



Work

Children at work

In the past children were encouraged to work by their parents, not just for pocket money, but to supplement their families income.

On this page and we explore four extracts from 'Growing up in Ditchling' by Doris Hill, which looks at the seasonal work children would undertake from making jams, growing and picking herbs, raising rabbits for fur and food, and investing in growing apple trees.

Visit 'A farmers boy' for memories on the hard life children often endured working on local farms.

Getting the fruit for jams

We children had the task of picking the wild fruits in season - bullace (small wild plums), blackberries, eggasses (hawthorn berries), the heads of dandelions, rose-hips, elderflowers for champagne, and later the elderberries for wine.

We used to eat the tender shoots from the middle of new hawthorn leaves in spring. We called this 'bread and cheese'. But the best task was the picking of wild raspberries, for to gather these we had to roam the South Downs, as up there the canes grew in abundance.

We also had to take our turn at stirring the great pans. This was a very hot job, for we had a two-burner kitchen range. The jars had to be washed. These were not of glass as they are today, but of brown earthenware, holding either two or four pounds each.

Rex wrote the labels, to get out of having to don a large white apron which we wore when stirring the boiling jam. We made the covers by cutting grease-proof paper to size, usually by holding a pudding basin over the paper and drawing around it. These circles were dipped into skimmed milk, stretched tightly over the jars and tied with fine string.

Some of the ladies of the village would buy a jar, but most of it was packed into wooden crates and these would be collected by Carter-Paterson the carrier and taken to the various universities that were attended by the young gentlemen of the village. I always marvelled at the vast amount of preserves that they seemed to need each term.

Seasonal work

Although we did not receive any pocket money from our parents, we always seemed able to earn some. In the spring and early summer-time, we would collect herbs for the lady at the Blue House. One of the fields belonging to the Gospels Farm was named St. Luke, and as if living up to the physician for whom it was named, it always seemed to have a plentiful supply of herbs - agrimonies, coltsfoot, ground ivy, ground elder, dandelions, heads and roots - these would stain our hands brown.



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Children at work - continued

The stinging nettles were the worst to pick, but we gathered them cheerfully and carried the sacks up to the Blue House, where the lady (I think Miss Sawyer) would sort the herbs, clean them and then package them and dispatch them to London. This field was lovely in June, with ox-eyed daisy intermingling with the dainty ragged robin. We also sold cut flowers and paid mother for seeds each year, keeping the rest for pocket money.

In autumn we would pick acorns for the farmers to feed their pigs. This practice stopped after the 1939-45 war, for acorns tended to make the flesh slightly dark in colour. Another thing we did in autumn was to get up early and run bare of foot through the dew-soaked grass to gather mushrooms. There was always someone in the village willing to buy them.

On one of our holidays from school, Rex thought it would be a good idea to gather watercress from the all drainage ponds that were in most fields. This we were to sell. At the first pond, he leant over too far and fell in head first. By the time we had pulled him out and dried his clothes in the sun, it was getting dark, so we crept home to a good hiding.

The Bunny Trade

My sister Joyce and I were fortunate in getting a Saturday job. Two spinster ladies bred Angora rabbits. These they kept in two ex-army huts. The hutches were four deep down each side of the huts. There were similar hutches in a double row through the middle.

Our task was to clean out the hutches and put in clean litter. I disliked the job, but the pay was good - 6d a day for each of us. These ladies also taught us to card the wool that they collected each time they groomed the rabbits. Later they taught us to spin it, ready for them to weave.

I was sad when after a disastrous fire they left the village. This reminds me of a childhood curse we were in the habit of using: 'May all your rabbits die'. I wonder if this went back to the 'cony burrow' days, two or three centuries ago when rabbits were imported by the wealthy to breed and sell the fur.

Investing in an apple tree

Father persuaded us to invest some of our pocket money in an apple tree. Rex (canny creature) bought a dessert apple tree. We girls, on father's advice, bought a Bramley each. He assured us we would have a good return for our money. Those three trees are still in the garden, although the place no longer belongs to us.

20th Century Sparks!

Work

Children at work - continued



Women and Children in Egremont Street, c. 1930s
Brighton & Hove in Pictures



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A farmer's boy

In his memoirs, 'To be a Farmer's Boy' (1910-30), George Noakes recalls the frustrations of working through his childhood as a farmers boy and his early ambition for something more.

Farm Work

I could milk a cow by the time I was seven years old, and when eight I earned sixpence a day at harvest time for "stannarding" - that is holding the horse still by its head while sheaves of corn were loaded on the cart.

I would walk on at a command, then on the word "Stannard", I would stop. It meant "Stand Hard" or "Stand Still". Then at the end of the week I would line up with the men to get my pay. Most I gave to Mum to help buy boots which wore away quickly on the gritty country roads.

These (sheaves) were taken to a prearranged place where the corn stack was to be built. It was never far away but two wagons or three would be doing a shuttle service all day. For this job I earned sixpence a day.

After all the harvest had been gathered the women were allowed to go gleaning, that is picking up all the corn left behind by the reaper. My mother did this. For a few pence the miller would grind it, and it was always used to make our Christmas puddings.

There were also pea and bean picking on other parts of the farm and potato picking, all very back-bending jobs. Then the mangle pulling, which was done by a team of gipsies who came yearly. But we boys would do the earthing to where they built a mangle pile to be used for cattle food during the winter. We helped get the cows in, and helped milk them which all brought in a bit of money.

Work at the race track

My father helped to look after the racehorses in the stable and mother cleaned the bothy where the stable lads lived. She was always delighted when she was given a pair of their long leather boots. She could make them last a little longer although to them they were worn out.

(Later) We went to Lewes but in a very poor part, Eastport Lane. But as Dad was out of work beggars can't be choosers. He would go out daily to look for work. Holding horse's heads at 4d a time was alright on race days, but it was no wage.



Work

A farmer's boy - continued

R.N.V.R.

I wanted to do something else than farm work day after day. He [my Uncle] explained that was what I was brought up to, and I was not qualified to do anything else. There was no alternative in the village, it would mean going away, and I was a bit young. But he suggested going to Newhaven and joining the R.N.V.R. like my cousin. Maybe if I liked it I might in time get into the Navy.

This appealed to me, so off I went on my bike and I joined. There were varied activities to do with Seamanship, drills and sport. I liked the boxing, and sometimes weekend trips in a boat. I didn't have the opportunity, as farm work is seven days a week. This new activity filled a need in my life. Work seemed less of a bore. Also I had a smart uniform to wear once a week. I felt a different person when I wore it.