

The Influence of the Agricultural Executive Committees in the First World War: Some Evidence from West Sussex

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The War Agricultural Executive Committees acquired enormous powers to direct the course of agriculture during the First World War, and writers such as Sheail, Whetham, and Dewey have commented on their influence at a national level.¹ However, detailed studies of their activities at local level are lacking, not least because the minute books and other papers recording their activities appear to have been destroyed in some areas.² It is the purpose of this paper to examine the types of issues with which they actually involved themselves, and to investigate the ways in which they used powers available to them, as illustrated by the surviving records for West Sussex.

The primary purpose of the committees was to identify those pieces of land within their regions which were producing significantly less than their optimal potential quantities of food, and to take appropriate steps to remedy this situation. The options open to them ranged from mere exhortations to greater effort, through the organisation of practical help in the form of, for example, provision of horses, tractors, and labour, to the ultimate sanction of dispossessing a tenant or taking over the running of an estate. In addition they also took upon themselves the role of commenting upon, and thus seeking to influence, government policies and practices towards agriculture, and they became increasingly involved in a tug-of-war with the military authorities over scarce resources of men and machines.

The Executive Committees arose out of the earlier County War Agricultural Committees, which had been set up in the latter part of 1915 at the behest of the Board of Agriculture to act as mediators between it and the farming community, and were seen as a more practical and hard-headed group, supported by compulsory powers more suited to the desperate food situation which developed in the

latter years of the war. The County Committees were initially concerned primarily with exhortation, education and propaganda, but quickly identified problems, and proposed solutions, which paved the way for government legislation and for the later activities of the Executive Committees. In West Sussex, for example, the Horsham Sub-Committee expressed early concern about shortages of fertilisers, and suggested that the export of Sulphate of Ammonia should be prohibited, while Midhurst Sub-Committee urged that landlords be pressed to remove restrictive covenants in leases against breaking up permanent grassland. The Midhurst group also seized upon the problem of labour shortages, and was active in encouraging women and boys aged over twelve to assist with milking and light work.³

There was a very obvious need for accurate information about the state of farming, particularly in terms of underused land, but neither the government nor the committees seemed willing to force the issue. The Board of Agriculture and Fisheries sent the War Agricultural Committee a letter on 19 October 1915 announcing that figures of the acreages under the principal groups of crops were in preparation and would be duly forwarded.⁴ However, it still felt able at this stage to worry about confidentiality, for it pointed out that the actual returns would not be used, summaries only being provided.⁵ The Committee's response, at a meeting on 22 October 1915, was to suggest a return from all producers in the county, detailing cultivation, crops, live and dead stock, but the Agricultural Organiser gave his opinion that farmers would not fill it in and the idea was dropped.⁶ The Committee therefore had to rely on the local, detailed knowledge of Sub-Committee members in the Rural Districts.

By March 1916 the need for urgent action was becoming more apparent, and the War Agricultural Committee resolved that its Clerk should ascertain from each district the acreage in each parish which, in the District Sub-Committee's opinion, could be ploughed up.⁷ In this they anticipated a memo from R. Prothero (later Lord Ernle), President of the Board of Agriculture, stating there could be no increase in gross production without extending the arable area, since the ploughing of temporary grassland was merely the substitution of one crop for another, and hence it would be necessary to plough permanent pasture.⁸ In such cases, the unconditional consent of the landowner was to be sought. If the landowner refused, the area should be inspected by a "practical farmer" or local land agent, and the Board should be guided by his report in taking action wherever a farm, or part of a farm, was found to be derelict or inadequately cultivated. Prothero urged Committees in such

cases to "take possession and realise the crops", or do whatever was necessary for spring cultivation, recovering the costs from the occupier later.

To deal with the continuing shortages, the Committee began to meet on a fortnightly basis, from December 1916, when they received a communication from the Board of Agriculture which presented the problem in unequivocal terms, and urged further action. They were informed that one-fifth of the wheat, three-fifths of the barley, four-fifths of the oats, two-thirds of the beans and half the peas consumed in an ordinary year were grown in the country, the rest being imported. In these circumstances, it was vital to give priority to wheat, with oats also playing a very important role, and barley being supported because it would grow on land that was no good for wheat or oats. Crops such as parsley, brussels sprouts and flowers were seen as luxuries. Prothero exhorted members not to forget that "the object which the War Agricultural Committees will steadily bear in mind is the greatest possible production of essential food-stuffs for man and beast". A special meeting of the District Committees was called to appoint a Sub-Committee of three of the most prominent farmers in each district, who would prepare detailed information on all parishes to assess what land was not properly cultivated. There was talk of compulsion, if necessary, in what was now seen as a "nationally urgent matter". Thus, a survey was initiated, with returns due by 9 January 1917, using classification categories of "well-done", "indifferently done" and "derelict". By means of the survey, it was hoped to assess whether it would be possible to maintain the existing arable area in cultivation, to see whether it could be put to more profitable use for spring food production, and to mark down land for cultivation for the 1918 harvest.⁹

The Minutes of the War Agricultural Committees show a body acting as an agent for the Board of Agriculture in encouraging farmers to greater efforts, particularly in arable cultivation, and relaying messages of a practical kind regarding fertilisers and feeding stuffs. They were also alive to the problems directives from the Board would engender, and were not afraid to point them out, or urge the Board to do its best to increase supplies. For example, in October 1915 the Committee discussed the use of motor ploughs to help overcome the shortage of labour, and the Clerk wrote to the Board urging them to "do their utmost to facilitate the production of these ploughs on the market". The Committee also agreed with strong representations from Gloucestershire, that "farmers should not be depleted of any more labour, especially skilled labour".¹⁰ However,

they had little capacity to take direct and forceful practical action to solve the problems which were emerging.

By 1916–17 it had become clear that the projected food shortages resulting from shipping losses would necessitate rather stronger measures. Farmers had increased the cereal acreage by 194,000 in 1915, but the total area fell again by 148,000 acres in 1916,¹¹ and it was felt that compulsory powers, together with bodies capable of using them, offered the only solution. The Board of Agriculture therefore initiated the formation of the War Agricultural Executive Committees in January 1917, with the aim of ensuring that the powers created by the Board under Regulation 2M of the Defence of the Realm Act 1917 were used effectively at local level. These powers were far-reaching, encompassing the passing of Orders to Convert to Arable and, ultimately, the dispossession of tenants.

The membership of the War Agricultural Executive Committee in West Sussex consisted of five men of local standing. The Chairman, F.H. Padwick, born at West Thorney (West Sussex), was a Barrister-at-Law, an agriculturalist, and a member of a prominent land-owning family. In addition to the West Sussex War Agricultural Executive Committee Chairmanship, he served on many other committees, was Vice-President and later President of the National Farmers' Union, and was Chairman of the Employers' Section of the Agricultural Wages Board in 1917. The other West Sussex War Agricultural Committee members, and those of the eight District Sub-Committees on which the main Committees relied for information at parish level, consisted of a mixture of local landowners, land agents and tenant farmers. Given unprecedented powers by the Board of Agriculture, members of the Executive Committee required necessary status to carry out what were, sometimes, unpopular measures. The mix of men of social status and of ordinary practical farmers was therefore probably ideal for the task of dealing with obdurate farmers, resentful of any interference with their personal liberty to farm as they wished. Certainly Prothero had urged that the Executive Committees should consist of men of "practical agricultural experience who could give constant attention to the work", and had expressed his confidence that "in the hands of practical agriculturalists, [he did] not think that compulsory powers for ploughing grass [would] be abused".¹²

The first meeting of the newly constituted War Agricultural Executive Committee on 22 January 1917 dealt with the forms generated by the survey. One had been sent to each tenant, and the details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Returns from tenants in West Sussex land survey, 1917

Condition	Forms	Arable	Mkt Gden	Orchard	Pasture
Satisfactory	2,171	95,165	3,732	247	97,004
Unsatisfact.	698	27,911	71	72	34,705
Derelict	27	34	0	0	154
TOTALS	2,896	123,111	3,803	391	131,864

Source: WSRO WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 107. Land use figures in acres. Pasture is permanent pasture, excluding open downland.

The Committee's response was to identify oats and potatoes as the desired crops most susceptible to expansion. Targets of 4,019 acres for oats (an increase of 13.27%) and 360 (18.87%) for potatoes were set, the Sub-Committees being charged with finding suitable areas of permanent pasture for the purpose. However, it was later pointed out that labour was much below the requirement of the area already under cultivation in all districts, and doubts were expressed that the food production levels of 1916 could be maintained unless more could be found.¹³ Estimates showed that workers in the several categories were urgently required, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Categories of Agricultural Workers in Short Supply, West Sussex 1917

Carters/ploughmen	324
Machinemen	26
Stockmen	196
Shepherds	65
Labourers	743
Thatchers	63
Women	240

Source: WSRO WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 4.

In practice, far from improving, the situation was being made worse by the redeployment of agricultural labour for non-farming tasks. As a result, much equipment was being under-used. It was estimated that at least 650 horses were not working full time, threshing machines were idle so that farmers were unable to get straw, and where wheat was not threshed early enough in autumn the land could not be sown due to lack of seed. Steam ploughs were also lying unused, and the survey showed that a large area of land was not

properly cultivated.¹⁴ Thus while there was ample spare capacity to increase the county's food production, the difficulties that faced the Executive Committee in making use of it were severe.

One immediate barrier to a successful ploughing-up campaign was finance, for the breaking up of grassland could not be achieved without some input of capital. Provision was therefore made for credit to be obtained through the Executive Committee and bankers for such items as manures and seeds, and a letter from Prothero to the Board hinted that such credit might also apply in the future to horses, implements and machinery. It was also appreciated that the ploughing-up of pasture might entail financial losses for the farmer, and arrangements were made for compensation payments to those against whom the Executive Committees were obliged to make compulsory orders. As the West Sussex War Agricultural Committee pointed out in a letter to Prothero, this produced an unfair situation where patriotic landowners who unconditionally consented to the breaking up of pastures were unable to claim for losses while those who were uncooperative could.¹⁵ The response was perhaps not what they had expected, for on 7 August 1917, the Executive Committee discussed a letter from the Food Production Department (FPD) in which it was suggested that, to safeguard the claims of both landlord and tenant where any loss followed the ploughing of grassland, the Committee should, in every case, make an Order for the purpose.¹⁶ The Committee discussed the enormous number of inspections this would entail, and resolved to ask the FPD if it would be sufficient for a practical farmer approved by the Committee to make the inspection and report before the issue of an Order.

One consequence of this decision was that landowners and land agents covered themselves by formally refusing to agree to an order, and the Committee was placed in the anomalous situation of having to proceed against its own members. On 30 July 1917 an Order was issued to W.J. Passmore, a member of the Committee, to plough up and cultivate pasture field numbers, 199, 200, 201 and 220 in the parish of Woodmancote.¹⁷ Similarly, in January and February 1917 Frank Aman, Land Agent to Viscount Cowdray, and a member of the Midhurst District Sub-Committee, refused, on behalf of his employer, to give permission to F. Smith of Selham Manor Farm Midhurst to plough and sow with oats a portion of his land. The Committee was again obliged to grant an official order, on 19 February 1917.¹⁸

It is clear from the records that the committee saw its principal initial task as the management of land use, and much of its work in 1917 was devoted to this end. Its main targets were the 27, 945 acres

of arable land that the tenant-by-tenant survey had highlighted as unsatisfactory or derelict, and the permanent grassland which the committee estimated could be ploughed in preparation for the 1918 harvest.

The Board, working from the 1916 Agricultural Returns for West Sussex (Table 3), had set a target of 96,000 acres of corn, including 25,000 acres to be broken up from pasture. This would have given a total of 64% of the arable land devoted to grain. The committee, however, were of the view that the 65,516 acres of corn grown in 1916 would not be exceeded under normal conditions, and that, even with the addition of 25,000 acres of newly broken pasture, the new total of 90,516 acres would be 5,484 acres under the quantity asked for. Furthermore, some of the land in the north of the county was too heavy and not suitable for cultivation, but had been included in the Board of Agriculture and Food target of 25,000 acres of grassland to be ploughed because it was thought necessary to suggest a definite acreage, "no matter what the consequence in succeeding years".¹⁹ The committee thus reduced the 25,000 acres to 19,630, but it felt that, in the interests of food production in general, it would not be advisable to break up more than 15,000 acres.

The only arable land from which an increased acreage for corn could be drawn was that under root crops, clover and rotation grasses, and bare fallow. With an adequate supply of machinery, labour and favourable weather, the Committee felt that the land which would be bare fallow could be transferred to roots, liberating a corresponding area of root acreage to corn, especially if there were a slight reduction in the areas under roots and clover. Hence it might be possible to achieve 5,500 acres, just sufficient to bring the total to 96,000 acres if 25,000 acres of grassland were broken up. However, since the Committee was recommending that only 15,000 acres be broken up, there was a shortfall of some 10,000 acres. In practical terms, the heavy Weald Clay (forming the greater proportion of grassland in the county), which had been in cultivation in the early 1870's and producing fair crops in favourable seasons, could not be prepared in time for Autumn sowing, and Spring sowing of wheat would be risky.

Table 3. Figures for West Sussex from 1916 Agricultural Returns

Crop	Acres	Percent
Corn crops (incl. beans and peas)	65,516	51.9%
Potatoes	1,908	1.5%
Turnips, mangolds, cabbage and kohlrabi	21,089	16.7%

Rape and vetches	4,742	3.7%
Clover, sainfoin & grasses under rotation	24,805	19.7%
Other crops	2,764	2.1%
Bare fallow	5,226	4.1%

Source: WSRO WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 107.

From October to November 1917, the Minutes show a concentration in the number of Orders to convert to arable, with fifty-three orders dealt with on 22nd October and seventy-one on 12th November.²⁰ All told, some 278 orders are recorded, though this is likely to be an under-estimate of the real total, since the Minutes also refer to orders or, more commonly, suggestions made by Sub-Committees, that are not officially logged. Unfortunately there is no ready means of assessing the acreage represented by these orders, since many give no area for the fields concerned. In the absence of the Valuation Books for Lloyd George's 1910 Land Survey for the Chichester and Midhurst regions, which were destroyed during World War Two,²¹ it would be necessary to match each of the field numbers with those on the Ordnance Survey 25 inch series and total the figures from them. However, an indication of the extent of the land involved may be gained from the meeting of 22 October 1917, when acreages were given for thirty of the thirty-one orders. On that occasion the total was 822.29 acres.²² As has already been suggested, some of this resistance to the ploughing-up of grassland was a formality aimed at ensuring that the landowner would be eligible for compensation for any loss, but there was undoubtedly a genuine reluctance on the part of many farmers. As a contemporary pointed out, "the experience of the past generation had suggested no safe alternative to grass", and, in any case, "the process of converting permanent pasture into arable is new to the experience of many agriculturalists of the present generation".²³ After some forty years during which returns on arable land had been at best mediocre and at worst disastrous,²⁴ it is hardly surprising that many farmers would react only when compelled to do so.

The task of overseeing the improvement of the 27,945 acres of unsatisfactory and derelict land was also an onerous one, and at the same time as the Committee was supervising the expansion of arable land, it was obliged to act against incompetent and often recalcitrant farmers. For example, in April 1917, Mr Knight of Naldret House and Mr Allfrey of Stall House Farm, Pulborough were given seven days to say if their land could be properly cultivated,²⁵ presumably with satisfactory results at least in the latter case, since there were no further references to Allfrey. Knight, however, may possibly have

been the W. Knight who was later prosecuted for defying a ploughing-up order. Mr Goodeve of Backsett Town Farm proved even more of a problem. This farm was discussed on 23 July 1917, when one field of forty eight acres was described as a "disgrace", and it was felt that strong measures needed to be taken to bring the land into good cultivation. The Committee decided that the situation was so bad that its members should personally inspect the farm to formulate a plan of action, and eventually on 8 October they felt obliged to take possession of the farm. Meanwhile, Goodeve continued to cause problems on his Kilsham and Brightams Farms, which were the subject of further reports to the Committee.²⁶

While the Minutes show evidence of farmers who willingly and enthusiastically made their own contributions to increased food production, the case of Goodeve is by no means unique, and certain names continued to appear throughout the war in a way that suggests at best apathy, and at the worst stubbornness or wilful neglect. The most prominent of these was C.R. Scrase Dickins, owner of the Coolhurst Estate near Horsham. Minutes of the first meeting of the Executive Committee on 22 January 1917 contain a report on this estate, and the dereliction of over 600 acres can be very clearly seen. The Mansion is described by the inspector as "quite useless . . . as a dwelling house", the park neglected, and "in some of the fields the hay has not even been carried in and tons of good hay, which could have been used for the Army or cattle, have been absolutely wasted".²⁷ Things were bad enough on the lands held in hand, but were even worse on the various farms available for letting. At Holme Farm, cattle were "the only sign of habitation", and "buildings of good structure are falling through, the roofs being damaged" or even entirely absent. Goldings Farm is described as derelict and over-run with game, and the inspector acidly comments that "nothing seemingly has been done on the owner's part to keep or help his tenantry". In the opinion of the Sub-Committee, "it is impossible . . . to overstate the amount of neglect and waste occurring on the land in this gentleman's occupation and this applies to both land and buildings; an accumulated neglect of probably 25 to 30 years".

Scrase Dickins was present at this inspection, and was in regular correspondence with the Committee, promising to get things moving on his estate; however, Committee members must have found him very frustrating to deal with, since on many occasions it is clear that he had actually done very little. As late as November of the same year he was ordered to properly top and thatch the hay rick opposite Coolhurst Lodge.²⁸ However, the Committee finally lost patience, and took over the estate at the end of 1917.

With long-established neglect on a scale such as this, the Committee was forced to put a great deal of effort and money into renovation. As in many other cases, they were compelled to court co-operation from the owner of the estate, for with chronic labour shortages there would be no-one else to bring in, although in this case the Committee, recognising the need for a full-time foreman, was able to use the services of a Mr Smith to manage the estate for £150 per annum. Addition of the sums detailed in the Minutes as expenses on the Coolhurst Estate reveals a total spent of £10,612 0s 6d. (including repairs to damage caused by an Air Ministry balloon in July 1919). Much of this is related to building work and wages. There was obvious disquiet on the part of the Food Production Department about the amount being expended on this estate, judging by a resolution in the Minutes of 20th September 1919 to inform the FPD that, in view of the improvement effected by the Committee, there was no reason to doubt that the greater proportion of the expenditure would be recoverable.²⁹

The Ministry of Agriculture was not satisfied with this assurance, since in July 1920 the Committee once more found itself putting up a justification for its actions at Coolhurst. The land had been largely unlettable when the Committee took possession (though Scrase Dickins was now asking for a rent of 28s. per acre), and the Committee was confident that a 'considerable part of the expenditure for repairs will be recoverable under Article 4, Regulation 2M' of the Defence of the Realm Act. By the 8 November, the Committee estimated that the estate would show a loss of approximately £4,397 4s 5d., though there were the stock prices, outgoing valuations and the Committee's claim under Regulation 2M to be considered. The Committee finally withdrew from Coolhurst on 21 January 1921, and the result of the arbitration of the claims for compensation, held in August 1921 was as follows:

	Amount claimed	Amount awarded
Claim for improved capital value	£2,301 5s. 0d.	£1,150 12s. 6d.
Counterclaim by Scrase Dickins 3 years' rent of land in hand	£1,253 9s. 0d.	£ 791 3s. 0d.
Cutting and removal of trees and tellers	£ 200 0s. 0d.	£ 129 5s. 0d.
Restoration of pastures ploughed up	£ 269 10s. 0d.	£ 108 10s. 0d.

W.S.R.O., WOC/CM83/1/2, 31 Oct 1921.

In addition to Coolhurst, twenty-two other farms or pieces of land were taken over by the Committee during the course of the war. By

June 1920, the Committee were still in actual possession of over 1,500 acres. They seemed to use possession very much as a last resort, preferring to give tardy farmers time to get their affairs into order, and setting deadlines which were not always strictly enforced. For instance, on 8 October 1917 Mr Vallens, tenant of Gatehouse Farm, was given until Christmas to get his land into good cultivation, but the Committee's patience finally ran out in June, when he was given fourteen days to vacate the farm. The case of Mr Roseveare of Polthooks Farm, Fishbourne, is also of interest. His name first appears in the Minutes in February 1917 when, faced with a notice to quit in 1918, he wrote to the Executive Committee asking for advice on how to crop the land.³⁰ The Committee declined to give such instructions, and continued to do so in April when Roseveare wrote again asking for their reasons. He later wrote direct to the Board on this matter, with a similar result. Whether because of this early rebuff, or some aspect of his personality, from this point on Roseveare seemed to be actively hostile, refusing to cultivate his land properly, since in August 1918 the Committee's Chief Executive Officer received authorisation to enter Polthooks farm and harvest the corn if and when necessary. Roseveare's claim for £759 10s. 4d. in compensation went to arbitration on 9 October 1919, where the arbitrator Mr. Bannister directed that he was entitled to nothing, and that he should pay the costs of £32 2s 7d. This he refused to pay and, by November 1920, steps were being taken to make him bankrupt.³¹

As a later resort, the Committee initiated prosecutions against farmers for non-compliance with orders to cultivate their land; three such are detailed in May 1918, against W. Knight of Petworth, D.B. Hall of Burton Park and E.M. Rodocanachi.³²

The Committee sometimes had to deal with criticism from the National Farmers' Union in addition to the passive resistance met with from individual farmers. On 21 October 1918 it considered a resolution passed by the West Sussex branch of the Union, expressing the opinion that the Threshing Sub-Committee should be placed on the 'Extinct List' and that farmers should be allowed to make their own arrangements, as it considered that the "present muddle unnecessarily handicaps farmers without effecting appreciable economy either in labour or coal".³³ This was ignored, and the Committee resolved that no arrangements for threshing seed corn should be made which would prejudice the interests of the smaller farmer.

As the war ran its course and the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries were able to obtain and organise more of the necessary supplies and machinery, the Executive Committee was increasingly

able to offer practical help to farmers in West Sussex, in the form of Food Production Department horses, tractors, ploughs, rollers, drills, harrows and so on. They helped to organise more constant and better-distributed supplies of Sulphate of Ammonia, basic slag, lime, and coal for steam driven machinery, and regulated the hire and use of FPD equipment to ensure maximum possible use. The meeting on 5 March 1917 reported that Steyning District Sub-Committee had arranged for the full-time working of six sets of motor ploughs, with two sets of men each, and had appealed to the Mayor of Hove to send car drivers, and to the Officer Commanding HQ Canadian Camp, Shoreham for ploughmen. These appeals had been successful, and the ploughs were working from dawn till dusk.³⁴ The Committee also intended to contact the necessary Authorities controlling the use of lights at night, and permission to use the same in order to implement twenty-four hour working. Farmers were charged from 15s to 20s per acre for work done under the Board's control through the Committee, this sum covering all labour, fuel and maintenance.

At times, the Committee viewed instructions received from the Board as impractical, and it was a measure of the communication and trust between the two sides that the Board's officials were ready to modify their requirements according to local recommendations. Thus, in July 1917, the Board sent a letter requiring that approved agents should be appointed to undertake to store a minimum quantity of fifty tons of Sulphate of Ammonia and maintain the stock at that rate until 31 March 1918.³⁵ The Supplies Sub-Committee expressed the opinion that it would be difficult to obtain agents under these circumstances, and argued for a restriction to twenty-five tons until 28 February 1918, a recommendation that was put into effect by the Board later that month.³⁶ The Committee continued its work of disseminating useful information from the FPD, but now had the means to put suggested procedures into practice. Seven 16 hp Mogul tractors, supplied by the Board, were sent in July 1917 to Pulborough, Steyning, Horsham, Petworth and Angmering for distribution to farms, though the Committee asked for stronger tractors to be allotted in future. The District Organiser for tractors, Mr J. Rice, was given the power to take over any tractor that he considered desirable to hire on BAF terms, on behalf of the West Sussex War Agricultural Executive Committee, in order to ensure the maximum possible use of equipment. At the request of the Board in June 1917, the Committee submitted a detailed list of equipment necessary to cultivate the increased area for the 1918 harvest, and suggested that some 1,600 additional horses (together with the necessary harness) and 800 carters were also required.³⁷ Much of the work done during

Committee meetings consisted of organising the utilisation of machinery, discussion of pricing of hire and conditions of use, and the never-ending search for enough labour.

The emphasis on an adequate supply of machinery and labour highlights the constant concern with shortages of various kinds, and continuing attempts to match supply with demand. During almost every month the Committee sent the FPD requests for additional tractors and implements; even when these had been received and distributed, the Minutes often contain reminders to the Board that supplies were smaller than asked for or that repairs could not be done. In July 1917 the Committee addressed itself to the local difficulties with the production of lime, arising from a lack of labour and a ban on the use of the Petersfield-Midhurst road by traction engines. An experienced lime-burner had been refused exemption from military service. Producers of lime preferred orders to be more evenly distributed, and the Committee recommended that lime be applied immediately to grassland to be ploughed up, in order to help even out the demand. The Committee resolved to ask West Sussex County Council to allow the use of the faster and lighter traction engines, and the Food Production Department to use its influence to retain experienced lime burners.³⁸

This problem of retaining adequate appropriate labour in the face of growing military demands was one which greatly exercised the Executive Committee. Much of this aspect of their work comprised detailed examination of claims by farmers and others for exemptions from military service. For example, on 12 February, 1917 it was reported to the Committee that Mrs Burge's carter had been called up with no replacement available, and thus Mr Rapley of the Committee took it upon himself to make enquiries. In March 1917 there was correspondence regarding the call up of W.J. Willis, a tractor driver, and the return of Sapper H.R. Golding to take charge of threshing tackle. Many of the weekly meetings faced large numbers of applications, the largest total being on 22 October 1917, when twenty three pages of applications were dealt with at a single meeting, representing over 900 individual cases.³⁹ Eighty to one hundred and fifty cases per meeting were not unusual. There is a discernible pattern in this particular type of application; they begin being put to the Committee in early May 1917, when the plough-up campaign gathered momentum, continue in large numbers as farmers became increasingly desperate to get enough labour, and peter out in November 1918, when it became obvious that the war was ending.

A study of the Minutes indicates the very varied alternative sources of labour in a time when all available able-bodied men had been

called up for military service. The Committee drew upon prisoners of war, soldiers, conscientious objectors, civilians, women, public schoolboys and masters, Portsmouth residents and policemen. Canvas camps were arranged for boys to work during the school holidays, and for prisoners of war. With all these sources of labour, farmers had to contend with inexperience and, in the busy seasons, probably fatigue, since working hours were laid down for soldiers at least, to be 6.30 am to 5.30 pm, with half-an-hour for breakfast and one hour for lunch. Much of the work would have been heavy and physically demanding, with long hours of overtime when necessary.

At a meeting in March 1917, the Committee considered whether it would be advisable to give Saturday afternoon off to men employed as market gardeners, but they felt it essential that all men should use every hour possible to good effect. Later the same month, Messrs Pullen Burr of Sompting were censured for giving men a half-day holiday on Saturdays, which was seen as upsetting the labour of the surrounding areas and diminishing output. There was probably also a limit to what workers were willing to do, even in war time, illustrated by a letter received by the Committee in March 1917, from J.R. and E.W. Wadman of Sompting, who had tried to get men to work one hour extra each day for an increase of three shillings per week, but had met with no success.⁴⁰ The Committee set wages for prisoners of war without experience of 3s. 6d. per day (5d. per hour overtime), and for prisoners of war with experience of 4s. per day (6d. per hour overtime), while for other workers 5s. was the wage for each day of the hay harvest, and for the corn harvest 6s. per ten-hour day. The general wages for the district, stated in March 1917, were given as 25s. per week for experienced carters, stockmen and shepherds living out, 7s. per week for those living in, while labourers living out received 20s. per week, and those living in 2s. per week. Soldiers, while not actually working in the hay or corn harvests, were to receive 4s. 2d. per day (finding their own board and lodging) or 1s. 8d. per day when this was supplied by the farm.⁴¹

In addition to their major concerns, the Committee were drawn into a whole host of minor issues. In response to a request from the Board that horse chestnuts should be used in place of grain in acetone production (thus increasing the amount available for human consumption), the Committee organised that school children in the county should collect these, and then wondered whether they should also collect acorns.⁴² School children were also enlisted to collect blackberries in the autumn of 1918 for making into jam for the troops.⁴³ The Committee were also called upon to issue licences under the Sale of Horses Order 1917, for petrol, and for cartridges for shooting vermin.

While concentrating on local detail, the Committee did not lose sight of the wider issues arising from Government policy. They discussed on 7 August 1917 the disastrous effect that the Meat Order had had on the production of beef and mutton, and asked the Executive to watch closely the actions of the Food Controller with respect to milk, in order to see that the interests of producers were not prejudiced.⁴⁴ They protested to the Board against charges made for hiring horses, and recommended that the Board should either reduce the price of tractors or subsidise them so that farmers might buy at reasonable prices. In June, they had mooted the idea of a £2 per acre subsidy for newly cultivated land, an idea that was actually implemented, in anticipation of World War Two, in May 1939.⁴⁵ Even when the war was over, the Committee resolved that the Ministry of Agriculture be informed of the alarm with which it viewed the great shortage in the acreage of land being planted with wheat (February 1920), and recommended that guaranteed prices should be on a more economic basis. It is hard to say how much influence executive committees had directly on Government policy, but it is fair to say that, judging by the frequency with which recommendations were effected, either then or later, officials looked upon them as bodies in touch with the mood of the farming community and fully cognisant of the importance of their own role in increasing food production.

Towards the end of the war, the Executive Committee allows a small sense of satisfaction to be revealed in the Minutes. On 6 May 1918, it was estimated that forty-five to fifty tractors were at work in the county and this was deemed to be sufficient. The systems so painstakingly constructed were at last working, for each meeting includes a record of the area ploughed and cultivated, the tussle with the War Office over men appears finally to be abating and, while farmers could still be difficult, all the most intractable properties were now under Committee control.⁴⁶

As has already been seen, the work of the Committee went on for some time after the war, with compensation claims to settle and the divestment of properties taken over. In June 1920, the Committee revealed that 237 claims for compensation had been initiated, and the amount claimed was £38,251 8s. 1d. Twenty-nine of these claims had not been admitted, as no Order had been served or there was no proof of loss sustained, and two claims had been withdrawn. 131 claims had been settled by agreement, the amount claimed being £20,700 0s. 6½d., actually settled at £11,489 10s. 10d., while 15 claims had been settled by arbitration (£3,965 17s. 11½d. claimed, settled at £1,226 17s. 2d.). Another sixty claims waited to be dealt

with. All the equipment supplied to the Committee to assist in the ploughing up scheme (except for a number of horses and machinery transferred at valuation to the Coolhurst Estate and Backsett Town Farm to enable them to carry on) had been disposed of, fetching a total of £58,463 18s. 0d.⁴⁷

Though the volume of work undertaken by the committees can be readily appreciated, it is more difficult to assess their effectiveness. The minutes are very much concerned with decisions taken, and with the mechanics of production; there is little indication of any quantitative assessment of the success of their policies. A crude measure may be gained by comparing acreages in 1918 with those at the peak in the 1870s, for one of the specific aims of the Lloyd George government had been to restore the levels to those of 50 years before. By that highly demanding standard, they might be judged a failure, for the arable acreage of Sussex reached only 68% of its former peak, and wheat did even worse at 62%. By comparison, for England and Wales as a whole the figures were 70% and 72% respectively. Sussex, however, had moved more sharply out of wheat in the pre-war period, and comparisons with 1914 show the county in a better light: arable increased by 17% between 1914 and 1918, against only 2% for England and Wales, while wheat was up by 47%, against 41%. How far this increased acreage represented a major gain in production is even less clear; Dewey records Sussex as having the lowest wheat yields per acre from the newly-ploughed land of any of the counties which he investigated, though Short claims that corn production was expanded by 27%.⁴⁸

Whether even these levels of improvement were directly due to the activities of the committees is open to dispute, for Dewey has argued that national food control policies were the main contributing factor.⁴⁹ Nationally, it has been suggested that the labour provided was often not very useful, and that the tractors were too unreliable to make much contribution.⁵⁰ Locally, there is the evidence that West Sussex farmers were able to resist the committee's pressure for long periods, and policies such as shooting rabbits and rooks smack more of a desire to be seen to be taking some action than of any effective contribution to food production. The latter, indeed, was potentially harmful in removing a predator of insect pests.

Nevertheless, the West Sussex evidence does suggest that the work of the two committees did make a significant contribution to the war effort. The acreage of land taken over and run by the Executive Committee was small in percentage, but not negligible, and the same is true of the land ordered to be ploughed, or where restrictive covenants were over-ridden. Furthermore, the fact that they were

prepared to take such drastic action must have had an effect in galvanising other laggard or recalcitrant farmers into action. The huge number of applications for exemption from military service dealt with by the committee is evidence of an important, albeit passive, influence on agricultural labour supply. Without their influence there seems little doubt that the military's desperate search for manpower would have had an even greater and even more random impact on agriculture. The effectiveness of their role in allocating scarce resources of fertilizers, tractors, and horses is less obvious, at least from the evidence of the minutes, particularly in view of the doubts hinted at by the committee themselves.

In one respect, at least, the committees had enormous importance. Their work during the First World War was a vital source of experience on which to draw for those who planned the control of agriculture during the Second. When the County Agricultural Committees began their work, there was no precedent for the control of British agriculture on the sort of scale which was attempted. If their initial approach seems somewhat cautious and dilatory, this is hardly surprising, for there was little appreciation of the degree of disruption that a twentieth century war might bring. The work of the County Committees in identifying the problems, and the subsequent practical experience of the Executive Committees in trying to tackle them, enabled the later planners to produce a scheme based not on trial and error, but on a solid base of previous knowledge and experimentation.

Notes

¹ J. Sheail, 'Changes in the use and management of farmland in England and Wales, 1915-19', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 60, (1973), pp. 17-32; E.H. Whetham, *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1914-39* (Cambridge, 1978); P.E. Dewey, *British Agriculture in the First World War* (1989).

² Sheail, *IBG*, p. 18. J. Chapman, 'National, Regional and Local Trends in Land-Use during the First World War', *Department of Geography Working Papers, Portsmouth Polytechnic*, 2 (1989).

³ W(est) S(ussex) R(ecord) O(ffice), WOC/CM80/1/1, 16 Nov 1915.

⁴ Actually arriving in November 1915. W.S.R.O., WOC/CM80/1/1, 16 Nov 1915.

⁵ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM80/1/1, 22 Oct 1915.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM80/1/1, 17 Mar 1916.

⁸ Memo dated 29 Dec 1916. W.S.R.O., WOC/CM80/1/1, 1 Jan 1917.

⁹ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 3.

¹⁰ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM80/1/1, 22 Oct 1915 and 18 Dec 1918.

¹¹ J. Sheail, 'Land Improvement and Reclamation: the Experiences of the First World War in England and Wales', *Agricultural History Review*, 24 (1976), p. 111.

- ¹² Memo of 29 Dec 1916. W.S.R.O., WOC/CM80/1/1, 1 Jan 1917.
- ¹³ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 3.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁵ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM80/1/1, 25 June 1917.
- ¹⁶ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 157.
- ¹⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 136 and 148.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 17–8.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 107.
- ²⁰ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, pp. 216, 230–32, 303–5, 309–11.
- ²¹ B.M. Short, 'The Geography of England and Wales in 1910: An Evaluation of Lloyd George's "Domesday" of Landownership', *Historical Geography Research Series Number 22* (1989), p. 36.
- ²² W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, pp. 283–8.
- ²³ C. Brynner Jones, 'The breaking up of Permanent Grass in 1918', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 79 (1918), pp. 24–44.
- ²⁴ For a discussion of this period see P.J. Perry, *British Agriculture, 1875–1914* (London, 1973).
- ²⁵ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 65.
- ²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 49, 182, 213, 244, 248.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 302.
- ²⁹ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/3.
- ³⁰ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 16.
- ³¹ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/3, 29 Nov 1920.
- ³² W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/2, p. 223.
- ³³ *ibid.*, pp. 331–2.
- ³⁴ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 28.
- ³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 105.
- ³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 134.
- ³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 84.
- ³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 134.
- ³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 253–82.
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 45.
- ⁴¹ *ibid.*, pp. 40 and 111.
- ⁴² *ibid.*, p. 191.
- ⁴³ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/2, pp. 215, 231, 286, 304.
- ⁴⁴ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/1, p. 159.
- ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁴⁶ W.S.R.O., WOC/CM82/1/3, 14 June 1920.
- ⁴⁸ Dewey, *British Agriculture*, p. 209; B. Short, 'The Changing Rural Society and Economy of Sussex, 1750–1945', in *Sussex: Environment, Landscape and Society* (Gloucester, 1983), p. 158.
- ⁴⁹ P.E. Dewey, 'Food production and policy in the United Kingdom, 1914–1918', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, 30 (1980), pp. 71–89.
- ⁵⁰ Dewey, *British Agriculture*, p. 61.