



Local History Collection

7 - Poultry Farms in Fifield

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Before WW1 the 'hobby' of keeping chickens was a cottage industry, providing eggs for the home and the occasional chicken for the table. During the war the British Government called on farmers to increase food production in wheat and cereal to feed humans and, as a large proportion of animal feed was imported, any available animal feed was prioritised for the dairy industry and horses.

After WW1 many ex-servicemen had no jobs and they were encouraged into agriculture. Many turned their hand to poultry farming as it was reasonably cheap to self-build poultry coops, set up and feed poultry. A small holding with 1,000 chickens was sufficient to provide a living for a man, wife and child at this time. By the 1930's there were many commercial poultry farms in the UK with over 60 million layers. Just as a matter of interest - a dozen eggs in 1937 cost about 8d - about 0.033 of One GBP and the equivalent in value of about £2.42 in 2022.



By WW2 all grain had to be kept for feeding humans and the poultry population fell. It took until 1947 for the sector to start to recover and war time rationing didn't finish until 1953. It was Reading University's Lane End Farm that looked at lighting regimes for housing poultry and chickens to stimulate the lay of eggs that help develop battery cages/sheds for layers.

There were 3 Poultry Farms in Fifield although I can't give the specific date any of them started. They were all producing eggs and chickens up until the 1960's. Ledger's Poultry Farm on Forest Green Road, Braywood Poultry Farm opposite Braywood School, and Whyte Ladies Poultry Farm on the Fifield Road all supplied eggs and chickens and many local residents worked at these farms.

The largest Poultry Farm was Whyte Ladies (**Whyte** being the old English spelling of **White**) that was still a 5 acre field in 1916 and owned by J. Lyons and Co. Joe Lyons started the Lyons Corner Houses with his Brothers-in-law in London in 1894 and went on to dominate British mass catering in the 1st half of the 20th Century. They owned hotels such as the Strand Palace and Regent Palace and restaurants including The Trocadero. Eventually there were 250 corner houses. A Lyons Corner House waitress was distinctively recognised by their 'maid like' uniform and hat and were called 'Nippies'. By 1939 there were 7,600 Nippies in the UK. Lyons produced bread, cakes, biscuits, pies coffee and ice cream (former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher worked for Lyons as a chemist and she helped develop methods for preserving ice cream). There is a Lyons Corner House recreated in the Museum of London.

If you drive along the Fifield Road towards the Maidenhead to Windsor A308 you will notice a number of single storey buildings and a bungalow on the right hand side just before the road junction. This was the Whyte Ladies Poultry Farm. A local family called the Langley's lived in the bungalow during the 1950's as Caretakers/Managers of the Poultry Farm and 3 of their children worked at the farm. All 3 sons played cricket for Braywood CC and 2 of their Grandsons played for the Junior section until recently.

All the chickens were transported by train to Maidenhead as day old chicks and taken to Whyte Ladies. All the chickens were white as they gave a better overall appearance than coloured birds once plucked They also tended to gain weight and mass the fastest. This poultry farm was a large local employer after WW2 and it was estimated that 4,000 chickens were sent to London by train every week as well as eggs. This meant that approximately 30,000-40,000 birds were on the farm at any one time. These chickens and eggs were sent to Cadby Hall, the largest manufacturing factory in the UK covering 13 acres along the Hammersmith road owned by Lyons where 30,000 staff worked 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. This factory was also the 'birthplace' of the 1st business computer - LEO.

I spoke to one local resident who told me that her late father worked at the Poultry farm in the 1950's plucking chickens and another local resident told of her horror at visiting the Poultry farm as her school trip from Braywood School in the late 1950's. All the children had to walk from Braywood school to the farm and her overriding memory is the awful smell, scale of the operation and conveyor belt production line. I was told that many eggs were purposely covered with manure so as to look like genuine farm fresh eggs!

By the 1960's J. Lyons and Co were losing money and began closing some of its London tea shops and hotels and by 1963 the Whyte Ladies Poultry farm was derelict and the low clapboard and asbestos huts in disrepair.

The Whyte Ladies Poultry farm was bought in 1963/1964, for £15,570 by wealthy widow Rita Thorburn as a centre for craft and artistic activities 'to advance and support public benefit to the public in traditional crafts'. The Guild for Research into Craftsmanship Ltd was created and included teachings in horticulture, husbandry, cabinet making, woodwork, weaving, dyeing, carpet making, needlework, pottery, leather work, book binding, puppet making, drawing and painting. In 2008 the ownership of Whyte Ladies Poultry Farm was transferred to the Gurdjieff Society, a quasi-religious movement founded in 1949 and many of the huts have been replaced and upgraded.