

Memories of George Drinkwater, as he told me

George lived in the house at Clifton which is now Anne's Cottage. At that time it was thatched. The bedrooms had no ceilings. One could see all the rafters and black cobwebs - it was rather cold in winter. I should think in his younger working days his father was head of a gang of mowers with scythes. They did contract work. They started early in Middlesex, mowing from farm to farm, sleeping rough, and working their way back here ready for the mowing which was later than in the south. He said one of the men always lay on his back in the full sun at meal times. The others said when the hollow at the bottom of his throat became full of sweat, it was time to start work.

Given good conditions, a man could mow an acre a day. They worked long hours and it was hard work. I never did any real scythe mowing but I did plenty of thistle cutting in the grass fields with a scythe. I didn't take to the job very well.

George next had eleven years with his father working a pit saw. A saw pit would be in a field with a steep embankment. A slot would be cut into it. Then two strong posts put up and another one resting on each and dug into the embankment. The trees were then rolled onto the beams. George's father was an expert. He would then make the tree roughly square using an axe, then draw the sawing lines top and bottom of the tree. A pit saw had large teeth. It did all the cutting with the downward stroke. The bottom sawyer had to put up with the sawdust in his face. The sawyers had two old pence a cut whether it was a four inch thick plank off the tree or a broom stick. George said no matter how cold it was they stripped to their shirts as soon as they started, which at that time would be 6 am. He was a thin man but must have been very strong. His brother Fred worked a farm, first as a hay tier. He went through the Battle of the Somme and other battles without a scratch. He never talked about it. He and Fred both had a dry sense of humour so we were a droll lot. The boss told us once there were no flies on us.

One other thing George told me - Clifton allotments used to be in the second field on the right of Leadenporch farm road. Some of the men would go there (1 mile) at 2 am and work until around 6 am and then walk the $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles to Upper Heyford to start work at 7 am hay tying. They must have had a lot of strength and energy to then walk the $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles home. I don't know how I would have fared in those days, not very well I shouldn't think.