Seale-Hayne College and Agricultural Education in Devon in the 1920s

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The Dame Hannah Rogers Trust acquired Seale-Hayne College after the University of Plymouth closed the college for education in 2004. Hannahs (as they were known) struggled to make the college financially viable and eventually left in 2019. As they moved out, several ancient carboard boxes of documents that they had inherited when they moved in were handed over to the Seale-Hayne Archiving Group. To our utter surprise and delight, there were many pages – mostly foolscap reports – detailing the process of setting up the college, along with many of the financial discussions dating from 1919. This summary is taken from those reports.

Some background information about the need for a college such as Seale-Hayne was also included in the form of newspaper reports preceding the 1920s. These are contained in two large scrapbooks, which came to light recently at Seale-Hayne, holding newspaper cuttings from 1909 through to 1943.

There was almost no formal agricultural education in England and Wales until the 1890s; the exception was the privately run Cirencester Agricultural College, opening in 1843. Nor were there apprenticeship schemes, as in other artisan industries.

The depressed state of farming in the 1880s and 1890s had produced three parliamentary investigations of the industry, which published five reports during 1880–96. Accordingly, the Board of Agriculture had a deal of information about the industry, but implementing those recommendations was slow because it seems there was little administrative structure in place.

Eventually, the departmental committee on agricultural education in England and Wales, The Reay Committee, reported in 1908 that there should be three levels of Agricultural education: university degree courses, agricultural college diploma courses, and farm institute certificate courses. Reay reported that most areas, except the Midlands and the South West, had adequate facilities for higher agricultural education but only a fraction of the agricultural population was attracted to these new teaching institutions because most farmers and most men had learned their trades by the ancient custom of 'working with father'. Few farmers therefore had time for 'book learning' or to send their sons on courses.'[1]

This attitude is further exampled by a report in the *Western Morning News* newspaper, circa 1909, of the annual meeting of the Devon Farmers' Union. There had been a depression in agriculture for the last thirty years, ever since the repeal of the Corn Laws, but the *Western Morning News* journalist reflected that it was made worse because of the 'stick-in-the-mud attitude' of farmers and their resistance to change. At the meeting, George Lambert MP, a yeoman farmer and chairman of the

[1] Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, *Report of the Departmental Committee on Agricultural Education in England and Wales* (chairman Lord Reay), 1908, Cmnd 4206, London, HMSO.

governors of Seale-Hayne, referred to the establishing of Seale-Hayne College, saying that it would be of 'great benefit to the agricultural community'. The *Western Morning News* journalist commented: '... in not a few cases there was to be observed a sneering contemptuous smile on the faces of his listeners. These same gentlemen would very likely be found grumbling at hard times'.[2]

Lambert went on to allude to Charles Seale-Hayne's bequest (of which he was the one remaining executor) and remarked that: 'in the way it [S-H] should be utilised, he did not get a single representation from any farmer in Devon'.[3]

Although agriculture suffered prolonged depression in the late 1800s, it seems very strange that – excepting the Cirencester Agricultural College, which opened in 1845 – all other agricultural institutions opened during these agricultural depression years of 1880s–90s and the early 1900s. By the 1920s, there were fifteen such institutions. A few were larger, for example Oxbridge and Reading, with around two hundred students each, but most of the rest had around fifty students, although Seale-Hayne had between seventy and eighty.

The First World War started a change for agriculture. U-boats threatened food imports, so urgent home production was needed, and the government supervised this by establishing War Agricultural Committees ('The War Ag'). With men at war, women were recruited to work on the land (the Land Girls), and by the mid-1920s most farmers' established prejudices still prevailed, but the circumstances of war had subdued them.

Figure 1: An early postcard photograph of Seale-Hayne[4]

[2] *Western Times*, 18 February 1910.

[3] *Western Times*, 18 February 1910.

[4] All photographs in this essay were taken by Edward Brooks, a professional photographer working in Union Street, Newton Abbot.

The Seale-Hayne buildings were almost complete in 1914 and it was intended to accept the first students for the Michaelmas term in 1915, but the war intervened. The Land Girls were instructed there at first and then the War Office commissioned the buildings as a hospital for 'shell-shocked' soldiers from April 1918 to July 1919. It was at last available as an agricultural college in the early autumn of 1919 but there was not time to prepare it ready for the Michaelmas (autumn) term, so students arrived at the beginning of January 1920, with three terms being crammed into two in that first year.

There was much discussion about types of courses. The governors' attitude – with which the principal Lt. Col. Edwards-Ker agreed – was that Seale-Hayne should not be a County Farm Institute. The standard of the college diploma courses would be higher. In a memorandum to the governors in 1919, Edwards-Ker suggested the following:

- No student be admitted under the age of 16.
- There should be three types of course;
  - Three-year college diploma in agriculture or dairying, which will prepare students for the National diplomas NDA or NDD.
  - A certificate course in agriculture or horticulture of two years.
  - Four separate short courses (including poultry and beekeeping) during the normal summer vacation, and for a while, one for surveyors.
- Women would be admitted for short course certificates in the summer vacation months only.
- Degree courses were considered essential for those seeking government administrative service – but these did not start until 1927.

In January 1920, fifty-one students with an average age of twenty-two arrived for the first courses. Apparently, they were of three distinct types: ex-servicemen, public schoolboys and farmers' sons.

Figure 2: Students of Seale-Hayne Agricultural College

The college was very ill-prepared with furniture and equipment, and the farm was in a dreadfully run-down state. There were not quite enough school desks (borrowed from Highweek) so some students took notes standing up because of the desk and chair shortage. Apparently, most of the staff – although well qualified – had never taught before. Nevertheless, morale was high and according to accounts, students enjoyed the experience.

One governor expressed that: 'Seale-Hayne is probably the best agricultural college building in the country, but the farm buildings are the worst!' The main barn was a complete wreck with the thatched roof fallen-in and left lying. Accordingly, a new set of farm buildings and staff cottages were quickly commissioned and built in 1921. The plans for these buildings were drawn by Gutteridge architects at the same time as the main quadrangle, but the First World War interrupted their construction.

In 1919, the Board of Agriculture had been replaced by the Ministry of Agriculture, which provided grants for agricultural education to county councils to enable the employment of an agricultural organiser with staff. Accordingly, the 'Ministry' had some influence over the structure and provision of courses in the 1920s and 1930s.

Figure 3: First farm class at Seale Hayne, 1920

The county agricultural adviser was the first person that farmers consulted, but was not a specialist in all farming matters. Accordingly, the counties of England and Wales were formed into 'provinces' with specialist advisers based at an agricultural institution within its borders. For the South West province, Seale-Hayne served this purpose.

In 1919 Principal Lt. Col. Edwards-Ker made proposals to the board of governors for the syllabus, finances and so forth for the new Seale-Hayne Agricultural College. In addition, because Devon and Cornwall County Councils provided grants to the college, the board of governors asked the principal to prepare a memorandum for the County Agricultural Committees outlining how extension work by an established Seale-Hayne would benefit agriculture in Devon and Cornwall.

He proposed his highly qualified staff would be available to give information and advice free of charge to subscribing counties, all matters to do with crop, animal and horticultural husbandry, together with costings, drainage, surveying and buildings. These specialist advisers were in addition to the teaching staff and were of great benefit to the college as well. The college paid the advisory officers' salaries, which the Ministry then reimbursed. The principal subjects on which advice was provided were:

- Mycology: plant fungal and bacterial diseases.
- Chemistry: soils, manures, feedstuffs.
- Economics: costings, management, bookkeeping.
- Entomology: insect damage of plants.
- Veterinary science: animal diseases of general public interest.

Edwards-Ker argued that 'the usefulness and value of an institution such as S-H can only be developed to the maximum if the closest contact and co-operation between the counties and the college are initiated and maintained.' He went on to propose his staff would be available for out-lectures and a range of advisory visits for the small cost of covering their travelling expenses. He argued this would be a far less extensive way of providing agricultural extension work rather than a county employing their own county lecturers. He must have heard the idea of county staff being recruited even before the government provided the finance after the Repeal of the Agricultural Act in 1921.[5]

Principal Edwards-Ker's proposal may have been a bit optimistic. His lecturing staff might have been hard-pressed to fulfil all their lecturing duties at college and run an efficient extension service. In the event, the proposed extension works by Edwards-Ker did not flourish as he had hoped. How much this claimed lack of linked direction between Seale-Hayne staff and the County Agricultural Education Organisation can be directed at personalities or other factors is at yet undiscovered.

Figure 4: The first course of students, 1920

[5] Seale-Hayne Archive, *Memorandum by Principal Edwards-Ker to members of the sub-committee of Devon County Council regarding grant aid*, 1919.

One very significant reason, however, was the frightful consequences of the Repeal of the Agricultural Act in 1921, the consequences of which are outlined below. There is a revealing paper in the National Archives, 'The Agricultural Act, depression and subsidy'.

The First World War gave birth to a state subsidy for agriculture because food imports were severely reduced and much more food had to be home grown. Productivity of land increased, farmers prospered and pay for workers increased. Subsidies continued post-war and many tenant farmers bought their farms, but this could not continue. The government was facing a £20 million subsidy bill for agriculture when other sectors of the economy did not have such protection. Accordingly, in 1921, the Agricultural Act, which guaranteed minimum prices and wages, was repealed.

The consequence was immediate. Wages fell by up to 40 per cent in one year and many arable farmers fell into debt. Restrictions on imported Canadian grain were lifted and the government did not intervene. Consequently, productivity fell and rural poverty increased. Some land lay waste, even in fertile areas such as Norfolk. This Agricultural Act repeal became known by the farming community as 'the great betrayal'. Recognising this, the government did provide a few grants to agriculture, but nowhere near their previous support.

In the 1920s, the reports from the Principal to the Governors to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and to Devon County Council were very comprehensive in covering the development of courses, the teaching staff, the farm and finances.

Around £26,000 of Charles Seale-Haynes legacy of £103,000 was spent building the main quadrangle of the college. It has not yet clear how the rest was to be spent because much of the principal's financial reports were to do with generating enough income to run and develop the college. At a conference between the governors and representatives of the Board of Education on 13 July 1920, the entire discussion stressed for the new farm buildings (plans drawn before the war) and a set of workers cottages; this was vital if the college was to fulfil its purpose. At an estimated cost of £20,000, the Ministry of Agriculture was asked for a grant of £6,000; the remaining £14,000 to be raised by a loan, repayable in annual instalments.

Devon and Cornwall gave grants to the college, but in return they required reduced fees to be offered to students who attended on county grants. Devon, in return for their £3,000 grant, required twenty-four places at the reduced fee of £15 per term to be reserved for Devon students. This compared to the normal fee of £40 a term for other students. But strangely, in a 1924 report, only seventeen places had been taken at any one time. In addition, free advice to farmers in the county was provided.

Figure 5: Tractor 'trials' in the early 1920s, held at Seale-Hayne. During the First World War, 5,000 of these Fordson F tractors were imported to replace draft horses, which had been requisitioned by the Army

From around late 1922 to 1923, as a consequence of the 1921 Act, things were becoming very difficult again in the whole agricultural sector. All available college places were filled immediately after the war demobilisation; there being eighty-eight students in the Michaelmas term of 1922. But, as with all other agricultural institutions, fresher intake reduced from 1923. A loss in fees of 14 per cent was due to a decrease in the number of foreign students who pay the highest rate and to an increase in students sent from the counties who pay the lowest rate. This drop is partly due to benefits given to Devon and Cornwall students.[6]

In a July 1924 financial report to the governors, Edwards-Ker states in the four years between 1919 and 1923, the college has run practically level financially – a total loss of the period of just £117. He states, however, that in the year 1924 to 1925, economies of £1,500 to £200 will be necessary. He finishes his report on an upbeat note, saying he:

> … does not want the governors to think that the College is in difficulties. The fall in student numbers is general in all agricultural colleges and economies planned for the next year (1925) will keep the college solvent … It only remains to ensure by economies next year the college budget is made to balance so as to repay by a sinking fund the present bank loan … economies next year seem to be the key to this for the moment.[7]

It is clear that the 1920s were a difficult time for the principal because of the nagging problem of finances. As the decade progressed, further economies were necessary, culminating in 1929–30 when a strictly confidential, six foolscap sides of Economy Proposals Report to save £2,500, 'without interfering with the Instructional and Research work of the college', was presented to the governors. It lists savings to be made in much detail, even for examples to decrease the loss on the Poultry

[6] Seale-Hayne Archive, *Remarks made by Edwards-Ker on the Profit & Loss Account to the Governors,* October 1922.

[7] Seale Hayne Archive, *Extract from remarks made by Edwards-Ker to the Governors,* July 1924.

Department cockerel breeding scheme.[8] But the most significant of all was the need to save on salaries. The salaries bill for the main sixteen academic staff was £6,235 and the economies required them to accept a reduction between 5 and 7½ per cent, including himself. In addition was a 2½ per cent reduction for clerical staff, porters and engineers. This must have been very tough for staff, and their salaries and wages were not restored until 1934.

The principal reflected on the success of Seale-Hayne students in the NDA examinations in the last seven years and the subsequent careers of students thus: 'of the 282 alumni, 84% are engaged in agriculture at home or abroad, while 39% are on their own farms.' County grants to the colleges varied considerably as student numbers declined because of the depression; by 1926 and 1927 apparently only one agricultural teaching establishment made a profit.[9]

What is clear, though, despite all these financial worries – of which the staff must have been aware – is the standard of teaching, which was outstanding. With so much research and advisory work centred at the college, plus its attendance at agricultural shows and events, the reputation and academic achievements of Seale-Hayne began to grow. In about 1926, it came second in the national league table of NDA passes.

Ken Haine, a student, and later a researcher, wrote;

> By 1929, Seale-Hayne was developing into a well-recognised agricultural college. The high quality of tuition produced success for students in the national examinations. In the early years, first place Honours were achieved twice in the National Diploma in Agriculture and likewise dairying (NDA and NDD) examinations but by 1933, more Seale-Hayne students gained the NDA than from any other institution. Likewise, in 1933 and 1934, more Seale-Hayne students gained their Degree in Agriculture than in any other institution. This was a great success, especially as there were only 50 to 60 students there in the 1920s and 1930s.[10]

Grant aid from the Ministry of Agriculture to agricultural colleges was in general for five years. A committee of the Ministry visited in November 1926; it made no serious criticism of the college, which was generally commended. A suggestion was made at other agricultural colleges that courses should be modified to be more locally relevant, and that the NDA course should be abandoned. There was a long discussion and account by the principal, who vigorously opposed the idea.

Of the fifteen agricultural institutions in England and Wales, those with lower numbers had a disproportionate number of staff for the number of students. In a report of 1930 by the departmental committee (of the Ministry of Agriculture) they questioned the economic need for so many, suggesting that some might be reduced to County Farm Institute designation. It was acknowledged, however, that in addition to teaching, they were centres of technical advice for their province via the county council. The report urged that the management of college farms should be in the hands of the senior lecturer in agriculture so as to keep a close link between theory and practice.

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[8] Seale-Hayne Archive, *'Strictly Confidential' Economy Proposals Report by Edwards-Ker to the Governors*, 1929.
[9] Seale-Hayne Archive, *Report by Edwards-Ker to the Governors at a visit by the Ministry of Agriculture committee,* February 1927.
[10] Seale-Hayne Archive, *Ken Haine tbc*

Accordingly, the teaching staff also conducted research. Leading this was Frank Horne, who joined the first course at Seale-Hayne aged 16 and was the top student. Horne went on to gain an MA at Cambridge and returned to Seale-Hayne aged 23 as head of biology. He set-to researching and improving broccoli (winter cauliflower) strains in Cornwall, hoping to compete with the imported broccoli from Brittany. Likewise, to improve varieties of perennial ryegrass – for a long time (and still) the main grass grown for grazing animals. Horne and a colleague identified more than 100 strains of ryegrass to work on. One strain of ryegrass, 'Devon Eaver' emerged from this work at Seale-Hayne.

The advisory and research work carried out by staff was considerable right up to and during the Second World War. Much of it was to do with existing problems of diseases, both in animals and in plants. Examples are too many to detail here, but one such is of an extensive economics study (jointly with Dartington Hall) of 200 farms in South Devon. It was conducted so that farmers could compare their systems with others and develop new systems of accounting and management. The raw data was sent to USA Cornell University Agriculture Faculty. Connected to this research is the sad story of L.N. Staniland researching and using dimethyl mercury as a fungicide against eelworm. Nobody then knew that mercury vapour accumulates in the system, causing kidney failure, which led to Staniland's early death.

From the very beginning, one could detect from students' comments that they felt privileged to attend this wonderful new college. Accordingly, in 1923, the Seale-Hayne students formed an alumni association, 'The Old Seale-Haynian Club'. Their first meeting was held in October 1923 and they appointed the Right Hon. George Lambert MP as the club's first president. The annual subscription was fixed at 10/6 and the club colours were agreed as: 'broad bands of blue and yellow divided by a narrow strip of red, arranged diagonally across the tie'.[11]

The inaugural meeting discussed the formation of an 'employment bureau', but no satisfactory decision was made! The bureau did eventually emerge with the aim of linking ex-students to leaving students, enabling the leavers to find ready employment, but it had limited success.

The students also organised a very active debating society, discussing such topics as; 'that prohibition should not be introduced in this country,' 'that it shall be lawful for doctors to use lethal treatment,' 'that the break-up of the British Empire is eminent' and (the society's first debate) 'that motorcycles are a public nuisance!' In addition to the debating society, other student clubs, sports and societies started to form from early in the 1920s.

The alumni association still exists and it has copies of *The Seale-Haynian* magazine, which was first produced in 1922. The magazine was initially issued termly and it carried reports about happenings at and news from Seale-Hayne, coupled with fictional and non-fictional writings from past students. Many ex-students were posted to developing countries, especially in Africa, to improve the farming, and interesting letters from these students back to their Alma Mater were published in those early magazines.

[11] Seale Hayne Archive, *Seale-Haynian Magazine, report following the inaugural meeting of the Old Seale-Haynians Club chaired by W.J. Radford,* December 1923.

The matter of women students surfaced again in 1929. A number of women enrolled for the short summer courses in the very early 1920s, a continuation of Land Girl courses. But these courses dwindled, except for one mixed course in the summer of 1926. Since then, it had not thought desirable to mix the sexes at Seale-Hayne.

Then, in 1929, a 'special committee' of four men and Miss Calmady-Hamlyn reported to the governors on the admission of women students to Seale-Hayne. The question arose because of the possibility of another institution arranging classes in dairying and similar subjects for women students. In a single-page confidential memorandum, most likely intended for the governors, Principal Edwards-Ker was against it, saying: 'I do not feel that the mixing of the sexes will be an advantage to the college either financially or otherwise.'[12]

Edwards-Ker thought that the idea it would increase numbers was false, predicting a decline in male students because many parents are not in favour of co-educational establishments. Moreover, that there would need to be further outlay in building a separate hostel for women. He suggested to the governors that provision for women could be achieved by offering ten-week courses in the summer vacation. Five women students were admitted to Seale-Hayne for the first time for a year's course in dairying in Michaelmas term 1933.

Reflecting upon this documentary information, which came to light in early 2019, it seems that agricultural education in Great Britain progressed slowly in forming a standard curriculum: 'The expansion of provision from 1914–1939 produced a system that might at best be described as intricately integrated and at worst confusing'[13]

It is perhaps understandable when formal agricultural education started only in the mid-1890s and there was no precedent on which to base a curriculum. To some extent, Seale-Hayne reflected this because in addition to the main CDA and CDD three-year courses, there was a two-year certificate course in agriculture or horticulture, and also several short courses held in the summer vacation. One view expressed was that 'Seale-Hayne had a long incubation period'.[14]

In her paper *Agricultural Education in the Inter-War Years*, Lynne Thompson stated:

> However, due to lack of managerial and financial expertise, severe cuts in funding and a lack of clarity regarding the main educational focus of the college was to be, the college never realised its full potential during the interwar period.[15]

This assessment could be regarded as rather severe. Surely, Seale-Hayne's purpose was never in doubt. The report to the governors of Seale-Hayne in 1919 by Principal Edwards-Ker on the 'Utilisation of the Seale-Hayne college for agricultural education' states that the principal objective

[12] Seale-Hayne Archive*, Confidential Memorandum by Edwards-Ker to the Board of Governors*, 18 April 1929.

[13] Paul Brassley, 'Agricultural Education, Training and Advice in the UK, 1850–2000', *The State and Rural Societies*, January 2008, DOI:10.1484/M.RURHE-EB.4.00060.

[14] Alston Kennerly, *The Making of the University of Plymouth* (University of Plymouth, 2000).

[15] Lynne Thompson, 'Agricultural Education in the Inter-war Years', in Paul Brassley, Jeremy Burchardt and Lynne Thompson, eds, *The English Countryside Between the Wars* (Boydell Press, 2006), p. 61.

was to train agricultural students to diploma and degree level.[16] Regarding 'financial expertise', in the documents referred to there are many detailed estimates and costings presented to the governors.

There is no doubt that it was a very bumpy ride during the 1920s for all colleges. That said, it can be argued with conviction that in spite of the difficulties and criticisms, the examination results indicated above prove that Seale-Hayne Agricultural College fulfilled its primary objective of producing highly qualified agriculturists. These foundation achievements in the 1920s continued and after the Second World War, Seale-Hayne became internationally renowned as a premier agricultural college.

[16] Seale-Hayne Archive, *Report by Ker-Edwards to the Governors*, October 1919.