

Village Echoes

Goudhurst and District Egg and Poultry Depot.

A local institution which was flourishing about 100 years ago was the Goudhurst and District Egg and Poultry Depot. The parish magazine for April 1914 reported that it had handled 6,545 more eggs than in the previous year and because of this had been forced to seek larger premises. So, just what was this organisation?

The depot was formed in the summer of 1910 as the Goudhurst and District Egg Collecting Depot. It was affiliated to the National Poultry Organisation, which had been advocating co-operation in the egg and poultry industry since its inception in 1898 with a view to reducing the number of eggs imported into the UK. 1910 was also the year that the Daily Mail launched a campaign to encourage egg producers to band together for marketing purposes.

Newspaper reports of the formation of the Goudhurst depot state that the Rev. H. P. Fitzgerald, owner of Lidwells, was elected as President and Treasurer and Basil Clarke, son of the vicar, as Secretary and Tester. Other notable members of the parish were elected to form a committee, and the vicar generously allowed the vicarage stable and coach house to be used rent-free as premises. Here the eggs were tested for freshness, graded and officially stamped before being sent to market. Members of the depot, i.e. the local egg producers (large and small), bought at least one share in the depot at a cost of 2s 6d per share, with a maximum shareholding of 200 per member. Each member was then given a number which was stamped on their eggs which were collected on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Eggs more than 3 days old were sold as "cookers" at 1d less per dozen than the market rate for fresher eggs. Members of the depot received payment for their eggs and a bonus and interest on their shares.

Small advertisements in the Kent & Sussex Courier in the autumn of 1912 and 1913 show that preserved eggs were in great demand: customers were advised to order in advance. However, after the death of the vicar in 1911 and the burning down of the vicarage during renovations in 1912, the depot ended up in Goudhurst High Street, using the cellar under the Post Office to cope with the need for a bigger storage area.

Basil Clarke had emigrated to Canada in October 1910, and in 1913 Rev. Fitzgerald advertised for a manager and collector of the egg depot advising that it "would suit a single man with small means and good business habits". Earnings were based on commission and "by increasing the business, an energetic man could expect to earn between 18s and 30s per week". The manager appointed was Claude William Hyde Hewett of whom little is known, except that in 1917 and 1918, when he was in his early 30s, he appeared several times before the military tribunal in Cranbrook where he successfully sought exemption on medical grounds from serving in the army. In February 1914 he married Mabel Bahin, the Fitzgerald children's governess. After their marriage the couple lived in Staplehurst before moving to Worthing in the 1930s.

Meanwhile, the egg depot was proving highly successful. Rev. Fitzgerald reported at a meeting on agricultural co-operation in February 1919 that an initial annual turnover of £200 had by then reached £6,000. Just two years later, however, Extraordinary General Meetings were held, first in Staplehurst and then at Lidwells, to agree the voluntary winding up of the Society and the appointment of a liquidator. The Society was finally wound up in December the same year.

Local History Society

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