



Bletchingley Conservation and Historical Society

St Mary's Training Farm

From a talk by Chris French given to the BCHS in 2012:

In the mid-1930s the Southwark Catholic Rescue Society helped children from broken homes, slums or other situations where they might otherwise end up on the streets. These children had never experienced the countryside.

Chris French's father (The Hon. Hubert French) was approached by the Catholic Bishop of Southwark and asked to help set up, and be senior warden of, a facility for boys aged 16 to 18 to come out to the country and experience agriculture and horticulture. Joan and Harry Marshall were also on the management committee. The Catholic Rescue Society bought 260 acres of Underhills Farm together with the house (now Wychcroft), which became the hostel for up to 20 boys.

The boys lived there for 2-3 years for training on the farm. There was a dairy herd of 20 cows (a large herd in those days) where 2 or 3 boys would learn how to milk the cows, first by hand and then by machine. Another group looked after pigs at Coldharbour with the pig-man, Mr Tunks. Jim Loveman was the head greenhouse-man, in charge of the greenhouses (now gone) where all sorts of produce was grown commercially.

Some of the boys were extremely difficult, having experienced violence and other troubles at home, so the role of the Training Farm was more than just teaching them about agriculture. On Sundays the Bletchingley Catholic families would gather together with the boys and farm staff at the chapel at Underhills which had been converted from what had been a squash court. A chaplain provided by the Catholic diocese would spend Sundays with the boys.

A highlight of the year was an annual cricket match and tea at Brewer Street Farm, with a team made up of the workers from Brewer Street Farm and Frank Martin's Lake Farm against the Underhills boys.

The farm was opened in 1935 by the Lord Mayor of London and continued until the end of the 1950s. By this time it was beginning to lose momentum, there being greater social understanding and awareness, and agricultural training was being taken over by the major farming institutes such as Merrist Wood near Guildford. At Hubert French's recommendation the farm was sold in 1960.

It was bought by Uvedale and Melanie Lambert, and became part of the South Park estate, with the house becoming a Church of England Diocesan Training Centre. Hubert received a medal from the Pope in recognition of his work before he died in 1961.

Additional information taken from the website of the St Francis of Assisi Catholic Ramblers Club:

“The ramble sometimes finished with a social evening after tea. Members used their musical talents to provide entertainment and background music for dancing. When the ramble went to a camp site for tea there was usually a sing-song or social especially when there was also a camping weekend.”

... “From 1937 until 1941 several rambles finished with Benediction, tea and social at Underhills Training Farm (St Mary's), Bletchingley. This farm, run by the Southwark Catholic Rescue Society (now the Catholic Children's Society), trained young men, from their schools in Orpington, Gravesend etc, in farm work. These young men, although enjoying the socials, being shy and not used to female company tended to hug the walls rather than join in the dances.”

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