



Local History Collection

28 - The History of the Emmett Farming Family

Autumn 2025

Researched & written by Sarah Grace

The name Fifield comes from the old English "*five hides of land*" or a village surrounded by five fields. As you drive along the A308 from Windsor to Maidenhead or along the Drift road, Forest Green Road or the A330 Ascot road, you have the privilege to see many wonderful open green fields being put to worthy farming use.

Many of these fields are under the ownership, care and responsibility of the Emmett family. You may have met the 'elder statesman'; William, at various village functions or Parish meetings or even ventured to their farm shop for the butchery or a cup of tea and cake!

FIFTY YEARS A FARMER



A champagne dinner to celebrate 50 years of farming by Mr. W. Emmett of Bray Rise, was held at the Hind's Head Hotel on Tuesday evening. He was entertained by his three sons. They are (left to right) John Henry, William Curtis, and Charles Edward, all farmers.

Before coming to Water Oakley, Fifield, he was farming Parlaunt Park Farm, Langley,

the present site of the big Hawkers works, Slough. He moved to Fifield in 1939. The Langley farm was bulldozed out of existence.

A successful exhibitor at agricultural shows, his principal interests are market gardening and arable farming. On five occasions he won the King's Cup at the South Bucks Show. He is a regular winner also at the East Berks Show.

Ben Emmett (William's Great Grandfather) was a butcher/farmer at Hatton Cross near Heathrow. He founded his business in 1906 and in 1938 Ben's son William found his farm being compulsory purchased for the war effort. His farm was handy for the London markets as he could deliver fresh food to the wholesale markets by horse and cart and then transport the horse manure out of London on the return journey.

William (current William Emmett's Grandad) moved out and purchased three farms, one for each of his sons; Water Oakley Farm, Rockwell End Farm in Hambleden and Drayton House Farm in St. Leonard's, Oxon.

William also farmed Hornbuckle Farm on the Drift Road. This farm had originally been farmed/part owned by a William Hornbuckle in the 1850s as part of the New Lodge Estate. This estate was sold at Auction in 1916 and lot 39 was the sale of 108 acres with a pair of cottages known as Hornbuckle farm for £1,700 to a Mr J Headington of Braywood. Hornbuckle farm was sold again in 1928 and 1944 and eventually purchased by William Emmett (Grandad) in 1947 whilst he was living at Brayrise, Windsor Road (near the new Thames Hospice). Hornbuckle was then farmed by Jack Emmett (William's Father) and eventually passed to William Emmett.

William left school at 15 and had his own farm by the age of 20 and with his older brother, John, took on the family farming business based at Water Oakley Farm. This farm was sold in 1964 to Hoveringham gravel but the Emmett family carried on farming the land as tenants. During the gravel extraction on this farm there were a number of interesting finds such as the remnants of a bridge that proved the river Thames had originally taken a different course from the river we know today. As the gravel south of the A308 is being extracted today and the land restored, even more treasures are being found.

William was married in 1971 to Sarah and they have three Daughters; Deborah, Charlotte and Louise. All three daughters farm, run liveries, farm storage, and a farm shop.



A family photograph taken at Brentford market at the turn of the century. Founder William Emmett would transport farm produce there daily by horse and cart.



Tradition stands side by side with the latest techniques. Pictured are John Emmett and Jayne Thomas outside the new farm shop at Water Oakley with one of the company's original market barrows.



Big day for Mr. Jack Emmett as he holds the King George VI Cup, awarded for root crops. It was won by W.Emmett & Son of Water Oakley Farm, Bray.

During the 1970's Water Oakley Farm employed over 300 people in its business supplying major supermarket chains such as Waitrose, Tesco's Sainsbury's and Safeway with their vegetables and also ran a stand in the London wholesale trade markets. Over the years the crop range was widened to meet these supermarkets specialised needs and these supplemented the English growing season.

During the winter months of the 1970's the farm at Water Oakley would send 800-1000 boxes of produce to Covent Garden Market per night and this rose to double or treble in the summer months when produce also went to Spitalfields, Western International markets, and Brighton. This farm was run by Jack Emmett (Current William Emmett's Father) until the late 1960's and then by John Emmett (William's older brother) and his wife Helen. John and Helen focussed on market gardening, producing 500,000 boxes of produce a year. John found that the Thames Valley climate was a good spot for growing salad and he could cut lettuce a week earlier than other growers in Norfolk or Bedfordshire.

At this time the Emmett's belonged to the Thames Valley Vegetable group linked to the National Farmers Union who helped each other with mutual interests like buying cardboard boxes in bulk. John was Chairman of the box committee. In the winter months this Vegetable group would arrange training courses for safety, reverse ploughing, tractor management, welding, irrigation, and the safe use of chemicals.

From 1984 into the 2000's William and his brother John farmed in Murcia, Spain, to provide an everlasting season of fresh produce. In the late 1980's the vegetable growing side of the business was sold and land was acquired in Oxfordshire. However, this business came back to the family via the finance bank in the early 1990's and was restructured and the family still grow in parts of Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Surrey. The local farms that William

continues to farm may be familiar to many - Gadbridge farm, Forest Green farm, Budds farm, Fernygrove farm, Cruchfield farm, Water Oakley farm, Foliejohn park, in and around farming land in Bray Village as well as Hornbuckle farm.



The Emmett Family

William Emmett front left with his siblings, parents, and Grandad William

In 2005 the horticulture business was sold to the management team and relocated to Lincolnshire. William's brother John grew herbs at Taplow until his death in 2018 and William still grows herbs along with potatoes, broccoli, spinach, coriander, wheat, barley, oats, peas, beans, hay and haylage (for the polo industry). John specialised in vacuum cooling facilities and designed and developed the pillow-pack for spinach which is still in use today.

I really find it hard to list all the 'achievements' of the whole family but I need to mention a few of them; 1954 Winners at the Royal Show at Stoneleigh with Tamworth pigs, boar and sow (several photos from this time are available to view on the walls of the Fernygrove Farm Café), President of the Young Farmers, Chairman of the Young Farmers at the age of 21, President of the Royal East Berkshire Agricultural Association, Chairman of the Bucks, Berks and Oxon branch of the National Farmers Union, 10 years on the National Council of the National Farmers Union, Vice- Chairman of the RBWM Council Rural Forum, Winners of the best farmed large farm at the East Berks Agricultural Association (winning a trip to Germany), Water Oakley Farm shop, Quintessential Meats and Fernygrove Farm shop and café, Chair of Bray Parish Council planning committee, opening the farm at Hornbuckle in aid of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Association and Alexander Devine, providing the wheat for bread for 31 Olympic UK venues in 2012.

When I spoke to William in person I could hardly fail to see his deep passion for farming and its community, his continuing care for the countryside, its hedgerows and woodlands (such as the complete rejuvenation of the elm hedge along the Ascot road) and other

environmental countryside projects. He considers that the whole Emmett family are utilising rural assets in an urban environment. We spoke about many of the difficulties that ALL farmers are facing from topics like rural crime, lamping, hare coursing, fly tipping, inappropriate developments in rural settings, inheritance tax, lack of police to tackle rural crime and break-ins, rising costs, tight budgets, lack of Government support, state of the roads and the dangers. For example - the Drift road used to have grass running down the middle of the road, it was used as a farming highway as opposed to the volume of traffic at great speed which uses this road today along with heavily laden 44 ton lorries carrying loads to illegal landfill and waste tips.

I was reminded that the small island of the UK only produces 60% of the food we need and the remainder is imported and some products are imported from parts of the world where certain pesticides are not cleared for use on food grown in the UK - a clear double standard. We all want cheap food. However, the recent threat of further food price inflation is not generated at the UK farm gate.

William is glad that he diversified in earlier years but the farming situation is not encouraging for the next generation of farmers, but he has several Grandchildren who may be interested in continuing the legacy of the Emmett family.



William Emmett 2011

*The plough's sharp kiss, a lover's gentle plea,
To wake the sleeping earth, beneath the sky's vast sea.
From ancient hand to ours, the furrow turns and bends,
A rhythm etched in soil, where life eternally transcends.*

*With patient care, the seed in darkness sown,
A future harvest held, a legacy to be known.
The hedgerows stand as watchers, green and deep,
Where wilder lives and secrets softly sleep.*

*We walk these fields, their history in our stride,
The sun, the rain, the seasons, side by side.
But shadows fall, and concrete starts to creep,
And fragile beauty struggles, promises to keep.*

*So guard the pasture, keep the clear stream bright,
Protect the quiet valleys, bathed in soft moonlight.
For in this earth, our roots are deeply bound,
A heritage to cherish, on sacred, fertile ground.*

Author unknown