



The Society in Wartime - working behind the scenes, 1939 to 1945.

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*Harvests of Change, The Royal Agricultural Society of England 1838 – 1988, by Nicholas Goddard, 1988* records the activities of the society during World War II. Along with many other learned societies and similar organisations, the outbreak of war resulted in considerable changes to its operations. The holding of normal meetings of Council and its various committees were suspended and the day to day affairs of the society were entrusted to a small Executive committee. The staging of the Royal Show was obviously not a possibility during hostilities but a decision was made to hold the first post-war event at Lincoln and it was eventually staged in 1947.

The Journal continued to be published annually but the main emphasis of its contents focussed on matters relating to the war effort. A series of articles on War-time Food Production: the Work of the War Agricultural Executive Committees; Cropping for the Production of Feeding Stuffs and Experiences in Land Reclamation (with illustrations) covered activities in various counties throughout the country that provided a cross section of the differing types of agriculture. Attention also started to be focussed on post-war agricultural policy both at home and in Europe once the war was over.

A number of its peacetime activities were able to continue and in 1942, the President announced that matters such as diseases of animals, trials of tractors, the shortage of labour, long service awards and the National Diploma examinations had continued largely along pre-war lines. Nevertheless, the society came in for some quite severe criticism, particularly in the national agricultural press, for not taking a more proactive role in the war effort; the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* 7<sup>th</sup> September 1943 - '*The inactivity of the RASE*', stating

“that with its great experience, its brilliant membership, not to mention its high accumulated balance of £260,000 the RASE ought to be playing a part in today's great drama very different from that of the slumbering Rip van Winkle which it appears to have chosen.”

The use of artificial insemination was starting to get a foothold and although the society's initial interest in its development led to some friction with the breed societies who held conflicting views as to how regulations should be formulated, the issue continued to be discussed behind the scenes and the circulation to the breed societies in 1942 of a confidential minute of a meeting between the RASE and the Ministry of Agriculture when impending regulations were discussed, provided the link between the Ministry and the breed societies when negotiations continued in 1943.

The established 'up front', 'cutting edge' involvement in the development of the industry that the society had always practiced (and did so again once the war was over) and that continues to the present day, had evolved into a very much 'behind the scenes' operation. This is evidenced in the society's contribution to the development of the post-war agricultural policy and in particular the 1947 Agricultural Act that set the scene for the industry for the best part of the next 50 years; an involvement that Goddard described as '*the society's greatest influence during the war period*'. The recognition that a vibrant and profitable agricultural industry was of strategic importance in the times of political unrest had led to the passing of the 1937 Act which made provision for some degree of support for the industry including subsidies for commodities such as lime and basic slag together with price support payments for some cereal staples; the 1939 Act extended the range of these support policies but the industry remained sceptical that when the war was over there would be another 'great betrayal' similar to that which had taken place after World War I.

As early as 1940, the NFU had established a committee to look into the future of agriculture and the society responded to an invitation to submit evidence and established its own ad hoc committee on post war policy. Initially government confidentiality restricted its findings from being published but, in 1943 when the '*embargo*' had been lifted, the society's statement was the first to be issued.

Subsequent statements published by other bodies indicated that there was a substantial degree of agreement in the views that were being expressed. The result was a conference called by the society in 1944 that was attended by all the leading agricultural organisations and such was its success that it fully justified its calling.

When the war was over, some leading politicians were somewhat sceptical about excessive demands that may be made by the industry to justify a continuing support policy, but the 1947 Act did contain many of the ideas that had been promoted within the industry during the war years and highlighted the effect that the society had had, through its various initiatives, on the formulation of post war policy. The policy decision taken to work 'behind the scenes' had been fully vindicated.

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