

## Norfolk Farming Links

*Lois Lamplugh*

Two years after he moved to Stiffkey to farm, Henry Williamson began to read, in the *Eastern Daily Press*, a series of articles on the Norfolk countryside which attracted him by their quality. They appeared anonymously, but he discovered from the editor the identity of the writer. 'With what appreciation did I read Lilius Rider Haggard's journal of her everyday actions and thoughts – a journal which her friend Margaret collected and preserved as it was written – and with what eagerness did I urge that the notes should be published, and offer the use of what small skill and experience I possessed to shape them into a book.'

His offer was accepted, and he began 'clarifying and arranging the various entries and subjects of the journal – sub-editing, in fact – and here and there adding a running commentary in pedal notes.' The result was published by Faber in 1943 as *Norfolk Life*, and went into seven impressions during the next two years.

Lilius Rider Haggard was one of the three daughters of the much travelled public servant and novelist Henry Rider Haggard, KBE, (1856-1925) whose best known books, *King Solomon's Mine* (1885), *She* and *Allan Quatermaine* (both 1887), Henry Williamson may well have read in boyhood. This link between two very dissimilar authors is interesting in the parallels that may nevertheless be seen between them. Both were concerned about the state of British agriculture; both wrote articles for the *Daily Express*; both farmed in Norfolk, taking over run-down farms, and both published books about their experiences.

Rider Haggard, however, was Norfolk born, being the eighth child and sixth son of William and Ella Haggard, who lived at Bradenham Hall in West Norfolk. He became a man of considerable means; not only was he deriving substantial royalties from his many successful books, over sixty titles in total, (mostly forgotten today, those already mentioned apart), but on returning to England at the age of 24, after five years of administrative experience in South Africa, he had married a well-to-do orphan, Louisa Margitson of Ditchingham House, overlooking the River Waveney on the borders of Norfolk and Suffolk next to the little market town of Bungay. He lived at Ditchingham for most of the rest of his life, when not travelling abroad on Colonial business. He was thus cushioned against the average farmers perennial anxieties about weather, poor harvests and abrupt fluctuations in the selling price of their produce. Although Henry, too, subsidized his farm to some extent by his earnings as a writer, this was largely by means of freelance journalism, often produced under pressure at night after a day of hard physical work.

Rider Haggard published two non-fiction works on farming, and it would be surprising, especially after his meeting with Lilius, if Henry had not read them.

The first was *A Farmer's Year*, being his commonplace book for 1898, and originally appeared in serial form. (Henry too, of course, in *Goodbye West Country*, presented the journal of a single year, 1936, a time when although he was not actually farming, he was looking forward eagerly to becoming a farmer.)

Just forty years lie between Rider Haggard's account of his late-Victorian experience and Henry's on the eve of the Second World War as it appears in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, but the state of East Anglian farming seems to have changed little – farmers were struggling, and often failing, to make a living, and the price of land had dropped sharply in the 1890s as in the 1930s.

Rider Haggard's second book on farming was *Rural England*, being an account of *Agricultural and Social researches carried out in the years 1901 and 1902..* This two-volume work was published in 1902 – remarkably swiftly after completion. For some time, he

explained in his introduction, he had wanted to produce a survey of English agriculture, following in the tradition of Arthur Young, William Marshall and William Cobbett, and at last 'through the enterprise of the *Daily Express* newspaper, discovered an opportunity of carrying out my design'. The articles he wrote for the *Express*, however – under the general heading 'Back to the Land', a phrase which was to be much quoted in the Twenties and Thirties – were 'expanded to two or three times their original bulk' in book form. Even then, he admitted, his work was incomplete: 'I have, I think, examined into the state of 27 counties. But other counties remain unexplored, and beyond them lie Scotland, Ireland and Wales.

Nevertheless it was a considerable undertaking. Sometimes he visited the farms of large landowners and listened to their opinions, or those of their bailiffs or foremen, but for the most part he talked to the owners or tenants of farms of some 200 to 400 acres – in other words, properties on average little larger than Old Hall Farm, Stiffkey. One complaint he heard often was that cheap imported food offered unfair competition, and the solution usually proposed was a return to Protectionism.

He noted the geology and variations of soil and climate of each county, its livestock and crops, methods of cultivation, rents and wages (a farm labourer in 1902 received about twelve shillings a week) an village housing conditions.

One of the themes that runs through the work is rural depopulation, as a considerable proportion of England's national census of 1801 and that of 1901, population had risen from around eleven million to 33 million) was migrating to towns and cities for higher wages, which all too often were absorbed by higher rents and prices, and better housing, which all too often turned out to be a crowded slum. Rider Haggard's solution was to make smallholdings available to all who wanted them – though not by direct Government aid. It had been said of him, he remarked, that he wanted 'to cut up England into smallholdings.' He claimed that 'wherever smallholdings exist in England there is comparative prosperity, great love of the soil, and a desire to cultivate it'. His proposals for stimulating an increase in smallholdings are outlined in his final chapter, 'Conclusions', and are not relevant here. He devoted his penultimate chapter to Norfolk, the county he knew best. There, in 1902, he was told by a man who owned and rented a total of 1,500 acres that 'farmers in this part of Norfolk (the East Flegg district) were losing ground every day. Men who had held their own three years before had been broken and their places taken by others; he did not know one who was doing well a legitimate farming, but he could recall many who had faded away. They did not go bankrupt, but they vanished, and some of them died brokenhearted.' (One is reminded of Wilbo's predecessor in *The Phasian Bird*, who shoots himself in despair.)

Writing during the harvest of 1902 (the fact that his book was nevertheless published in that year is an indication of the printing efficiency of an earlier period), Rider Haggard observed that the weather had been wet, and it was expected that both barley and wheat prices would be low, 'a loss such as many could not withstand'.

He himself farmed 364 acres (110 of them rented) at Ditchingham, on and near the estate his wife had inherited on the Norfolk-Suffolk border by the river Waveney, and 104 in Bedingham, five miles away. They were mixed farms; he kept Red Poll cattle, Blackface sheep, and grew corn. However, he was laying down a good deal of land to permanent pasture: 'Sad as it is to say, corn scarcely pays to grow

When he died in 1925, at the age of 69, the Ditchingham estate was apparently left to his three daughters (his only son had died in childhood), who retained at least one farm: Liliás speaks in *Norfolk Life* of visiting it to make a list of repairs necessary. She did not marry, but seems to have been part of a large household, employing servants. She refers to 'family', but does not specify relationships. Both her sisters married, and there were

nephews: Ditchingham House may have been shared.) However, she owned a cottage on the North Norfolk coast near Morston Marshes; during the years 1936 and 1937, the period covered by her book, she quite often drove up there for holidays. At other times she let it. During her later years she made this her home.

When Henry first met her she was probably in her late forties. She had travelled a good deal in her youth: Rider Haggard took his family with him on many of his world-wide journeyings. During the First World War she had worked as a volunteer nurse in a hospital near London, but she did not care for the life of cities. She was happy to spend her time in her native county, apart from an occasional holiday abroad. A keen gardener, knowledgeable about farming, as was to be expected, an interested observer of village life, a member of the local W.I. and a parish councillor, she was also a lover of poetry and responded with a poet's eye to the countryside and the sea. She had brought about the publication of a book before *Norfolk Life*. This was *I Walked by Night*, 'the life and history of the King of the Norfolk Poachers, written by himself and edited by Lilius Rider Haggard'. A farmer's wife had given her a dog-eared and grimy exercise book, knowing that she had 'a fancy for such things'. Published with his own spelling, the book contained an account of the poacher's life and also ballads, songs, rhymes and charms. The very prolific Norfolk artist, Edward Seago, who was later to paint Henry Williamson's portrait, illustrated it with line drawings and a frontispiece in colour.

*Norfolk Life* contains two references to Henry, without naming him. On a forty-mile tour around the area of the Norfolk coast in 1936, she noted that the Old Hall in Stiffkey, 'that gracious Tudor house built by Sir Nicholas Bacon has at last been sold, to an owner (says rumour) who will deal with it worthily. Rumour also says that the farm land above the valley has been sold to a writer of stories of wild life from Devon.'. In 1937 she noted that 'the coastal area north of the Stiffkey valley is saved for the nation under the National Trust and the valley itself and the woods and fields have been bought by a Devon author who is going to farm the land'.

(There are, happily, three other major National Trust properties on that coast – Brancaster Staithe, Blakeney Point and Morston Marshes, comprising many thousand acres of beach, sand dunes and saltmarsh where seabirds breed.)

In due course she would meet that Devon author, and owe him, one would have thought a debt of gratitude for turning her quiet-toned record of her country life into a war-time best seller. But, it seems that in the long run she did not. In a letter written in 1945 Henry complained that 'flushed with success', the author declared I had spoiled her book. No one would look at it until I rewrote and recast it. What a joke life is!

It was an unfortunate ending to an association with the daughter of a writer of the generation immediately preceding his own, whose concern for the future of English agriculture he shared.

One may wonder what Sir Henry Rider Haggard, his daughter Lilius and Henry Williamson would make of the situation today, when green field building is pursued by developers of all kinds, private and public; when roads duplicating existing but narrower roads rip across farmland; when barns become holiday homes and farms are 'diversified' into theme parks, shooting estates, pony trekking centres and golf courses; when a former president of the country Landowners Association is quoted as saying that 'sport is the farm crop of the future' (*Observer Colour Magazine*, 2.6.91), and an ever-growing population – complacently assumes that other countries will always be able and willing to supply Britain cheaply with all the food she chooses not to grow herself. It is a long way from Rider Haggard's dream of large numbers of prosperous smallholders lovingly cultivating the soil, or Henry's struggle to reclaim a derelict farm as a symbol of a better life for all when the war ended.