

The Tractor Becomes the Workhorse for Local Farms

On seeing this photo, I felt compelled to share my recollections of the demise of the carthorse.



Haymaking in Colden

The photo, loaned to me by Mrs Madeline Chadwick, was taken at Higher Pilling Farm around the end of the 1950's and shows a Fordson Standard.

On the cart is the farmer, Rennie Speak, Madeline's uncle. Standing by the cart is Jack, Rennie's brother, who was a butcher in Midgley Road, Mytholmroyd; most farmers had the assistance of family members during hay time. Madeline has many happy memories of visiting the farm and meeting up with her cousins, Pauline and Kathryn, Jack's daughters. The photo stirred many memories for me, as I grew up just across the valley at Lower Strines Farm.

In the Colden valley, most of the farms were milk producers and this meant the land had to be better managed than it is today, when much of it is given over to sheep grazing with no distinction between pasture and meadowland. In the harsh conditions of these hills, cows were kept indoors between October and April each year to maintain milk production. This meant the farm had to produce fodder to feed the cows during these winter months. The staple was hay which was harvested from the meadows during summer.

Prior to WW2, the sight of a tractor in the upland area of the Pennines around Hebden Bridge and Todmorden would have been a rare thing since few farmers would have been able to afford one. Therefore, the machinery used in hay production was dependent on the cart-horse for power. Generally, each farm had one horse (unless the farmer was also in business as a carter, when he might have as many as six horses). The horse generally lived in a stable along

with the various harnesses used to yoke up the horse to the machinery. This machinery might include a mowing machine, a swathe turner, a shaking machine and a hay-cart. Often, hay-making was also done by hand especially when the crop was too heavy for a machine to work effectively.

After hay-time, which could extend from June until October depending on the weather, the horse would be used in leading out the manure to the fields from the middens using a muck-cart. Rows of "muck-owks" criss-crossed the field; the manure would then be spread later by hand.

Also during harsh winters, the horse would be needed to draw a sled to get the milk kits from the farm to the collection point on the main road. Another use might be collecting ashes from the local mill for use in repairing the farm track or carting stones for repairing the many stone walls.

At this time there were few horses used for riding.

With impending hostilities in 1939, War Agricultural Executive Committees (War Ag) were formed on a county basis. Among the most important of the measures contemplated by these committees was the ploughing-up of a considerable area of grassland and its conversion to tillage. War Ag supplied the tractors which were mainly British made Fordson Standards, and also, the drivers, sometimes the Women's Land Army also supplied workers known as Land Girls.

My own memories include the time of the War Ag coming to the farm and ploughing up part of the meadow. I remember the "tractor-men" catching trout in the stream that ran past the farmhouse. They were very successful at "tickling" trout. I also remember my father being annoyed that the heavy tractors were damaging land drains which were generally not far beneath the surface of the ground. For many years after the war, my father would be working on re-laying drains in the meadows. In fact, stacks of clay drainage pipes could be seen in the corners of fields on many farms at that time.

Whether it was a result of seeing the War Ag tractors or just a desire to become more efficient I don't know, but several farmers began acquiring tractors which were generally second-hand Fordson Standards, possibly War Ag surplus equipment no longer required after the war ended.

Of course, having acquired a tractor there was no money to buy the machinery specifically designed for use with the tractor so, conversions were necessary. The shafts used to yoke the horse were removed and a cast iron draw-bar was put in place to attach to the back of the tractor. This worked well with the simple muck-cart but was less successful with other implements. The mowing machine, for example, still required someone sitting on the machine to operate the levers for lowering the cutting bar and to engage the gears to drive the blade. A problem arose here that, whereas if the cutting bar dug into the earth, a horse would bring itself to a halt, but with a tractor pulling, the driver had to notice the problem and stop the tractor. Sometimes, if this were a little late, the machine would pivot and in the worst case, unseat the man on the machine.

Horse drawn hay-carts were four-wheeled affairs with the wheels below the cart like undercarriage. The front wheels were pivoted on two large iron rings which enabled the cart to be manoeuvred around corners. Again, with a horse, the cart could be easily reversed as

the horse could be made to move sideways thus turning the cart. Reversing this type of four-wheeled cart was almost impossible with a tractor. My father, having good joinery skills built his own hay cart/trailer for the tractor. It's not clear from the above photo whether the hay cart is a conversion or has been specially designed for the tractor.

Another problem with tractor-drawn machinery was that, because of the hilly nature of much of the land, the tractor would have trouble dragging uphill. On many occasions, to stop the front axle lifting off the ground, we boys would be asked to stand on the axle to prevent it lifting up. Unfortunately, accidents were reported where the tractor rotated upwards and turned over trapping the driver underneath.

Things improved when farmers started to use the "Little Grey Fergie" (Ferguson T20) which had Power Take Off (PTO) and a hydraulic three-point hitch system for attaching implements directly onto the back of the tractor. This system was taken up by other manufacturers, for example, David Brown whose Model 990 was very popular in the 1960s.

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