

The First 150 Years of RABI

Part 1

In the build up to our 150th anniversary in 2010 we will be tracing the development of the charity. Where better to start than with the man credited with its foundation?

Like so many of agriculture's pioneers, John Mechi was a first generation farmer who came into the industry without preconceived ideas, treating it as a business rather than a way of life and with a willingness to embrace new concepts. While the more enlightened farmers considered his ideas to be the way forward many regarded him with suspicion.

The fact that he was both the son of an emigrant and had made a fortune in commerce, which enabled him to invest large sums of money into his farming enterprise, did not endear him to traditional farmers struggling to make ends meet. But he was not a man to be deterred by criticism, rather he encouraged his critics to visit the farm, published accounts of what he was doing and travelled the country addressing meetings.

His father, Giacomo, a citizen of Bologna, Italy, was employed in business in France but took refuge in England during the "Reign of Terror" and found employment in the household of George III at Kensington Palace. He married Elizabeth Beyer of Poland Street, London and John was their third son.

After completing his schooling in France, at the age of 16 he became a clerk in the City, working in a mercantile house in the Newfoundland Trade.

At 21 he married Fanny Frost and by 26 he had saved sufficient to set up on his own account as a retail cutler at 130 Leadenhall Street. Three years later, in 1830, he was admitted to the Loriners' Company and became a freeman of the City of London. The same year he moved to larger premises in 4 Leadenhall Street.

Over the next ten years his business supplying scientific instruments, pencils and quill cutting penknives prospered as did his ability to "set and ground razors with more than ordinary skill". But the item which made his name known across the country was his patent 'Mechi's magic razor strop'.

Some accounts suggest that he designed the strop but the two patents registered in his name concerned lighting, so he probably purchased the design. Either way it was the product that made his fortune, enabling him to develop the business and turn his thoughts to farming.

After an intensive study of English farming writers he resolved to practice and publicise improvements in agriculture. To this end, in 1841, he paid £3,250 for 130 acres with a lath and plaster farmhouse known as Sadlers or Bigmores, at Tiptree in Essex.

The land, variously described as "poor marshy land" or "poor clay soil", was in an area where "the poverty stricken grass struggles, in patches, for a precarious existence amongst the monopolizing furzes" and "the few half-starved cattle that search there for a living, walk many a mile ere their cravings are satisfied."

Tiptree Hall, Essex

He demolished the house, replacing it with a 'modest mansion' - renaming it Tiptree Hall - and added new farm buildings designed according to his theories, introducing the idea of keeping cattle of slatted floors. A further 42 acres were added to the farm; old hedges were replaced by new hedgerows, banks and fences; some 300 trees were cut down; and between 80 and 90 miles of drainage was laid.

In the first five years he spent over £13,500 creating a model farm, which was to attract hundreds of visitors each year to demonstrations of new machinery, methods and ideas. His "annual July agricultural show", which included a speech about his ideas and an ample luncheon, became well known. In 1852 it was the subject of a six page report in Charles Dicken's weekly journal Household Works; the following year it featured in the London Illustrated News, which described it as "Mr Mechi's annual lecture and annual feast"; in 1854 it was reported in The Times. By 1856 he was entertaining some 600 people at his annual gathering.

A constant theme of John Mechi's speeches was that the old ideas and time-honoured methods would have to be abandoned if farming was to be made to pay. However, it was many years after his death before his 'meat per acre theories' were accepted and his prediction that ploughing would be done by machine was 60 years ahead of its time.

With the industrial revolution gaining force, he warned that farm labourers would have to be paid more and housing conditions improved to prevent the drift from the land. Something which he certainly practised, housing his own labourers in neat, red bricked cottages and helping to finance the building of the village school and the local church, St Luke's, where he and his second wife Charlotte are buried.

His first wife, Fanny died in 1845, reportedly giving birth to a son who "predeceased him" although one account of John Mechi's life states that his first marriage was childless. The same year his farming achievements and business acumen were recognised by his appointment as a council member of the Royal Agricultural College, which was going through a difficult period, and he became a member of the committee of management which was to restore the college's fortunes.

He remarried in 1846, to Charlotte Ward of Chillesford, Suffolk and between 1850 and 1859 they had five children - Louisa, Isabella, Joseph, Alice and Florence, only one of whom, Louisa appears to have married.

Meanwhile he maintained his interest in the life of the City. He was both an exhibitor and a juror at the Great Exhibition of 1851 and, at the recommendation of Queen Victoria, a juror at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1855. In 1856 he became a sheriff of the City of London and Middlesex.

His commercial business prospered and with the purchase of another cutlery business in 1855 he expanded into extensive premises in 112 Regent Street. He advertised widely, stating that his stock included the "the finest specimens of British manufactures" in a wide range of items including dressing cases and bagatelles as well as "other articles of utility or luxury suitable for presentation" with a "separate department for papier mache manufactures."

1859 was a busy year for John Mechi. He became alderman for the ward of Lime Street; he published the first edition of 'How to Farm Profitably' which sold 10,000 copies and had run to four editions by 1864; and he took on a partner, Charles Bazin, restyling the business "Mechi & Bazin". In 1869, after Bazin's death the business reverted to John Joseph Mechi with an announcement that he would be "assisted by his son".

It was also the time when his thoughts turned to the plight of fellow farmers and the lack of any organisation to help those who had fallen on hard times, leading to the formation of the Agricultural Benevolent Institution in 1860.

John Mechi continued to flourish as a man of substance, writing numerous letters about a whole range of subjects, often having his ideas caricatured in publications such as Punch. He had a ship (the SS Tiptree) and a fuchsia (Alderman Mechi) named after him as well as a farm scheme in Blennerhasset, Cumbria. The scheme lasted just ten years (1862-72) but Mechi Farm is still there. Between 1860 and 1863 he was master of the Loriner's Company and by 1866 he was in line to become Lord Mayor of London.

Then, reminiscent of a Thomas Hardy tragedy, events beyond his control conspired to bring about his downfall. The failure of the Unity Joint Stock Bank, of which he was a governor, and the Unity Fire and General Life Insurance Company, cost him £30,000, but he was proud of the fact that "his was the only bank to pay all its creditors". He felt compelled to resign as an alderman and remove himself from the running to become Lord Mayor.

His fortunes were not helped by plummeting sales of razor strops, the result of a vogue for beards, following the Crimean War. However, he determinedly pursued his farming activities, becoming chairman of The Farmers Club in 1877. The following year ill health prevented him from working on the estate and the culmination of a succession of bad farming years in 1879, when so many farmers failed, finally brought an end to his fortunes.

On Boxing Day 1880, just 12 days after having to place his affairs in liquidation, John Mechi died of diabetes and, it is said, a broken heart.

It is a fitting tribute to the man who gave so much to agriculture that in his last months the farmers of England subscribed £5,000 to help out his financial insolvency. He died before he could receive it but the money went to his wife and family.

Part 2

Decline in Farming Fortunes

During the Napoleonic Wars, with the blockading of major European ports, food prices soared and farming prospered. However, by the middle of the 19th century when John Joseph Mechi moved from London to Tiptree Hall in Essex, to become a gentleman farmer, there was a sharp decline in farming fortunes.

The repeal of the Corn Laws, the arrival of cheap grain imports from North America and the development of refrigerated ships bringing meat from the southern hemisphere, all resulted in a

considerable reduction in farm incomes. At the same time the industrial revolution was denuding the countryside of much of its workforce and farmers had to leave the land uncultivated.

Coming from London, where the City Guilds supported those in their particular trades who fell on hard times, John Mechi was horrified to find that there was no one to whom farmers could turn in time of trouble. Having initially written letters to The Times he canvassed influential landowners and others to support the formation of a charity to help farmers in distress. Then, in January 1860, he wrote the following letter, appealing to farmers across the country: -

Sir

I most earnestly beg to draw your attention to the accompanying appeal to the Landowners and Farmers of the United Kingdom issued by me end May last – soliciting support in a cause which much needs it, a fact well confirmed by the hearty and sympathizing response I have received from 700 Noblemen, Gentlemen, Farmers, Implement Makers and others whose names are thereto subscribed. They saw the necessity for such an Institution in this Country. They have given their names and subscriptions liberally to aid its foundation, and now I most earnestly appeal to you for assistance in the Cause – both as a subscriber and by enlisting the support of your friends and neighbours. My object is to raise £10,000 in donations and one thousand guineas in annual subscriptions by the time of the meeting in May next, and to do this with as little cost as possible, by avoiding a large staff of paid canvassers.

I appeal to the farmers as a body to link themselves together as volunteer canvassers; no reproach can attach to great energy in advocating a subject of such holy import as this. Not profit but charity is the mainspring of your efforts and desire to help those who are helpless, comfort those who are comfortless, support the aged, shelter the homeless & befriend & instruct the innocent and unprotected orphans.

I again ask your support; with zealous and combined efforts I do not fear the results.

To this date the donations amount to 1700 guineas & the annual subscriptions to 410 guineas from 450 out of the 700 founders enrolled.

I am sir

faithfully yours

J. J. Mechi

Birth of an Institution

On 7th February 1860 the first council meeting was held at 112 Regent Street, London - the west end premises of Mechi & Bazin. Why the minutes are headed the 'Royal Agricultural Benevolent College' is unclear - it could have been a slip of the pen or, with John Mechi's association with the Royal Agricultural College (he was a member of its management committee), he may have had plans to link the two charities. Minutes of subsequent meetings, which are not written in the same hand as the first one, refer to the Agricultural Benevolent Institution.

The meeting was attended by Thomas Scott (of Parliament Street, Westminster); James Howard (of Britannia Works, Bedford); John Collins (of the Cattle Market, Islington); John Mechi; Thomas Batson (of Coombe Down, near Bath); and Charles Bazin. 'It was moved by Mr. Mechi that Mr. Batson took the chair' and although there is a blank space where it says 'seconded by' he was unanimously elected as the charity's first chairman.

Mr. Bazin gave a statement of the donations received and promised to date, with £700 being on deposit and £188 on a standard account at the Unity Bank. He then read the draft proposed rules, which he had prepared 'from the rules of various public institutions and adaptable to the present; with such new suggestions as were necessary for their sound and efficient availability in realising the objectives of the college'. These were accepted unanimously.

The fact that it was John Mechi's business partner who proposed the draft rules leaves one to wonder if he was presenting them on behalf of John Mechi, who did not want to be seen running the show, or if he had been assigned the task by his partner who was too busy drumming up the financial support.

Subsequent council meeting reports refer to the charity as the Agricultural Benevolent Institution at 55 Charing Cross and at a meeting held on 1st May 1860 'The secretary, (Charles Shaw) reported that His grace the President (The Duke of Richmond) had fixed Tuesday 26th of June 1860 for the first festival of the Institution'.

Widespread Support

Thus, just over a year after John Mechi launched his appeal for support, the Agricultural Benevolent Institution held its first annual general meeting. The list of subscriptions and donors published for the AGM records that 'Mr. Alderman Mechi' was one of the three trustees, together with the Duke of Richmond and the Right Hon. Earl Howe, as well as being one of 35 vice-presidents, which included two dukes, seven earls, a viscount, nine lords, five knights and five members of parliament.

The list of over 700 subscribers, as at the 4th June 1860, from 43 counties across England and Wales as well as donations from Dublin, Scotland and one from Hungary, makes interesting reading with many of the names still identifiable as current farming families. It records both donations and annual subscriptions, most of which ranged between one and ten guineas, and is testimony to the resolve of John Mechi to establish the charity.

Benjamin Disraeli had indicated his intention to be involved with the charity from the beginning but political business took precedence. However, he readily accepted an invitation to chair the second 'Anniversary Festival' held at Freemasons Hall on 12th June 1861. A reflection of the importance attributed to agriculture 150 years ago.

The raison d'être, as set out in the rules, was straightforward – "That the object of the Institution be to secure a home for, or pension to, the bona fide farmer, or widow of a farmer and to maintain and educate the orphan children of farmers."

To qualify for assistance was less simple. One had to be a British-born subject, aged 60 or over, whose exclusive means of support had been farming, for 20 consecutive years, not less than 50 acres or had paid rent of not less than £100 per annum over the same period. Except in "special instances

of sudden injury or accidental bodily infirmity” resulting in permanent disablement when the minimum age was 45, which was the same for widows whose husband’s had fulfilled the qualifications. In the case of orphans, the qualifying time for their father was reduced to 10 years and the minimum age at which they could be admitted was six. They would remain “inmates of the Institution” until they were 14, if they were boys, or 16, if they were girls.

Voting for Beneficiaries

Selection of beneficiaries for a pension was by election, with every donor and subscriber having a number of votes according to the amount that they had given. An annual subscription of half-a-guinea entitled the subscriber to one vote, one guinea bought two votes and then the same proportion of votes for every guinea subscribed. A donation of five guineas made the donor a life-member entitling them to one vote at every election with a further vote for every additional five guineas. In addition, all clergymen preaching on behalf of the Institution were treated as honorary donors with voting rights according the amount collected from their congregations.

The first election for beneficiaries took place on 2nd May 1861. £455 had been ‘appropriated for the maintenance of twenty farmers, farmers’ wives, and widows selected from numerous applicants, as most worthy of its earliest bounties’. Nine men, three couples and five widows were chosen to receive annual awards of £26 for male pensioners, £40 for married couples and £20 widows.

In subsequent years the election was held at the annual general meeting in June with the number of suitable candidates, each recommended by two persons of standing in the community, always considerably exceeding the number of pensions available. For example, in 1884 there were 377 candidates for 64 pensions.

The number of pensions available was a direct reflection of the level of donations until the Institution started to receive legacies which could be invested, enabling it to help more people. However, the annual amounts paid to the beneficiaries, 10 shillings (50p) a week was to remain unchanged for 100 years.

Part 3

The Early Years

To landowners, farmers, and others connected with British agriculture.

“The distinguishing characteristic of our home charities, as compared with those of other nations, is the fact that they rest entirely upon private effort. Almost every profession, almost every trade, has its asylums for the old, its endowments for the widowed, its schools for the orphaned – all founded and maintained by that puissant esprit de corps which forms one of the most noteworthy social traits of the Anglo-Saxon race. In a movement so honourable it seems difficult to explain how it is that the Agricultural interest, with its endless ramifications and vast resources, should have remained hitherto unrepresentative. The farmer can turn to no refuge from misfortunes, which so often, in his case above every other, depend on the influences entirely beyond human control.

Backwardness in works of benevolence has, it is true, never been a characteristic of the agricultural classes - of no class, probably less! But their charity has hitherto been promiscuous and individual,

while the conditions of the times imposed upon it organization and publicity. Let us hasten to correct an oversight which may so easily be misrepresented as a reproach.

Let us, in short, collect into one grand reservoir – organized, imposing and exhaustless – all the streams and rivulets of private charity – scattered – often, haply, misapplied – almost always unobserved – through every nook and corner of the land. Towards this fulfilment of this worthy object, support has already flowed in from zealous well wishers of every grade. His Grace the Duke of Richmond has accepted the post of President and among the Promoters of the scheme, names honoured by us all will be found in profusion. That these examples will be eagerly followed, we cannot allow ourselves to doubt, and, in the firm conviction that such confidence is well placed.”

Extract from the foreword by the secretary, Charles Shaw, to the list of subscriptions and donations published for the first annual general meeting of the Agricultural Benevolent Institution, May 1860.

Royal Recognition

Just three years after its foundation the Agricultural Benevolent Institution received Queen Victoria’s official nod of approval. The minutes of the council meeting held on 5th May 1863 record the following letter from Sir Charles Phipps dated Windsor Castle, April 15th 1863.

“Sir, - I have had the honour to submit to Her Majesty The Queen the purport of your letter of the 8th inst., as well as the spirit of the Agricultural Benevolent Institution subsequently forwarded to me.

I have the pleasure to inform you that Her Majesty has been graciously pleased to consent to become Patron of that Institution.

I am further commanded to notify to you of Her Majesty’s intention to grant an Annual Subscription of £25 to the funds of the Institution.”

After approving the secretary’s letter acknowledging ‘the honour conferred upon the Institution’ the council passed a resolution ‘that the nomination of one duly qualified female pensioner, to be selected from the list candidates, be placed at Her Majesty’s disposal and that such nomination be renewable from time to time upon the death of the nominee’.

From then on the prefix Royal was added to the name of the charity, as the heading for the minutes of the meeting testifies.

Establishing Grass Roots Contacts

After the initial surge of donations, coming from over 700 individuals spread across the country it was important to ensure that contributions continued to flow. To this end a network of local voluntary secretaries was established, presumably to promote the charity, encourage donations and raise subscriptions.

The annual report for 1864 shows that there were 107 honorary local secretaries covering 30 counties. By 1884, the number had grown to 305 covering 38 counties, the largest number being in those counties, predominantly in the east and south of England, which had the greatest number of contributors.

With donors and subscribers voting for those who were to be selected from the vastly oversubscribed lists of candidates, it is not surprising that this bias towards the more prosperous farming areas of the country was reflected in the origins of the beneficiaries as well as the benefactors.

Early Surge of Applicants

As RABI became established and funds were accumulated, the number of beneficiaries who could be accepted each year increased but so did the number of candidates being proposed. In 1868 there were 120 candidates (including 13 married couples) for just 23 places (including three couples). As a result the council meeting held on January 5th 1869 'unanimously resolved: That the Council shall at their discretion be empowered on the application of candidates for relief who have been two years on the books of the Society, and are not less than eighty years of age, to give out of the funds of the Institution a sum not exceeding £10 in any one year.' Six eligible candidates then receive the grant.

By 1898 the number of available places had increased to 90 but the number of candidates was 433, of whom 75 were males and 265 females, with 93 married couples. The concern caused by this disparity between the sexes was highlighted by the following paragraph in the annual report presented to the 1899 annual general meeting: 'In view of the increasing number of Female Pensioners and applications, to the detriment of those of the Male class, for whose assistance the Institution was equally, if not primarily, designed, the Council, after careful consideration, have resolved to make the minimum age of admission, on and after January 1st 1900, the same for both sexes, namely 65'.

Orphan Children

The original rules of the charity state that recipients may include 'the orphan, of sex, whose father shall have fulfilled the (required) conditions for a period of ten years, and who is not an imbecile, diseased, or deformed so as to impair its growth.

'The minimum age of submission for children shall be six years, the boys admitted remaining inmates of the Institution until they attain fourteen years of age, and the girls until sixteen years; and no child shall be balloted for after attaining the age of ten years.'

The term orphan was defined as being a child who had lost its father, either by death or incurable insanity. There were also strict rules about numbers, only one child from the same family 'except there be three dependent children, and both parents dead' and then not more than two could be admitted with only one permitted to stand on the list for selection at any time.

When the children reached the age of 14 (boys) or 16 (girls) the rules required 'two respectable householders, approved by the council, to be responsible for their removal from the Institution'. Alternatively, in the case of the mother's remarriage they should be removed earlier.

The first reference to provision for children appears in the minutes of the council meeting held on May 7th 1867: 'The Secretary having brought before the notice of the meeting the important subject of providing for the maintenance and education of farmers' orphans – the Council approved the

course taken by the Secretary and directed him to write to Mr. Pulchete stating that the Council had given consideration to the subject and hoped to be able, through the means of the Welsh Charity*, at the annual meeting next year to elect ten orphan children. The Secretary was further directed to prepare "forms of application" for the admission of children.'

Welsh School

The annual report for 1868 refers to the 'maintenance and education of Orphan Children, at the Welsh Schools at Ashford, Middlesex,' as forming an interesting and important feature.

On April 6th 1869 five members of the council (including John Mechi) together with the secretary, Charles Shaw, paid an official visit to the school. There followed a glowing report on the establishment in the minutes of the council meeting held on May 4th 1869: 'The members of the Council communicated individually with these children and have great satisfaction in reporting favourably of the careful treatment they appear to receive, as indicated by their healthy cheerful and cleanly appearance.

They are receiving suitable instruction to fit them for practical occupations in after life, and the moral and religious training of the establishment was not less satisfactory to the members of Council. The dietary (sic) was also enquired into and found to be good plain and substantial. The school and internal play rooms are capacious and airy and the dormitories (sic) high in the ceilings and well ventilated, indeed superior to the generality of sleeping rooms in ordinary houses. The buildings stand upon a dry gravelly soil and the playgrounds afford full scope for all kinds of games and exercise.

'Under these circumstances the Council think that they are most fortunate in being able to secure the advantages this establishment affords at such moderate terms and they wish to send their high opinion of the Head Master Mr. Davies and their obligation to the Directors'.

The 'moderate terms' were £15 for girls and £17 for boys which were increased to £18 and £20 respectively in May 1873, when the secretary was directed to 'convey to the Committee of the Welsh Charity the best thanks of the Council for the care and attention bestowed upon the Children placed in the establishment.'

However, it appears that not everyone was quite so happy with conditions at the school. Later in 1873 the council received two letters of complaint about the standard of the food. These were considered at the January 1874 council meeting 'together with a communication in reply to the Secretary from the Matron of the Establishment'. The minutes record that 'the Council upon careful consideration of the whole matter were unanimously of opinion that the complaints were sufficiently unimportant to warrant their taking no official means to bring them before the notice of the governors of the Welsh Charity.'

One of the orphans, John Inckle (also recorded as Inchle) who was taken on in 1870 at the age of nine, had the distinction of receiving a donation of £5 from the council in June 1877 'for exceptional good conduct during his scholastic career as testified by the Master in a special report to the Council'.

However, by March 1879 the need to concentrate resources on meeting the growing number of adult applications resulted in a decision by council 'that no more children be admitted after the next election'. Interestingly there was also a resolution at the same meeting that 'the Annual Dinner be suspended in view of the charge it entails upon the funds of the Society' but this was defeated by nine votes to two!

The intake of RABI orphans, 99 in total, to the Welsh School had lasted just 12 years, although that was not quite the end of the matter. Correspondence from a Mr. Scott Burns concerning the admission of children is mentioned in the minutes of the October 1881 council meeting, although what he said is not recorded. The secretary was instructed 'to thank that gentleman for the interest he expresses in the General welfare of the Institution but to state that at the same time they were unanimously of the opinion that his views could not be entertained, with any practical advantage to the objects of the Institution'.

*The Welsh Charity administered the Welsh School, which had started as the British Charity School in London where it was established in 1718 by the Society of Ancient Britons. The institution was supported by voluntary contributions. It moved to Ashford in 1857 and in 1882, it became a single-sex school, renamed the Welsh Girls School. It is now named St David's School.

Some of those who were helped in the early years and the reasons why they were in need.

In the early years the names of the pensioners, together with their background details and the reason for their application, were published with the annual list of subscribers and donors. These provide an interesting insight into the problems that faced many farmers in the 1860s and 70s, mostly as a result of the downturn in farming fortunes following the end of the Napoleonic War food blockades and the repeal of the Corn Laws.

Thomas and Sarah Tilbury aged 84 and 73. Farmed 220 acres for twenty-eight years, in Sussex, at a rental of £210 per annum.

"Losses by the low price of corn in 1823; heavy losses in stock; and great expenses from long illness in his family, the children being very sickly."

Charlotte Mason aged 62. Husband farmed 250 acres for forty years, in Buckinghamshire, at a rental of £265 per annum.

"Misplaced confidence in the family solicitor."

Mary Way aged 74. Husband farmed 730 acres for twenty-one years, in Hampshire, at a rental of £760 per annum.

"High rental and buying stock in a very high year, succeeded by low and ruinous prices in agricultural produce."

Jonathan Smallbones. Farmed 184 acres for twenty-one years, in Wiltshire, at a rental of £250 per annum.

“Wife afflicted for twenty-four years, and losses through relatives and friends.”

Charlotte Smith aged 69. Husband farmed 946 acres for many years, in Sussex; also 300 acres in Kent, at an estimated rental of £3,500 per annum.

“Depreciation in the value of hops, and incapacity of the husband for business through paralysis of the brain.”

William Stanford aged 66. Farmed 570 acres for twenty-nine years, in Wiltshire, at a rental of £500 per annum.

“1317 sheep died from the ‘rot’ in 1834 and 1835. In 1836, July 5th, all crops destroyed by a hailstorm.”

Sarah Ovens aged 69. Husband farmed 365 acres for twenty-six years, in Northamptonshire, at a rental of £600 per annum.

“Free trade, sale of stock, &c., for benefits of creditors, 1850.”

John Cory aged 58*. Farmed 450 acres for thirty years, in Warwickshire, at a rental of £740 per annum.

“Being a bondsman for friends and ill health.”*exempt from limit as to age in consequence of chronic rheumatism.

Edmund Painter aged 78. Farmed 500 acres for many years, in Oxfordshire, at a rental of £360 per annum.

“Unfortunate circumstances and misplaced confidence.”

Mary Anne Bolton aged 78. Husband farmed 100 acres for thirty-four years, in Suffolk, at a rental of £140 per annum.

“Husband having a large family, and much sickness and bad times to contend against, leaving applicant totally unprovided for.”

Millicent Mott aged 64. Father farmed 372 acres for fifty years in Essex.

“Farm sold and quitted at great loss; since unsuccessfully engaged.”

Mary Grundy aged 72. Husband farmed 360 acres for thirty-six years, in Staffordshire, at a rental of £602 per annum.

“Diseases in cattle, and losses by rendering himself liable for debts of his brother.”

Part 4

End of an Era: Beginning of a Century

The years 1880 to 1910, and the completion of RABI's first 50 years, was a period of significant change and enormous technological development in Britain. Schooling became compulsory; time was standardised by the adoption of GMT; agricultural workers (men that is) were given the vote; old age pensions were introduced; both Queen Victoria, after celebrating her Golden Jubilee, and King Edward VII died; the Labour party, the Suffragette movement and Sinn Fein were all founded and there was a plethora of technological firsts, ranging from radio transmission and air flights to zip fasteners and paper clips.

It was also a time of change for RABI. At the beginning of 1880 the charity's founder, John Mechi, seconded a proposal, which was unanimously agreed at the February council meeting, "that any member of the council on compounding with his creditors shall be disqualified from retaining his seat on the Council Board". Ten months later, the following letter, addressed to the secretary Charles Shaw, was read to the December council meeting:

"Dear Shaw,

Owing to my advanced age, declining health and financial difficulties I have determined on resigning my seat at our Council and also withdrawing my name as a Trustee to the royal Ag. Bent. Instn. In doing so please assure my brother Councilmen that my exertions on behalf of the Charity will continue and that I shall always look back with pleasure on our social intercourse in connection with the charity.

Dear Shaw

Thine truly

J.J. Mechi".

The secretary was 'instructed to reply on the most sympathetic terms.' Within five days of the meeting on 9th December his affairs had been placed in the hands of the liquidator and he died on Boxing Day, not of diabetes, as previously recorded but, according to his death certificate, 'phrenitis, gastritis, exhaustion'.

Tribute to a Worthy Founder

The minutes of the next council meeting, on 4th January 1881, record:

"That this being the first meeting of the Council since the lamented death of Mr John Joseph Mechi the secretary be instructed to convey to Mrs Mechi and family their unfeigned regret at the loss they have sustained by the decease of their much valued friend and coadjutor Mr Mechi. In their

severe bereavement the Council desire to assure Mrs Mechi and her family of their sincere and heartfelt condolences." It was unanimously agreed the secretary prepare a framed address, to be 'engraved on vellum and presented to Mrs Mechi'.

It was also recorded that there would be a proposal at the next meeting for “an annuity be granted to Mrs Mechi out of the funds of the Institution”. However, events seem to have overtaken this proposal as within days of the meeting a national ‘Mechi Fund’, had been established.

Championed by a number of MPs the fund was chaired by the Marquis of Huntly and its committee included the Duke of Bedford, the Earl of Leicester, Lord Carrington and many other men of wealth and influence.

As a result, at the February meeting the proposal was postponed “until the total sum resulting from the Mechi Fund should be ascertained.” At that stage, with £4,000 already, the Prime Minister William Gladstone, at the request of Samuel Morley MP, granted a donation of £200 from the

Royal Bounty. It was agreed to close the fund at £5,000 (equivalent to about £500,000 in current values) - an overwhelming acknowledgment of the respect in which John Mechi was held.

In April the deaths are also recorded of Charles Cantrell (who had chaired the council for the past 29 years) and Thomas Scott (the original deputy-chairman), who had both served on the council since its formation. Subsequently, at the May meeting, it was unanimously agreed: “That the Annual Dinner of the Society should be abandoned for the present year in consequence of the death of the Founder and of other influential members of the Society.”

Cattle Plague Donation

During this time there was also a long-running correspondence with the Norfolk Cattle Plague Association. The members of the association, having decided that there was now little likelihood of their remaining funds (about £6,000) being required for the original object of the association, wanted to give two-thirds of the amount to RABI.

The RABI council had agreed that it would permanently invest the one and use the income exclusively for the relief of Norfolk farmers, with a stipulation that should any legal proceedings be taken against the Association for breach of trust the money, or investments, would be returned. However, the agreement ran into legal obstacles and after several months of procrastination it was finally resolved that the money be invested by the Norfolk Cattle Plague Association with the interest paid to RABI.

The council agreed that the income from the fund would be used to ‘maintain one married couple, one male and two females’. In return all present members of the Association were each granted a vote, for the period of their life, in the annual ballot for the selection of pensioners.

Balloting for Pensioners

By present standards the system of selecting pensioners by an annual vote may now seem somewhat archaic. But with the number of qualifying applicants far exceeding that which could be accepted, this method of selection with the results being available for public scrutiny was considered the most acceptable.

However, the allocation of votes, based on how much a subscriber donated, could enable wealthy donors undue influence in the selection of pensioners. Large donations could also result in voting rights being granted for a considerable number of years with the rights passing on to heirs or executors.

For example, in 1885 Miss Emma Goodman of 68 Tavistock Street, Bedford left £1,500, which equated to 228 votes (for 60 years) to be administered equally by four trustees (72 each) and “on the death of any one of the Trustees his or her votes to be divided among the survivors”. When the last surviving trustee died, in April 1930, the 228 votes passed to the Bedfordshire Agricultural Society “until 1944 inclusive”.

In 1882 the council agreed a rule “that Firms, Companies, and Corporate Bodies making Donations to the Institution shall receive Votes at the rate of One for every Five Guineas, such Votes being vested in a Trustee or Trustees, to be appointed at the time the Donation is made, and to cease on the death of the same or surviving Trustee; but in no case shall the number of trustees appointed exceed the sums of Five Guineas so paid.”

This encouraged donations from numerous organisations such as local farmers’ clubs, agricultural associations and hunts that held votes for varying lengths of time. Not all of them had an obvious connection with agriculture. For example, in 1897, the Tring Association for the Prosecution of Felons donated £5 5s 0d and held one vote for 50 years. The records also list 73 vicars and others who had life votes standing in their names, as a result of church collections, and among the

executors “administering deceased’s’ votes” the Westminster, Barclays, Lloyds and National Provincial banks, as well as the Public Trustees Office, all held a considerable number of votes which were not due to expire until 1962 to 1966.

Death of Victoria

The minutes of the February 1901 council meeting carry the text of a very fulsome address to “The King’s Most Excellent Majesty” expressing the council’s condolences on the death of Queen Victoria and welcoming King Edward VII to the throne. At the May meeting the secretary read a letter from the Keeper of the King’s Purse, Sir Dighton Probyn, confirming that the King was “pleased to accede to the request that he should become Patron.”

In August 1901 the Archbishop of Canterbury voiced his support of RABI. In a letter read to the council, he said that having “inquired in to the work” of RABI he was “quite satisfied that it is of great value”. He added that the need for it “in the present state of agriculture is undeniable and the mode in which an endeavour is made to meet that need appears to me to be sound in every way.” He declared his support for the donation of harvest festival collections to the charity and encouragement for “clergy who are deeply interested in the agriculture of this country” to find other modes of supporting RABI.

By 1909 two topics dominated the council discussions – the affects of the government’s proposed introduction of an old age pension scheme and a celebration to mark RABI’s 50th anniversary.

Pensions Act

David Lloyd George, the chancellor of the exchequer in Asquith's Liberal government was determined to take action to "lift the shadow of the workhouse from the homes of the poor". He believed the best way of doing this was to guarantee an income to people who were too old to work and in 1908 he introduced the Old Age Pensions Act to provide between 1s. and 5s. a week to people over seventy on incomes not exceeding 12s. a week.

The council set up a sub committee to study the effect that such a pension scheme might have on RABI funds and its pensioners and, as result of its deliberations, the following statement was made at the AGM in June 1909. "With a view to preventing their funds – which are entirely voluntary – from being used in the relief of State obligations, the Council have resolved that the pensions of persons who are over 70 years of age shall be reduced by such a sum as will enable them to apply for the Government Old Age Pension of the largest amount, provided such a reduction does not involve their Pensioners in any pecuniary loss. Any saving thus effected will enable the Council to increase the number of their annuitants."

However, it was not to prove to be a straightforward operation as the auditors (Messrs Deloitte) pointed out to the October 1909 council meeting. Because, unlike the government's old age pension scheme, RABI did not pay the same rate to men as to women the calculations would be different and the charity "must entertain the keeping of an entirely fresh set of books and additional office staff as well as more lengthy and careful audit of the accounts."

At the same time the auditors estimated that the savings should be not less than £1,000 a year "if the revision of pensions was carried out with care and accuracy." In fact the secretary reported to the December meeting that "a saving of £1,500 per annum would probably be effected".

Dinner That Never Was

As early as June 1908 the RABI chairman, The Earl of Jersey, was approaching the Prince of Wales to seek his consent to preside at a Jubilee Dinner in 1910. Not surprisingly, the prince was "disinclined to make any definite arrangements for an event separated from us by so long an interval of time", and told him to come back nearer the time. During 1909 there are indications that some members of council were concerned that a date for the dinner could not be fixed until they had received a response from the Prince. This was resolved by his acceptance at the beginning of 1910 and at the council meeting on 2nd May it was reported that "the Prince of Wales had expressed his personal approval of the arrangements made for the Jubilee Dinner on the 10th inst, and that the acceptances up to date amounted to 370".

On 6th May, just four days before the dinner, King Edward died. As it is recorded in the proceedings of the 50th annual general meeting on 8th of June: "The arrangements that had been made for celebrating the jubilee of the Institution by a public dinner, at which the present King

had graciously consented to preside, were in consequence of the national affliction immediately cancelled." The report continues to say that the jubilee fund, which would remain open until the end of the year had already reached a total of £5,000.

In an attempt to salvage some sort of celebration of the anniversary it was decided to hold the postponed jubilee dinner in December, during 'cattle show week' (the forerunner to the Smithfield Show), and the Duke of Portland who had expressed a willingness to attend, was invited to preside. Unfortunately the Duke was unable to attend during December and he suggested that the dinner should be postponed "until the present Prince of Wales becomes of age to take part in public affairs when he would be glad to find out if His Royal Highness will honour the Society by presiding."

As a result, on the recommendation of the dinner committee, the council decided to 'relinquish' the dinner and what had been hoped to be a year of celebration ended on a rather low note.

Part 5

A period of steady growth

The time between 1910, the 50th anniversary of RABI, and the next milestone, the celebrations for the 75th anniversary in 1935, was one of steady growth. Annual turnover rose from £24,415 to £33,664, providing pensions for 1,127 beneficiaries. But this was still insufficient to meet the demand, with the number of applicants always exceeding the number of available pensions, particularly during the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

One thing, however, remained constant. The basic pension of £26 a year – just 10 shillings (50p) a week – paid to pensioners since RABI's foundation remained unchanged and did so for 100 years until 1960.

In the early 1900s the honorary secretaries, who had been established across the country to collect subscriptions and donations, were forming themselves into county committees, forerunners of the current network of RABI volunteers. It was not long before some of them were also seeking representation on the Council.

On 6th July 1920 the council discussed a letter from W.G.C. Skinner, the honorary secretary of the Somersetshire committee asking that his committee might be permitted to nominate a member of the council without complying with the qualification of membership. He wrote "This the Somerset committee ask, as Wiltshire, Somersetshire, Dorsetshire, Devonshire and Cornwall are not represented on the council at all."

To qualify for membership of the council (which consisted of "not less than 15 or more than 21 members" two thirds of whom should be "landowners possessing not less than 200 acres of land, or tenant farmers not occupying less than 500 acres of land") one had to subscribe a minimum of two guineas. The response was that the council could not ignore the rules, much as it would value a representative from the county.

Change in pension qualifications

While the members of council would not bend the rules they were willing to amend them when required. In February 1920 a letter from the Tunbridge Wells Farmers' Club requested that the qualifications for receiving a pension should be reduced from a minimum acreage of 100 to 50 acres, and suggested that the assistance of the National Farmer's Union should be sought to secure further

funds to meet such a change. Nine months later, the council “unanimously agreed, after some discussion,” a proposal to the next General Meeting, that the rules governing the admission of candidates were changed to a minimum acreage of 75 or a minimum rental of £100 (reduced from £150). The period of occupation, 20 years, and the age limit of 65 would remain unchanged and the maximum private means of candidates should be £40 for single applicants and £50 for married couples.

Council's routine work

Much of the council's deliberations in this period focused on routine items, such as approving accounts and the payment of expenses, deciding on queries concerning the eligibility of applicants and receiving information about pensioners. For example, the entry in the minutes for December 1912 that reads: “Miss Jane A. Palmer, who had been elected a pensioner in 1908 was replaced on the pension lists on her discharge from the asylum”.

An item that seemed to take up more than its fair share of time was that of the eligibility of female applicants. Again in December 1912, “the council agreed to accept the case of a woman who had been twice married and whose husbands were both farmers, but in respect of a widow who had twice married and whose second husband was not a farmer, her case could not be accepted.”

The fact that ‘unmarried orphaned daughters of farmers’ were only eligible if one of their parents had fulfilled the qualifications for prospective pensioners raised a problem for the council in March 1913. Miss Anne Newman, aged 65, was only able to prove her father's tenancy for nine years, from 1863 to 1872, but it was agreed that her application could be accepted because her stepmother had carried on the same farm until 1899.

In the January 1918 meeting it is recorded that “In the case of Mr and Mrs John Brown the husband only was admitted as eligible as the wife's first husband was not a farmer and she had married John Brown when he had practically ceased to be a farmer”. It was resolved that in future “all cases in which such a woman applicant has been recently remarried careful enquiry be made as to whether the first husband was a farmer or not in order that the council may be fully informed as to be bona fides of such cases.”

In 1935 there was considerable concern that there was a “great preponderance of women over men pensioners, especially in the unmarried orphan daughter class.” The previous year the council had rejected a proposal from the Norfolk committee that unmarried candidates should be restricted to those whose fathers had contributed at least five guineas to RABI funds. However, when the suggestion was echoed by the Buckinghamshire committee, the council agreed to apply the additional qualification “for some time”.

Growth of local funds

In the early part of the 1900s, a large number of small farming charities, often set up by individuals, were springing up to provide support for people in specific areas of the country. Mostly they could only ever cater for a handful of beneficiaries and in the long term they either became defunct or sought to be absorbed into RABI, where their funds continued to be administered according to their specific remit. These funds joined other restricted funds, already established within RABI where the

donors had the right to select the pensioners to benefit from their generosity. The accounts for 1935 record 26 such trust funds.

As recently as 1995 there were over 130 special funds. In that year 17 of them were absorbed in RABI. The rest remained until 2005 when, with the annual income from more than half of them being less than £50 and many not raising sufficient to cover the cost of their administration, the Charity Commission agreed the removal of the restrictions on their capital, allowing the transfer of their funds in RABI's general fund. Typical of these was the Kent Farmers' Benevolent Institution, formed in 1926 by the Maidstone branch of the National Farmers Union

Councils answers criticisms

In March 1934 Mr. Richard Stratton, secretary of the Wiltshire county committee, "voiced certain objections and recommendations regarding the council's policy and the Institution's work." Unfortunately the actual points that he raised are not minuted but it is recorded that they received the councils "sympathetic consideration" and a letter setting out the council's response gives an idea of some of his requests.

Judging by the final paragraphs of the letter, his major concerns were financial. They read: "Though naturally deploring the general drop in contributions the Council realises that the welfare of such a Society as this must necessarily be much affected by the worldwide upheavals of recent years, and it was expected that 1933 would be an even more difficult year than those immediately preceding it. They are therefore delighted to find that no fewer than thirteen counties show an increase on 1932 receipts, while Beds shows but £6 decrease, Berks 10/-, Kent £3, Worcestershire less than £1, and Huntingdonshire is in the about same position as in 1932.

"Furthermore it must be remembered that just a fraction under 90% of the total receipts goes on direct relief, a fact which demonstrates the soundness of the policy adopted by the Council in regard to organisation."

One of Mr. Stratton's proposals, which appears to have been that annual subscriptions should be in pounds, elicited the response that "it is a long established custom among subscribers to charities to pay in guineas and half-guineas, and we could not deprive ourselves of the additional revenue which reaches us in consequence of this practice".

He also raised a question about donations from hunts to which it was pointed out that between £1,500 and £2,000 was received annually from hunt caps.

First woman council member

Despite the fact that the majority of the beneficiaries that RABI was supporting were women, for the first 55 years of its existence the council was very much a male preserve. It was not until 1915 that the first woman, Mrs. W G Austin of Bishops Waltham, was elected. She remained the sole female representative until 1928 when Miss Mary Bailey and Miss Annie Gauntlett were both elected.

Mrs. Austin served on the council for 37 years, including chairing meetings in 1932 and 1933, and when she retired, having also clocked up over 50 years as an honorary local secretary for Hampshire, she was unanimously appointed a vice-chairman for her services to RABI.

Anniversary celebrations

Wednesday 26th June 1935 was a very special day in RABI's history, marking the charity's 75th anniversary in considerable style. The day started with the reception for some 170 RABI vice-presidents, county committee members and honorary local secretaries at St. James's Palace where they were addressed by HRH the Prince of Wales. The Prince concluded his speech by presenting the RABI chairman, Lord Eltisley, with the Royal Charter of Incorporation, "which His Majesty the King in Council has been graciously pleased to grant to the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution in token of his interest in your work".

Lord Eltisley's vote of thanks was supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

After the reception the guests moved on to the Criterion Restaurant for the annual general meeting at which the Lord Bishop of Norwich seconded the chairman's motion for the adoption of the annual report. This was followed by a celebratory lunch at which good wishes were received from His Majesty the King, the Archbishop of York and the Prime Minister, and where the guest of honour was the Minister of Agriculture, the Rt. Hon. Walter Elliot.

To commemorate the occasion a souvenir booklet containing all the speeches and a record of the election of pensioners at the AGM was produced for the honorary local secretaries.

As at the 50th anniversary, when the Jubilee Fund raised £6,570.17s.1d, there was a 75th Anniversary Fund which brought in a total of £11,516.9s.

Back in 1935 the press coverage of farming matters was treated as important and covered by all the national and regional papers. But there was also a considerable interest in the activities of the Prince of Wales at the time and this is reflected in the widespread coverage given to the Prince's speech. A total of 211 press reports covering the anniversary events of 26th June - from the Times to the Daily Sketch; the Western Morning News to the Newcastle Journal; Polo Monthly to the Christian Herald; and the main Scottish and Irish papers, helped promote RABI to a far wider audience than ever before.

Kent Farmers Benevolent Institution

At a committee meeting of the Maidstone branch of the National Farmers Union (NFU) on 1st October 1925, the secretary, John Watson, expressed his concern that a large number of the members, from whom he "had been in the habit of collecting large sums of money" on behalf of RABI, would "never be qualified to receive the privileges of the Institution".

Quoting the rules for qualification to become a RABI pensioner (to have farmed at least 75 acres or paid a minimum annual rental of £100 for not less than 20 years), he told the members that in "his opinion the time had arrived for the county town of Maidstone to possess a Benevolent fund of its

own on the lines of Ashford". This gained the support of the members and the first meeting of the Maidstone & Mid Kent Farmers Benevolent Institution took place on 19th March 1926.

By 1928 it had become the Kent Farmers' Benevolent Institution (KFBI), with 159 annual subscribers and 10 life subscribers, and within two years had gained the support of the Cranbrook, Eastchurch, Edenbridge, Faversham, Rolvendon and Wittersham NFU branches.

As well as being NFU secretary, John Watson was an agent for the Phoenix Insurance Company with offices in Maidstone, providing insurance for most of the local farming community, and with his contacts he soon built up a comprehensive list of subscribers to KFBI. As the majority were also his customers the annual subscriptions, of either one or half a guinea (£1.05 or 52¹/₂p), were mostly collected with the annual insurance premiums.

John ceased to be the Maidstone NFU branch secretary in 1928, possibly because the NFU Mutual became the preferred insurer, but he remained secretary of KFBI and also continued to provide the insurance for most of the farmers.

A target of raising £1,000 was achieved by 1933, at which time the first two pensions (£26 per annum – in line with the RABI pension) were granted, with a third the following year. In 1935 a fourth pension was granted and, despite encouraging Kent farmers to support a local rather than the national benevolent fund, John was among those invited to meet the Prince of Wales at the RABI's 75th anniversary celebrations.

His grandson, also John Watson, remembers becoming involved in 1948. "I joined my grandfather in the insurance business when I left school and it was not long before I was being sent to the KFBI meetings to take the minutes.

"There were never more than six beneficiaries at any one time, mostly in mid Kent, and they were all visited regularly by my grandfather to ensure that their needs were being met. Then when he retired, at the age of 78 in 1956, I took over. I was secretary for 10 years then, a year after my grandfather's death; we decided that it was time to close."

Administering such a small charity for such a limited number of beneficiaries was no longer a viable proposition, especially with changes at RABI eliminating the need for a separate local fund. John remembers handing over the assets and pensioners to the then RABI secretary, Commander Pares, in 1966.

The investments from the fund continued to be used to support RABI beneficiaries from Kent for the next 39 years, until they were absorbed in the general fund in 2005.

Part 6

Marking a hundred years

Preparations for the celebration of RABI's centenary in 1960 were set in motion in 1957. With the cost of living rising since the end of the Second World War the RABI council was aiming to raise the beneficiaries' pension to £2 a week by 1960. To meet the extra demand RABI funds a sub-committee of six, under the chairmanship of the council chairman Leslie Drewitt, was formed to 'consider the

centenary appeal'. It included Sir Evelyn Shaw the honorary treasurer, and Commander Martin Pares RN, who had joined RABI as secretary at the end of the war in 1945.

The sub-committee met on 25th June 1957 and Sir Evelyn set out the challenging circumstances they faced. Farming casualties since the war had never fallen below an average of 800 a year and RABI should be prepared to maintain a total pension roll of 500 in addition to the 200 pensions to be cared for in hostels or their own homes at a weekly cost of £4 each. He estimated that this would cost nearly £94,000 a year by 1960, more than double the current expenditure on pensions and grants.

To meet this extra expenditure there would have to be at least a doubling in annual income or a capital endowment of not less than £1 million.

Plea to increase pensions

Sir Evelyn believed that the centenary provided a unique opportunity to raise a large capital sum without affecting the council's parallel plans for seeking much wider support from the farmers themselves. However, he argued that they could not make a case for an extension of benefits "unless we put in the forefront of our programme the determination to put an end, as soon as circumstances allow, to the ridiculously small pension of 10shillings (50p) a week, designed to keep a destitute member of the farming community from the workhouse a hundred years ago."

The sub-committee approved Sir Evelyn's proposal to aim at an endowment of £1million in addition to making every effort to raise subscription income.

It was suggested that they should employ a paid canvasser to increase subscriptions in a selected county (Lincolnshire was mentioned) where they were low. However, it was pointed out that this idea had previously been rejected by the Gloucestershire county committee and turned down by the council in "the belief that it would give offence to many honorary secretaries who had for many years given their services voluntarily".

Among the proposals which the sub-committee put to the council were:

- To raise the £1million by appealing to all "firms and bodies associated with the industry of agriculture" for substantial donations and for a goodwill donation of at least £1 from every farmstead in the country; and
- To increase the subscription income by appealing to "all farmers in business and all members of the NFU" for a minimum subscription of 5 shillings (25p) or 10 shillings a year to be collected "in any way best suited to the county organisation concerned".

Autumn Days Fund

The National Farmers Union (NFU) took on the challenge of raising the £1 million and the Autumn Days Fund was launched in 1959 by the NFU president Lord Netherthorpe. As it was considered that it was "not appropriate for agriculture to seek funds for its own cause from outside its own membership and related interests", counties were set targets based on NFU membership. To reach the £1 million target they would need between £4 and £5 from every member.

Disappointingly the actual total fell considerably short of the target. By April 1962 it was calculated that the appeal would close at £402,533 and a bulletin issued at the time stated the then NFU president, Harold Wolley, would present a cheque for “the appropriate amount” to the RABI president, the Duke of Beaufort at the RABI AGM in June. The appropriate amount was in fact somewhat short of the estimate, being £325,000, although some belated bequests were still being received.

The dispiriting result was attributed to “problems and frustrations that have dogged the operation... two bad harvests, an unfortunate price review, rival appeals, and the increased Union subscription”.

The report of the outcome also considers that farmers, being “traditionally a thrifty people” through bitter experience of difficult times, found it hard to understand how any farmer could “be so stupid as to blunder into monetary difficulties or so improvident as to fail to make proper provision against old age or inevitable disasters”. It concludes that in hindsight and appeal of this magnitude needed three or four years to be successfully completed.

Four counties, West Sussex, Hertfordshire, Middlesex and Worcestershire exceeded their targets while Kent raised the largest total amount - £21,452.6s.7d. At the top of the average contribution by county NFU members was West Sussex with an average of £7.2s.2d per head while the bottom county managed just 2s.8d (13p).

Royal recognition

The annual general meeting on 31st May 1960, held at the Criterion, Piccadilly, received the following message from RABI's patron, HM The Queen:

“Please convey to the Council of the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution my warm congratulations on the occasion of its centenary. I am keenly interested in the work which is done by the Institution in relieving distress, sickness and anxiety in old age, and note with approval the tasks which the Council of the Institution has set itself for the second century of its existence. I send you all my best wishes for the future. Elizabeth R.”

The AGM was presided over by the Duke of Beaufort and the main speakers represented the Church, the Bishop of London, government, the minister for agriculture, the RT Hon John Hare; and farming, the NFU president, Harold Wolley.

Rise in pensions

The centenary appeal made it possible for the council to carry out its intention of raising the standard beneficiary pension for the first time in RABI's history. However, the annual report for 1961 points out that the rise, from 10s (50p) to £1 a week, was not the quadrupling of the pension for which they were aiming and the doubling had only been possible at the expense of the Christmas grants. Nevertheless, like dispensing with the annual ballot for the selection of pensioners some ten years earlier, it was a step in the right direction.

A family affair

The name of Shaw has been synonymous with RABI since 1860. It has a much deeper historical significance than just being part of our address.

Charles Henry Shaw, a barrister at law, joined the steering committee of the Agricultural Benevolent Institution at the beginning of 1860 and at the founding of the charity became its first honorary secretary, a post he filled admirably for seven years before being succeeded by his son, Charles B Shaw, also a barrister at law, who was secretary and treasurer from 1867 to 1925. In 1925 his son, Sir Evelyn Shaw KCVO LLD followed him as honorary secretary (until the appointment of Commander Pares as secretary in 1945) and treasurer, serving on the council until his death in 1969. He did not have a son to succeed him but his daughter, Mrs Pam Romer-Lee then joined the council, until retiring due to ill health in 1981, so taking the involvement of the Shaw family to an astonishing 121 years.

Speaking at the 1960 annual general meeting, in reply to an appreciation of his family's 100 years of unbroken service by the Duke of Beaufort, Sir Evelyn said that for the first 30 years of his life, between 1880 and 1910, RABI had rarely received fewer than 400 to 500 claims to pensions every year, and often fewer than 100 of these could be granted. That was the story right down to the Second World War. When it is understood that only a proportion of the total farming casualties petitioned for our weekly pension of 10s, it can be appreciated how very precarious the state of farming was in those bad old days.

He also said that, while he had not produced a son to continue the active interest of his family (although there were grandsons on the offing) he had been able, in the last days of the war, to lure Commander Pares from the Royal Navy, who had since dedicated his life to the service of RABI and placed it back on the map.

When the RABI office moved from Vincent Square, in London, to Oxford it was a fitting tribute that the new premises were named after the Shaw family and equally fitting that they were officially opened, on 25th September 1979, by Charles Henry Shaw's great-granddaughter, Mrs Pam Romer-Lee.

Writing in the RABI annual report for 1981, Mrs Romer-Lee recalls that one of her earliest recollections of RABI was her father bringing home the weekly pensioners' cheques to sign over a weekend, before the payments were made quarterly. "I was the one allowed to use the blotting paper. In later years he often talked about RABI and explained that he was able to sign the pensioners' cheques only because of the generosity of those who had the welfare and interests of the farming community at heart. There were many more tenant farmers in those days who because of the depressed state of the industry depended in their declining years on a regular pension cheque."

As a council member she was particularly involved with the development of Manson House, RABI's retirement home in Bury St Edmunds, and was an active member of the homes' advisory committee.