

# HOW THE WAR AFFECTED THE COUNTRYSIDE

Kelso, unlike the mill towns of the Borders, had virtually no industry. Even George Henderson's foundry and C. Smith's rope works were largely supplying farms and so agriculture was of major importance, serviced by Kelso companies like the seed merchants Laing and Mather.

Also of major importance was the work of the Border Union Agricultural Society who offered advice on farming matters but also monitored the increasing number of regulations issued by the government. In December 1916, Lloyd George's new coalition government set up the Ministry of Food to regulate the production and supply of food and by 1918 there were government controls on virtually all aspects of farming. Farmers were under pressure to produce more food, both for the army and to make up for the shortages caused by U-boat attacks. Conditions and wages for farm workers remained poor. The Scottish Farm Workers Association was very active, holding monthly meetings and working assiduously to improve the lot of farm workers.

Unfortunately, the young male farm worker was ideal material for the Army in wartime and almost a third of male farm workers signed up. Later, there were a number of cases where the Tribunals refused to exempt the only male worker on a farm, despite the farmer pointing out that without his help, the farm was virtually unworkable. Ploughmen and shepherds were skilled workers who could not easily be replaced. It wasn't just the farm worker who went to war, but the saddlers, farriers and blacksmiths along with all sorts of mechanics. Work horses were commandeered by the Army and those farmers who could afford to buy tractors might have them requisitioned. The government did import tractors from America. The Ministry of Munitions was responsible for the production and distribution of agricultural machinery to increase the number of tractors used on farms.

Prisoners of war, as well as the army were employed on a temporary basis, for instance to help with sowing and the harvest. By 1917 there were over a quarter of a million women working on farms. With 3 million men away, women learned the skills involved with ploughing, sowing, threshing, driving tractors and drainage work.



*Cattle in The Square 1910*

*Courtesy of Derek Robeson*