

Written by Mollie Rippin

Desford & District Land Fertility Association

On 10th April 1940 a meeting was held in the School at Desford to form an Association to encourage and help people to grow and preserve as much food as possible. We are fortunate to possess the Minute Book with the records of what they achieved and briefly how they did it.

This account is necessarily influenced by filial piety, but I saw much of the actual work and organisation at close quarters. It was a corporate effort, but I surmise that the idea probably originated with my Father, William Rippin. He had been involved in a similar organisation in Kirby Muxloe during the 1914-1918 war, and knew how to go about it.

At the Meeting on 10th April those present started with a resolution to form an Association to supply lime, as a 50% Subsidy could now be given for garden as well as allotment use. The rules of the Land Fertility Association (national) were read, and it was decided to adopt them - though in practice the Committee met as and when necessary, with the formal Annual General Meeting when the Accounts were presented and adopted. The Committee was as follows, and they all signed their names in the Minute Book.

E. Maud Warner	President
R. L. Bedingfield	Treasurer
Harold Prentice	Chairman
Wm. H. Rippin	Secretary
J. Poole	
J. Chambers,	Kirkby Mallory
P. Ward	Peckleton
Lucy Paul	
H. Beall	
Donald Richards	

The name of the Association, Desford & District, needs a little elaboration. Mrs. Warner, the President, was the County Councillor for Desford, Newbold, Peckleton, Kirkby and Cadeby, Wm. H. Rippin, the Secretary, was County Councillor for Groby constituency and the villages in the constituencies were included in the scheme. The letter sent out early in 1941 stated the aims of the Association: "Its object is to encourage increased food production by purchasing in bulk and selling to members in smaller quantities. A cheerful Committee does the work, but volunteers are needed for weighing the potatoes. Let the Secretary know if you can help - there's no pay, the reward is helping your neighbours. Please remember - if you help yourself, you are helping the Nation. Last Spring we supplied 41 tons of lime at half-price, and in the Summer 3000 Glass jars for bottling fruit. Many people delayed orders until it was too late, and the number would have been 1000 more."

Then followed particulars of Scotch seed potatoes, Great Scot, Gladstone, King Edward and Redskin at 1/9 stone, 13/- cwt., and also of Chemical fertilizers, Bone meal and lime, and the letter ended "one and all, and all together."

When the Committee met in May, about 55 tons of potatoes (first class Scotch seed from Hill Batchelor of Montrose) had been distributed, 11 tons of fertilizer and 54 tons of lime "and people who had been supplied were all anxious to pay."

In that Year the turnover was £1204 - so that it needed a great deal of organisation and strict control.

Mr. T. W. Faux of the Old Hall very kindly allowed the Association to use his Dutch Barn and Dovecote to store and weigh up, potatoes, fertilizer, lime etc., and Mr. Hammond of the Bull's Head, allowed them to use his Skittle Alley, and latterly it was all done at the Bull's Head.

It was hard work, and much valued help in weighing up was given by Cyril Broughton, - Claypole, John Evans, J. Hall, George Stewardson, James Poole, Wm. Poole, Isaac Poole; but the organising brain was Wm. Rippin's. He found out where and what to buy, and once it had been approved in Committee, sent off the orders, arranged insurance for the potatoes in transit, as they had to come from Scotland during what is often the worst weather of the year in February. Sometimes they came by train all the way, sometimes by sea to Hull, and then by train, so that there was the added risk of submarines and mines, as well as air raids. Mercifully, none was lost by any of these hazards, nor did they suffer from frost.

Once the orders came in, he listed them, village by village, street by street, each list being mounted on a stiff board. Then when it came to delivery, he went round with the lorry, John Harris and Frank Smith in Desford, H. Wilkinson in Newbold, and J. R. Hargraves in Markfield, and it is recorded how they turned out often at short notice, and did a fine job - but the delivery was simplified and made straightforward by Wm. Rippin's planning and going with them as a Roundsman.

Payment: People may have been 'anxious to pay,' but it was made easy for them. Wm. Rippin would go to each village, and call individually, house by house - and collect the cash, and then walk home the 5 miles from Markfield carrying the cash, and he was then well over 70. His dog went with him, and years later in Thornton or Markfield I've been greeted by men who had known him as County Councillor and through the potato work, "I see you've still got the old dog, Miss Rippin" - although it must have been 2 or 3 dogs later - but they were all brown and very similar in type - a sort of Rippin Trade Mark.

Each year the quantities supplied increased, the Committee met and sanctioned the orders and payments, and as each year the turnover was anything between £1200 and £2000, it needed care and work on the part of the Collector and the Treasurer Mr. Bedingfield.

Although no profit was aimed at, as the work proceeded, the Association found it had some cash in hand, and grants were made in 1942 to the Comforts Fund for men of the village serving in the Forces £15., Prisoner of War Fund £5., the Nursing Association £10., Desford O.A.P. 5/- each at Christmas (5/- then had some value!) £5. was reserved for the purpose of sending a Monthly letter to the men in the Forces. Presumably this was the beginning of the Annual Christmas Letter to the Forces which proved so valuable throughout in keeping men in touch with village life.

In 1943 they were able to increase the grant to the Comforts Fund to £28., and the Prisoner of War Fund to £20., and add in £5., for the Red Cross and in 1944 amounts were maintained or increased.

The work continued; 96 tons of seed potatoes in 1944, but the 1945 letter emphasized that it was, "entirely a service to lighten the stress of war, when peace comes it will cease, unless younger men come forward to carry on the work." "The weighing has fallen heavily on a few, and helpers are wanted to share and lighten the work."

In fact in these last years the actual weighing was falling entirely on a very few (3 or 4) old age pensioners, and it was proving too much. Two members of the Committee alone weighed over 500 lots of potatoes from 1 stone to $\frac{1}{2}$ cwt. In the 1945 season 1 cwt bags were supplied, and people were asked to share with their neighbour. Bags and sacks were a difficulty, although the Scouts had done good work collecting them in the early days.

The letter sent out in October 1946 informed people that it was essentially a war service, and not intended to carry on afterwards, but as the food situation was still so bad, the Committee felt it must carry on for another year, despite the failure of Scotch seed that season, but that this would probably be for the last time. It summarized that over the 7 years the Association had supplied 437 tons of Seed Potatoes, 44 tons of Fertilizer, 188 tons lime, 38,500 Fruit Preserving Jars, and total receipts £8,450, and grant to Comforts Funds etc., and O.A.P. of £226.

It then enumerated and thanked men in the various villages who had given ungrudging help, the various Transport Firms who had done the delivering, the generosity of Mr. Hammond in letting them use the Skittle Alley at the Bull's Head, and the men in Desford who had served on the Committee, and helped with the weighing up, and ended:

"Next season, 1947, will most likely see the end of our work: it has been most enjoyable, we have been able to help each other through difficult times, we all know each other better, and our country's travail and suffering has brought out real friendliness."

In a village often torn by feuds, that was a real achievement.

1948 saw the final season.