

## **Cheese Schools and Cider Classes: the Development of Agricultural Education in Somerset**

**By Janet Tall**

During the late nineteenth century a quiet revolution was going on in the teaching of agriculture. Growing foreign competition along with economic depression in the agricultural sector, and the increasing demands of an urban population for more standard, high quality food products, all contributed to the development of a more scientific approach to farming. Agricultural societies, prominent individuals from the farming world, and latterly the state, came to see the promotion of better education as a way of helping a struggling agricultural sector.

In Somerset this was first attempted under the auspices of the Bath and West of England Society. During the 1880s they established travelling dairy schools, and demonstrations at a working dairy during their annual shows. Travelling butter schools were held on farms around the county, and in 1890 the first cheese school took place at Palace Farm, Wells. These schools attracted mainly female students, many of whom went on to win competitions for their cheese and butter at agricultural shows in the region.

Among the membership of the Bath and West were several prominent Somerset landowners, all of whom viewed the development of agricultural education as significant for the long term well being of rural society. Amongst the most vocal were Sir Richard Paget of Cranmore Hall, West Cranmore, Henry Hobhouse of Hadspen House, Castle Cary, and Sir Thomas Dyke Acland and his sons, who owned estates on the Devon/Somerset border. Only by keeping the rural economy viable, they argued, could the growing problem of rural depopulation as a result of emigration and urban migration be tackled. The census shows that the population of Somerset directly involved in agricultural work fell by 43% between 1861 and 1901.

In their capacity as MPs, these men contributed to a growing lobby which called for direct state intervention in the provision of technical education for agriculturalists. Sir Richard Paget chaired the Departmental Commission on Agricultural and Dairy Schools, whose final report was published in 1888. However, their real breakthrough came with the voting of the Whisky Money in 1890. This money was originally destined to compensate publicans following a move to reduce the number of public houses in the country. Following an outcry from the temperance lobby Arthur Acland suggested that the money should be used instead to fund technical education, to be provided through the newly formed county councils.

Somerset was voted £12,017 from the whisky money funds for the year 1890-91. This paved the way for a growing number of county based initiatives over the next decade. Classes in manual instruction, aspects of dairying, poultry rearing, orchard

management and fruit growing were carried out on a peripatetic basis. Early plans for an agricultural institute were seen as too ambitious and had to be shelved, but 1900 saw the opening of an experimental farm at Bickenhall, just outside Taunton.

However, the farm was short-lived, as these developments took place against a backdrop of agricultural depression, which left many farmers struggling to survive. An active lobby of farmers within Somerset County Council and the various local agricultural societies remained firmly against any growth in technical education for agriculture. Their priority lay with ensuring a low level of rates, coupled with a belief that practical farmers did not need to be educated in their occupation by outsiders. The existence of the two opposing views on agricultural education within the county existed throughout the period up until the First World War, and provides much insight into the stresses and strains which existed within rural society during the period. The fabric of that society was changing, and the attempts to provide a more scientific approach to farming was a visible manifestation of this. As late as 1914 the County Instructor in Agriculture, John Burton, was still unable to obtain support from the farmers for the opening of a farm institute for Somerset.

In other areas more rapid changes occurred. Cider making experiments had been taking place from 1893 on Robert Neville Grenville's estate at Butleigh, near Glastonbury. In 1903 this was placed on a more formal footing by the opening of the National Fruit and Cider Institute at Long Ashton, just outside Bristol. Over the next decade work was carried out to systemise the production of cider and perry, as well as to scientifically categorise the wide range of apples grown in the region. By 1912 the institute had been drawn into the Government's scheme to rationalise agricultural research, using the funds made available from the recently created Development Fund.

Attempts were also made to interest a generation of schoolchildren in their rural surroundings, in an attempt to stem the tide of rural migration and emigration. Educators, agriculturalists and politicians debated the best way to achieve this aim. The result was a rapid growth in the teaching of nature study in rural schools, along with the active promotion of school gardens in the years immediately prior to the First World War. At a more senior level Wellington County School, Shepton Mallet Grammar School and Sexey's School, Bruton, developed specially designated agricultural sides to their curricula.

Somerset provides just one example of an educational movement which was sweeping across the country in the decades before 1914. It opens a number of debates on the extent to which the state should become responsible for technical education and its curriculum, whether education for a specific economic sector was desirable or necessary, and the impact it had on a predominantly rural county such as Somerset.

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This article gives a brief introduction to the research that Janet Tall has been undertaking for a part-time PhD on The Role and Development of Agricultural Education in Somerset, c.1865-1914. Janet is happy to hear from anyone with information sources that may further her research and she can be contacted by email: [janetnic@surfaid.org](mailto:janetnic@surfaid.org) or you can write to her c/o The Regional Historian.