starting cry at eight o'clock in the morning. At noon it was, "All to dinner" and the day's picking finished

promptly at 5pm when his shout was, “No more hops to be picked today” or just “Pick no more hops”. In between times, at roughly two-hour intervals, when it was time to empty the bins and measure out the hops into hessian ‘pokes’ it was, “Get your hops ready”; time then to clean up the hops and pick out the leaves. The measurer (done by volume) was the foreman in charge of the hop garden during picking. By tradition the pickers hated him because they always thought he measured unfairly by pushing down the hops too forcefully into his measurer’s bushel basket. Whatever they might think though, nobody argued with George Davison. When, many years later in one summer vacation I did this job for Dick Goodwin at Nashes Farm, not having George Davison’s voice or authority, I used to walk down the line of pickers and request politely, “Get your hops ready, please”. But when once they didn’t think my measuring fair, one grabbed me by my hair and tried to



tip me into the bin. Tipping the measurer into a bin was the traditional joke for the last day of picking, but the hop-pickers always tipped the measurer in the traditional way as well and by the end of the day his pockets weighed heavy with money.

So in the late summer of 1940, workers in the Penshurst hop gardens had a grandstand view in the skies right overhead of the ‘dogfights’ in the Battle of Britain, and the giant formations of German bombers and their fighter escorts carrying out daylight bombing raids. Mostly they passed harmlessly overhead on their way to and from London but I can recall seeing on one occasion two German airmen baling out on parachutes from their stricken aeroplane. One was already dead when he hit the ground the other, who came down between Penshurst and the next village, Fordcombe, was quickly surrounded and captured. First on the scene were farm workers armed, it was reported, only with pitchforks, but in the face of this hostile mob, after what he had just been

*Hop-pressing at Beckett's Oast, Chiddingstone Causeway*

through, he was in no mood for further resistance. The military police quickly arrived on the scene and took him away.

### **Horses and tractors**

Carthorses were used for most of the basic farm work, especially haulage. The village blacksmiths and forge was owned by John Ephraim Skinner J.P. He worked there with his son William, better known as Bill or ‘Topper’ and occasionally by his youngest son Bert. They were always busy, shoeing

horses and repairing farm implements. There was also a battery charger and for a fee they would recharge and top up the acid accumulators people used to power their wireless radio receivers.



*The smithy at Penshurst*

When we came out of the school, just up the road, we could always pick up the smell of burning hooves when shoeing was going on. We liked to stand and watch: it was usually Topper, wearing his tattered leather apron, not his father, who did most of the farrier work. Sometimes we were even allowed to work the bellows, pumping the handle with a polished cow's horn fitted as a hand grip on the end. The main workshop area with the anvil and furnace was stacked out with what must have been hundreds of horseshoe blanks held on racks round all the walls. Yet Topper always seemed to start making each shoe from a new straight length of steel.

Watching him was fascinating. After removing the old shoe and the nails, examining and trimming the horse's hoof, he raked together the smouldering embers of the forge coal fire and pumped the roaring bellows to get it going again until the coals were glowing. Having selected what he wanted he heated up the chosen length of metal in the fire until it was red hot. Holding it with tongs, it was then hammered out and shaped on the anvil, including forming a lip at the front to help hold the new shoe in place. He punched a nail-hole so that he could carry the red-hot shoe, spiked on the punch to the patiently standing horse. Having first lifted the horse's hoof up onto a tripod stand or gripping it between his knees, hence the leather apron, he applied the still glowing hot shoe to the hoof for fitting. This was where the smoke and smell of burning hoof came from and most young horses hated it. Nowadays horses are nearly always shod cold.

He would often need to take the shoe back to the fire for reheating and further shaping on the anvil and making the holes for the nails. When he was finally satisfied, he plunged the finished shoe with a hiss into the water tank to cool it. For nailing it into place on the hoof he used special shaped soft iron nails taking care to avoid the sensitive central 'frog' area. Finally he crimped off the ends of the nails with pincers and used his rasp to smooth it all down.

I have no idea how long it took Topper to shoe a horse, perhaps half an hour; I just stood there fascinated by the whole process. Although I recall that it was Topper who did most of the farrier

work, when a film crew made a short documentary of Penshurst Life in 1950 and featured the work of the blacksmiths' forge, it was the senior John Ephraim Skinner who emerged from semi-retirement and took centre stage.

Topper Skinner was famous for other things too. He had a most hideously mangled left thumb, no doubt the result of a misdirected blow with a hammer in his younger days. He was also the regular, highly regarded umpire for the Penshurst Park cricket team. He wouldn't umpire Sunday matches because of his strong religious beliefs. Penshurst, playing a Saturday or weekday evening knockout cup match, without taking Topper along as umpire, was unheard of because he had built up such a reputation in the district for his umpiring. Years later when, in student vacations, I played cricket for Penshurst Park myself as wicketkeeper, I realised that Topper's reputation and popularity as an umpire may have been partly based on a strong bias in his decisions in favour of his own side. But I never said anything, except to my father who was a highly experienced cricketer who had played for Penshurst since before the war, although never on Saturdays because of his job. I think he just smiled, so clearly he knew.

Local farmers kept the forge busy converting wagons and other farm implements from having shafts or hitches for drawing by horses to having draw-bars for tractors. As a consequence of the wartime 'Lend-Lease' arrangement with the USA, the first few farm tractors started to appear. Gordon Goodwin at Elliott's Farm, in addition to having a conventional red David Brown tractor with rubber tyres, was allocated a track-laying distinctive yellow Caterpillar tractor. This was shared around other farms for heavy duty work pulling multi-furrow ploughs. His son Dick Goodwin at Nashes Farm got an impressive green and yellow John Deere tractor, a massive brute with enormous wheels and the driver's seat perched high above.

Salman's farm run by Oswald Cunnington was not actually in Penshurst but was part of the estate of the Hever Castle owned by the Astor family. Presumably because he was farming not just the one but three Hever Estate farms, Salman's, Lew Cross and Lockskinners, he got three tractors. Nothing fancy, just the original Standard model Fordsons with big steel rear wheels fitted with spikes or 'spade lugs', totally unsuitable for going on roads. Notoriously difficult to start, their handle had a kick powerful enough to sprain a wrist if you got the timing and position wrong. To make starting easier they were fitted with a dual fuel system. They were started from cold on gasoline from a small tank, then after 10-15 minutes when they were running warm, they could be switched over to the cheaper TVO. Drivers often found it easier to leave them standing ticking over while they had their dinner break, rather than having to start them again from cold.

John Ephraim Skinner at the Forge also rented and farmed a couple of fields, in total about 10 acres, adjacent to the forge, lying between the school and the River Medway. Known to us simply as 'Skinners Fields', the smaller of these, alongside the road leading to Smarts Hill and Fordcombe, was kept under permanent pasture, on which he sometimes grazed a few bullocks. But he always grew corn on the large level field down by the river. Local farmers, notably his friend Oswald Cunnington, helped him with the cultivations. 'Ossie' liked to keep in with Skinners, because although he was a confirmed bachelor living on his own, cared for by his housekeeper, in planning for his old age he clearly had designs on their niece, a spinster called Lillian Hollingsworth who lived with them at the forge.

Ossie's car, an Austin 12, number EKO 903, was often to be seen parked by the side of the road opposite the forge with him sitting in it, waiting in the hope that 'Lil' would take notice of him and come out. Sadly, although I'm sure unfailingly polite, she wasn't really interested in marrying Ossie and moving into Salman's farm. But, a man of his word, Ossie always helped the Skinners' with their harvest. One of the Salman's farm tractors would bring the binder and cut the corn, a two-mile journey on hard roads for which they had to put on the 'road wheels,' flat steel bands which fitted round the wheels over the spade lugs. This was a hated job for which there were few volunteers, so they were tempted to leave them off and risk the bumpy ride and damage to the road surface.

### **Harvesting and threshing**

When corn was first harvested with a binder, even the early horse-drawn models, it was the custom for the field to be 'opened up'. Men using scythes cut the corn round the headland by hand to prevent the tractor and binder running over the crop and flattening it. Others would follow the scythes, gathering up the cut stems into sheaves and tying them round their middle using lengths of straw twisted into ropes. In my time, I have done this and am pretty sure I could soon remember this knack and still be able to do it today. The binder, however, cut, formed and bound its own sheaves in a single operation, providing that the knotting mechanism was working OK, but this was sometimes not the case. Knotters could be tricky things but, after all, it was called a self-binder.

Rabbits were everywhere and if you could get one, a highly valued boost to the household meat supply. Cornfields, especially if they were alongside woodland, were often full of them. After opening up a field, the tractor and binder used to go round and round cutting the standing crop, gradually driving the rabbits into the middle. It was best for catching rabbits if it was a smallish field and cutting could be completed in one day because if left overnight they could 'leak' out. While the odd rabbit would make an early bolt for it as the tractor approached, the rest would be increasingly concentrated in the remaining uncut block in the centre as it gradually diminished in size.

Somehow word would get round when this was happening and people would converge on the field. The farmer and his friends would appear with their shotguns and take up stations on the line where they thought the rabbits would run. If one was around, a gamekeeper might appear out of his covers and join the fun. Farmworkers and local lads would arm themselves with stout sticks. The action would start when the rabbits began to bolt in earnest. The guns would be standing well back and try to pick them off safely out in the open. Sometimes the man on the binder, who kept a stick by him to clear blockages, would grab it and leap off if he saw a frightened rabbit crouching in the corn. I have even seen a driver stop his tractor to leap off to try and catch a rabbit. Those armed only with sticks slowly edged in, keeping out of the way of the guns, and got in on the act by chasing the escaping rabbits. If a rabbit tried to hide and get under a sheaf lying on the ground, the chaser would do a belly-flop on top, scrabble around underneath and try to grab it. Dogs at this stage were a bit of a nuisance running loose and were kept back until the very end when all that was left were rats and mice, then they had a field day.

When the binder had cut the corn, everybody around waded in to lend a hand with stooking the sheaves, lining them up in rows. Usually people worked in pairs, grasping a sheaf by the ears in each hand moving in together in a kind of ritual dance and building the stook. Depending on the type and condition of the crop, they would have six or eight sheaves to each stook. When they were judged dry and ready, usually after a week or so depending on the weather, the crop was ready for carting.

The Faircloths from Warren Farm would bring horses and wagons for carting the sheaves to where the stack was built at the bottom of the other field, nearer the house.

Stacks of corn were always built round with the butts of the sheaves pointing outwards to prevent the ears of corn getting wet. There were no balers, so hay was stacked loose in rectangular 'ricks'. Stack building, whether for corn or hay, was not a job for the unskilled. It was important to get it regular and upright otherwise the stack would lean out and have to be propped up and this was publicly regarded with scorn as ineptitude. At that time, both corn stacks and hay ricks were properly thatched with straw. Today straw or reed thatching is a specialised and highly valued skill, yet back in those days, every farm employed its own competent thatcher. They sometimes signed off and completed their work by fixing a 'corn dolly' on the very top.

The real fun time came when, months later (during the winter), Lou Bromley drove his steam traction engine drawing the threshing machine onto the field. Then it was 'all hands to the pump' and in great excitement everybody came along and joined in. First the threshing box was moved into position close alongside the corn stack and held in place by wooden chocks. The traction engine was uncoupled and moved round end-on to the thresher so that the wide leather driving belt could be fixed in place, running over the driving pulley on the thresher and over the flywheel of the steam engine which was carefully eased back to tighten the belt. It was essential that this set-up lined up perfectly otherwise the belt would fly off. Mind you, it sometimes broke and did this anyway. To help keep it on, a kind of resinous tacky substance was applied to the inside of the belt.

On threshing days, Lou Bromley had to be there early to fire up the boiler and get up a good head of steam. Two men with pitchforks climbed up a ladder onto the stack and removed the thatch. When the threshing box was set running and humming away, two more men got up on top, one with a sharp knife, moved into position above the open hatch of the threshing drum where the wooden beaters were whirling away. The pitcher on the stack started forking down sheaves to the men waiting on the threshing box. Each sheaf was carefully passed, one by one, all the same way round, to the feeder who in one swift action cut the string and shook the contents of the sheaf evenly and carefully into the rotating threshing drum, all the while keeping hold of the strings which he tucked into his belt. Getting a string caught up in the beaters was bad news.

When the thresher was running flat out with all the belts and pulleys spinning round, everything seemed to be rocking and moving at once. The threshing action of the beaters produced a kind of a roar which deepened as the volume of straw increased and the engine took up the extra loading. Powerful fans produced currents of air which separated the grain from the chaff. The grain, have been shaken through sieves and winnowed to take out the husks and bits of chaff, was carried away on conveyors and bagged off through sliding wooden shutters. The 140lb grain sacks took two men to shift them. Straw came out the back and was tied into large trusses. Chaff and dust came out of everywhere and had to be raked up. It got really exciting if the stack was full of rats and mice and the farm dogs had a field day.

Mrs Skinner always made sure that there was a trug basket full of eating apples for general refreshment. Contrary to popular belief, there was no barrel of cider on tap, most of the men drinking cold tea. Threshing was an all-action dangerous operation and everyone, as well as the dogs, had to keep their wits about them. What modern Health & Safety inspectors would have made of it I cannot imagine. As boys of seven or eight, my friends and I had to keep well back out of the

way. But we still shared in all the general excitement, especially if the dogs needed help chasing rats and mice. Sometimes we might nip in unnoticed and take an apple or two.

### **Landgirls**

Supporting the regular farm labour force, or what was left of it after the call-up for military service and the seasonal casual labour, there was the official Women's Land Army with several landgirls directed to work on local farms. The Church House in Leicester Square was requisitioned for them as hostel accommodation. These young ladies, all volunteers, were willing and industrious workers, quick to learn new skills. They were issued with distinctive uniforms comprising a green sweater, fawn colour cord knee breeches long woollen socks and stout brown lace-up shoes. This outfit was topped by a wide-brim felt hat with a WLA band, although they rarely wore this except for formal occasions or perhaps when it was raining. Their cheerful disposition made them popular in the village.

I remember one in particular, called Molly, a happy girl who rode through the village on her bike to and from her work at Nashes Farm, singing at the top of her voice. Another, only ever known to me as Miss Pilgrim, worked for Gordon Goodwin at Elliott's Farm with his dairy herd of Guernsey cows and retail milk round. She was a quiet and studious young woman who regularly borrowed books from the lending library in the Village Hall; she did not live in the WLA hostel but rented a cottage near the Leicester Arms. Continuing to work at Elliott's, she stayed on for a few years after the war. Another of the girls married one of the local farmers. Farming was classed by the government as a 'reserved occupation' and young men working at home on the family farm were not automatically called up for military service so there were plenty of likely candidates for landgirls seeking a partner.

### **Prisoners of War**

At the end of the war, farms in the area were allocated labour from German and Italian prisoners in the POW camp at Somerhill Park near Tonbridge. By arrangement they were brought out by army transport to farms around the village, where, supervised by a guard, they undertook whatever seasonal manual farm work was needed. They were not paid for this work and brought their own food and drink. But some may have been given gifts, fruit perhaps, some milk or even cigarettes, by the farmer and may even have come to take this generosity for granted and expect this treatment.

It was not always forthcoming, though. One group of Italian POWs arrived at Nashes Farm one morning, but hung back and refused to start work. "No milk, no cigarettes, no work" they said. Dick Goodwin the farmer was having none of it and responded in no uncertain terms saying, "Right then, no bloody work," and sent them back in their truck.

There was little point in any of them trying to escape while out with a working party. The war was over, they were going nowhere and were, frankly, better off staying put. A couple of Italians did briefly abscond one day from a group working at Lew Cross farm on the Hever estate. But they didn't get far and were quickly rounded up.

For recreation and exercise they played football in their camp. A friendly match was arranged against a scratch Penshurst Park team, mostly regulars in the Leicester Arms, and the game was played on the pitch in Penshurst Park, recently renovated and used by the army. The Germans were proper footballers and won easily 10-1. But they presented the losing Penshurst team with a fine



wooden plaque decorated with the oak leaf emblem of their camp and inscribed with neat Gothic lettering recording the occasion. This hung in the public bar of the 'Leicester' for years afterward and for all I know, may still be there.

My sister Pamela became friendly with one of the young Germans, called Werner Hartmann, working on Salman's farm. Such was the freedom eventually allowed to some of the POWs after the war, that one weekend he was able to come out on the bus for an unsupervised visit to Penshurst. No doubt believing their own propaganda regarding the state of our post-war deprivations resulting from food rationing, he brought for us a gift of tea and sugar. This was received by my parents with silent indignation and the small packages, tightly wrapped in blue paper, remained unopened in our kitchen cupboard for a long time afterwards.

Eventually Pam encouraged Werner too much and scandalised our parents and no doubt most of the neighbours by taking him to a concert at the Assembly Rooms in Tunbridge Wells. The resultant mega-row when Mum and Dad discovered this, rapidly led to the termination of the friendship and we saw no more of him. Anyway, I believe that soon after, he was repatriated home to Germany. But he continued to write and send us Christmas cards for some years after the war.

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