My memories of life at Grounds Farm during and after the war

The Lamb family living in the big farm while we were evacuated there were Uncle Fred, Aunty Ivy, Gerry, Arnold, Judy and Leonard. An older brother Bob was in the army away most of the time. There was an older sister, Barbara, who lived almost as a recluse, not on the farm. She tended goats. There was an uncle Bernard who would come and work on the farm.

It was very hard physical work without access to modern machinery. In the sheds and barns there was a rusting collection of ancient obsolete machinery, never used.

I remember one tractor with great metal teeth on its giant back wheels. These were to gain purchase on steep inclines. On one occasion they failed and the tractor turned over. Thankfully, no one was hurt. The wheat and barley crops were harvested using a very old windmill-like machine pulled by tractor or sometimes by Captain the big Shire horse. He was getting really old and had an uncertain temper. He would sleep standing up and slightly listing over to one side! I was afraid of him, he was so huge and looming, he bit my hand once when I tried, clumsily, to give him an apple.

Harvest time was very hard work and many hours toiling was expected of everybody while the weather remained dry. The government passed a law that there would be double summer time to help the war effort. The sheaves of grain, barley, wheat, oats were thrown off the windmill-like machine to lie on the ground. Then they were hauled up by hand, each worker propping them up four to six to a “stook”, so that they could dry out. If it rained, there was a chance the grain could go mouldy and the crop could be ruined. When it was deemed dry enough, a threshing machine would separate grain from straw. Then the straw was built into stacks that were dotted about the farm. We children had endless fun playing on them, building dens inside them in spite of dire warnings that they could collapse and suffocate us.

Hens and rooster wandered at will, truly free range, and laid their eggs wherever they wanted, often in the shelter of the straw stacks. If we children found any still warm, we made sure we'd run to Auntie Ivy with them and we might get a treat.

There was a method of keeping fresh eggs from going bad. No fridge of course, but a cool larder where a bucket of isinglass (like polycell wallpaper paste) stood. Gently, the eggs were lowered into it and the isinglass sealed the shells. Of course you had to use them, lower layers first, and wash the viscous icing glass off with water. I found plunging my hands into the gloopy stuff quite disgusting!

The village school in Sibford Gower was very small. Mr Chard was the headmaster and he had an older girl as a teaching assistant. He wasn't called up as he had a tin leg, probably from WW1. Never mentioned it of course, but we knew it was metallic as he would thump on it with a stick to get order. My brother

Jonathan, who died in 1997, and I would walk across the fields to get to school, as to use the main track to the main road would add an extra mile to our journey.

Winters were harsh. The schoolroom had a coke burning stove for warmth. At Grounds Farm the only warm place was the flagstoned kitchen where a range boiled water, baked, roasted. Everywhere else was served by small paraffin heaters, really inadequate in the very cold weather.

One snowy morning my brother and I set out for school. It had snowed and settled overnight, drifting at the sides of the road. We got as far as Sibford Village, struggling a bit on the wind. Then Jonathan took a step off the road and sank into a drift well over his knees. He was wearing short trousers and wellingtons but for some reason no socks. The boots filled, he floundered and howled with shock and cold. I howled as well at the predicament we were in. I dragged him back onto the road and tried to empty his boots. I made the decision just to turn tail and retrace our steps to the farm and mum. Life was hard, but we were stoic. Harder still was it for my mum trying to keep us all together, clean, and warm.

Everyone wore wellingtons all year round. Shoes were just not an option. All of us had continual chilblains from freezing and then too rapidly thawing ourselves by the stove. My unfortunate brother even had chilblains on his ears (does anyone today even know what they are?) He wore a little knitted balaclava in the cold but his ears were huge and wouldn't stay tucked in.!

At school, when snow turned to ice in the playground, we made a wonderful long slide, worn like glass. Children would balance on their feet or use a piece of wood or something similar. The steep slope of the playground ended in a grassy patch and a flowing stream. You tried to swerve off at the last moment to avoid ending up sitting in the stream.

Hot lunch was served to children who lived too far away to return home for the hour. This was provided by the village mothers. I do remember lovely hot mugs of soup.

In the summer came a novelty – a visiting or peripatetic dentist. He set up his chair and drills etc outside in the playground. The drill was powered by foot pedal like an old sewing machine. No nice gentle reassuring manner here! He was very brusque and everyone was terrified of him. Some bolder children just refused to sit in the dentist’s chair and ran off, knowing that he couldn't catch them. I remember sitting hating it all and watching clouds sail by over my head.

In the afternoons we were all employed in useful activities – knitting for girls and rudimentary woodwork for boys. I remember sitting and crying bitterly because I was handed a half knitted sock on 4 needles. I couldn't even knit on two! I was left to it. No one else could knit something as complex as turning the heel on a sock either, so eventually the project was abandoned as hopeless, amid much sobbing!

Diet wise I would imagine my family were more fortunate than those living in the towns. We ate healthy fresh food, had access to fresh eggs from the free

wandering hens in the yards and fields. Auntie Ivy was a splendid cook and baker. Ration books were handed over to her. We foraged for extras, wild blackberries, apples, mushrooms, cobnuts. In the autumn when conkers were falling we used to pick up beech mast and nibble that.

Auntie Ivy and Judy could churn the full fat fresh milk from the herd into butter, by hand. One day I was in the kitchen and watching them do this, rather too close to the vigorous hand action. I'd been given a piece of chewing gum and was chewing away and probably talking at the same time. The lump of chewed gum flew out of my mouth and dropped straight into the large bowl of cream being made into butter. I was in big trouble over that – the entire bowl had to be thrown away. Wicked, wicked waste! Naughty, naughty girl! I was banished from the kitchen in dire disgrace. Thinking about that incident now, I imagine the spoiled cream, plus gum, would have been mixed with pig feed. Pigs eat anything, even each other. Towards the end of the war, my family came back to South London. My dad was invalided out of service in the Air Force and spent many months recuperating at home.

We still kept contact with Uncle Fred, Aunty Ivy, and the Lamb family. My aunt Marjorie Simmonds was still working as matron at Sibford School.

Every Christmas Uncle Fred would send our family a huge capon for our Christmas dinner. Rationing remained in place for years after the war and everything was in short supply, so roast chicken was a wonderful treat for us.

Uncle Fred also supplied us with eggs – mum had a bucket of isinglass ready in our larder to preserve them. When I was thirteen I went to Grounds Farm to help with the harvest. I helped to “stook up” the sheaves. I wasn't strong enough to heave them up onto the trailer. Judy Lamb cut down the handle of a pitchfork so I could use it more easily. Then I was put on duty in the midden “yupping up muck” along with the rest of the family. I worked for three weeks and really enjoyed the hard work in the hot sun. When it was time to go back to London, Uncle Fred paid me £5 for my efforts. I was so thrilled – real wages. I remember what I spent it on. I bought a beautiful raincoat, totally waterproof and gold in colour. I wore it for years and it never wore out! It was passed on to my sister and then my mum wore it.

This is a transcription of a document hand-written by Ann O’Hara, which she sent to the Sibfords History Society in July 2025.