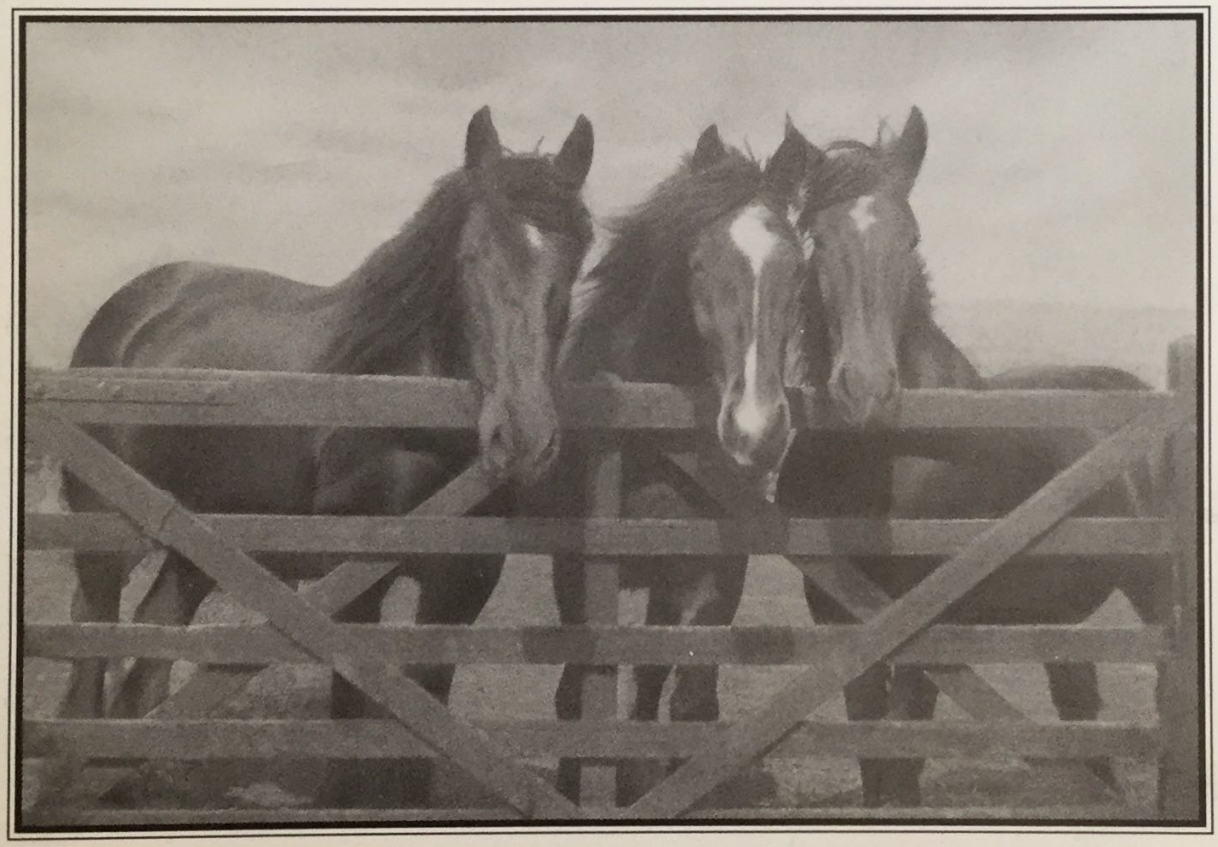
The Lost Farmyard

by Harold Brighton



Three Sisters ~ Faithful Friends

The Lost Farmyard

Could anyone see as many changes in one's lifetime as I have in my 90 years? So many I have to scratch my old brain box to think what has changed, but one of the most drastic and (I think) saddest changes must be from the busy, noisy farmyard, full of hens, pigs and cows, of my youth to no livestock at all. I realize it is more so here in this fenland than on the hills, but to me a whole way of life has vanished.

In my early days everyone had pigs. They would grunt and be pleased to see you; nowadays them old tractors don't care two hoots, so the yard seems dead to an old livestock man like me. Most farm-workers kept a pig for the housekeeping. The butcher would come one morning and kill it, hang it up in a tree to let it drain then come back after tea to cut it up into hams etc, everything for the ladies to work on the next day. And were they busy! They made porkpies, sausages, haslets and more. The flitches of bacon and hams were salted for a month, then hung up on the wall. Most weeks we'd cut a piece to eat - home cured ham took some beating. Who would have them hanging up today? We all loved to see a litter of pigs, some sows would have as many as ten or more in a litter. Sometimes she would lay on one and it would not survive.

The old boar was the one you wanted to keep your eye on, he could be a rough character. If they did too much rooting a horse nail was put in their nose; I have seen it done many a day. I have taken fat pigs to Adams slaughter house in Bond Street (now the Coop car park) in a horse and cart with just a net over the cart to stop them jumping out. Some horses did not like the smell of the slaughter house so next time you took a quieter one. I have also taken suckling pigs or stores to the Sheep Market which was just for sheep and pigs.

Most farms had a dairy cow, just for the milk and a bit of butter – you tried to get as much as possible out of the yard to live on. Next there was the fowl; we always had plenty of eggs and a young cockerel for your Sunday dinner. If the old cockerel didn't look too good, neck him and have him in the pot before he kicked the bucket. When I was young it was Quaker Oats or bread and milk 'til the milk nearly ran out of your earholes - and you sat at the table until you'd finished.

All the yards had cattle to help get a living. The straw bedding was used to make manure to spread on the fields. Not so much fertilizer was used in my early days, farmers had to economise wherever they could.

Some farmers kept a bull, always seemed to be called John Henry, you had to keep an eye on him. When I was very young Father would take me round the yard to show me a baby calf - where that calf came from he did not say - I found that out in my years to come.

If a small farmer didn't have many cows and didn't keep a bull father would get me to go with him to take the old cow for a walk, It was my job to close all the gates, if one was left open she would be through it. When we got to the farm where John Henry was father would tell me to wait on the road. What was going on in that yard and why I was standing on the road I just could not understand. No doubt John Henry was pleased to see that young female. Sometimes you had to repeat the journey (I was learning slowly). Just remembered, going back on one occasion we met someone coming away with a cow, so when we got there John Henry was not interested. The farmer ran him round the yard thrashing him with a thatch peg swearing and telling him to wake up. We got home in the end.

Most cattle in those days had horns, not very comfortable if they caught you. Odd ones would have a go at you, so you had to be wary of them. Now there are different breeds, some are hornless and others are dehorned as calves

At milking time – twice a day, morning and night – father would sit at the side of the cow on a one legged stool. I often wondered how he kept his balance. He didn't always, if the flies were bothering the cow her tail would swing round his neck- he wasn't bothered by the tail it was what was on it! When you milked a cow for the first time she was likely to kick you so a rope was tied to the leg next to you and then to a ring on the wall behind her.

For 3 days after calving the milk was called beastlings, most country people liked it for making custard - very nice with nutmeg sprinkled on top. I have happily taken many a bottle round to neighbours for a penny. They all knew not to wash the bottle out (as the cow could get milk fever – another old wives tale, but it we believed it!)

One time we had week old calves from Ben Pearson, his son Mall brought them in his car boot, in a bag stitched up round the calves neck so they could not get out. We reared them all on artificial milk. At times we have had as many as 100 heads from one week old to the day when they were fat and ready to be driven to Spalding Fat Stock Market. I remember the market used to be in New Road, there were no pens to put them in just a post and chains along the side of the path so it was a job to keep them there until they were sold.

One of my jobs, while I was still at school, was cleaning mangolds on a Saturday morning. I had to clean enough for the week for the cattle. If the weather was very cold father would put a shade up to shelter me from the icy

blasts. Cotton and linseed cake came in slabs and it had to be broken up into pieces for the cattle to eat. I would do this holding the slabs on a 4 stone weight and hitting the slab with a hammer. In later years father bought a cake breaker, you just had to turn the handle, but once he put his hand in and his brother -in-law turned the handle, it took the end off one of his fingers.

Next I'll turn to Old Faithful, Man's Best Friend, but many a day a slave. We spent many a day working in very poor conditions, many a rainy day walking in sludge or when it was extremely dry on dry hard clods which caused broken hooves and they would have to have a few days off.

We had to get up at five in the morning to give them 2 hours feeding before taking them to work. Many a morning father has shouted to me around 5a.m. "them hosses want feeding" (he was still in bed). So began my day creeping out of bed, lighting the lantern to find my way to the stables, what a light. We generally had 5 or 6 "friends" I had to feed. When they had started feeding I would go back in for my breakfast. Mother had to clean the ashes out and light the fire before you could get a cup of tea, the room was not very warm either. Half an hour soon went by and so back to the stable as they had eaten up and were ready for more. Then they were groomed, their tails tied up in winter, but left down in summer so they could switch the flies off, sometimes in your face which was rather uncomfortable at times.

In the spring all the horses lost their winter coats. It didn't matter how much you brushed and combed them there was always hair everywhere, even on your clothes.

I was thrilled and excited when Grandfather gave me a Waltham watch (I had come home from ploughing too early one night), but every year it had to be cleaned as

horse hairs got in the winder. That watch like me is still going strong today.

Coming back to the stables after a days work, Dobbin would be wet from sweat or rain so a thin bag was cut open and put over his back while you had your tea. When you went out to give him some more food his coat would be nearly dry, then you would start grooming again while he was feeding. Mucking out had to be done if you had been late up, and then fresh bedding, also mending the gears if they were broken during the day. (Grandfather would always have me carry a pocket knife, false link and a piece of string incase I had any breaks, they would help you carry on, he didn't like me coming out of the fields unnecessarily.) When all the jobs were done it just remained to give them a mangold, that's what we called suppering up.

Grandfather and Father would always try to breed a foal every year. I recall one time when father had a foal that wouldn't lift his head to suck. He couldn't lift his head up to help him find his mother's milk so Father put him in a wheelbarrow and steadily ran the barrow under the mare, after a bit of time and patience the foal managed to suck

Most young lads loved to come into the stable and see the horses. It was usual to ask them if they stood horse-mans height. They wouldn't know so we would get them to stand behind a quiet horse, tight up nearly under his tail. We would lift the horse's tail up and ask if they could see the star under his tail. When they answered no we would shove the boy's head into the horses bum!! I did that to one boy and he went home without his cap. Boys will be boys!

There was a time when I was working 3 sisters in a team; one had a quiet temperament, one was alright, the other

was just plain awkward, I will not write what I called her some days; I'll leave that for you to imagine!

In my younger days the pony was the only means of getting about as very few people had a car. Most farmers had 2 traps; one for every day use and a good clean one for going to a place of worship and to market. We also had 2 sets of harnesses, an every day one, the other was leather with brass buckles etc. The pony was shod on all 4 feet as he did more road work, field horses mostly only had the front two shod. Did the blacksmith have something to say when you went on a wet day straight out of the field, feet all muddy to get some new shoes? His words are not worth printing.

Life for the farmers' wife was always busy; feeding the hens and ducks morning and night. As the hens were allowed to roam free collecting the eggs was a challenge you could not always find where some had laid then one day this old hen would appear with lots of chicks – where she had been sitting we never knew. When a hen had finished laying for a time she would go broody so she was used for sitting. We used to put her in an old orange box with 13 eggs - ducks had 10 or 11. (All oranges came in these boxes made of thin wood, some had 2 sections, most had 3, ideal for those sitting hens) The hens had to be taken out daily to feed and have a drink, plus doing their duty. Hens sat for 3 weeks, ducks for 4.

If you had a cow the separating had to be done, that made more work churning and making the butter. The separator was used to take the cream from the milk. The milk was poured into a container above the machine. When you started to turn the handle a bell would ring and would continue until you were turning fast enough, as you turned the handle you turned the tap on and the milk would come out one side and the cream the other – don't ask me how

it did it. This had to be taken apart and washed daily, there must have been fifty or more pieces that then had to be put back together again ready for the next day.

I always had to do the churning in my summer holidays. If the weather was very hot you could churn for hours. After a while it would "go to sleep"- that's what we called the point between cream and butter, you just had to keep turning that handle. For awhile it did not seem to move, but it did in the end – then I could go out to play. The butter was too soft to make up so it would be hung in a bucket down the cistern for the night – no fridges then.

The Farmer's wife would set out for market on a Tuesday with the clean pony cart laden with goods she had made: eggs, butter (sold for 8d per pound) dressed poultry, baby chicks and ducklings; apples, plums, gooseberries - anything out of the yard or garden she could sell. When she got to Spalding she would sit in the Butter Market until she had sold out, not a very warm place in the winter time. I'm pretty sure none of this money got in the bank, it was needed for the next weeks housekeeping. Who would have been a farmer's wife?

The Stallion would call to see his lady friends. He was a big powerful horse. He was always decked out with plenty of ribbons on his mane and tail and a colourful band around his belly. As a boy I was told to go in the house, there would be a lot of squealing from the yard. So at times with the Stallion, Bull and the Boar I had to keep in the house, but after a few years I was able to put two and two together and realized what was happening and where the foals and calves came from. Remember two young boys looking at a foal seemed to know more than I, one said to the other "could you put it back where it came from?" I was amazed, stood there and said nothing.

Now how much work did all the livestock make 7 days a week morning and night, wet or dry, snowing and blowing? There was mucking out, and fresh bedding to be put down daily, fetching straw and hay from the stack, cutting mangels and potatoes- another hard job - and carrying water to those tied up. I remember father nodding against the wall as we called it. This was a small chaff cutter turned by hand for cutting oat sheaves, and all this was done after tea, we mostly had a few sheaves in the chaff house. In the night if a birth looked like taking place I would be asked to hold the lantern in my school days after tea. How did we see with that tin-willy light and smoked glass, it might even blow out in a strong wind. Father would say "if I can see you can". So work in the yard was never done, even on a wet day there was always a job. But on a wet day all the field work "was getting in Dickeys Meadow". Where's that you may ask? Where the old cow's tail is – Behind!

There was a time when a lot of Belgian horses were brought over to be sold; they had a lighter cleaner leg and foot than the Shires. A lot of Sugar Beet growers were interested in them as they were suited to walking down the Sugar Beet rows. We had one (Bill) he had a neat trick when walking back from the manger after feeding him he would quickly turn his head and give you a pinch on the backside – I had other names for him then.

We had to pump the water morning and night from the drain (The Delph) as we were not on the mains, very few were. During the winter many horses and cows were tied up to the manger so we had to take it to them in a bucket, if they were thirsty it was soon gone, especially milking cows. Odd times old Dobbin would drop his last mouthful in your neck a cold thank you on a frosty morning. Soaking wheat was a daily chore as it had to be soaked for 24 hours before feeding it to the horses.

Another thought! I recall the time when a cow was having a difficult time calving and we had to call the vet out. That vet if things didn't go too well, had very little patience and you knew it. I was holding the lantern, but didn't hold it right for him, soon told me, in a not so friendly manner, that he would throw me and the lantern over the roof - not a very likeable man. He always had a lady to drive him around!

The farmyard cats did a good job of keeping the rats and mice down, and there were plenty of them as in those days there was no rat poison. All the barn doors had a cat hole so moggy could have a look round day or night. The farm dog was useful helping with the sheep and cattle. They were always with the shepherd and understood every word he said.

All the farm buildings; stable, chaff house, cowshed, barn, granary, loose boxes, open sheds (where the crew yard was) and cart-hovel were kept in good order, painted every few years, and roof tiles or slates were replaced when they were blown off. These jobs were done just before harvest. The granaries caused a lot of hard work. I have carried 18 $^{st.}$ sacks up that ladder. Today I just stand at the bottom and look up, I don't know if a 50.00 pound note would get me up there.

Some farms had a wagon, some a trolley - all could carry up to 3 ton. Pulled by 3 horses, they were mainly used to take loads to the railway station. These wagons and carts were always painted every 3 or 4 years. They all looked very smart when the painter lined them up with the farmer's name and farm painted on the side.

So let's have a walk round the livestock, buildings and stack-yard of the 1920's and 30's. Harvest was one of the

busiest times. The corn crops had to be carted up from the fields, after the stooks had stood for a time to dry out. They were then left in the stack during the winter. Building a stack was a skill, it had to be done right to keep out the rough weather during the winter until it was time for threshing. The man on the outside was the key; he had to build it straight up, making sure the next sheave bonded with the outside one. Some built round stacks others long ones with round ends, but all had to be thatched - a work of art. The thatch was held on with string and thatch pegs. (We used any old piece of stick for thatching the straw stacks.) Who could do that job today? Most of those skilled men have retired. The hard work has gone, now it is all done by combines in a matter of days, sometimes hours.

The farmer would have the threshing engine (coal fired) and drum during the winter months, when bedding was running low or when he was getting short of money and needed to sell some corn. (I remember my father selling at 18 shillings (90p) per quarter – two 18 stone bags.) Before threshing could start all the thatch had to be taken off. There would probably be 8 to 10 men in the yard at this time, that's if you could see them for all the dust and smoke from the engine. The engines needed water and I spent many days lugging water from the dyke with a yoke and 2 buckets. The steps up from the dyke got very slippery. Many a time spuds had to be put on the engine wheels to help move the heavy engine and drum on the wet ground. The elevator took the straw from the drum to the stack. Some had a pole and wires to take what we called "a bottle" (a big heap of straw with a rope round it) to the stack and dropped it in the middle of the stack so it didn't matter how far the drum was from the stack.

If the horses met a steam engine on the road they were very frightened, so the driver would stop and his mate

would get off and help you lead the horses by. Some were more frightened than others. The ploughing engines were the worst as there were always 2 of them.

People complain today if they see the odd rat or mouse, but there were more mice under one sheaf than the dogs could catch, they had a good time just killing one after another. We didn't have any rat poison, only a rat trap and a good dog.

The corn was taken by horse and wagon to the local railway station then began the job of tidying up the yard. The cart was loaded with straw for bedding in the crew yard. One day I recall John Henry (the bull) put his head under the cart and just lifted it off the wheels. When most of the yard was cleared up the sparrows had their turn – there were many more than we could count. As boys we would go round the stacks at night with a potato riddle and hold it on the side of the stack, if lucky one would catch sparrows - the cats always went with us.

Then came the day for mucking out (as we called it) the crewyard, 3 men would fill the cart, a boy would take it down the field and one man would empty it in a heap to rot down ready to be spread on the fields after harvest. All this work was caused by having a yard full of livestock, and where there is a manure there are plenty of flies - too many to be comfortable for us and the horses. If the horses were being badly tormented we would cut bags open and put them over their backs, but the flies would still bother them round their eyes and mouths.

In my early years most of our cattle were Lincoln Reds, later the Aberdeen Angus, and then we had Jerseys and Guernsey's as they were good milkers.

Another job was grinding barley and mixing proteins etc. The grinder was driven by tractor, before we had tractors we had to take the barley to the local mill.

All these jobs, most of which have long gone, helped to make the farmyard interesting, sights, sounds and smells all distant memories; the working horse, mare and foal, milking cows and calves, stores (pigs) growing for market, geese and goslings, hens and chicks, ducks and ducklings, sights I loved to see and sights which can now only be found on the odd farm in this fen. Machinery and tractors do not look for you in the morning and you just switch them off at night - Tat ta.

Most big farms had a lot of trees round them, many of them were elm and a few years ago they were felled because of Dutch elm disease. Crows used to make their homes in these trees, now the trees have gone and so have the crows. It was uncanny, but the crows always seemed to know which field you were going to drill and be there before you! Scarecrows were a common sight in the field. Poor chap - he worked 24 hours a day, no food no wages!

I have always felt a farm is not a farm without livestock, I know I am old fashioned, but a farmyard needs animals to make it come alive. I couldn't bear walking out of the house each morning into a yard with no livestock so I bought 2 Shetland ponies to breed and show. I had 20 successful years showing them, but now only have 2 left – I call them my Mates. God has given me a good and interesting life. I've worked hard, had some rough days, but I don't think it hurt me. I've got old, but in my old age I have found a new interest. Not once in all the years I have just described did I ever imagine I would be writing not one, but three booklets about my life. Who would have thought it - Not me!

Signed an Old Man

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All money raised from the sale of this booklet will be donated to
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Harold

Threshing - a scene from my younger days