



British Farmers and War Effort

THE author of this article, Mr. G. A. Holmes, was leader of the group of New Zealand agriculturists loaned to the British Government to assist agricultural production in Great Britain during the war. He comments interestingly on the British farmers' wartime production effort.

WHEN Britain stood alone after the collapse of France in June, 1940, with Europe and a large part of North Africa occupied by the enemy, her shipping appeared an uncertain lifeline, menaced both from the air and from beneath the sea. Yet on this she depended for her imports of food, raw materials, and munitions. The strategy first of a defensive struggle, and then of widely extended and mounting offensive operations, was at all times viewed in relation to the availability of shipping. Agricultural policy was formulated so as to produce at home the maximum volume of food for direct human consumption.

By 1943 the increased production from the land, coupled with the rationing system, had made it possible to reduce imports of food by 50 per cent. Nearly 7 million acres of old grassland had been ploughed up for grain, potatoes, sugar beet, flax, and vegetables, while additional forage crops had to be grown to offset the sharp curtailment in imports of animal feeding-stuffs.

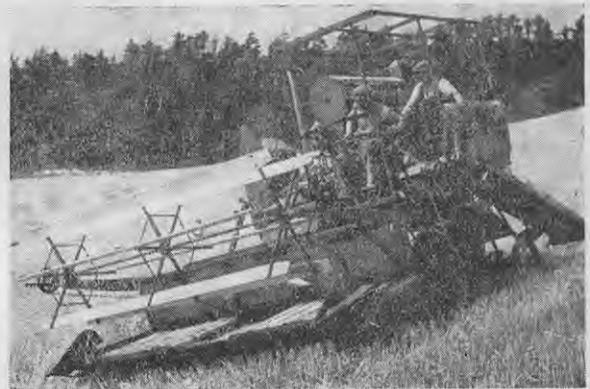
Under the Defence Regulations sweeping powers were vested in the Minister of Agriculture authorising him to give directions as to the use of land, its cultivation and management, and in all matters incidental to such operations. These powers were delegated to County War Agricultural Executive Committees, comprised mainly of practical farmers with lengthy experience of local conditions, who gave their time voluntarily in the national interest. Their policy throughout was to secure the willing co-operation of the farmer, and there were relatively few cases where prosecution or dispossession became necessary.

In some counties the task of securing the ploughing quota must have appeared in 1939 as a most formidable one. A great deal of the land had been allowed to become almost derelict, and had reverted to a tough, matted turf of fine-leaved fescue and weeds dotted with thorn bushes or clumps of blackberry. Hedges were overgrown, encroaching a chain or more into the fields. Many fields were useless for cultivation until the ditches had been cleared and re-dug. Many farmers had "kept cows" by running them on this poor grassland, and feeding them

heavily on purchased concentrates; they had neither a tractor nor a plough, nor sufficient area to warrant the purchase of either. On such holdings the War Committees were obliged to do all the cultivation, and perhaps the harvesting also, by contract. The low value of the old grassland is perhaps best indicated by the fact that, in spite of the ploughing up of more than one third of it, the numbers of cattle have actually been increased, as also has the production of milk.

Grain Crops

The area in wheat in 1943 was nearly $3\frac{1}{2}$ million acres, more than double the average of the three years prior to 1939, and the highest recorded since the "Golden Age" of British farming in the early seventies of last century. The total acreage sown to grain reached more than $9\frac{1}{2}$ million acres, the highest figure ever recorded. Barley is frequently grown following wheat, and is the most profitable grain crop on the light, sweet land overlying chalk. Oats is the only suitable cereal for a great deal of the cooler and wetter country of Wales, the North of England, and Scotland. Ryecorn, although never popular with British people as an ingredient of bread, provided a means of extending the cereal acreage by utilising sand or clay soils too acid for wheat.



This self-propelled combine harvester on a Hampshire farm illustrates British agriculturists' adoption of new labour-saving methods and increased use of machinery.