In this chapter, we examine the extent of children’s involvement in agricultural production, drawing on school histories and our interview data as well as propaganda and other documents from the time. We describe how children’s contributions were evaluated. Finally, we suggest that children could effectively be seen – in theory – as a kind of reserve army of labour; that from the children’s points of view, the work was very physically demanding – and, occasionally, appalling – but that they felt that they ‘did their bit’, however small, to help in national food production at a time of crisis.

Background

As in the First World War, schoolchildren were an important source of labour in agriculture. Though concerns about the ill effects of ‘heavy continuous muscular work’ on children were voiced in the run-up to the war (see Chapter 4), it became clear that children of school age would have to be employed in agricultural work if Britain was to be able to feed its population. Several million acres of meadowland were ploughed up each year in the struggle to increase food production. According to the Ministry of Information, between 1939 and 1943, 6.5 million extra acres (just over 2.5 million hectares) of grassland were ploughed up and 98,000 skilled men were lost from the land. By 1943, the estimated net output of the soil of the UK was up 70 per cent on pre-war output (Agriculture 50, 1943: 217). Wheat production increased by 109 per cent, barley by 115 per cent, oats 58 per cent, potatoes 102 per cent,
sugar beet 37 per cent, vegetables 34 per cent and fruit 55 per cent (Ministry of Information, 1945).

Faced with a growing shortage of adult male labour, the government had to look to other sources of labour – particularly, that of women and children – to work the increased acreage. One of the first measures of the war, in early October 1939, was to pass a Bill to postpone raising the SLA to 15 (Bills Public 1938–39 (274) ii 655; see also Barber, 1994: 2). A subsequent series of government measures relaxed child-employment legislation to allow schoolchildren to work on the land. The Board of Education issued the first of its annual ‘potato’ circulars in 1941, asking local authorities to arrange for school holidays to be fixed – if necessary, at short notice – in those periods when the needs for seasonal agricultural labour was greatest, so that children over 12 years of age could be employed in agricultural operations during the holidays and also that schools should organise parties to visit local farms on certain days in term time in order to help with the work of planting and lifting potatoes (Board of Education, Circular 1541, 20 February 1941, cited in Gosden, 1976: 462). In May 1942, new regulations freed more children to work the land during term time where local education authorities were satisfied that ‘by reason of a shortage of labour any agricultural work of a seasonal nature will be seriously delayed unless school children in the area of the authority are employed in that work’ (Emergency Powers (Defence), Agricultural and Fisheries. Employment of Children in Agricultural Work, No. 802: 105).

Children over 12 could work, with parental consent, for not more than 36 hours a week, or 7 hours a day. It was also suggested that, wherever possible, children under 14 should be employed only for half days so that they could attend school in the morning and work in the fields in the afternoon, or vice versa. This was more or less identical to the half-time system, described in Chapter 3. War Agricultural Executive Committees (WAECs) were also asked to discourage the employment of children under 14, so long as any other source of labour was available (reported in the TES, 9 May 1942, and in Gosden, 1976: 462). However, we know from our interviewees and from school histories that younger children took part too. It is impossible to assess the extent of children’s contributions in terms of hours spent working on the land; the amount of produce planted, sown or harvested; or the acreage of land that they cleared. Official statistics were not kept (in contrast to the First World War, as described in Chapter 3). The important point is that, according to the official view, children’s work was voluntary – this is emphasised over and over again in contemporary reports – and it was paid.
See, for example, Figure 6.1. The caption published alongside the image in *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* (1942a) reads, ‘It was not discussed whether boys or girls got the better results. The sun shone equally on the just and on the—just prudent.’

![Boy picking peas, wearing protection against the sun. Source: Mary Evans Picture Library](image)

**Figure 6.1:** Boy picking peas, wearing protection against the sun. Source: Mary Evans Picture Library

The most thoroughly researched aspect of children’s involvement in agricultural production is the case of ‘school harvest camps’ – that is, camps for schoolchildren, accompanied by their teachers, run in the school summer holidays. These were organised by state and private schools, urban and rural, and were attended by boys and girls in increasing numbers throughout the war years. Rural schoolchildren also helped out on local farms, in the holidays and while at school, in much less formal arrangements – and these are the experiences of agricultural work remembered by most of our interviewees.
School harvest camps

The school harvest camps, or ‘school agricultural camps’, have been well researched by the agricultural historian R.J. Moore-Colyer (2004). In 1940, there were 249 camps for eight thousand boys organised by both private and state schools. However, the arrangements had been ad hoc – and after an accident, a more formal system was introduced by the Ministry of Agriculture:

Much concern is felt by secondary teachers at the development of the case recently heard at Birmingham Assizes when heavy damages were awarded against a headmaster for alleged negligence in allowing a party of 20 boys to work on a farm without supervision [a boy lost an eye when hit by a clod of earth intended for another boy in a fight]. (Cited in the TES, 26 April 1941)

This case led to teachers being ‘unwilling to organise camps unless a formal structure embodying indemnification against legal action could be elaborated’, and it was agreed that camps should be better organised (Public Record Office (PRO), Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) 47/7(34), cited in Moore-Colyer, 2004: 193). The Ministry of Agriculture set up the Schoolboy Harvest Camps Advisory Committee (SHCAC) under the chairmanship of Robert Hyde, Director of the Industrial Welfare Society. This was ‘a small body of experienced people to guide and advise schools on a number of matters that were likely to arise if the movement grew’ (Hyde, 1952: 469). The Board of Education issued guidance as to how camps were to be financed and organised, down to detailed instructions about diet, pay and insurance. Table 6.1 shows the numbers of children involved in the scheme, which lasted until 1950.

Table 6.1: The school harvest camps scheme, 1941–1945

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1941</th>
<th>1942</th>
<th>1943</th>
<th>1944</th>
<th>1945</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Camps</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>1,068</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys in single-sex camps</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>26,425</td>
<td>41,372</td>
<td>45,968</td>
<td>28,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls in single-sex camps</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3,869</td>
<td>20,424</td>
<td>15,593</td>
<td>12,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in mixed camps</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>6,892</td>
<td>5,679</td>
<td>4,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>31,142</td>
<td>68,688</td>
<td>67,240</td>
<td>44,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total boy/girl weeks of work</td>
<td>124,568</td>
<td>274,752</td>
<td>268,860</td>
<td>178,320</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PRO, MAF 105/45(214) cited in Moore-Colyer, 2004: 202
According to Harold Dent, boys under 16 were paid a minimum of 6d an hour, and those over 16 were paid 8d an hour (Dent, 1944a: 119). The fact that children were paid wages was explicitly contrasted to the situation in Germany, where the government had introduced a similar system with an instruction that stated: ‘The children will regard their auxiliary work in agriculture as honorary service but to encourage joyful alacrity in their work, the farmer must give them pocket money’ (cited in Hyde, 1952: 468–70). The British Ministry of Agriculture insisted:

There was no question of ‘conscripting’ youths on Nazi lines, nor will the plan involve any regimentation of youth labour. The idea is to invite these young men to offer themselves for farm work at their local Employment Exchange where they will be placed with farmers who are willing to accept their services. (Ward, 1988: 18)

Moore-Colyer describes the considerable levels of organisation required to establish the camps, and farmers’ appreciation of children’s work – for example:

So delighted were growers in the Fylde district of Lancashire (where children from twenty schools picked 2000 tons of potatoes in 1943) that they provided camp participants with illuminated scrolls as expressions of gratitude. (Moore-Colyer, 2004: 202)

While there were official figures of the numbers of children involved in school harvest camps, there were no statistics kept of how many children were employed in agriculture outside the camps. Dent suggests that thousands of others helped from their homes:

During term time elementary and secondary school pupils by the thousand engaged in part-time agricultural work. Altogether, it is estimated that during the year schoolchildren did about 3,000,000 hours of work on the land. (Dent, 1944a: 117)

Many school histories draw on school magazines of the time to record children’s activities in these organised camps. Several include children’s poems and drawings, and teachers’ descriptions of the camps. Some give detailed accounts, logging the amount of time spent in work, the amount of produce and the numbers of children volunteering. Nearly all of them record the hard work involved. For example, the school history for Barrow Grammar School called it ‘a hard but profitable holiday’ (p. 110).
Agricultural camps were run by both urban and rural schools. For example, George Dixon School, Edgbaston, Birmingham set up camps in Warwickshire. According to the school history, ‘the boys travelled to the location either by train or on their bicycles. There they found a quasi-military regime, led by Mr Walker. Days were organised as follows’:

7.30 a.m. Reveille and prayers
8.00 a.m. Breakfast, followed by briefing and identification of daily tasks
Midday Cold sandwich lunch
5.00 p.m. End of working day
Evening Supper, games and baths
9.00 p.m. Parade and evening prayers

Mr Walker remembered that ‘the farmers and the Warwickshire Agricultural Committee gave unstinted praise to the boys and their efforts. They were magnificent’ (p. 41).

The history of Stationers’ Company School, Hornsey details some of the practicalities. In the summer of 1942:

Mr Davis organised the Harvest Camp for three weeks at Stockcross near Newbury. The boys cycled from London to Stockcross, and then used their cycles to travel from the camp to the farm each day. After an early breakfast the boys would arrive at the farm by 8 a.m. The first job was ‘shocking’ [i.e. stooking] \(^1\) . . . When the harvest was in on the first farm, the gang was at work by 8 a.m. on the next farm, more mechanised than the first, to clear out the tractor shed and pitch up sheaves to the cockpit of the threshing machine. The day ended at 8 p.m.: time sheets were completed and the boys cycled back to camp, where the staff, headed by Mr Davis, doctored their wounds, and Mrs Davis patched their torn garments. The boys who took part were clearly very appreciative of the support given them by the staff – and produced an additional verse of the School song, ‘respectfully dedicated to BD’. This begins:

‘We are the campers who gather the harvest in,
Stooking and sweating at five bob a day,
Living on sandwiches packed into ma’s best tin,
Moaning and groaning and earning war pay.’
The history adds, ‘This account of the Harvest Camp, drawn from the jaunty report at the time by P.H. Carter in the School Magazine, reflects something of how cheerfulness and willingness to contribute to what was called “the war effort” expressed itself in a group of Sixth Form pupils at the turning point of the war’ (p. 73).

The history of Trinity, a London grammar school, describes children’s involvement in harvest camps in Hertfordshire, and includes accounts of their memories. Jenny (Lunnon/Suckling) recalls:

And finally pea-picking camps at Terling in ’42 and ’43. When at Hatfield Peverel the boys had done some pea picking, but not many girls were involved until those wonderful camps where we slept in the village hall and the boys in the upper area of the apple packing shed. The lower part was our dining room and communal area. We returned home looking like gypsies after several weeks out of doors. We were often transported by lorry to distant farms singing popular songs of the day – Run Rabbit Run, Down Mexico Way, and Deep in the Heart of Texas. (p. 75)

Bedford Girls Modern School describes how girls were involved in agricultural camps from 1942 onwards:

In 1942 four weeks were spent at Bourne, Kesteven, by two sets of 22 girls and 3 mistresses who each worked for a fortnight. The following year from 40–45 girls at a time took part in lifting potatoes, while in 1944 the quarters were in the Carre’s Grammar School, Sleaford, and the work flax pulling for three weeks, and potato lifting for the last. The fourth and last camp was at Hacconby near Bourne, Lincolnshire where potato lifting and thistle spudding were the chief jobs. Miss Pugh, as a Guider with some experience of camping, was a regular staff member and gives a vivid picture: ‘Viewed in retrospect the conditions were appalling but we were prepared to put up with anything to be able to help our country’ . . . ‘The work was mostly potato picking, though we did do a bit of fruit picking and weeding sugar beet. The potato lifting was back-aching work. A machine called a “spinner” turned up rows of potatoes and they had to be picked up by hand and put into baskets . . . A basic wage was paid but bonuses were added at so much per hundredweight over a minimum and some girls earned what were quite princely sums in those days.’ (pp. 86–7)
The history of Kingston High School, Hull records evacuees’ reminiscences. Barbara Dawson, for example, recalls:

A great adventure was participation by some of us in a journey to Bourne, in Lincolnshire, to help with the harvest. We were the youngest pupils able to take part in 1944 and we were each allocated to a particular farmer . . . Most of our time was spent weeding carrots and sugar beet . . . although I believe we did stook barley. It was a back-breaking job and . . . the reward was 28 shillings a week. [The farmer] also gave a bonus – he booked seats at the local cinema in Bourne for the two Saturdays we were able to go . . . When we first arrived at the house we were each given a palliasse cover and told to fill it with straw from the barn. Thus, we were provided with our beds for the two-week stay, and our ‘beds’ went on wooden floors in the attic . . . Hot water was very scarce and at times non-existent. It was very difficult removing soil, sweat and general grubbiness with cold water at the end of a day working in the fields. However there were many good memories. We had great fun there. (p. 40)

The school log for St Edmund’s College, Liverpool records the following:

July 18th: Miss Wilson will take girls from LVI and VI to Stonehouse near Worcester for fruit picking.
1942: Girls will begin pea picking at Wheathill Farm July 23rd to 27th.
1942: October 26th–30th: School closed for girls to help in potato picking (at Ranford and Altcar).
1943: Sept 27th: Party of girls began potato picking at Formby. Other parties to Formby and Melling. No girl to miss more than 20 sessions.
1944: October: Lots of potato picking – Formby and Melling. (p. 90)

And the school history also contains reminiscences from former pupils:

I remember volunteers were needed for two weeks potato picking at Formby. Trying to pretend that we were helping with the war effort, my friends and I volunteered our services; had we been more honest, perhaps the thought of two weeks holiday was more compelling – but we would live to regret the rash decision! It turned out to be two weeks of sheer misery – up and out at 7a.m. – icy
cold hands trying to pick potatoes – gloves became soggy and heavy as the day drew on. However, it was an experience to remember. How could I ever forget aching joints, back pain, frozen red hands! (M. Phillips, pp. 97–8)

M.J. Moody, a member of the party that went fruit picking in the summer of 1941, recalled:

I loved the peace and quiet of the countryside after the nerve-racking nights we had been through. We picked blackcurrants, loganberries and the raspberries which were the last to ripen. At the end of the day our crop was weighed individually and we were paid so much per pound. I earned enough for my keep for the month, to pay back my train fare to my mum and to buy myself a second-hand bicycle which was my pride and joy. (p. 98)

One of our interviewees, Roger Sawtell, born in 1927, recalls a harvest camp:

We lived in tents – it was lovely, I’d never been camping before. At nine o’clock lorries used to arrive to take us round to the local farms. We did the stooking . . . we did that day after day. And sometimes we went to the canning factory – I remember they were canning soft fruit. I think we were on a sort of conveyor belt, sorting out plums, throwing out the bad ones.

The overall impression from the school histories is that agricultural work was very hard physical work, but fun, and that children enjoyed being out of school. However, there are some negative accounts. For example, Bolton School, in 1941, ran a harvest camp for pea picking:

The Parbold camp was . . . limited to 25 senior boys who were not then involved in public examinations. This was perhaps the first of all War Agricultural camps for schools. It was used for propaganda purposes, and boys found their photos appearing in the most unlikely pages of society magazines. (pp. 214–15)

The same school recorded illness during the camp, and three boys contracted polio. ‘Most tragically, J.C. Davies died. He was one of the most promising of his generation’ (p. 215).
The school history for Shrewsbury, a private boys’ school, regretted that the national mood was turning away from honoured and honourable traditions:

In comparing the number of boys who volunteered for farming in term and holidays with those of the previous war, it is only fair to the latter to remember that their service had been purely altruistic, and the boys received nothing for it, while in the Second War the principle was accepted that the labourer was worthy of his hire, and the boys combined the virtue of doing useful work with the advantage of a pleasant addition to their incomes. No doubt it was necessary as part of a nationwide movement away from the principle of unpaid service that had long been the pride of ex-public school men in public life. (p. 214)

However, published in the Bishop’s Stortford College magazine in 1942 is a boy’s poem (pp. 127–8) that provides a critique of such rhetoric by encapsulating the exhilarating, exhausting experience of potato picking:

All the morning, gasping, bending
In the furrows all are seeking,
From the earth the taters grasping:
By midday their backs are breaking.
For an hour midst hay reclining,
Eating, they forget their troubles;
But when they have finished chewing
They must pick up more – Potatoes.
Still the pains of toil enduring
Worked the aching band of heroes:
Where they turned their wide eyes, straining,
All they saw were more – Potatoes.
Now the day of toil is ended:
Wearily to bikes they stagger,
Shoulders o’er their cycles bended,
Plod towards the School back yonder.
Joyful, seated on the saddle,
They forget the dread Potato
Strength returning, pedal faster,
(One bright lad crashed by the wayside).
Finally beneath the showers
Scraping mud from dirty elbows,
They forget the bending hours
During which they picked – Potatoes.

And the author’s verdict: it was ‘a holiday with pay, in which there was never a dull moment’ (p. 128).

All this evidence suggests that children from all kinds of schools were involved in a range of agricultural tasks in organised camps, but the one that seems to have absorbed copious hours of effort and was understood by commentators as an important contribution to the war effort was potato harvesting. The accounts reflect a range of experiences – children appear to have felt that they were making a contribution, but the work could be physically very demanding and living conditions were basic and uncomfortable. In some cases, the experience was positive when contrasted to living in urban areas that were the target of bombing raids.

Helping on local farms during school terms and holidays

Less systematically documented, because it was more informal, was schoolchildren’s help on local farms. While the school harvest camps were well organised and would not have drawn on the labour of under-age children, it is likely that on local farms the under-12s (12 was the minimum age for work) were involved. Keith Murray acknowledges that ‘there were countless children who helped, particularly with potato lifting, from their own homes’ (Murray, 1955: 209).

Several of our interviewees, including some who were under 12 at the time, describe working on local farms. Rose Pockney recounted a week’s work in 1942, when she was 10. The village school was closed for a week so that the children could do ‘tattie picking’. They were told to report to the farm in boots and gabardine. She recalls, ‘The tractor went round and round the field and turned over the plants and we had to pick up as many potatoes as we could before the tractor came past again.’ She got 19 shillings for five or six days’ work, and felt hard done by – ‘I was a mercenary little girl and I wanted the money.’

One of our interviewees, aged 11 in 1939, growing up on a farm, noted that much work had to be done by hand:

I helped with the harvesting. There was no machinery then. You had to go and help, and you’d do most of it by hand. And rake, there was a special rake for turning hay, and gathering it up into one
heap. It was really hard work . . . That was our life and that was it. I did the hoeing of swedes and things like that. Everything was done with hoes. It was in 1947 when we had our first tractor. There were no tractors anywhere. It was very rare that you would see a tractor.

John Balsdon, born in 1928, grew up near Sidcup, in Kent, about a mile from the local farm where he worked during the summer holidays of 1941 and 1942 when he was 13 and 14 years old. He provides a description of stooking:

I would start when the cereal crop harvesting began. A tractor towing a cutter left the crop on the ground. Several workers (usually farm-workers’ wives) would gather armfuls and bind them into sheaves with a stalk twist. My first job was to gather up sheaves and form them into cone-shaped stooks. This allowed any moisture to dry out. Those sheaves were then pitch-forked on to either a horse-drawn cart or a small open lorry. I did this work and then graduated on to being a stacker on the cart or lorry. The loads were taken off to a temporary store until the harvest was complete and then a steam engine towing a mobile threshing machine would arrive . . . The thresher was belt-driven from the steam engine’s flywheel . . . Feeding sheaves into the thresher was hard work. All the work was hot and quite tiring, but not exhausting.

John describes how he stayed on after the harvest:

[I was] in the charge of an old wizened Romany farm-worker who lived in one of the farm cottages. He taught me how to harness up a farm horse for towing a brake [rather like a small plough] which I would then guide down between endless rows of various brassicas. This was easier work than harvesting but rather lonely after the companionship in the harvest field. I remember leaving at the end of one week . . . for I had put in some extra time, and was gleefully clutching 8 shillings.

Peter Rivière, born in 1934, recalls agricultural activities while at prep school ‘pulling up ragwort . . . I remember the whole school used to have afternoons in the summer, when we all turned out, to the local farm and pulled ragwort – out of grazing fields.’

Some of the school histories provide evidence of rural children helping local farmers during the war, but this had been a widespread
practice anyway, as noted in Chapter 3. For example, the history of Great Rissington School (elementary), Gloucestershire, describes how

[t]he pattern of school holidays was changed in 1942 to allow older children to help out on local farms. The school was closed for a special period of two weeks at the beginning of August, and again for three weeks at the beginning of October for potato picking. This pattern continued for the rest of the war and is reminiscent of the 19th century when harvest time determined the start and finish of the school holidays. (p. 89)

At the same school, Rupert Duester recalls potato picking at Barrington Park:

The children had to pick up the potatoes and put them in sacks or buckets which were then loaded on to a horse-drawn cart. It was hard work and ‘certainly no picnic’, though they enjoyed being out of school. They had to work quickly, filling the buckets and getting out of the way before a machine came round to dig up the next row. Italian prisoners of war from the prison camp at Northleach also assisted with potato picking in this area. (ibid.)

Charlie Pratley, who left Great Rissington elementary school at the age of 14 in 1944, remembers being allowed out of school when he was 13 to help in the fields with various tasks including stone picking prior to haymaking, dock pulling in the wheat fields and mangel pulling (for cattle food in winter).

At Merton Court School, a private preparatory school, some boys were evacuated to the village of Butleigh, near Glastonbury, in Somerset. John Waters recalled how he and his fellow evacuee were

very happy at the farm and lived with the farmer and his wife as if we were their children. We had our meals with them, and helped with the bread, butter and cider making. Our great friend on the farm was Jack, the farm labourer who, at that time was 19 years old. We helped Jack with rounding up the cows and hand milking them, hay making and riding the cart horses to and from the farm to the fields. (p. 103)

John’s map of the farm indicates his close knowledge of the farm and its work (see Figure 6.2).
It is difficult to estimate how many children were involved in agricultural work, but some school histories do give an idea of extent. For example, at the Royal Grammar School, Worcester, it was noted that another service actively undertaken by boys was the driving of tractors on farms. 28 boys were trained for this. Three-quarters of the School helped on farms during the summer holidays, and boys were also given leave of absence for the purpose, during term-time, ‘when vitally necessary’. (p. 245)

Another kind of work was collecting herbs. According to the Scouter magazine (May 1942: 73), the Ministry of Supply asked people to collect
medicinal plants – and in 1941 about ten tons were collected, mostly by Scouts, Guides, Women’s Institutes and schools – see Figure 6.3, first published in Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News (1942b). The caption that appeared with it read, ‘LAYING OUT HERBS in the drying-shed, which is the old boiler-house, and was converted by the children themselves. All this extra work was done out of school hours.’

![Figure 6.3: Laying out herbs. Source: Mary Evans Picture Library](image)

The school history of St Clare, Penzance describes a more unusual crop:

25th July 1944: seniors picked seaweed for the Ministry of Supply – For what purpose? There was a second expedition moreover, this time to Marazion, on 10th–11th July 1945. It has now been discovered that the girls were probably picking a type of red seaweed called Gigartina Stellata from which was obtained a gel-like substance, agar (extract from Rhodophycean Algae), that was used as a medium in the culture of bacteria. The normal supply from Japan would not have been possible in 1944–45, and it is probable that the gel was required by the Government for use in the early days of penicillin production. (p. 44)

Sadie Ward, social historian of war in the countryside, notes the usefulness of children because they were a flexible, readily available
source of labour: she claims that ‘[t]he young excelled at the really back-breaking jobs, such as potato-picking and pea-pulling, at which they were invaluable during “catchy” [changeable] weather when speed was of the essence’ (Ward, 1988: 49).

Colin Dibb (aged nearly 11 in September 1939) sent us a written account of his memories. He grew up on a 50-acre (20-hectare) farm in Lancashire. Milk production was the main enterprise, until the WAEC instructed his father to plough up 10 acres (4 hectares) and plant cereals. They also grew some vegetables to sell. One of Colin’s main jobs was the milk round (from the age of 6, with his father, and later on his own):

In the summer of 1943, when I was fourteen, father was seriously ill for about one month with septicaemia. Fortunately I was on summer holiday and was the only one who knew the milk round (except for the horse!) So, I set off at 9 a.m. every morning with the horse and milk float and delivered the milk, returning about 1 p.m. I had no mishaps of any sort and, on Saturdays, collected the weekly money. Looking back, it was a big responsibility, but I do not remember my parents worrying about me – this was what sons were raised for.

He also had to collect the ration coupons for the milk. He was not paid for this work, but got some ‘tips’ from customers. His second main job was milking the cows, by hand, twice every day of the year. ‘I started pre-war when I was seven and continued through the war and after until I left in October 1946 for university.’ Thirdly, he took part in haymaking – this involved cutting the hay, turning it the next day and spreading it out till it dried. Then it was gathered in rows across the field, and if rain threatened it was made into ‘little foot cocks,’ which was a very skilled process at which I was very good, using a hand fork with two tines to create a cock which would shed the rain’. Then he would lead the horse and wagon, loaded with hay, to the barn to be stacked. ‘When father was ill, the farm man and I, with some casual help, successfully completed the hay harvest.’ Fourthly, Colin worked on the oat harvest, stooking the oat sheaves, which then had to stand in the field for at least two weeks – ‘to hear the church bells twice’ – while the sheaves ‘fed out’ and matured, before being stacked. These are only brief excerpts from a detailed account, which shows how farming families expected sons to work for the family business, and in wartime there was extra work in cereal production and vegetable cultivation to be done. Colin combined all this
with academic schoolwork – having passed the scholarship to grammar school in 1939.

**How was the work evaluated?**

This section examines how children’s contributions were evaluated by commentators at the time, including farmers, trades unionists and children themselves.

**The government/official view**

In the official history of agriculture in the Second World War, the agricultural economist Keith Murray discussed manpower during each year of the war and recognised children’s contribution, particularly to potato picking. Since 1939, ‘the potato crop had increased by almost 1,500,000 tons, or 31%: such a crop could not have been harvested successfully without the very special efforts and the use of schoolchildren and volunteers’ (Murray, 1955: 102). Murray suggests that ‘Schoolboy [sic] camps had been phenomenally successful . . . rates of payment were raised and the Ministry of Agriculture undertook to help with rents, railway fares, and the salaries of camp organisers’ (ibid.: 159).

Contributors to *Agriculture*, the official journal of the Ministry of Agriculture, certainly acknowledged schoolchildren’s contributions. In a piece entitled ‘Leicestershire schoolchildren help the farmers’, it was claimed that

> [s]o great was the help given to Leicestershire farmers during 1941 by school teachers and schoolchildren in both city and county, that it was freely admitted by the War Agricultural Executive Committee and the National Farmers' Union that without it the potato crop of the country would never have been gathered. (Measures, 1943: 84)

Boys and girls harvested potatoes, though girls were paid slightly less per hour than boys. The opinion was that ‘they were not so mischievous as boys and were more conscientious. In most instances, however, farmers did actually pay the girls at the same rate as the boys; some even went so far as to make bonus payments’ (ibid.). The author comments:

> The city children apparently enjoyed the work. Viewed against the background of the U-boat menace and the need to release every
available ton of shipping to carry [sic] the war against the enemy, the harvest this year will be even more crucial than it was in 1942. Every man, woman and child that can be spared will be required to cooperate with our farmers to ensure that there is no disparity between the yield and the harvest. (Measures, 1943: 84)

Children’s agricultural work also featured in propaganda material, such as a Ministry of Information booklet (1945) about agriculture published ‘to inform people about the progress of the war and the home-defence operations’, and as a ‘tribute to those who had contributed to the war effort at home’:

Schoolchildren gave great help everywhere. Those from the country were used to seasonal work on the land. But great numbers came from the town and city too, from public and council schools alike – boys and girls to whom the produce of the farm had never been much more than items on a shopping list. It was a great adventure for them; they came in loud, excited groups, bursting with curiosity for the new world . . . They helped with every kind of job: the boys potato planting and lifting, tractor-driving, harvesting, flax pulling, root-hoeing and singling; the girls potato-planting and lifting too, weeding, pea-picking, fruit picking, flax pulling – their neat swift fingers unrivalled at such labour.

Surrounded by the clamour of war, they appreciated very well the reality of what they were doing; they knew their work was important and, of course, they were being paid for it.

There was never enough labour . . . Harvesting, suddenly, became everybody's business. (Measures, 1943: 91–3)

In official statistics, there is brief acknowledgement of children’s ‘assistance’. As noted, statistics do not include children, but the text does recognise their contribution – alongside that of the Women’s Land Army:

An extremely important part in the food production programme has been played by the Women’s Land Army . . . In addition, farmers have been assisted by schoolchildren and adult volunteers who have spent their holidays on the land (Statistics Related to the War Effort of the UK, 1943–44. Cmd.6564 viii 597: 17).
The role of evacuees was also recognised. A Ministry of Information pamphlet described the situation of evacuees, and the ‘benefits’ of evacuation, to the children concerned. The pamphlet contains photographs of children ‘helping on the land’:

It is true to say that practically all the children have improved in physique, general health, poise and bearing during their stay in the country . . . [There,] children can get fun from very different things – fishing, rambling, cross-country running – but especially from helping in the many and varied jobs on the farm or in the garden. In their spare time children have learned to feed the poultry, to keep the runs and houses clean . . . They seem particularly to have taken to looking after animals – calves and pigs – and many have become expert milkers. Boys have often developed into experienced helpers on the land, learning how to use their tools and to guide simple machinery with practised skill; while some of the girls have become quite proficient milkmaids and dairy maids. (Ministry of Information, 1941: 10)

Documents such as this refer to children ‘learning’ and ‘helping’, but the evidence suggests they were doing valuable productive work. As Murray notes, ‘[i]t is unfortunate that complete statistics are not available to show the immense contribution made by volunteer workers to the successful collection of the great crops in 1942 and 1943’ (Murray, 1955: 209). He adds, ‘it would have been impossible to plant and lift over 1 million acres of potatoes if children had not been permitted and willing to assist in the busy period before 1944 when prisoner of war labour became relatively plentiful’ (ibid.: 58). Thus, in 1943, when it was clear that many children would be needed to help with the harvest, again the Board of Education issued a circular appealing for the cooperation of the local authorities: ‘This appeal is made on behalf of the government as a whole, and the purpose is not to help farmers to make profits but to safeguard the country’s food supply’ (TES, 27 February 1943). The Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries appealed directly to schoolchildren, asking them to see it as their duty to take part in agricultural work:

This may mean surrendering some of your leisure and recreation time, and engaging in what in many instances will prove to be long, hard and wearisome tasks, but the service you will give will be a direct contribution to the winning of the war. (TES, 10 April 1943)
And a 1944 Board of Education memo asking for help with the harvest included an appeal from the Minister of Agriculture:

This year the military situation will demand a supreme effort. The cultivation and harvesting of crops will be carried out in even more difficult conditions than last year . . . There will again be a heavy demand for potato planting and lifting, and in certain districts for root hoeing and other important work in term-time. (TES, 25 March 1944)

A further circular modified the conditions under which children were employed in agricultural work: ‘a child shall not be employed in any agricultural work involving heavy strain, and in particular shall not be employed in extracting sugar beet crops from the ground’ and ‘no child shall be employed in any agricultural work under the control of a gangmaster as defined by the Agricultural Gangs Act 1867’ (TES, 8 April 1944). In 1944, a Home Office circular called for the ending, as soon as possible, of the Defence Regulation that allowed exemption from school attendance – subject to conditions – for employment in seasonal agricultural work. ‘The circular asks for observations and comments regarding the effect of employment on health, education, character, and aptitude, as well as suggestions concerning further prohibitions or restrictions which seem desirable’ (TES, 1 July 1944). This circular reflects an attempt to balance exhortation to children to continue to do farm work against wishing to protect them from exploitation and injury.

Educationalists’ views – the TES

At the start of the war, the TES was wary about the engagement of children in agricultural work. An early leader article, entitled ‘Lessons of 1916’, complained that

[c]hildren are again allowed to take employment at 14, and in East Anglia a local education authority has found it inevitable that children of 12 should be allowed to help in agriculture, in spite of the offer of troops, the training of the Women’s Land Army, and the existence of several hundreds of thousands of able-bodied unemployed. Within a month of the outbreak of war the symptoms which caused such alarm in 1916 have shown themselves. (TES, 7 October 1939)
However, by 1942, a TES article by ‘a correspondent’ examined children’s agricultural work in some detail, and expressed some of the dilemmas of the time:

The Defence Regulations 29 and 30 have reversed the educational policy of a century. Children may become half-timers once again, even if only for limited periods, with all the educational disadvantages that this entails. Yet the employment of children, apart from its economic value, has at least one good thing to be said for it. The nation is in danger. The call goes forth to the entire population. Even children are not omitted. They are part of society. If they are not asked and encouraged to contribute their mite to the total effort, they feel useless and unwanted in the middle of a battle they see going on all around them, and out of such impotence social neuroses are born. It is better, surely, that children should be worked a little too hard in war than they should feel socially neglected. A child brought into the war effort is better than a child brought into the juvenile court. There is not much doubt that children like farm work, it gives them status and feeds their pride. They are glad to join the wage earners and happy to feel the bonds of school loosened. (TES, 15 August 1942)

The author then suggests that the law should be better enforced and that notices could be posted (‘in non-legal language’) in villages about the regulations surrounding the conditions of employment of children. He asks, ‘Notices are exhibited where the protection of wild birds is necessary – why not therefore for the protection of children?’

Farmers’ views

There is evidence that farmers were initially sceptical about employing schoolchildren, as they had been about taking on women. According to Ward (1988: 19):

While many farmers were pleased by the willingness of their young helpers, there were inevitably complaints. One farmer telephoned the Labour Committee to protest that a master in charge of a camp had refused to allow his boys to spread sludge, while another grumbled that the four lads who had been working on his farm had been ‘larking about’. Even so, the experiment worked well enough to be repeated in later years.
Ward notes that farmers had been wary of schoolgirls’ labour (their scepticism of the Women’s Land Army is well known), but again their views shifted. According to a Lancashire farmer, Mr Heyes of Bickerstaffe, ‘we farmers have said all sorts of things about unskilled labour, but the way some of these dainty High School girls have tackled the job out in the fields, seven and eight hours a day, has fair capped me’ (Ward, 1988: 49–50).

A.G. Street, a Wiltshire farmer, wrote a regular column in the Farmers Weekly.7 His views on casual labour also shifted over the course of the war. On 7 August 1940, he noted a good supply of teenage casual unskilled labour for harvesting: ‘Too many boys are more hindrance than help, and six boys are as many as we can handle efficiently on this farm’ (Street, 1943: 87). A year later, he noted,

All last week my harvest field was inhabited by soldiers, nurses, schoolgirls and schoolboys, most of whom had never before stooked one sheaf. In spite of the fact that a large proportion of the wheat sheaves were awkward and bowzy, after a little practice these new hands did far better than I expected. (Street, 1943: 187)

By 1942, Street was describing ‘rural camps for schoolboys’ as ‘admirable’ (p. 283). Dent (1944a: 120) also noted that despite initial suspicions, many farmers

are loud in their praise for the boys and girls who have worked for them, and it is not unusual for a farmer to ‘book’ a party from the same school for the following year. Some schools have indeed returned each year since 1940 to the same site.

The trades unions’ view

Throughout the war, the TUC frequently raised concerns about the use of child labour in agriculture, though it was generally acquiescent (Griggs, 2002: 185). For example, the General Council of the TUC was critical of the Board of Education’s proposal that children should visit farms during term time to help with planting and lifting potatoes, and suggested that they should be engaged only in ‘light work’ with a maximum of four hours’ work a day for 12–14-year-olds – thus accepting that the work was inevitable, and needed to be regulated (TUC, 1941). On the other hand, in 1942, E.G. Gooch,7 President of the National Union of Agricultural
Workers, responded to new Board of Education regulations freeing more older children to work the land during term time by arguing that the place of children under 14 was at school or play. Farming had not yet reached the stage when its salvation depended upon the labours of the workers' young children. (TES, 16 May 1942. See also Moore-Colyer, 2004: 191)

Thus, there were wide-ranging views, and some changed over time as it was pragmatically accepted that children could, should and would contribute their labour in agricultural production. While it is unlikely that, during the war, the TES or anyone else would publish tales of appalling hardship and exploitation of child workers in agricultural labour, children did give negative, as well as positive, accounts. But many people (recorded in school histories and reminiscences) claimed that children ‘loved farm work’. Whenever the subject of their agricultural employment came up in the House of Commons, someone eagerly pointed out that ‘children regard it as a pleasure’, that it was a ‘very healthy education’ or that ‘children love working on farms’. Kenneth Lindsay, Secretary of the Board of Education, argued in the House that ‘the Board are strongly in favour of giving every opportunity to schoolchildren over the age of 14 in evacuation areas to enter rural life’ (Hansard HC Vol. 351, 19 October 1939). Mr Butler, President of the Board of Education, gave a revealing reply to a question about ‘the acceptability of child labour’:

The Right Hon. Baronet gives a rather sinister implication to what is a perfectly normal war-time occupation for children. I think when he reflects upon the trouble taken by the Government to ensure that conditions are satisfactory, he will not feel so disturbed about it. (Hansard HC Vol. 379, 7 May 1942)

Health and harm in agricultural work

In June 1943, the Board of Education set up a compensation scheme for injuries sustained by children aged 12–14 employed in agriculture. Dent (1944a: 118–19) notes that during their hours of employment in agriculture, campers would in the ordinary course of events be protected by statute and common law in the event of accidents. But it was felt to be essential that children should be insured against all kinds
of accidents at all times. Later commentators, looking back, were more likely than contemporary ones to note the damaging effects of children’s involvement in agricultural work. Peter Gosden (1976: 81), discussing children’s contributions to the war effort, suggests that

there were circumstances in which they could retard children’s education . . . the employment of schoolchildren by farmers in some of the eastern counties certainly damaged the elementary school system in those areas and set back the education of many of the older children – even though it may have helped the agricultural war effort.

Gosden suggests that there was ‘plenty of evidence that children below the minimum age of 12 were being employed’ (ibid.: 84). However, he argues that on balance the employment of children was justified:

If children had not been allowed to help with potato lifting and if a food shortage had developed, the effects on the whole community, including the child population, could have been very damaging. (Gosden 1976: 84)

Children’s evaluations of agricultural work

One kind of comment by children was that they learned from their agricultural work. According to the history of Westminster City School, evacuated to Kent:

[O]ver the years the boys picked plums, apples, loganberries and damsons, kept rooks away from crops, helped with the harvest, pulled up and cut down weeds, gathered vegetables, and in a few cases helped with hop picking . . . at the end of the day, and certainly at the end of the week, many boys had cultivated a healthy respect for those who worked on farms in all weathers. (p. 73)

Evacuees to rural areas also recorded life there as learning; one woman recalls her billet in Sussex: ‘I learned how to pluck geese and to live like a farm child . . . I really got my education there. I learned about flowers and wildlife generally’ (Wicks, 1988: 89). Alun Howkins, in his social history of rural England, draws on Mass Observation archive material11 and relates the observations of Emily Baker, a Sussex schoolteacher,
who suggested that ‘many [evacuees] clearly enjoyed the change, like the 10-year-old girl from Greenwich who a week after evacuation was helping to drive cattle, turning out cows to the manner born’.12

In an article in the TES about children’s involvement in harvesting, ‘a correspondent’ gives examples of ‘what children think’ – they liked, for instance, earning money:

Many boys in the village brought home £2 in the first week. The second week of the holiday earnings dropped off because the temperature suddenly soared and the children felt the heat badly in the shadeless fields . . . All this work is piece work, and the amount a boy earned depended on his strength and patience . . . No farmer or boy who had heard of the limit of 36 hours, or even on any one day, imagined it applied to the holidays. Often schoolboys were bringing home larger wage packets than boys over 14 who were permanently employed. More than one small boy boasted to me that he was earning more than a soldier. (TES, 15 August 1942)

There is also evidence that close working relationships developed between children and adults – not only with the teachers who organised the camps and accompanied the children and worked alongside them but also with other agricultural workers and the farmers themselves. For example, the history of Repton, a private boys’ school, reports:

The series of Harvest Camps began with the camp at Brockhampton, Hereford, on a truly magnificent site, in an area where the farmers were for the most part very pleasant to work with – in fact, friendships formed have lasted long after the camps were over – and where really useful work could be done. The cooperation between Staff and boys reached its height in these enterprises. (p. 129)

Dent (1944a: 119) also emphasised benefits for children’s relationships with other workers:

Of the pleasure and satisfaction felt by the campers, and the benefits they have derived from the vigorous work in the open air, there can be no doubt; and among the happiest camps in 1942 were those in which school boys and girls worked alongside young people released from shops and factories by their employers.
Discussion

As many of the above quotations indicate, it seems that adult views about children as agricultural workers changed during the war. Initial fears and scepticism were modified through the impacts of children's agency and their demonstrated willingness, competence and usefulness. We argue that children changed adult understandings of children. Moore-Colyer concludes, ‘in a very British sort of fashion, common sense prevailed in the pursuit of the common good. One way or another the wartime cereal and potato harvests were gathered in, much of the effort being contributed by people with little previous contact with the land’ (Moore-Colyer, 2004: 206). This ‘British’ behaviour is presumably thought to build on a flexible approach to what is proper and on appropriate responses to the immediate crisis, while eschewing the system under fascism of forcing young people to take part. The crisis could, in effect, set aside pre-war recommendations on protecting children from hard physical work (e.g. the Spens Report, see Chapter 4). At the same time, it is important not to present an overly urban bias to this story. Children who grew up on farms were very likely to have done agricultural work as a matter of course, especially given the low level of mechanisation and high levels of labour needed at peak times of the year.

During the war years and beyond, children’s contributions were clearly necessary for agricultural production. One can speculate, drawing on people’s reminiscences, about the effect that this had on their experiences. Did they feel that they belonged to a greater mass – and, moreover, were a vital part of that greater mass? Perhaps by participating in wartime food production, not just for their families but (as propaganda frequently proposed) for the sake of the whole country, they felt a sense of belonging and satisfaction from their work. Our interviewees suggest that what they did was largely typical – part of the life of children at the time. What was new in wartime was the scale of children’s involvement, the involvement of privately educated children and the highly organised participation of children from urban areas – in hard physical labour in school harvest camps, and in a collective effort. The work that they undertook was clearly important to the survival of the nation but this vision of children as workers clearly conflicted with the nascent ideas that their proper place was in school, as learners. In structural terms, one could argue that they constituted a reserve army of labour, in the classic Marxist sense, for the purposes of gathering in wartime harvests.
Notes

1 Stooking is the arranging of sheaves of corn ready for threshing.
2 Thistle-spudding involves pulling out thistles, and excavating the root with a ‘spudder’.
3 While school histories might be thought likely to be overly positive about schools’ and children’s achievements, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that schools, or the authors of the school histories, were realistic in their assessments.
4 Drawn mostly from the farming press, especially the Farmers Weekly and the Farmer & Stock Breeder.
5 Foot-cocking involves making little mounds of hay that shed rainfall.
6 Street’s articles are collected in his 1943 book, Hitler’s Whistle.
7 E.G. Gooch was the Chair of the Norfolk WAEC, and continuously and vociferously opposed the involvement of children in agricultural work. Thanks to Professor Brian Short (University of Sussex: pers. comm.) for pointing this out to us.
8 Major General Sir Alfred Knox, Hansard HC Vol. 351, 19 October 1939.
9 Vice-Admiral Taylor, ibid.
11 The Mass Observation project began in 1937, and aimed to record everyday life in Britain through a panel of around 500 untrained volunteer observers who either maintained diaries or replied to open-ended questionnaires. See: www.massobs.org.uk