

Once again, in November, we remember the fallen in past wars, especially that of 1914-18. Many who enlisted then did, however, survive and return with stories to tell, or perhaps some they preferred to forget. Leonard Cooke of Grange Farm was one of those.

It has often been remarked that many young men joined up seeking adventure as an escape from dull lives in crowded homes and the endless drudgery of many jobs, including those in agriculture. This certainly applied to Len Cooke, who packed his bags and left the family farm at the age of 18, as soon as war started in 1914. Relationships within the family also played a part.

The family story in Bicton started when his grandfather, John Cooke of Wem, took the tenancy of Churncote Farm on the Wingfield Estate in the 1880s. It was a truly family enterprise, involving two sons and a nephew in addition to hired staff. Census records show a really crowded household of 10 or more.

Relations with the landlord were obviously good, which enabled John to secure the tenancy of another Wingfield farm, 'The Grange' for his son, Joseph, now with wife and family. Other family members also acquired Wingfield tenancies.

The Grange was a modest farm unit of about 60 acres overlooking the Severn Valley at Montford Bridge, a mixture of boulder clay and sand upon the old glacial moraine, good for both arable and grass. The Wingfield Estate had acquired it in 1829 as part of the Preston Montford estate, then owned by Hills of Hawkestone. It had been added to that estate by purchase from John Mytton of Halston in 1795. Much further back, the site must have been held by Buildwas Abbey, hence the name.

The Cookes continued to manage it as a typical mixed farm, including a small milking herd now supplying the local liquid mild market. Indeed, there was work for all the family. To son Len, Joseph was therefore both a father and demanding employer, a situation ripe for a show of youthful rebellion now made possible by the war. Once Len had departed his younger brother was obliged to give up school and cover his workload instead.

Ironically his escape from farm type work was not altogether complete, since the military welcomed his experience with horses and placed him in the transport corps. To widen his skills he then spent several months training to handle mules, before eventually moving to the action in France.

Transport duties there involved quite a lot of night-time work stocking up the front line with ammunition and other stores, then returning with the dead for burial. Len wrote regularly to his Mother, but censors prevented him from discussing too many details of this. He commented on the billets which he occupied behind the lines and often requested some food parcels and spare clothing to match the changing weather. Living in French farming communities also made him homesick at times.

Although not directly involved in front line fighting he could see its results in the damaged bodies which he transported and also share the hazards of long-range shell fire. The rolling chalk lands of northern France are naturally well drained, but their veneer of red stony clay was soon turned to deep mud by this constant traffic. Nevertheless, the superiors still wanted shining steel and well scrubbed leather on the harness. They even sent our infantry into action with polished badges, which no doubt helped the aim of German snipers!

So much for the adventure which he had hoped for, and now perhaps he felt to be 'in a rut' in more ways than one. Others around, however, recognised in him some potential for leadership and suggested he tried for a commission. After initial hesitation, he did so and was accepted for training, which involved a course shorter than the one he had for mule driving! The nature of this warfare was creating a rapid turnover of junior officers, so there was 'no time to lose'.

While on such training, his mind turned to the expanding opportunities in the air and therefore applied to join the Royal Flying Corps in 1917. Apart from basic flying lessons, which took place in England, training involved becoming familiar with the ever-changing improvements stimulated by the needs of war. As 2nd Lieutenant and a 'sound pilot', he returned to France in September 1918, by which time the German Army was in retreat. Action therefore spread over a wider area with sorties devoted to both bombing and reconnaissance, but then after a hectic couple of months, the war finally ended with the armistice.

His unit returned to England for dispersal or demobilisation, so Len was able to return home to the Grange, but was too restless to take on actual farming. Instead he joined the police, but gave up after a couple of years. Next he tried working in Australia, in the wool trade. However, Joseph then died at the early age of 47, so Len returned to take up the Grange tenancy and be his own boss.

Marriage and a new family followed on, while his local liquid mild trade expanded. Eventually in 1988 they all left the Wingfield Estate to take up another farm at Felton Butler, which son John still holds today. During the next war it was no surprise to find Len involved in the Home Guard. He died about 1975.

Len may have gone but his letters and photographs still remain to remind us of those difficult times by providing a 'window on the past'.

Many thanks to Ruth Cooke for providing the information about her late father.



LEN COOKE
trainee pilot

