

Village Echoes

One hundred and fifty years ago in January 1862 the Goudhurst Agricultural Association held its annual ploughing match in a field at Home Farm, Bedgebury. The Association was originally formed in 1845 as the Goudhurst and Cranbrook Agricultural Association for the encouragement of servants and agricultural labourers and, at the time, the newspapers reported that it was hoped the association would be supported by the nobility resident in these two parishes. By 1848, however, the papers were referring only to the Goudhurst Agricultural Association, and from then on, until its demise some time in the early 20th century, the local paper printed regular reports of its activities.

The main objective of such associations was to award monetary prizes to the best agricultural workers (such as ploughmen and shepherds) as well as to other labourers and domestic servants in the parish. One of the "extra" awards was to the agricultural labourer who had raised the largest family in the parish without asking for assistance in the form of parish relief. William Wilson, who had 14 children, and worked at Marlingate Farm, near Bedgebury, for many years was very proud to have won this prize nine years in a row. Prizes were also given for long service, as noted in 1853 when the papers reported the first prize was awarded to an unnamed man who had worked for the same employer for 54 years.

The ploughing match was followed, the same evening, by the annual dinner which, apart from an occasional visit to The Chequers, was, until 1871, held either at the Star and Crown or the Vine Inn. After that date, the meetings were held in alternate years at either the Vine, Goudhurst or the Globe and Rainbow, Kilndown. While the dinners could be seen as an excuse for the committee of management to get together and have a jolly evening, in among the worthy speeches and loyal toasts to the reigning monarch and to each other, it is possible to learn snippets of information about a variety of subjects relating to the history of the parish, including such items as the activities of the Volunteer Rifle Corps, the intention of Alexander Beresford-Hope to build new cottages in Kilndown, the state of roads and the pros and cons of having a railway.

Venues for the actual ploughing match changed from year to year. For instance, in 1882 it was held in Bluecoat field on the Finchcocks estate; in 1909 the Kendon family allowed it to take place in a field near the old brick yard to the west of Wormshill in Curtisden Green; in 1910 it was at Cherry Gardens, and so on. With the outbreak of the First World War, a decision was made not to hold a ploughing match in 1915, although it is not clear if this policy applied only during the war period or if they resumed once the war was over.

Local History Society