

Memories of farming in Sutton Courtenay

By Jonathan Blinman

Jonathan is a long-time resident of Sutton Courtenay, having grown up in the village from age three

I have a memory from the 1950s which, as you will see, harks back to an even earlier time.

I had just finished my National Service with the army in Germany and was helping out with the harvest in the fields at the back of Lady Place. (In fact, 'the Backs' was what we called the cart-track running parallel with the High Street, from the top of Doctors Lane to what is now called Wallingford Way.)

Our task was "shocking up" - gathering the sheaves of wheat left by the binder and stacking them upright in groups of six. Later these would be loaded onto horse-drawn wagons for transport back to the farm. Our work was hot and dusty and we looked forward to 'lunch': this was the mid-morning break about 10 o'clock when we would retire to sit in the shade.

I remember one of the old farmworkers, Jack Brookland, swigging cold tea from a glass bottle with a lemonade stopper and eating slices of cheese straight from the blade of his clasp-knife. A rugged older man, with a walrus moustache, he leaned back against his tree and talked of his youth in the Great War when he had to travel to Flanders with his favourite cart horses requisitioned by the military and who never came back from the slaughter. The sadness in his voice and the faraway look in his eyes stays with me to this day.

This story triggers another smaller memory - when as a child I witnessed corn being hand-sown on that very same field. The farmer, Cecil Allen I think, carried a wide metal tray of seed supported by a shoulder strap, the tray curved at his hip. Walking at a steady pace, he rhythmically broadcast handfuls of seed, left hand, right hand, in time with his stride. A skill that delighted the eye.