

The seed business was concerned with small seeds only - not corn - so we were concerned with hay crops only. This is a most interesting business and in the early part of the century when the four year system was used by the farmers a most flourishing one. Separate ledgers were kept for this and each farmer either had his own mixture to be mixed or would rely on my father's judgement. Usually 14-20 lb to the acre was allowed and the mixture consisted of English and/or Italian Rye Grass, Clover, Trefoil, Alsike and White (clover) and perhaps Red Suckling.

Other seeds were added for permanent grass mixtures such as Wild White, The Fescues - Cocksfoot and Timothy.

A finer mixture still was used for lawns.

To approach the seedroom we come first to the granary. Here we kept vast amounts and varieties of dog biscuits. Later on when the binders were in use - binder twine. Also we had a huge circular bin for household flour - which we bought several sacks at a time. I was too young to know the quantity but this flour was sold in 5 stones to most of the cottagers in the district. As a child I have been out in the trade cart when this has been delivered. Most of the cottagers made their own bread, as this was far cheaper on average. I should think there were at least 4 or 5 children. Flour was sold at about 8/- to 10/- for 5 stone. Later the sale of this went off - I cannot say why unless baker's bread was cheaper and more easily obtained.

Also in the granary was a contraption known as a sack lifter - which when a lever was turned somewhere it raised a full sack of seed to the height of a man's back for carrying it.

A crane worked by hand was for lifting the stone sacks of new seed from the wagon onto the granary floor. Rather heavy chain was used for this purpose and again chains and pulleys were used to haul the sacks onto the second floor leading to the seed room.

Here the long corridor over the granary was lined with bins, divided into cubicles and each one was filled with the new seed that came in (in the sacks, of course). In the off season when all was cleared up seed from the seedroom was stored here and padlocked.

To come to the seed room. This had a special wooden floor made of hard wood - all around the sacks were opened up and turned back ready for use and each year the seed was placed in exactly the same place so that no mistake was made. In the early days this part of the business was very near to my father's heart as it was the next best thing to farming he used to say. He had wanted to be a farmer - although I doubt if he would have made such a success of it as he did of his iron-mongery and seed business.

He and our chief assistant generally used to do the mixing themselves unless my brother helped and since during the day they were occupied in the shop this was often done in the evenings to the light of two hurricane lanterns and a hanging lamp - sometimes in the height of the season in late February, March and April until 10 pm. They did not mind as it was such a short season.

The seed was measured by the bushel and peck and a long piece of wood about 3 inches square was used as a "strike" to make sure the measure was so much and no more.

This strike assumed almost a polished appearance with so much use. The various seeds in specified quantities went on to the floor in a heap and with beautiful large shiny shovels turned over three times, in rhythmic motion. One man each side of the heap and working both the shovels in alternate "sweeps". This mixture was then sacked - label and mixture enclosed and then another label outside the sack denoting name of the farmer - possibly the name of the field - or if not at least the number of acres for which this mixture was required.

After the first world war regulations were tightened. No longer could we sell by measure it had to be by weight and an analysis given with each mixture of weight, the country of origin and percentage of purity and germination.

After the second world war even this business deteriorated. The four year system was no longer an essential part of farming - the young farmers became more specialised and preferred more scientific methods. Also many of them became gigantic market gardeners with their fields of sprouts and cabbages and carrots etc. In fact I have actually heard my father remark to a young farmer that "in the old days we knew how to farm". This of course was only in a sense his sense of humour since all things must naturally progress with mechanisation and science.

I have probably left out a lot of this that may be important.

My father used to buy home grown seed from the farmer and he had machinery for cleaning this, to take out the docks and weeds. We were not allowed to sell this latterly until it had been sent to Cambridge for analysis. It is interesting to note that whereas we had to pay a fee of 10/- and later £1 for each sample tested, the farmer could have this done free - why?

To come back to the showroom and the garden seed trade. This was quite an event too. Packets of seeds weren't so plentiful as they are these days. We used to buy peas and beans in sacks of large quantity and sell them loose - in pints and half pints. We used to packet the smaller garden seeds - lettuce, carrots, onions etc and they were sold at 2d per packet. Our customers liked this method as at least they knew that they were getting good genuine seed in good measure. There was much heart searching in the business when we took on selling packeted seeds from a well-known seed firm to prevent the Agency being taken elsewhere in the town. At that time we were practically the only purveyors of garden seeds in the district.

With the progress of years this also has changed and one can buy packeted seeds anywhere but it needs an expert to know which are the best buy.

Besides small seeds we sold root seeds - mangolds, swede, turnips, cattle cabbage and in later years marrow, stem kale. Mustard was also sold in large quantities mostly for ploughing in purposes.

Latterly seed inspectors would call unawares and take away samples of seed - farm and garden. The sample of clover or any small seed was taken from the centre of the sack with a special instrument stuck through the side of the sack.

Were these the good old days of the early 20th century - or not?

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