

## Report for the March 2016 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 11 March a packed audience enjoyed a splendid talk given by Robin Hill on the working countryside, bringing to life the rural past of the West Midlands. Through fascinating images we learned about the lives and working routines of people on farms and smallholdings, where farming methods changed very little for hundreds of years until the arrival of the steam engine and the internal combustion engine revolutionised agriculture.

Robin has worked in museums for over thirty years in Wales, Shropshire and Worcestershire, with a special interest in agriculture. He also has a smallholding which can be visited by arrangement.

The voyage of discovery that we went on took us back into a countryside where the majority of the population worked in a local community and in poverty, and so where there was none of the commuting that we see nowadays. We were fascinated by the original images he showed us of black and white photographs and of some paintings. The photographs were loaned by people who still own them and covered the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. After the talk, there was a range of farming objects to view, including equipment used to feed horses and horse shoes used in the period.

The history of nineteenth century agriculture started with protectionism and the Corn Laws of 1844, where we did not allow imports until home-grown wheat reached a certain price. The 1850s were the high point of agriculture when fertilisers came in from overseas and would have reached Malvern, helping to increase production. There was a host of new inventions which included hay rakes, mowers and things that were recognised as technology. Twenty years later there was a low point when there was an epidemic of foot and mouth disease which hit the livestock farmers badly. Then at the end of the century market gardening flourished, doubling in ten years, and was hugely successful in Evesham. Disruption was experienced in the First World War when 70% of foodstuffs were imported and this was repeated in the Second World War.

Old photographs of people included: gypsies, who did small-scale agricultural work and mended pots and pans; Irish workers who would work for the summer then go back to Ireland with money (farmers relied on them as they worked hard and slept rough); and ladies doing piece work such as picking bilberries. Hiring fairs were commonplace so as to give people farm work and where a house or cottage would be part of the arrangement.

Methods and types of work so different from that of today were illustrated, for example, wagoners working with horses to move goods, vermin catchers such as one who was freelance and worked till the age of 90; people milking cows from 3-legged stools; and sheep dipping and shearing by hand. Working a 60-hour week on laborious hand processes was the norm. Harvesting and arable farming using shire horses was common until around the 1920s and 1930s although steam engines came in during the Victorian period for threshing. Steam engines were then superseded by tractors. Tractors came to the fore in 1947-48 taking over much of the work that horses had done. Skilled soldiers came to work on farms in World War I to help bring the harvest in whilst the Women's Land Army, established at the same time then increased its numbers dramatically in World War II from 23,000 to 87,000.

Clive Hooper gave the vote of thanks for this most interesting and revealing talk, praising the splendid selection of photographs that were very evocative.

On Civic Society business, Clive Hooper summarised the latest news and referred everyone again to our Great Malvern station clocktower project sponsorship appeal at [http://www.malverncivicsociety.org.uk/news\\_n.htm](http://www.malverncivicsociety.org.uk/news_n.htm) where there are details of how and where to send contributions.