

A GLIMPSE OF FARMING ON THE BUTLEY ESTATE

From 26 July to 3 September 1939 when war was declared, a diary kept by a student farmer, Stephen Ryder, provides a vignette of state-of-the-art farming methods as practised on the Butley estate that summer.¹ It is rare for farming operations to be described in such detail and Stephen's entries have a poignancy for us given our awareness that people's lives were then about to change forever.

Historically the estate had been created by benefactors of Butley Priory which was founded in 1171 close to Henry II's newly-built castle of Orford. In the centuries following its dissolution in 1538 it had been dispersed and recreated differently several times.² The depression following the end of World War 1 led to the sale of lands known collectively as the Rendlesham estate; its component farms lay derelict or struggled to survive. In the 1930's it was the turn of Sir Bernard Greenwell to buy up neglected land in the Sandlings, creating an estate there of more than 7,000 acres and providing employment for local people. Sir Bernard was an agricultural catalyst at a time when the need to increase food production had become critical to those who had judged war inevitable. He was described by a fellow landowner at a London meeting of the Farmers' Club which he addressed in January 1939, as a man of affairs as well as a successful landowner and the farmer of many thousands of acres of land.³ The acres spoken of were widely dispersed; in Inverness, Durham and Surrey. He was praised for his recent work in Suffolk where he had carried through



Fig. 1. Now redundant. A cluster of former milking sheds and byres at Capel Home Farm where Stephen and Peter lodged in 1939



Fig. 2. Stock grazing on the marshes before the war. Horses were still the main power on the land

in the previous five years or so 'a fine piece of development work, the transformation of what was a derelict estate into well farmed land.' For Sir Bernard soil fertility was key; he understood that practically the whole of the riches of the world came from the land. It was the basis of all wealth and manufacturing was only secondary to it. In his lecture 'Soil fertility - the Farm's Capital' he explained the utmost importance of subsoiling to introduce oxygen and form humus and gain all the benefits of mycorrhizal (root and bacterial) association. He was far ahead of his time in realising the disadvantages of using chemicals on the land, promoting the application of organic fertilizers and recycled town waste. He listed a few of what were then improved tools for farming enabled by the introduction of the internal combustion engine: tractor, harrow, subsoiler, combine harvester, gyrotiller and grass drier. He perceived that the planting of sugar beet was probably responsible for much better cultivation of the land and it remains to this day a major crop on the Sandlings soil farmed by his grandson.

The Butley estate, Sir Bernard's last venture, was run by a pair of agents; below them were farm managers, tenants of individual farms and farm workers. Sir Bernard possessed the capital to modernize farming; tractors, pressers, balers and crop driers were new (and not altogether reliable) phenomena in the Sandlings. The centralized distribution of feed stuffs by lorry from Abbey Farm was impressive. It was a good place for a budding farmer to get work experience. Stephen Ryder was lodged together with another farming student, Peter Gadden, at Home Farm, Capel St Andrew. There the farm manager, Francis King, was their host.