

## The children who lost their schooling to help on the farms in WWI

*"I left school when I was thirteen, in the First World War. I never went back.... I always say I done wrong, lost the last year of my schooling, 'cos you didn't get nothing else in those days."*

Bill Chapman, whose words these were, was a former pupil at Charing Heath School in Kent. Like many of his contemporaries he was allowed to leave school early to work on a farm and help in the struggle to maintain and increase farm output in the First World War. With many of their workers having enlisted or being called up, and increasing pressure on them to produce more food, farmers were desperate to find labour. Older workers, troops not actively engaged in fighting and later those enlisted but deemed not fit enough for the front were all part of the solution. So were women. But while the role played by women, and the Women's Land Army, in the First World War is well known, the role played by children is less so.

It was common at the time for children to work on farms during their holidays and in Charing, as elsewhere in rural areas, the school year was organised so that the main holiday coincided with harvest time. But working during term time was another matter. Yet the need for farm labour was so great that in early 1915 suggestions were made that children of 12 and over should be exempted from school in order to help out on farms at key times. This was highly controversial and in Kent the Education Committee was divided. Some argued that everything should be sacrificed to the needs of the war; others that to cut education short could be disastrous for those affected. But in March 1915 the UK Board of Education explicitly authorised the employment of youngsters as an exceptional measure for limited periods. Kent then agreed to allow children of 12 and over to work from Easter to 11 October providing certain conditions were met.

School log books record the absentees. *"Several of the older boys are leaving just now, some under the new bye law which is intended to release boys for agricultural work during the war"* wrote the Headmaster of Charing School in May 1915, while his colleague at Charing Heath School noted that *"Three children over twelve have been granted a licence to work during the half year ending October 11<sup>th</sup>".* As the war progressed so numbers being exempted increased. By 1918 it was reported that over 3,000 boys and nearly 900 girls were exempted in Kent alone and it was thought that more were working unofficially.

Many of the children may have felt a sense of pride in working and helping the war effort. But life was not always easy for them nor for those slightly older who had passed the official school leaving age of 14. John (Jack) Hills had hoped to stay on at school in Ashford and eventually train to be a teacher. But the death of his father in 1917 meant he had to leave school at 14 and for two years he worked on a farm in Charing. He was not paid for most of this period, working only for his keep and the food was meagre. He lost weight and during the cold winter of 1917 suffered badly from chilblains. He finally asked for money after his second harvest in 1918 and eventually was given just one pound. Luckily he found better employment after the war ended.



*Children and Teacher in Charing School thought to be around 1914  
Courtesy Stephanie Reed*