

WORKERS AND THEIR WORK :

LIFE ON AN EAST ANGLIAN
FARM.

BY JOHN FOSTER FRASER.

*Illustrated from Photographs specially
taken by PAYNE JENNINGS.*

THE farm at which I lived was in Suffolk and seven miles from a station. It was an out-of-the-way corner of the world with no letters reaching us unless we went to another farm over a mile distant, where they were left by the postman. A London daily paper rarely travelled to that solitude, but once a week we scanned the local sheet and found that a rent dinner was of more importance than a national crisis, that the announcement of a change of ministry was pushed into a corner after a long report of a sale of sheep. Farmers have their own little

world, and they know little and care little about the world beyond.

"There's no farming now; it's only grubbing," said a big, bluff, red-cheeked and stiff-jointed old man to me one evening when we leaned over the gate of the stockyard and talked of these sad times for agriculture. Land all over the country, and more especially in the Eastern counties, has depreciated in value, and with a melancholy shrug you are told it is not worth the cultivation; that corn costs more to grow than it will sell in the market, that cattle do not

pay for their food, and that every year the farmer has a balance on the wrong side of his account.

The East Anglian farmer is the most conservative man I know. He has no faith in newfangled notions. He jogs along as his father did, working the heavy clay lands year in and year out, wishing for rain to help on his root crops; then cursing the rain when it comes because it is likely to spoil his hay. And yet he is a type which those of us who live in towns would be glad to have more of—honest, a little rude in speech, warm-hearted, and optimistic—save

as the trees have their leaves tinged with russet and then with gold, a deep October sadness spreads over the land; the heavy rains come and the roads are miry and in places almost impassable; the fields lie desolate and the cattle stand shivering under the thin branched trees. It is a time repellant to the townsman, unless like me he loves the country best when the gay colours have been laid aside and the sombre drab of late autumn wraps the world as in a cloak.

But this is a busy time for the farmer's men. No sooner have they cleared away the crops than they must sow for the coming



IN THE FARMYARD.

respecting the coming season, with regard to which he entertains an abiding pessimism—kind to his labourers, although he does pay them only eleven shillings a week (to which, however, harvesting money and allotments make an additional income), and possessing a strong belief in the virtues of his thick home-brewed ale, in fat bacon and broad beans.

The farmer's year begins at Michaelmas. The wheat and the barley have then been garnered; it has been sold or stacked with the hope of better prices being gained later on. The brightness of summer has gone, and

year; the land has to be ploughed, and from the early morning, when the mists rise from the soil, till the late afternoon when they sink again, the ploughman's "Gee up" and "Whoa, there" are heard as he calls to his horses, and they slowly trudge from field-side to field-side turning the furrows and sowing the wheat.

The ploughman's great pride is his ability to plough each furrow straight. A good man will not deviate an inch in his course. In former days, before cricket was so much in vogue, ploughing contests were the favourite pastime with the young farmers.

But the farmer, unless he farms in a very small way, does not plough now. With all his old-fashioned notions about agriculture, and his open contempt for any man who dubs himself a scientific farmer, his ideas about his own personal position have changed.

I met one or two old farmers who take an active part in the working of their land, but the younger generation prefer to ride on horseback giving their directions, to cut a dash at the "ordinary" on market-day in the neighbouring town, and take an interest in horse-racing. "There's some of them," said the old man I have already quoted, "who only farm about two hundred acres and must keep a hunter. Of course they fail; but I don't see that bad prices has much to do with it in their case. I don't say that there's much to be got out of farming, but there's too much extravagance—a great deal too much." And this was from a wealthy man, according to the reports of his neighbours, but whose hands were horny, who received me with his shirt tucked up, a dusty and battered old straw hat on his head, and wearing corduroy trousers and heavy ironshod boots.

Corn cannot be grown year after year on the same land. It exhausts certain constituents of the soil to such an extent as to forbid two consecutive crops of the same nature. Twenty and thirty years ago, when even the farmers themselves admitted they were doing well, pasture land was broken up for corn-growing purposes, and if the soil was particularly good a crop might be grown several years in succession. But since prices have gone down so much, and when, according to one very precise and calculating farmer, it costs £7 to grow an acre of corn for which only £4 or £5 can be obtained in the market, the tendency is to put down land to pasture for stock-rearing purposes. I found that men throughout East Anglia were going back to the old methods of a four-course shift as the best and cheapest way of dealing with their land. That is, on one quarter of their land they grow wheat, on another quarter barley, a third quarter is clean fallow—land that is being turned over and given a rest—and the fourth is pasture or roots or clover. Where wheat and barley are grown this year roots and clover will be grown next. So on one farm there will be growing corn, to produce a lump sum of money after harvest, and

there will be cattle reared in the pastures and fed in the winter with the roots and clover. Thus, as much as possible, a farm is made self-supporting.

During the long gray winter months life is dreary and monotonous. The hands turn out and repair the hedges where they have been damaged by cattle or where they grow thin. The ditches, which have become choked with weeds and old leaves, are cleaned and the drainage of the land is looked after, though of recent years it must be said that little has been done in this direction. When the weather is frosty, then the corn gathered a few months before is threshed. No longer can you hear the swing and the thud of the flail beating the corn from its shell on the hard floor or see the chaff driven with a hand-fan. The



"FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD."

whirr and the buzz of the threshing machine have taken the place of the more poetic method. Some of the small farmers make their horses provide the motive power. Many others are showing an inclination towards the breeding of pigs, though every farmer I came across told me that if there was one thing that paid less than another it was pig-breeding. A sow has two litters of from five to fifteen each year. All the food-rubbish of the farmyard is thrown into their trough. But pork is very cheap, and the reason a farmer breeds pigs he will tell you is in the hope of it becoming dearer; but the arrival of that time is generally a long way ahead.

There is much to be done about a farmyard during the dreary months of winter. The land on which it is intended to sow mangolds

in April, to be pulled in the following October, has to be ploughed and manured; the cows and sheep to be cared for, and to be fed, by cutting up and preparing the food.

Only a few hands are kept on at the farm in the winter. The farmer cannot find work for all his labourers, and they have to shift as best they know. True, they do not pay much for their cottages, maybe a shilling or eighteenpence a week rent, but how a family of eight or ten exist on an average wage of nine shillings is a problem it is not my duty in these pages to investigate. Yet they belong to provident societies, and many of them rear a pig. Allotments are fairly popular in the district, and the labourers, if they do not make much money out of them, manage to grow all the vegetables required for their homes, whilst the pig is their staple meat supply. The East Anglian labourer, as far as I could make out, has but one ambition, and that is to grow finer peas than are grown in his neighbour's garden. He cares nothing for books, and could hardly spell through them had he an opportunity to read, which he has not.

The sort of Christmas one becomes acquainted with through the agency of coloured illustrations, the snow and the rollickings, the ghost stories and the love-making, exist now but in a rather diluted condition. More often than not Christmastide

is a green time, if it does not happen to rain, just as though it were an ordinary April day. As many of the farms in East Anglia are far from any station, and the people are not yet affected by what must be called—though it be a vile word—modernity, there is a good old-time flavour about the junketings. The rooms are decorated with paper roses and festoons; everybody has a hand in the making of the plum-pudding; for several days folks seem to live on cake and ale, there is singing and dancing—somewhat elementary maybe—and the cares of business are not allowed to interfere with the mirth, which is free and unconfined. There is a rustic, warm-blooded, generous hospitality abroad, so that you are even melted into permitting the importuning labourer to drink your health many times over.

But with the New Year the flood of rejoicings is on the ebb and the farmstead settles down to its customary life. As the days lengthen the work in the fields becomes greater. The spring oats have then to be sown. The spring oats do not however afford so good a crop as the winter oats. In spring also is sown clover and other food for sheep and horses over the same ground as the growing wheat. But all through the winter the clover will be growing and be ready for reaping next spring. There are two kinds of clover, white and red. Of the white clover there is only one crop; of the red



FARMER'S CHILDREN FISHING.

clover there is a crop in June and another in September, the September crop generally being used for seed. A clover crop is, as a rule, sown after the field has produced barley; then comes wheat, and then beans, mangolds, turnips, or clean fallows, and so back again to barley. The ground is not tired out by this process, and the farmer saves in the manuring. These and other plans he follows to lessen expense. For instance, he turns his cows first into a grazing meadow; after they have eaten all they can the horses are given a turn, for they can get hold of grass much closer than the cows can; when the horses have eaten the ground pretty trim the turn of the sheep comes. As long as there is an eighth of an inch of grass the farmer knows that the sheep will be able to eat it. A field can be almost eaten bare by this means.

As spring advances additional hands are taken on at the farm. The hoe has to be used among the young cornshoots, and the root-crops have to be singled and cleaned. Weeds grow almost as rapidly in a wheat-field as they do in the most modest of back gardens, and they have to be ruthlessly cut down or they gain the upper hand. When time and funds permit the farm buildings are refurbished in the spring; roofs are repaired and fresh coats of tar make the out-houses bright. Gradually Nature awakens from her sleep, and the barren trees and hedges begin to sprout buds of green. After a warm rain they burst, and the country is robed in beauty. Every day the bright leaves on the hedges accumulate until the twigs are covered and there is a bank of rich foliage. The call of the cuckoo is heard from a clump of trees not far off, and already there is the twittering of birds as they build their nests.

At this time the farmer is very anxious about his hay harvest. He wants plenty of fine weather, and he is happy when, by the middle of June, his meadows are knee deep with rich herbage. Then some morning, when the sun rides in a clear sky and the hedges are entwined with honeysuckle and wild rose, there will be heard the clatter of the mowing machine as it sweeps round the

outer edge of the meadow cutting down the long sweet-smelling grass. The next morning from a dozen to twenty men and women—the women chiefly in milkmaid cotton bonnets—come down to make the hay. Haymaking, to do it properly, is not the holiday occupation it seems; it tires the muscles of the arms, and to the beginner there is soon an aching pain in the back. But tiring as it is there is a delight in the labour of haymaking, the delight of working in the genial rays of the sun, of breathing the balmy air and scenting the aroma of the drying grass; the delight of working with your shirt loose at the throat and your arms bare, tossing and turning the hay through the long hot hours of the day; the delight of the midday meals under the shadow of the



IN THE HAYMAKING SEASON.

adjoining hedge, and drinking the strong home-brewed ale from the farm, and then towards evening, before the sun sinks low and shadows dance long over the bundles of hay, the joy of loading it on the carts and stacking it in the yard for use when there is no buzz of summer insects, but the world looks cold and bare.

All the time the farmer is rejoicing in his fortune at having such a spell of good weather to get in his hay, he is probably also grumbling that the continued drought will be playing mischief with his corn crops, and he sighs for a steady downpour. When I remonstrated with a farmer for this unreasonable attitude, he smiled and said, "Yes, you are right. I would like the sun to be strong in this meadow, but I would

like it to be raining a couple of fields away." Sometimes rain will come on while the fresh mown grass is lying on the ground, and the farmer can only stand by helpless, unable to put forth a hand to avert the virtue of his

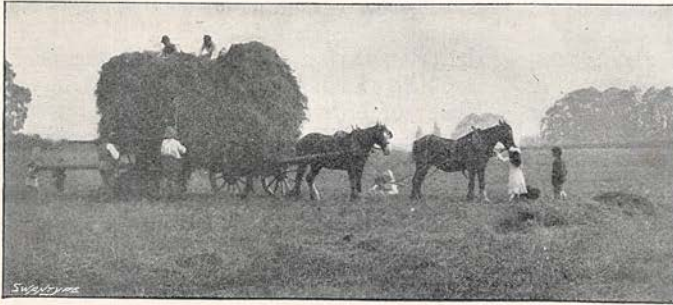
time is ruinous. Farmers recall with a shudder of dismay the wretched harvest of 1879, which was the worst within the memory of living man. It was all the more acutely felt because it followed on a series of

most prosperous years, which had induced farmers to put their all in corn-growing, and not rely on cattle-rearing, roots or dairy produce.

At harvest time the labourers are not as a rule paid so much a week, but so much for their services during harvest. It is reckoned that one man is required for every twelve to eighteen acres to be cleared, according to the machinery employed. Every company

of men has a "lord" or foreman. Thirty years ago each labourer was paid £4 or £5 for the harvest, but as times improved the prices went up to £7, £8, and even £9 a man. But of late years these figures have dropped. One plan sometimes pursued is for the farmer to hire his men for five weeks, from five in the morning till seven at night, at £6 or £7 for the whole period, and a "harvest home" if all goes well.

The reaping comes when all the country side has ripened into beauty, when the vivid greens of spring and the gorgeous colourings of summer have given place to the soft variegated tones of early autumn. When the garnering of the corn begins the first

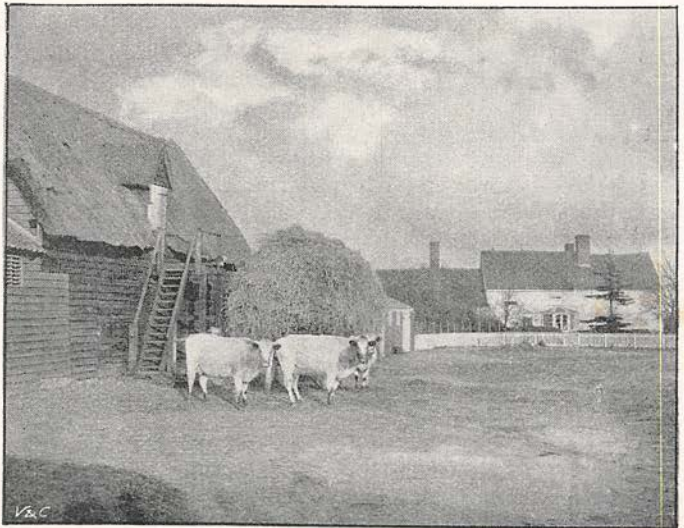


TAKING IN THE HAY.

hay being washed out by the continuous wet. An afternoon's rain in a district where the hay harvest is in full swing means the loss of many thousands of pounds.

The farms in Suffolk are on heavy clay, eminently suitable for corn-growing if there is not too much wet. When the land is what is called loose then it can do with plenty of rain. What heavy land wants is fine weather with light showers. If the weather is too fine the corn is scorched; there is not much straw and the kernel is small. East Anglian farmers, in face of the bad times, do not spend much money in having their corn crops hoed.

Fields of waving golden corn make admirable pictures no doubt, but they are hardly what the farmer wants. It is generally admitted, I think, that wheat that can be cut green produces more flour, and the straw is better for feeding purposes, than when it has been well scorched. The proper time to start the reaping of wheat is when you can squeeze the kernel and no moisture comes from it. Harvest time is of course the most important of all. A tradesman is always turning over his capital in the course of twelve months, but a farmer sinks his capital in the land one autumn and he has no chance of a return till the following autumn. A season of wet at harvest



A CORNER OF THE FARM.

operation is to cut the winter oats. They are tied in sheaves and left standing in the fields in picturesque array to dry. Then are they carted to the homestead, stacked, and a substantial roof of thatch prepared to keep off the rain and the snow when the dark days of winter come along. Many cottagers make their own beer, in preparation for harvest, and every morning the bronzed sons of the field as they trudge to their work carry their dinner in a handkerchief under one arm whilst under the other is a bottle filled with home-brewed. The reaping of the corn, the building of the sheaves, and then the gleaning of the fields by the women and the children of the village, present delightful pictures of English rural life. The outlook for the farmer is hopeless enough, and the future of the labourer is black, but for the time, at any rate, they have the joy of healthful vigour, which the workers in the factory and the city never fully realise. The wives and the little ones always appreciate the delights of gleaning. It is surprising what a bunch of wheat they will gather in the course of a day. If the farmer is kindly disposed he will give permission for it to be run through his machines. It is then taken to the miller to be ground into flour, or it may be used for the fattening of the pigs. Good wages, good health and good weather make harvest the happiest time in the round of the year.

Should the harvest be early it is all over by the second week in September; but be the weather bad the last sheaf is not stacked till the dull gray days of November. A wise farmer will tell off one of his men to plough the land as soon as it is harvested. This greatly improves the soil and makes it at least worth an extra pound per acre.

When the ground is clear of the corn and the labour of the year is over, when the young clover is peeping over the short stalks of straw and the big autumn moon casts a silver halo over the world, then comes the feast of the year—the harvest home. This is a supper given by the farmer to his men in celebration of a prosperous harvest. It generally takes place in one of the barns, which is decorated with bunting, and lamps

are hung from the rafters. The tables are on settles, and every man has as much roast beef and beer as he wants. The mirth is boisterous; everybody is in the heartiest and the wildest of spirits, hoarse laughter is only interrupted by shouting for more beef and more ale; the servant wenches from the farm, who do the waiting, are chaffed by the young swains from the village, whilst at the head of the table sits the beaming farmer with a huge knife in one hand and a huge fork in the other, slicing off morsels of a pound weight from a great round of beef. Then when the tables have been cleared away there is singing; the young fellows sing music-hall ditties they have picked up at a fair, and the old men sing the half-forgotten ballads of fifty years ago. There



IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HARVEST.

is generally somebody who can play the cornet, vigorously but not always tunefully, and before the evening is far advanced there is dancing. The East Anglian labourer dances with the delirious enthusiasm of a dervish. If he cannot dance with a woman then he dances with a man, and if he cannot secure either then he dances by himself. There is no rhythm in the dance. It is a wild shuffling and twisting into all sorts of postures of the feet, a shaking of the body and a twirling of the arms. As the dancing follows after a particularly heavy supper, with an unusual consumption of liquor, it is hot work. So jackets are thrown aside, shirt sleeves are rolled up and vests loosened; streams of perspiration run down the brick-tinted cheeks, but eyes sparkle with delight, and in simple ecstasy a man will often give

a yell like a war whoop, seize somebody round the neck and insist that he too should join in the fun. The moment the dance ceases he gulps down a mug of beer and is ready to start again. "If only Londoners could see this," said a farmer to me one night as I stood watching the labourers dance, "they would be pretty well astonished. Some of those men have never been on a train, and only rarely seen one. Few of them have been twenty miles from here all their lives. You get an idea to-night of how rural England enjoyed itself a century ago."

And I confess that the sight of these hard working men, toiling from the day they can

in the front of which is a group of farmers and merchants sampling small bags of corn. When a farmer sells his corn the buyer retains the sample. During the week the corn is carted, and if all be right then the money is paid on the following market day. It is very rarely the buyer is dissatisfied, for sharp practice is not a fault of the farmer. But still there are black sheep among farmers just as among other people, and I have heard of instances of a man putting good corn at the bottom and the top of the sack and inferior in the middle. The reason good corn is put at the bottom is because the corn is transferred from the farmer's to

the miller's sacks, and what is at the bottom of one comes to the top of the other. On the other hand the merchant may try to be too clever. Perhaps between one market day when he buys the corn and the next when he ought to pay for it the current price has gone down. Then he will cavil and say the wheat or the barley or the oats are not up to sample, and unless the price is brought down he will refuse to have them. The farmer is entirely in the hands of the merchant and has to give way to him. It is a constant grievance of the farmers that they are practically at the mercy of the merchants.

And now let me say something about the animals on a farm. The horses, the cows and the sheep all require a great amount of attention. The horsekeeper gets a couple of shillings more than the labourer. Looking after the horses is important work. The keeper must be in the stables between four and five every morning baiting the horses so

that they will be ready for work at six o'clock. It is seven or eight at night before the man can get home to his cottage or to the village ale-house to have his customary pint. Though the farmer who is fond of "cutting a dash" has a hunter, the ordinary farmer, who dearly loves a bit of hunting also, generally goes to the meet astride the same animal as he rides about the farm and uses in his gig for driving to market. But good sound cart-horses are what are wanted on a farm, and a three-year-old will fetch from £25 to £45. If the cart-horse is very good it is sent to London as a dray-horse and £50 is readily obtained for it. Shire horses, with long-haired legs, go principally



A CHAT WITH THE GAMEKEEPER.

walk till the day they are buried in a pauper's grave, but now for a few hours as happy as the happiest men in all the land, was one of the strangest I have ever beheld.

The custom during harvest is to stack the corn and then sell it at suitable times in the course of the coming year. But if there is a prospect of a good market it is thrashed right away and put in sacks. The farmer takes a sample sometimes direct to the miller and sometimes to the merchant. The merchant is met on market day in the neighbouring town. The farmer drives in his gig, often accompanied by his wife. While the wife goes off to do some shopping the husband walks over to the principal hostelry,

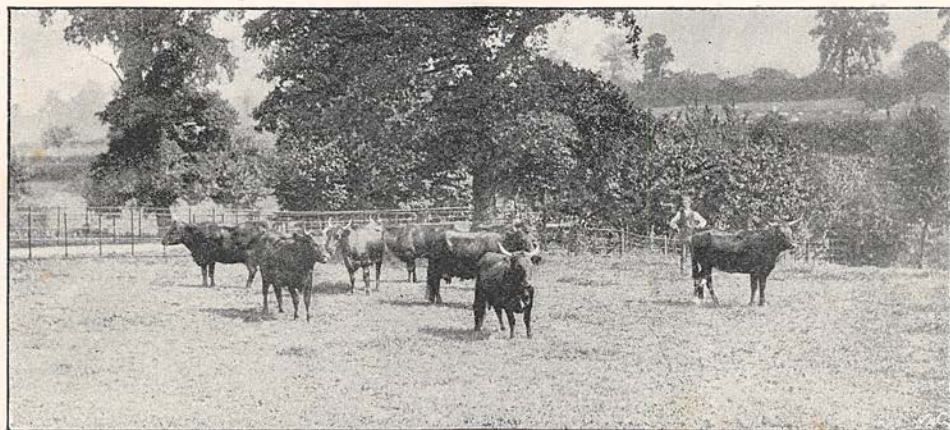
to the London market. These shire horses are not much used however on the heavy lands for the very reason of the long-haired legs. As I have said the land is heavy and the clay, getting clogged with the hair, makes the foot of the horse soon double its size. To remove the clay is difficult, and therefore farmers avoid the difficulty by sticking to Suffolks with their clean legs.

Several agriculturalists told me that had they the capital to work upon they would take up stock-rearing as better paying than corn-growing. But they keep to corn-growing because the return, though late enough, is quicker than with stock. Dairying is not on a large scale in the Eastern counties, and where there is butter-making it is generally on old-fashioned lines. The richest milk is given by Alderney and Jersey cows, but the quantity is small; so what a good dairy-mistress will attend to is to have a few Alderneys and Jerseys in the herd to enrich the bulk of the milk. Each cow calves once a year, and before the birth of the calf a decreasing quantity of milk is taken from the mother. If, after the calf is born, the milk is required for dairy purposes, then only the skimmed milk is given to the young ones along with oatmeal. A good cow will yield about two gallons of milk twice a day. The produce is nearly all sent to big towns, except when kept for butter-making. It is therefore far more difficult to obtain new milk in the country than in the centre of London. During the whole of the winter the cows are either chained up in their stalls or kept in the cowyard, and fed on swedes, straw, corn, and oil-cake. They have to be well and regularly fed for there is a danger, when they

are badly fed, of the butter being strong and tasting of turnips. When really rich milk is wanted oil-cake is added to the ordinary food. Where dairying is carried on to any extent brewers' grains are given to the cows. Indeed, in very large dairies the cattle are stall-fed all the year round, but these cows do not live so long as the others. As soon as they show signs of exhaustion they are sent off to the butcher.

Roughly speaking it may be said that a quart of cream will make a pound of butter. This depends, of course, on the quality of the cream. On most of the farms in East Anglia butter is made once or twice a week. Butter is always the best when made from fresh cream, but there is not enough cream to churn every day, so it has to stand for a few days and consequently loses somewhat in quality. A butter-maker is something like a poet, she has to be born a butter-maker. Some women are successful without training, but with others all the training in the world would not turn them into good butter-makers. Most townfolk have a fancy for what is known as buttercup butter. The butter receives its colouring, not from the buttercup, but from a weed the cow eats; and although this butter looks very nice it does not keep long. The way the farmer disposes of his butter is novel. He sends it all to the shopkeeper in the village or market-town from which the farm groceries are purchased. One receives butter and gives groceries in return. No money passes, until at the end of the year a balance is struck.

There is plenty of sheep-breeding in the Eastern counties, where the most popular breed is a cross between what are known as white-faced and black-faced. The great

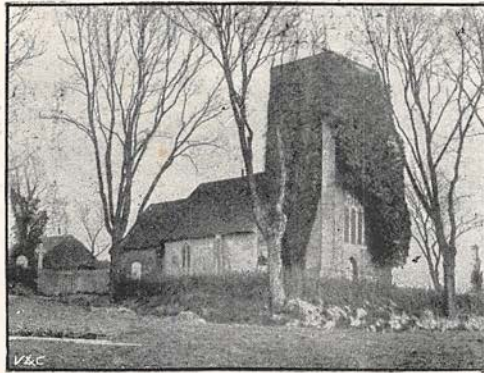


MILKING TIME.

desire of the sheep-breeder is to secure a speedy return for his outlay, and he does all he can to get mutton into the market. The old-fashioned style was to keep sheep for a couple of years before selling them to the butcher; but now one year is considered long enough. Lambs begin to fall in the Eastern counties immediately after Christmas, and in ten weeks or three months they are in the butchers' shops. The great evil of the lambing season is the wet. Sheep can endure plenty of dry cold weather, but wet induces disease. A farmer does well if from a hundred ewes he gets a hundred and fifty lambs. Sometimes the mother dies, and then the lamb has to be put with another ewe which has lost its lamb. The ewe will have nothing to do with the strange lamb, so deception has to be practised. The skin from the body of the dead lamb is wrapped round the body of the live one. The ewe, which recognises its child by the smell of the coat, then takes to the little one. In a couple of days the skin can be removed and the sheep will continue to be quite friendly and motherly to her foster-child.

I have only dealt so far with the most important incidents in farm life. There is the poultry-yard, the hatching of chickens, and the despatch of eggs to the town. Ducks' eggs are frequently placed under a hen, and when the ducklings are able to waddle about they put their mother into a flutter of excitement on jumping into the pond. Attached to most farmsteads is a fruit garden and orchard, and in summer-time it is the occupation of the daughters of the household to pluck the fruit and convert it into preserves or store the apples for the winter.

Life on a farm has indeed its many disadvantages. Your farm may be in a lonely part of the country and your next door neighbour a couple of miles away. You are shut off, as it were, from the world; and in winter all is dreary and barren and desolate; but with the summer comes the reawakening of happiness and the joy of living. And though the farmer has the constant worry of making both ends meet he has the satisfaction of knowing—if it be any satisfaction—that he is not the only man who is afflicted with the same worry.



A VILLAGE CHURCH.