

HOLT & DISTRICT FARMERS' CLUB

FOUNDED 1948

President: Richard Brooks

Chairman: Pat Cubitt

Vice-Chairman: Andrew Ross

www.holtfarmers.club

CLUB MATTERS April 2023

Ours is still an Unquiet County; I have cited the late Robert Lee's 2005 book *Unquiet Country* on the deprivations of Norfolk's rural poor in Victorian times. **Neville Stangroom**, a contemporary of Sir James Dyson at Gresham's no less and here caught scrumping in his youth, has alerted me to a recent



article in *The Torygraph* on the hundredth anniversary the Norfolk Farm Strike which itself occurred one hundred years after the Captain Swing riots of the 1820s. While East Anglia was the mainspring of the Agricultural Revolution the Norfolk poor have persistently struggled to gain a share of that prosperity. The Luddite smashing of threshing machines in this district after we had beaten the French in the Napoleonic Wars was a symptom of rural disquiet that was again evident after we had beaten Germany in The Great War. **Michael Pollitt** is an authority on these matters having promoted the book *Breaking New Ground* by retired grain trader Dr. Alec Douet of Aylsham which is a history of Norfolk agriculture based on the EDP archive. In 1923 Michael's predecessor as the EDP agricultural correspondent, Col. Sapwell of Sankence, foresaw that the withdrawal of postwar price support would make a difficult situation even worse. George Edwards, who was born and worked in the Aylsham area and had risen from crow scarer to M.P. for South Norfolk in a by election, led the farmworkers against what was termed The Great Betrayal. On top of the losses and costs of the war there had been the Spanish 'flu pandemic, drought and a poor harvest in 1922 as well as an outbreak of foot & mouth all in the face of plunging wheat prices with cheaper American grain imports.

The recently founded NFU, with George Mutimer one of the original members, tried to reconcile falling farm incomes with pay that the rural workforce and their families could survive on. Landlords, at a time when 90% of farmland was tenanted, were often prepared to drop rents to almost nothing with their tenants unable to pay them on top of paying their workers a living wage. After the Wage Board was scrapped and wages were almost halved the workers understandably started to lose patience. The areas around Aylsham, North Walsham and Fakenham saw thousands of workers congregate and it required the pacifying efforts of George Edwards to prevent a fatal confrontation at Walsingham. With the help of Edwin Gooch from Wymondham, later to become MP for North Norfolk, and with interventions from the Bishop of Norwich and Ramsay MacDonald as leader of the Labour party, an uneasy settlement was reached. However it would take most of the next 15 years before agricultural incomes returned to their previous level in the face of re-armament and the advent of the Second World War.

Last month there was a poignant reminder of these events when workers at the animal feed mill at Egmere, half way between Walsingham and Wells, threatened to go on strike. They were represented by Unite which was largely formed out of the Transport & General Workers' Union which had, in turn, taken over Edwards' and Gooch's National Union of Agricultural Workers. They work for AB Agri as the chief suppliers of pig feed in this country and are located opposite where we convened for our tour of the Holkham estate in 2019. Also here on the former RAF North Creake airfield is an Anaerobic Digestion facility and large solar park. It is odd that it was named after a village 4 miles away but it was built just in time for D Day to operate RAF and USAF bombers.



George Edwards speaking in Fakenham Market Place and at Walsingham during the 1923 strike



For quarter of a century after the war this history of organised agricultural trade unionism made the North Norfolk parliamentary constituency unusual in being an agricultural seat electing Bert Hazell, another NUAW President, as a Labour MP. With local elections time approaching and Labour leading in the national polls they may be in with a chance for the first time in decades but both they and the Tories have to confront a strong Lib Dem hold on power. Tory candidates like Ken Leggett (Old Catton), Mark Cook (Stody) and Charlie Mack (Gresham) will be hoping to capture some of the momentum of the Dutch Farmer-Citizen Movement that brought the Boer-Burg-Beweging such success in their recent provincial elections. John Cragg has alerted me to the Broadland Tories' Drinks Party at Sennowe Park at 6.30 on Friday, 12th May when Mark Spencer MP, the DEFRA Minister of State, will be present. Not to be outdone the North Norfolk Tories have got his boss Therese Coffey joining Duncan Baker at 12.30 on the very same day for a buffet lunch at the Beechwood Hotel in North Walsham. With the elections being on Thursday, 4th May (don't forget to have photographic ID) the timing may seem a bit odd but, judging by the reception both received from the NFU in February, maybe not. Duncan will now have both eyes focussed on Steffan Aquarone who is the hirsute and dynamic chap whom the Lib Dems have selected to fight him in the General Election.

Tim

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