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A Farmer's Life

George Sturt (1863–1927) was a British wheelwright and writer who usually wrote under the pen-name George Bourne. A native of Surrey, he inherited his father's workshop in the rural village of the Bourne, near Farnborough in 1894. He began to record the daily lives and recollections of his rural family and acquaintances, which he published towards the end of his life. First published in 1922, this volume contains Sturt's unique biography of his uncle, farmer John Smith. Sturt bases his account of his uncle's life around Smith's anecdotes and recollections as recounted to him during the last years of Smith's life. This unusual structure provides a lively, intimate account of the life of a farmer in rural England during the nineteenth century. Through Smith's recollections and Sturt's own memories, Sturt sensitively describes the domestic life, work and farming methods of a now vanished way of life.

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[More information](#)

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

A Farmer's Life

With a Memoir of the Farmer's Sister

GEORGE STURT



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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

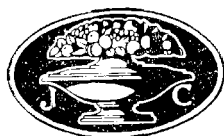


COLEFORD FARM

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George Sturt
Frontmatter
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A FARMER'S LIFE
WITH A MEMOIR OF THE FARMER'S SISTER
BY GEORGE BOURNE
THE ILLUSTRATIONS CUT ON
THE WOOD BY STEPHEN BONE



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By the same Author

THE BETTESWORTH BOOK

MEMOIRS OF A SURREY LABOURER

THE ASCENDING EFFORT

CHANGE IN THE VILLAGE

LUCY BETTESWORTH

WILLIAM SMITH, POTTER AND FARMER

First published 1922

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Chap.</i>		<i>Page</i>
1.	<i>Welsh Cattle</i>	17
2.	<i>Dog-Traction</i>	23
3.	<i>The Country Flavour</i>	30
4.	<i>Tramps</i>	39
5.	<i>“Smith”</i>	44
6.	<i>Surface Water</i>	50
7.	<i>Obstinacy</i>	58
8.	<i>Oddities</i>	62
9.	<i>Farnborough Recalled</i>	70
10.	<i>Two Harvesters</i>	75
11.	<i>The Bachelors</i>	84
12.	<i>At the Farm</i>	93
13.	<i>Chiefly Thatching</i>	102
14.	<i>Retiring</i>	109
15.	<i>Retirement</i>	115

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Chap.</i>	<i>Page</i>
16. <i>Mr. Smith's Chatter</i>	121
17. <i>More Chatter</i>	131
18. <i>Ebbing Powers</i>	138
19. <i>A Rally. 1: Mr. Smith's Manner</i>	142
20. <i>A Rally. 2: Conversation</i>	148
21. <i>Collapse</i>	160
22. <i>Souvenirs</i>	166
<i>Ann Smith</i>	177
<i>Appendix</i>	202

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

List of Illustrations

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Coleford Farm</i>	<i>Frontispiece</i>
<i>“Tumbledown Dick”</i>	27
<i>Canal</i>	35
<i>Road</i>	53
<i>Old Farm</i>	79
<i>Interior of Cow-sheds</i>	97

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

THE details in the main part of this book—namely, in the first part, relating to my uncle John Smith—are derived from notes or memories of my own close intimacy with him, when he was getting on in years. I saw him often; and in him, others assured me, I might see what earlier generations of our family had been like. Yet, much as he may have resembled his forefathers, he had his own individuality; by which I mean that he was always sincere with himself. If he fancied he liked anything his father and mother had liked, it had to win his own approval too, or it had no chance with him. Probably even this was an hereditary trait; probably he was in nothing so much like his father as in a certain unbending attitude in which, with all his amiability, he never departed from the convictions he had proved, the behaviour he had adopted, for himself.

And being thus faithful to his own views, which presumably were those of his childhood, traditional in his ancestry, John Smith was, it

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

seems to me, truly representative of a type once very important in England's life: the type that kept the country steady during all the upheavals of the last hundred and fifty years. Modern science is at last dislodging even English farmers, perhaps; yet there is good ground for expecting that the national temper will presently strengthen itself in modern science and make more John Smiths.

Similar conclusions have been reached in another way. During the completion of these chapters a notable change came over my attitude towards their subject. For whereas, at the start, it seemed that they were justified by something exceptional in John Smith, on the other hand, before the end was reached I realised that the exceptional thing was my intimacy with such a man, allowing me to see a little inside him, rather than in any great difference between him and his fellows. I knew him better than I knew them—that was all. In the course of many years I must have met dozens of men who would have been as good to know, if only I had happened to be equally well acquainted with them.

This does not at all mean that John Smith was less worthy of attention than I had thought; on the contrary, it makes him seem more and more worthy. Instead of being a rarity he was a type; instead of displaying singular and therefore unim-

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

portant characteristics he was a mirror, a glass, in which ages of England's life could be seen and loved. To know him was to know the sort of man Shakespeare knew, "whose thews were made in England"; and it was a continual enrichment of the whole outlook when, thanks to John Smith, I was more and more able to appreciate the time-honoured sturdy life still going on in every other farm throughout the southern counties. Verily the English were no parvenus! During centuries of silent and good-tempered endeavour just like my uncle's, there had been a give-and-take of character between them and the heaths, them and the pastures and streams and hills and woods and trades. I began to feel (and that was better than knowing intellectually) the meaning of the lanes and hedges, the crops and hamlets. Through long ages men like John Smith had willed to have these things so.

Yet it must nowise be thought that this uncle of mine had no singularities of his own. Of all the farmers I have known he was perhaps the least grasping; not so much because he did not care for money, as because he cared for other things more. His duty to his fields fascinated him. He showed also what seemed to me an excessive zeal for his landlord's interests. So, one way and another, he never made money, never kept his gig; but was respectable in a less

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

showy way. He was no great frequenter of markets; still less of market inns.

The reason for this may have been partly that the customary sociability of markets did not quite suit either his pocket or his taste. His pocket, never too well lined, might very well not have afforded such a hole in it as "treating" must have cost jollier men every week. To many men the markets of Farnham, Alton, Petersfield were a sort of farmers' club, where boon companions were sure to be met and where the gossip of the countryside could be jovially exchanged; where men whose field-life was often solitary could enjoy the company of their equals. Inns did good business; their parlours got crowded with friends smoking, drinking, settling bargains, swopping yarns.

But John Smith, even had he had shillings enough for this sort of pastime, was still a little bit too reserved to like it. He never swore; he never told a "smutty" tale. He would have been slightly out of his element in the ordinary market inn; in short, he was by way of being a trifle straight-laced. Others there were indeed as punctilious; but these others wrapped themselves round in aloof dignity which had an air of pride in it quite foreign to John Smith's manner. His religion was, I should say, more heart-felt than most men's; there was a glow of sincerity

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

in his outlook, conventional though he was in all his views. But at least he never played the superior person.

Yet what a high-minded race they were, if in some cases rather purse-proud—these provincials, of whom Mr. Smith, whatever the poverty of his purse, was essentially one! It is pleasant to think of them—the Simmondses and Mulfords, the Hewetts, the Bakers, the Cranstones, and dozens more—men shrewd sometimes to the point of avarice, yet of unimpeachable integrity. Their word was their bond; they were touchy on a point of honour; in their sunburnt faces, and through their nutty vernacular, the gorgeous English countryside seemed to live and speak, and they were worthy of it.

Such were the countrymen I knew, and such was John Smith in the main features of his character. His very defects were noteworthy, because with the qualities they came from they have such a place in the career of the English. If he was at times over-prudent and always over-anxious; if he never let himself go in company and never was reckless and gay, it was for reasons that had produced Wesleyanism, Quakerism, devout churchman though he was. A sort of instinctive spirituality lurked for him round every corner. He never got on glad, confident terms with it: even in his youth (I surmise) it had

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02525-6 - A Farmer's Life
George Sturt
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

inspired him as with an old man's seriousness. He was not afraid of death but a little timid of life. Somehow, more than most men I fancy, he felt the vast processes of Being going on around him; and they filled him with awe. And this too the English fields have had a trick of producing in country folk here and there, through many generations.