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Farming has been practised in and around Horton Kirby and South Darenth from earliest times. By 1894, especially in Horton Kirby, it was the mainstay of everyday life. This is illustrated by the large number of farms in the parish.

COURT LODGE FARM

Court Lodge Farm in Horton Kirby was built on the remains of a Norman Castle and farming has been carried on there ever since. In 1902 William Rogers added Court Lodge Farm to his Maplescombe Farm, Farningham, on his marriage to Minnie Cannon. He was already noted for his hops, horses and cattle and had won so many prizes at the County's leading shows that he was known as "William the Conqueror". He continued the good work on the 700 acres he took over at Court Lodge Farm (often called locally Rogers Farm). In 1904, 1906 and 1914 he won the Le May Open Challenge Cup for the best quality hops in England. Pete Wallace who does the hop drying now, in the 1990s, is still winning prizes for the farm.

Edward Fitness' grandfather was a highly-skilled thatcher and carpenter at Court Lodge Farm and in 1912 was paid £7 a week.

William Rogers died in 1948, by which time he had taken his son, Ralph Rogers, into partnership. Ralph Rogers still lives at Court Lodge Farm, although the farm is now managed by his daughter, Sarah Ward. She spent her early years in Ash Tree House, Horton Kirby, and, after moving away from the district for a while, returned to Court Lodge when her mother died.



*Emma Cumberland and family hop-picking 1928
Photograph courtesy of Stan Cook*

Sarah Ward and Ralph Rogers remembered the early hop-picking days. All local labour was used and, until the late 1950s, hops were still picked by hand. The hops are dried in the brick and corrugated iron building at the top of Jacobs Lane. Peter Flewin remembered helping to pick hops during the Second World War and when the Battle of Britain was on Peter recalled diving into the turkey shelters for protection - the fact that the roof was so flimsy did not occur to him at the time! Traders used to come out from Dartford to feed the hop-pickers, including a chap on an ice-cream tricycle and a man who sold cold fried fish.



Many of the farm buildings have recently been restored and are being used for craft workshops. There are now fourteen small businesses within the confines of Court Lodge Farm, including a recording studio, Darenth Valley pickles, a number of carpenters and a saddler.

Fitness, Hedges and Skinner families in the hop fields c 1930

Photograph courtesy of Pete Flewin

Frank Reynolds, cowman

Photograph courtesy of Sarah Ward



Frank Peacock measuring the hops c 1950
Postcard courtesy of Pete Flewin

An article in a local paper in 1993 stated that students from Europe were employed on the hops over the three-week picking season in August.

Court Lodge Farm was also well-known for its cattle and sheep. Frank Reynolds was the cowman for many years and his son Jack is the shepherd today. Turkeys

were reared and sold for many years direct from the farm. Court Lodge is also particularly well known for breeding horses. Sarah and Ralph recalled when up to 30 horses were being bred at any one time.



REYNOLDS PLACE FARM (CROWHURST'S FARM)

The Crowhurst family had been farming for over 100 years, coming from West Kingsdown originally. Their farm of 295 acres covered the area from Speedgate to the crossroads at the top of Rays Hill. Joan Wilkinson (nee Crowhurst) remembered that at one time the farm was mainly arable, with potatoes, cabbages, peas, beans and hay, and a herd of Ayrshire dairy cows. They used to bottle the milk on the farm and deliver it locally. They eventually dropped the milk round and started an egg farm. They also had a farm shop selling greengrocery. The farmhouse was at Northfield Cottages, Lombard Street but Joan now lives in a bungalow at the top of Mussenden Lane, next to the woods known as Horton Woods. These were originally recorded in the Domesday Book as "Horton Coverts". The present bungalow was originally the Gamekeeper's Lodge where pheasants were bred. The building next door was used for serving refreshments to shooting parties and amongst the latter was the Doctor to King George V.

MUSSENDEN FARM



*Mussenden Farm looking east with the (cream painted) Blue Cottages in the distance
1975
Photograph courtesy of David Hood*

Mussenden Farm on the right up Mussenden Lane, also has a very old, flint and brick farmhouse, parts of which are nearly 400 years old. It is an imposing five bedroomed building with large cellars. There are two staircases inside but the labourers had to use an external ladder to reach their sleeping quarters under the roof! There is a large granary on mushroom supports to deter vermin and other farm buildings include a large oak barn which used to be thatched and an oast house no longer in use.

Peter Palmer moved into the farm in 1897 and farmed there for thirty years. He had a milk round and his two daughters, Edie and Doris, rode round in a pony and trap, selling milk from churns to people in the village. According to Joan Wilkinson, the pony's name was Joey and he was inclined to nip people if they came too close. When the Palmers left Mussenden Farm in 1927 to take over Eglantine Farm, the Chaplins moved in and are still there.

The farm originally covered 204 acres growing raspberries, strawberries, wheat, barley and potatoes. Mr Chaplin had many interesting facts to tell about the farm. He used to have six working horses and it took three horses a day to plough one acre. He was the first farmer in the area to have an International tractor. Two tons of raspberries were picked in a weekend, which were taken immediately to Robertson's jam factory at Catford. Manure was bought 500 tons at a time and sent down from the Bricklayers Arms depot by rail to Farningham Road station, then transported by horse and cart to the farm. When motor vehicles replaced horses in London, Mr Chaplin began breeding pedigree Herefords and bulls. Gipsies stayed in one of the meadows for about one month every year to help with the harvest.

EGLANTINE FARM

Prior to the Palmers taking over Eglantine Farm in 1927, it had been occupied by Mr W J Reeves. Eglantine was a farm of some 200 acres, mainly dairy but with some market gardening. Each farm had its milk round and Spencer Gentry remembered helping his dad in the 1910s delivering milk from churns on a horse-drawn cart using $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$ or 1 pint measures and pouring the milk into jugs left on doorsteps.



*Mr Reeves with his cows, Eglantine Farm
Postcard courtesy of Stella Gentry*

Mary Hayes (nee Palmer) remembered several incidents during the War, when incendiaries fell all over the fields and orchards but, fortunately, missed the thatched barns. There was a balloon emplacement in the orchard behind the farm at Eglantine, manned by soldiers from the North of England. To the amazement of the Palmer children, they immediately dug slit trenches and as soon as the siren went would dive into them, telling everyone else to take cover. The children would peer up into the sky and say “Why? There’s nothing about yet”.



*Eglantine farmhouse at the turn of the century
Postcard courtesy of Stella Gentry*

For a time the Palmers employed some Italian prisoners of war from the local camp at Ship Lane, but sent them back as they were too lazy. They were replaced by three German POWs who worked very hard. When the war ended the Palmers were sorry to see them go and the Germans were equally sorry to leave.



*Workers “party”, Seventies style, in George Palmer’s beanfield after 7 years together.
Long service “medals” were jokingly presented by Mary Hayes.
(L-R) Mark Myers, John Palmer, Olive Elcombe, Joyce Theobald, Ann Myers,
Harold Giles, Nellie Deacon, Mavis Dring, Pam Stevenson, Ivy Thornton, Mary
Hayes.*

George Palmer was a particularly good ploughman and took part in many North Kent Ploughing Matches, being crowned Champion on several occasions.

Today Anne Palmer still lives in the 17th - Century farmhouse but the 18th - Century barns, all Listed Grade II Buildings, are derelict and awaiting renovation to large residential properties.

MEADOWBROOK FARM

Prior to 1925 Meadowbrook Farm in The Street, Horton Kirby, was part of the Kirby Hall Estate, which was owned by a family named Larkins. On 26 October 1925 Meadowbrook Farm was sold

Gerald Roberts, currently Parish Council Tree Warden, is Mr Horning's grandson and his mother, Vera, was also born in one of the farm cottages. They later moved to "Mount Pleasant", now called "The Leas", in Dartford Road next to the farm as this was the farm bailiff's house. Vera recalled that in 1936 the farm was sold to Mr Wheeler thus returning the farm to the owner of Franks Hall.

There used to be two farm cottages at the end of Calfstock Lane at the entrance to Farningham Woods. Nellie Deacon lived there until the mid 1950s even though there was no electricity or water laid on. Ron Ludlow, milkman before the War had to deliver milk to these houses - a very difficult task in times of bad weather. He remembered it was particularly hazardous getting back out onto Dartford Road (and he received no extra commission on his rural round for these very time-consuming calls). The cottages were derelict for a good many years but, in about 1970, they were blown up, apparently by a home-made bomb.



*Arthur Horning, farm bailiff with his tally book 1920/30
Photograph courtesy of Gerald Roberts*

During the Second World War and until the early 1950s, Franks was farmed by Mr Mungeam (whose son Barry still lives in South Darenth). After him it was farmed once more by Mr Langland, also of Homefield Farm, Sutton-at-Hone, who trained racehorses there. It was then taken over by the Palmers until 1989.

By 1994, the 18th Century barn, which together with the attached cowshed is a Grade II Listed Building, has been renovated and converted to three dwellings. The oast houses also have planning permission for conversion. The land is still farmed but is under threat from development possibly as a golf course.

RABBITS FARM

Rabbits Farm to the east of South Darenth is thought to date back to at least the early 1800s. Owners in 1994 are the Boxalls, who purchased the farm from the Murray-Woods in 1962/63, when there were orchards as well as arable farming. At that time there was a beautiful thatched barn, built entirely without nails. Unfortunately in 1966 it was burnt down at the end of harvesting - possibly deliberately. So many onlookers blocked the lanes to the farm that the Fire Brigade was unable to get through. By the time they did reach the fire, having to push cars off the road, it was too late.

There used to be two small single storey cottages, parallel to what is now known as Wilson Lane. These, like the other buildings, had no water laid on and were lit by gas mantles. They remained like this



*Harrow Place
Photograph courtesy of N Goodwin*

until the Boxalls came. Water was obtained from a stand-pipe in the yard. Opposite the entrance to Rabbits Farmyard was a nursery and a bullock yard built in the form of a square. In 1994 only one building remains.

Mrs Boxall recalled that Rabbits was one of three sites looked at by the Royal Botanical Society before they eventually decided on Kew. It was looked at because of its position close to the newly constructed

railway, its height, the varied types of soil on the site and the fact that it is usually frost-free. Just think, we nearly had a Kew Gardens in South Darenth!

At the present time, Rabbits consists of 226 acres, all arable. The old stables are now the farm shop which has a cobbled floor - the same as originally covered the whole of the yard outside. The original beams can still be seen where the partitions were for the separate stalls and the holes in the ceiling above each stall where the hay was pushed down from the hay loft above. In addition to farm produce, the farm shop sells conserves, dried flowers and plants of all kinds.

Just inside our parish boundary at Pinden, Harrow Place, so-called because that was where the harrows were kept, used to be three farm workers' cottages attached to Rabbits Farm. These were modernised in the 1930s and, from the brick foundations still to be seen in the field opposite, would appear to be all that remains of a small group of houses in this location just south of the railway line.

GILLS FARM

Gills Farm is also very old, probably pre-dating Rabbits. It is now owned by Mr Hawkins of Shellbank Lane, Darenth, whilst his son Mr D Hawkins lives in Deanscroft near the farm. Many years ago a well-known magazine called the Dean Rag Book (printed on paper made from rags, as good quality paper used to be) was published here.

Former owners include Mr Barnes, Mr Fowler (from Sutton-at-Hone) and Mr Wingrove, who farmed much land in the area. The farm is now mainly arable and, as with many farms these days, some of the farm buildings are let to small businesses, notably a joinery and furniture-making firm.

EVEREDS AND WATERLANDS FARMS

These two farms, where Benjamin Whiffen, parish councillor in 1894, farmed, were at the bottom of Holmesdale Hill, South Darenth, with a farmhouse on each side of the bend. The White House was one of the farmhouses until 1950 with land stretching

northwards comprising mainly damson orchards but also watercress beds and cattle grazing. Until recently the cobblestones of the old dairy were still at the back of the house. Years ago the otter hounds used to be taken through the farm by green-coated walkers.

George Smith and his son, Frank, were the last farmers and George was famous locally for his pedigree pigs.

The other farmhouse (on land now part of the car park of the precision engineering firm, Evridge Engineering) was a dairy farm with its own milk round. In the 1920s this was a round with a handcart only whilst Mr Muggeridge further up the hill had a horse-drawn round. Mr Spoor (village organist, piano teacher and tuner) having married Ellen Evered, lived in this house before moving to the end cottage behind The Jolly Millers.



*The White House, Holmesdale Hill, a 17th - Century Listed Building, has been the home of George and Violet Lake since 1976. For 25 years Mr Lake has owned Timber Mouldings, the local DIY shop, renowned for its good old-fashioned service. For 27 years before them, it was home and workshop of Frank Smith, farmer and potter whose interesting pots were very popular
Photograph courtesy of Violet Lake*

WATERCRESS FARM

In addition to the traditional types of farming, the watercress beds in Station Road, South Darenth, were in existence from 1887 until the late 1950s, when the construction of a pumping station drained the land. They were owned by the Simmons family, and people came from far and wide to purchase their watercress. Kay Maggs remembered as a little girl going to buy watercress in the 1920s. She could have a large wicker shopping basket filled with freshly cut watercress for 3d. At about the same time Reg Sampson, a village character, took upon himself a delivery service for those who couldn't get to the watercress beds.

Mrs E Nicholls (formerly Simmons) who still lives in Jubilee Cottage, Station Road, remembered seeing rows of women hoeing the thistles in the nearby fields by hand.

Dr John Hudson, a former Chief Medical Officer of Health with Dartford Rural District Council told us that from the routine testing of water carried out by them, samples from the artesian wells supplying the watercress beds were as pure as any from the tap. "There were virtually no bacteria in the water at all" he said.



*A modern view of Jubilee Cottage, Station Road
Photograph courtesy of Carol Allart*

BEE-KEEPING

Whilst on the subject of farming, Mussenden Cottage Apiary must not be forgotten. David Hood is one of the few farmers in Kent making a living from bee-keeping and certainly the only one supplying honey by appointment to Her Majesty The Queen.

He has 350 hives. One third of his income comes from taking the hives to fruit orchards in Kent in the Spring for pollination. Sometimes en route a thousand bees may escape and are not seen again but that does not matter too much as each hive contains about 50,000 bees! They produce 5-6 tons of honey each year (about 7,000 jars) and plenty of beeswax for making candles.



*David Hood in
bee-keeping headgear
but otherwise
unprotected. The
trees in the
background are elms
(now sadly gone)
which used to
flourish along
Mussenden Lane*

David Hood was, in 1993, President of the Kent Branch of the National Farmers Union and his bee-keeping activities are well known far afield. He has even received a letter from Estonia addressed to the "Horton Kirby bee-keeper" on the subject of bee venom which is used in antihistamines.

Mussenden Cottage used to be two farmworkers cottages belonging to Mussenden Farm before David and Ina took on the renovation of the derelict building in the mid-1970s. The building has been dated back to 1820 but parts are much older. In the grounds of the cottage was an old mahogany railway carriage where farmer, George Palmer had been born and lived with his brothers as a child.

Bee-keeping would seem to have always played a part in village life here, as the following extract from the Parish Magazine for 1903 shows:

FOUR PRACTICAL LECTURES on “Bee-Keeping” are arranged to be given by MR JESSE GARRATT, in the INFANTS’ SCHOOLROOM GARDEN, SOUTH DARENTH, ON APRIL 27, AT 6 P.M.; MAY 25, AT 6.30 P.M.; JUNE 22, AT 6.30 P.M.; JULY 20, AT 6.30 P.M.

ADMISSION TO EACH LECTURE, 2d. And in connection therewith will be an APIARY COMPETITION between the members, for which prizes are offered.

H.B. RASHLEIGH, Local Hon. Secretary.

As announced above, our readers will see that four practical Lectures on “Bee-Keeping” are arranged to be given by Mr Jesse Garratt, in the garden by the Infants’ Schoolroom, kindly lent for the occasions by the Misses Keddell, Mission House. The opening Lecture, illustrated by a Magic Lantern, took place on Monday, March 9, and the capital audience of 60 much encouraged our Lecturer, and made him experience the pleasant sensation of appreciation, the exact opposite of cold water! We do not expect, of course, a similar result on April 27. The lecture is really of a strictly practical nature, for the instruction of those who have begun Bee- Keeping, or who intend to begin. It will be well to come provided with a BEE VEIL, in case our small but numerous guests should be in a bad temper, and revenge themselves upon the curious spectators.

Today the whole nature of farming has changed. There are no longer any dairy herds, a large number of fields, formerly cultivated, now seem to lie fallow or set aside and the grazing of horses is now popular with an increased number of riding clubs. One such club, run by Sarah Ward and Chris Hollands of Speedgate Farm, provides extensive off-road riding in the safety of the woods at the top of Stack Lane, Horton Kirby.

Local people are also not dependent on agriculture for their livelihood as they once were. However, farming land still contributes greatly to the environment of our parish and, in the main, adds to its rural beauty.



*Mr W Reeves (driving) at a ploughing match November 1920
Postcard courtesy of Wally Millen*

*Some seventy years later, a modern-day ploughing match using traditional
horse-drawn power
Photograph courtesy of Fred Ellis*

