

Hill Farms

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Between half past eight and nine o'clock each school-day, a number of children between five and 14 years of age could be seen walking down the Cleeves into Church Road, along Stradbrook and eventually to school in the British School.

These were the children from Grant's and Reeves' farms, which are situated in a fold of the hills way above the village of Bratton. Other children would straggle down Luccombe Road from Southdown Farm which lies almost halfway between Bratton and Imber. These farms, along with Thorncombe, New Farm and Ladywell, were known as hill farms.

Hill farms usually comprised several cottages and were scattered at intervals for miles across Salisbury Plain above the villages lying along the escarpment.

Children from the hill farms were often the only link between the cottages and the outside world for weeks at a time, especially during the winter months. Bread and other essential items were carried home from the village shops – and if the children were hungry, the bread arrived much the worse for wear!

Often it was dark when they left home in the morning and dark when they arrived home again in the evening. Snow, hail, rain and fog sometimes accompanied them on their travels, but they were healthy and seldom missed school on account of the weather, although one case is recorded where a very young child was kept home at Grant's Farm because of the weather. The school attendance officer – after some difficulty – visited the home and the child's mother attended to his personal comfort and made him a cup of tea. He expressed astonishment at the distance the child had to walk and the very hilly – often treacherous – road over which he had to walk to school, and decided on the spot to do nothing further in the matter.

People living in these remote areas could not receive medical attention very easily. They had either to visit the doctor's surgery in the village (thereby losing wages) or to carry out their own remedies. These included such things as nettle leaf tea for rashes and blood disorders, elderflower ointment for sores, cuts and bruises, dock leaf application for nettle stings, clover for toothache, dandelion leaves or ground root for upset livers, and application of common soda or vinegar for insect stings.

If a tooth needed removing, a string was attached to the tooth and tied to the door handle. The door was slammed vigorously and with luck the tooth sprang out. It was a very painful extraction, resorted to only in dire circumstances, but here again to visit a dentist in the neighbouring town would mean loss of wages if the sufferer was an adult.

All able-bodied adults worked on the farms, which were mixed – arable, cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry. Many hill farmers kept guinea fowl or 'gleenies' as they were called. Their eggs were very nutritious although the shells were tough. They were partridge-like in appearance and gave loud warnings when strangers approached. As they roosted in trees, foxes and badgers seldom attacked them, but they were fed like other poultry.

Cottages

Like most farm cottages, these were known as 'tied'. As long as a farm worker was employed, the farmer housed him and his family in a cottage at a nominal rent, and often supplied produce and milk at a reasonable price, if not free. Most cottages on the hill farms were built of stone and brick and whitewashed, with tiled roofs, and varied in size from two or three rooms to six rooms as in the 'shooting box' at Grant's Farm.

The shooting box was so called because it was used mainly by farmers and their friends who had been shooting game in the hills close by. The 'long room' was always kept ready, with the table laid and chairs arranged to accommodate the shooting party. This room was at ground level but the rest of the cottage was underneath it – being on several levels to accommodate the fact that it was built into a hillside.

Life must have been hard for there was no electricity or gas, but the water was usually plentiful as all the farms owned very deep wells. Fuel was gathered from the many trees surrounding the farm buildings, as fires were needed all through the year for cooking purposes. The meals were prepared on range-type cookers with open fire to the right hand side and ovens to the left.

Grant's Farm

The cottages were arranged in a rough horseshoe formation, starting with a thatched cottage amongst the trees on the right hand side, and ending with the shooting box on the left hand hillside. They were sheltered from the elements by a circle of beech trees, and interspersed with large grain barns on staddle stones, stables, cowsheds and cart-sheds. The deep well was a distance away on the south side, out of the sight of the children.

Southdown

There were not so many cottages on this farm, which was amongst trees again but at the side of the road. The two cottages lay back up against the hill behind the farm and were built of brick. A small pond (the remains of a dew-pond?) lay near the farmhouse at the foot of the hill. This farm was mostly a sheep farm with a small acreage of arable, and was on the road to Imber.

Thorncombe Farm

This farm was situated well away from the main road leading to Imber, along a track of about half a mile. The farmhouse and cottages of brick were completely hidden from view by large trees. Sheep were the main industry on this farm, with as many as 12 sheepdogs to control the very large flocks. A very familiar sight was that of the

shepherd's hut which was towed around to follow the folded sheep as they were moved from place to place.

New Farm

A track led over the hillside from Grant's Farm to New Farm, which was also reached from a minor road leading off the Imber Road, close to Southdown Farm. The farmhouse and cottage nestled in a fold of the hills and were completely invisible from the main road. The main product again was sheep with some arable land. One of the first motor cars to appear in Bratton was owned by the farmer's son at New Farm.

Ladywell

This was a fairly large settlement. The farmhouse had six bedrooms and there were two sizeable cottages as part of the homestead. Water was supplied to the farm from a very deep well, and a windmill was used to pump it up. This was a mixed farm, although sheep again were plentiful and dotted the hillside. Although this farm was close to Imber, children from Bratton walked to Ladywell to play with the children there – and to pick mushrooms when they were in season.

Westbury Hill Sheep Fair

Each September up to World War II, a sheep fair was held on the plateau behind the White Horse, where sheep, cattle, horses, domestic animals and chickens were offered for sale.

The sheep were driven overland for many miles from as far afield as Salisbury, Chippenham, Trowbridge, Devizes and many of the villages in between. Thousands of sheep were offered for sale and many were sold on gentleman's agreement – that is, a shake of hands between the seller and the buyer, the money to be paid at a later date. Some horses were brought over from Ireland; they travelled via boat and train and were walked up from Westbury station. Cheap Jacks were also in evidence selling their wares, and gypsies selling their paper flowers and clothes pegs. The gypsies camped for the summer at nearby Beggar's Knoll and did casual work on the hill farms. Local schools were closed for the hill fair. Older village folk believe that the fair originated as 'Bratton Fair', which was held during the summer months for hundreds of years and at which village folk not only bought animals, flour etc but replaced crockery and cutlery.