

THE LAST LOAD

Haymaking is perhaps the most traditional agricultural work in the Pennines.
But on our steep hillsides bringing it to the farm can sometimes
present problems as JACK DAVIES relates.



In the 1940's

Haytime in this Pennine valley in the 1940s meant employment for casual workers. On the whole they were skilled men with plenty of experience. However mistakes did occur, not all of them with a happy ending.

The hay meadows were on the flat top of the hill. Access was gained by a sunken lane which ran along one side of the layout. The empty carts used a quicker route running through a steep hillside field.

Two four-wheeled lorries and a two-wheeled cart were being used. The cart had extensions slotted into the sides allowing a larger load to be carried.

The system of working was simple but effective. An empty vehicle would take the field route back to the hay-fields whilst a full load was coming down the lane. At the same time a full load of hay would be in the barn being thrown up onto the 'moo'. When this cart was empty it would be pushed out of the barn, allowing the next full load to be backed into the barn. Woe betide the barn crew if they hadn't emptied the spare vehicle when the next full load arrived! After backing this load into the barn the horse was switched to the empty cart and the whole process began again.

On the day in question the farmer and his regular man, Bill, were busy with the evening milking. Because of this the last load of the day was being brought in by the casual labourers. Meanwhile the barn crew were eagerly waiting so that they could finish work for the day. This load was on the box cart so it wouldn't take long to empty.

Their wait was going to be longer than they expected. Up in the hayfield the loading crew were having problems. There was too much hay to fit on the cart. If they took a normal load they would have to go back for the small amount left on the field. So with great difficulty they made up all the hay into a huge load.

There were no baling machines, so the loose hay was carefully stacked to

form a load. Forkfulls were built into a strong wall around the edges of the cart, held in place with loose hay in the middle. On a two-wheeled cart extra care had to be taken to ensure the even distribution of weight. If it wasn't evenly distributed the burden would bear on the horse's back or threaten to lift the unfortunate animal off his feet! The load was then securely roped to the cart.

Dusk was falling when the barn crew spotted the cart coming over the hill. They hurried to their posts in the barn not realising that, because the load was too bulky to manoeuvre through the narrow gateway into the lane, the cart was coming down the steep hillside.

On a hillside the horses were always taken up or down on a diagonal course. This made the going easier for them, but was still unsafe with a large load. We could see that they were going to be in trouble. Instead of being diagonally opposite the sharp left hand corner, leading to the farm buildings, they were directly above it. This meant that they would have to veer right on the steep hillside to gain room for the manoeuvre round the corner.

Struggling

Ginger, a bright bay gelding, the younger of the pair in use on this farm, was struggling with the ungainly load. His hooves were tearing large chunks out of the turf. He was almost sitting down as he leaned back into the breaching strap, straining every fibre of his muscles in the fight to prevent the cart over-running him on the steep hillside. Behind him the over-loaded cart pitched and rolled like a ship in a storm.

As they neared the corner they veered right, the men hanging onto the rope lashings, desperately fighting to keep the load intact. After some tense nail-biting moments they managed to turn so that they were facing the corner.

After a short rest Ginger was urged forward. They had almost made it. As the horse strained to keep the cart moving the left hand wheel dropped into a rut, then immediately hit a stone. Disaster! The whole thing toppled onto its side trapping Ginger in the shafts. His legs were pointing uphill and although he struggled violently he couldn't get free.

The small knot of men spent several minutes discussing the situation. They decided that there was nothing that they could do so one of their number

was sent, at the double, to inform the farmer. Within a couple of minutes he appeared on the scene with Bill.

Whilst the farmer held Ginger's head, to keep him quiet, Bill began to unfasten the harness. Unfortunately many of the buckles were underneath the horse. When all those that Bill could reach were undone Ginger was still trapped.

The two men slowly stood up and, after a short discussion, a knife was produced. As the farmer stood to one side, directing operations, Bill began to cut the harness. He was working on the lower side of the horse so that if Ginger began to kick he wouldn't be caught by the flailing hooves.

Broke free

Suddenly Ginger gave a tremendous heave, broke free and rolled straight over his rescuer. As the on-lookers stood frozen with horror Ginger continued rolling down the hillside, bounced over the retaining wall and fell into the sunken lane, landing on his feet.

Snapping out of his trance, the farmer sent two men to attend to the horse, now standing dazed in the lane. Next he turned his attention to the prone figure at his feet. Gently rolling him onto his back he began to check for broken bones. To everyone's amazement Bill sat up, rounded on the casual helpers and gave them a large piece of his mind. Why on earth had they tried to come down the field?

Despite his understandable anger he allowed them to help him to his feet and through the gathering gloom to the farmhouse. Ginger in the meantime was being led, apparently sound, back to his stable.

Back on the Job

After a good night's sleep both man and horse were back on the job, a little stiff and sore perhaps but otherwise in fine fettle.

The debate which followed this event offered only one satisfactory solution as to why the injuries were so slight. The conclusion reached was that the ground was soft and Bill had been in a spot where the cart wheels had made a large rut. Ginger, with only a few slight cuts and grazes to show, owed his well-being to the fact that he had landed on his feet in the lane.

Needless to say the steep field route was never used again by a loaded cart!

Bob Phillipson at Pendle Hall Farm, near Padiham, is pictured making hay the traditional way — using one horse power.

Picture: Bill Wilkinson