



WOMEN'S SMALLHOLDING COLONY AT WIREMILL

Wiremill is a well-known local area, visited for its pub, water sports or for a parking place for walks. What is unknown by most visitors is that in the aftermath of the first World War it was the site of a major social experiment, trying to establish careers for women who would never marry and would have to face a future having to provide for themselves.

(There are more details regarding this in our Fact Sheet *The Surplus Women* – the story of how the slaughter on the battlefields meant that 2 million women would remain single. Today, the tragedy itself apart, this would not have such a cataclysmic effect but back in 1918 Victorian attitudes still affected women's social place and the roles that she was expected to fill).

Women's Farm and Garden Association - This was one of the first major organisations to realise the threat of the impending disaster. It dates back to 1899, when it was known as the Women's Agricultural and Horticultural International Union. In 1910 it became the Women's Farm and Garden Union, then Association in 1921 and was finally incorporated in 1929.

Its aim was to unite all professional workers on the land and those interested in outdoor work, to provide advice and education and influence public opinion concerning women workers. In the First World War it formed the Women's National Land Service Corps, the forerunner of the Women's Land Army which in turn was formed in 1917 by the Board of Trade.

The Association today is for anyone interested in gardening, garden tours, workshops or needing funding to help with a career.

The "lost" research - In 2003 a researcher visited Wiremill, spoke to the residents and using the WFGA's archive tried to build up a picture of the post First World War settlements which had existed there. Unfortunately although in her final work she acknowledged the help she had received locally she neither supplied the inhabitants

with a copy of the result nor did she lodge anything with the Lingfield Library or the Surrey History Centre, leaving everyone unaware of what is a fascinating part of our recent local history.

The RH7 History Group has returned to this research but before detailing the results here is a brief background to the women who were members of the WFGA at the time. They were mainly titled ladies, daughters of landowners, women who had risen to prominence in local politics and members of the non-violent Suffragist Movement. W.I. members will also recognise familiar names - Gertrude Denman, Louisa Wilkins, Mrs Nugent Harris. It is clear they were strong-minded women, used to organisation and exercising authority. Together with the W.I. their Association had influential connections with the Women's Land Army during the War, the W.I. assuming responsibility for the welfare of the young girls including caring for those who had run away from unwanted attentions.

The Wiremill Smallholdings – The WFGA had started to plan for such a scheme before the war and the Wiremill site was not the first to be on offer; it was, however, the first to be viable. The objective was to enable women who had worked on the land during the war to farm smallholdings independently in whatever way they wished, selling their produce on a co-operative basis.

The money was provided by two prominent suffragists – Miss Margaret Ashton and Miss Sydney Renee Courtauld. The former was born in 1856, the daughter of a Mancunian mill owner who shared the views of other industrialists such as the Rowntree, Cadbury and Lever Brothers who believed it was essential to care for their workers.

Margaret Ashton helped to manage the Mill school, became the first woman elected to Manchester City Council in 1908, was a founder member of the Women's Trade Union League and helped to found the Manchester Babies Hospital in 1914. She was a supporter of the Peace League and as a result of her pacifism, which was considered as being pro-German, she was regarded by Manchester Council as an 'unfit' person and removed from the Education Committee. She died in 1937, aged 82.

Miss Sydney Renee Courtauld was the daughter of Sydney Courtauld, crepe and silk manufacturers, one of the leading names in British textile manufacturers. She was born in Bocking, Essex, where the family business was established. She was educated at Roedean and Newnham College, Cambridge University where she studied for a degree but was not allowed to be awarded one. It was not until 1948 that Cambridge allowed women to become full members, the last University to do so. She became a social worker with the Women's University Settlement and the Charity Organisation Society, was a member of the Braintree School Board, was the secretary of the North and East branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies donating to the National Society for Equal Citizenship and lobbying her MP to support women's membership of Cambridge University. She died in 1962, aged 98.

The Wiremill Estate: A Trust Fund was established and at a meeting on the 2nd December, 1920 Miss Courtauld reported that the land for the colony had been

purchased. However, there seems to be some dispute about its size – both 91 and 98 acres are mentioned.

There is also some confusion about nomenclature – phrases such as 'Big House' and 'the Mill House' are used and it would seem the former refers to what is now called Wire Mill House and the latter to the Mill itself. The term 'central house' is also used.

Possession of the estate was taken on the 29th September and prospective candidates had to have a small private income, profits from the land being additional income.

A considerable area was orchard and the trees had been professionally checked, pronounced healthy and the selection of varieties described as excellent.

By Christmas most of the plots were let – 8 holdings, all large, held by 13 women, with the 'large house' (now Wire Mill House) and garden of 4¾ acres let to a Miss Williamson and two friends, at a low rent on the understanding they took boarders from the colony at a rate of 35/- a week for board and lodging. These would include applicants still waiting to acquire a plot as well as those who already possessed one without accommodation.

A Miss Sharpe was let the lake and a field of 1½ acres to keep bees, sell fishing tickets and provide teas.

Miss Wake-Walker and two friends acquired the flat at Mill House (now the pub) and rented a fruit holding of 7 acres and a farm of 12 acres. Also, at a rental she took responsibility for the farm implements and horse belonging to the estate and did all the horse work for the Colony.

Other plots included a fruit and market garden holding of 6½ acres with cottage, a farm holding of 8 acres with a cottage and a poultry holding of 1 acre, the tenant lodging in the 'big house'.

So, at this stage we have strong minded women administering the estate, equally strong minded and independent women working it, both groups being of some social standing; there is a fully established acreage of fruit trees and the plots are large. The stage was set for fault lines to emerge.

There were problems from the start, over which, in three cases, the smallholders had no control – a severe drought, a glut of fruit which had to be sold off cheaply and the economic problems which beset farming at that time. Tenants also found the plots too large to manage alone and were giving notices to quit. It becomes very difficult to follow the complication of those quitting, others arriving, some tenants taking over vacant plots, the redistribution of acreage etc.

The Chairman's report of 1922 refers to various adjustments made by the Association with the reduction of rents, and more help, including male labour, for the fruit farmers who were having a very bad season. A Seabrooks Extension Plough was purchased to enable ploughing nearer the roots, the orchards becoming overgrown.

A Miss Haley had her rent considerably reduced and she was given permission to try running young pigs on her holding rather than continuing with her horse cultivation but apparently this had not solved her problems because she had sent in her notice as she could not make things pay. On the other hand she was unwilling to leave and wanted to keep her cottage with five acres of land. She hoped the Committee would agree but this left it with further problems. For the scheme to be financially viable it was necessary for all the land to be worked but the rising notices to quit was leaving them with an increasing amount of fallow land.

Miss Wake-Walker was also a problem. She had been given the Mill flat as accommodation because she had responsibility for a large area of orchard. She had now given this up, as a result of which it had deteriorated badly. Additionally, as less land was worked there was less demand for her horse work services for the other tenants and she was obliged to seek more of this outside the Colony which meant all her energies seemed to be expended elsewhere, despite which she still lived with three friends in the Colony's best housing of five rooms. It now became necessary to reconsider this arrangement.

There were also the traditional female problems of family difficulties arising and the daughter automatically accepting that the responsibility of providing care was hers and consequently returning home. One smallholder had left to care for a sick mother. Miss Sharpe on the other hand wanted to give up her lake holding simply to do poultry farming with her sister.

The Chairman's report shows signs of exasperation. It seems no sooner are concessions made than more arise and the more the smallholders are accommodated the more they ask for.

Miss Mattingly is an example of this attitude – the Committee had accepted their mistake of making the plots too large, particularly the orchards. An offer was made to Miss Mattingly to lay down 4 acres of the worst fruit land to grass at the Colony's expense if she would provide the horse labour for cultivation along with the oat seeds; to let her have this at a moderate rent together with a reduction of rent on her present holding and to have the use, rent free, of the grazing by the lake. Miss Mattingly's response to this was to say she was prepared to accept the rent reduction and the free grazing but would not accept cultivating the oat crop. The Committee could not agree to this so Miss Mattingly sent in notice to quit on the grounds that she did not have enough land.

The next problem was Miss Williamson at the Central house (now Wire Mill House). The two-year lease expired on 29th September 1922 and she asked if it could be renewed. This raised a serious complication for the Committee. The reduced rent conceded to Miss Williamson had been based on the original plans for the Colony, as a whole, which was that 12 acres of orchards should be divided into small market garden holdings, the tenants of which would board with Miss Williamson. Unfortunately this had never materialised. Tenants refused to board at the house. Nothing specific is stated but there does seem to be an undercurrent of unrest with those who did use the accommodation not liking it and leaving within a short period. The small plot idea had to be abandoned and the area divided into two large ultimately unsuccessful lots

because the refusal to board at the Big House meant lack of accommodation, something which constantly haunted the scheme.

The garden had been neglected; it seemed the tenants were unable to keep neither it nor the house in proper order and with the others not being prepared to be boarders there was no longer any use for it so the Committee decided the lease could not be renewed and the house was placed on the market for sale.

In October 1922 it was unoccupied, 10 acres of land unlet and in bad condition.

By March 1923 the house had been sold for £2,750 to a Mr Creak with a licence to permit access to the lake and for boating. It seemed, however, that a gremlin was sitting on someone's shoulders for the Association found itself at another disadvantage this time due to a grievous mistake made by its solicitor when drawing up the conveyance – he included a licence to fish which meant the Association itself could no longer receive fees for such licences.

By October 1923 four new cottages were nearing completion, built with money from the sale of the big house and all had been let.

By February 1924 there were eleven separate holdings let and the Colony's population had risen to 14. A newcomer, Miss Whittington, had started a tea hut on the A22 and also sold the Colony's produce on commission; the ground floor of the Mill had been converted into a combined kitchen/dining room and a Luncheon Club formed which meant everyone could now have a mid-day meal for a shilling.

Also in 1924 it was resolved to allow married couples to be eligible for vacant holdings, as long as the wife had agricultural experience. From this it may be inferred that it was now difficult to find suitable single women.

On the 26th May 1925 the Annual General Meeting of the WFGA was held at Wiremill. It took place by the Lake with a farm wagon being used as a platform from which Lord Bledisloe, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture addressed the meeting along the lines that he felt the success of women's smallholdings was debatable but it offered to educated women, with a love of the countryside, a life which presented happiness and contentment. Visitors toured the Colony enjoying tea and cakes in the cottage gardens.

The AGM on the 8th July 1926 was held in the WFGA tent at the Royal Agricultural Show at Reading. The Colony now had two farm holdings, seven market gardens with poultry and a rabbit farm. Miss Bell had purchased her holding and now owned the cottage garden and an acre of the adjoining wood. It was the only year the Colony made a profit.

In October 1926 there were nine holdings. Miss Whittington, having bought a farm elsewhere, had moved from her cottage. Two cottages were built on the site occupied by her tea hut and one was let as a tea garden and was open as such by Easter 1927 (now Tammy's Thai Restaurant).

In May 1928 Court summonses were served on four tenants for arrears of rent. By the end of the year one of the original tenants, Miss Miller, had been offered a good post in Africa. During the time she had worked her holding she had recovered her capital and expenses.

In May 1929 the Mill House, lake and wood was put up for auction. Miss Mart offered £550 for her cottage which, after wrangling, was agreed.

A Miss Thorne who lived at No.2 Wire Mill Lane from 1928 bought a field from the Association which she finally sold for housing. This was the Wembury Estate and she must have made a handsome profit.

The Wiremill Estate was revalued at the end of 1928. It showed a steady loss over its eight year existence, was gradually sold off in the early 1930s and in 1934 Miss Taylor was the only tenant. Her smallholding was bought by Miss Bull (who had shared it with her) in 1938.

So, did the Colony really fail? There were various problems which were not of its making – the continuing depressed state of agriculture for one; the overall state of the economy; the emotional upheaval of 'getting back to normal' after a war. There are those of us with our own memories of the gloom and doom in 1945-1947, once the euphoria of victory had passed. The WFGA did make a mistake with the size of the plots. Obviously it was necessary to select women who were financially independent to avoid burdening itself with financial problems but may be if the women themselves had really had to succeed to survive with nothing to cushion them in the event of a disaster, then perhaps there would have been more co-operation and determination.

The WFGA members were strong minded women but obviously the smallholders were not going to be dictated to. The clashing wills and personalities are obvious. The greatest problem for everyone was simply human nature. At the same time two women ended up with farms of their own, another took up an appointment in Africa, having made a success of her plot, leaving with a profit and all expenses paid – they certainly had confidence which may well have developed during the eight years the Colony existed. Others bought the properties on the estate and undertook rabbit breeding or chicken farming.

Against this is the fact that smallholdings seem to be considered the ideal – there were many such schemes. The Wiremill experiment was the only one the WFGA attempted but there seemed to be a demand by ex-servicemen for plots and many demands made in Parliament. One was organised in Scotland for disabled servicemen and as late as 1934 the Land Settlement Association was formed at the suggestion of the Carnegie United Trust. It was sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture and was intended to provide work for the unemployed. With both schemes everything was provided – land, accommodation, livestock, seed, equipment, farm buildings were retained to house offices where deliveries and despatch of produce was arranged. With regard to the scheme for the disabled even the proximity of a military hospital was considered in anticipation that many men would need continuing treatment. In both cases training was given, applicants were vetted, plots were kept small for the disabled and for the unemployed that were 5 acre plots with house. Husbands and wives were interviewed

separately and then together. Recruitment for the 1934 scheme ceased in 1939 and in 1983 the settlements were discontinued and privatised.

Neither schemes really succeeded. The Depression was part of the problem. There were low returns for the work involved and the inability to adjust to country life was a major problem, with many finding it isolating and even disturbing. There had also been little consideration given to the need to understand that there were no regular hours – work depended on weather, daylight, the need to follow the yearly preparation of the ground, sowing, tending and harvesting. Sometimes nothing could be done, at others the work was endless. There was so much unpredictability with the weather causing crop failures.

Against all this it would seem the WFGA was correct to limit the holders of their plots to those who understood and had worked in the countryside. The Scottish and 1934 scheme were meant for people who had other problems and the failures are sad, but with that in mind it cannot be said Wiremill was also a failure when there is the evidence that it did provide the confidence for some women to live alone and provide for themselves.

What can be seen today? When the first research was done in 2003 there were still people living along Wiremill Lane who were related to those early tenants and others who remembered them clearly. There are still some contacts left. One is Ernie Borer, living in Lingfield. There is also one relative living in Wiremill Lane and one other person with personal memories of the people. Sadly one of the RH7 contacts died last year.

The plan of the estate is missing and the one map is totally inaccurate. It is very difficult to be precise in locating the position of the cottages and many are now missing so the following instructions just set the scene generally. Included are details taken from a conversation between Ernie Borer and RH7 member Sue Quelch. It was recorded on a CD for the Lingfield Memory Bank and is kept in the Lingfield Library.

Turn into WIREMILL LANE. The first house on right at the bottom of a drive is The Big House, or the Central House, now called WIREMILL HOUSE. Beyond the long drive on the left are two houses, well screened by trees. Mrs Thorne lived in the second, No.2 Wiremill Lane, from 1928 and bought the holding in 1934. She also bought 4½ acres of arable lane and made a profit when she sold it in 1934 for the building of WEMBURY PARK.

Drive to the T-junction. The house on the left, screened by hedges, is MOLES END. Once there were two cottages, now made into one. Ernie Borer's father bought the section on the right, when it was a self-contained cottage. He also bought about 22 acres of land. The family moved there in 1930 and fruit and vegetables were grown on the plot and supplied to Ernie's grandfather who kept a greengrocers shop in Croydon.

Ernie describes the lane as being half the width it is now and so full of potholes that in wet weather you could not keep your feet dry. He also describes the women as being strong characters – “Miss Thorne was probably the most masculine” – but all of them pleasant people.

He thinks the orchards were planted by the WFGA but, as we know, they were there

before the smallholdings were established. He describes the varieties – Newton Wonders, Worcester Pearmain, Cox's Orange Pippins, Stirling Castle, Prince Albert and Bramleys. (There are still a lot of apple trees – old gnarled trees).

If you turn left you can walk past properties that look too new to have been part of the WFGA estate (some of the Association houses seem to have disappeared) but if you continue to the end of the lane and then the footpath you come to a stile. At this point the footpath continues to the A22, but turn round to get some idea of size of one of plots, remembering it would have included the land on which the farm is now built.

Return the way you came. The housing which can be seen over the hedge on your right is the WEMBURY ESTATE – once “the bottom of Miss Thorne's garden”.

When you reach MOLES END continue ahead towards the MILL.

The first house on the left is TIMBER COTTAGE which was originally the music room for GARDEN COTTAGE (now called LEGENDS) next door, which was owned by Miss Taylor.

Mrs Rampling now lives in Timber Cottage – she bought it from Mrs Goth, one of the original smallholders (in the 1950s there were several of them still living on the estate). The stabling was built by Mrs Rampling.

From Mrs Rampling there was a little bit of gossip – one of the semi-detached houses opposite her (on the corner) was called the Four Crosses, because “four cross old women lived there.” It was owned by Sybil Mart, another of the original smallholders.

Go up to the front of the mill looking over the hammer pond. You are on the pond bay, i.e. the dam holding back the water of the Edenbrook. Continue over the river as it makes its escape off to the Race Course and Lingfield Station to join the Eden at Haxted Mill. At this point you can explore the woodland. There are two further properties on this side of the lake but they front onto the A22 – Lake View Cottage and Lake Cottage. They were built by the Association in 1926-7. Mrs Pyart lived in one, with tea shop, from 1931 and in 1934 bought both cottages. They are opposite The Peacock but well screened from the road.

Return to the Mill. Behind it is POOL COTTAGE. Ernie Borer refers to it as a “massive great house”, incorporating a “little tiny cottage” called Toad Hall where a London tailor lived.

RH7 History Group wishes to thank the following for their help:

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Sources:

The Museum of Rural Life, Reading University

The Felbridge History Society

British Newspaper Archive

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