

For 35 years a Pembrokeshire school had a special claim to fame - it was the only school in Wales with its own farm

School for farmers

WHEN Pembrokeshire county council acquired the Bush Estate between Pembroke and Pembroke Dock as a site for a new grammar school in the early 1950s, it found itself with a great deal more property on its hands than it really needed.

The hundred acre estate - once the property of Sir Thomas Meyrick - included farmland and walled gardens, nearly 30 acres of mature woodland, two lodges and a gardener's house and, not least, the great grey Victorian mansion of Bush House.

To cope with this embarrassment of riches, the education department came up with an ingenious solution - the new school would have its own farm where agricultural students, many of whom would board in Bush House, could have practical lessons in land management alongside their schoolwork.



Bush House boys receive instruction in the use and maintenance of farm implements.

Call **Sara Alderman** at Pembroke on **01646 685318**.

Howell Davies at Haverfordwest on **01437 762927**.

Rob Nicholas or **Dorian Williams** at Narberth on **01834 861944**.

Crymych on **01239 831445**.

Fishguard on **01348 873000**.

Or visit one of our local offices.



NFU Mutual

**For a more personal
approach to home,
motor and business
insurance.**

Agents of The National Farmers Union Mutual Insurance Society Limited.

So when Minister of Education Sir David Eccles opened the new school in October 1955, he also opened the only school farm in Wales. It was an immediate success, and in time the farm acquired its own pedigree dairy herd, a small flock of sheep which grazed on land at Cosheston, a pig unit and a prize-winning turkey enterprise which at its peak was fattening 500 birds a year for the Christmas market.

The farm had a small full-time staff, usually a stockman, a farm bailiff and the head of unit. For many years this was Bryn Davies who had previously run a farm institute in Ruthin, while from 1982 onwards Peter Isaac filled the role.

The willing farm-hands, however, were the pupils on the agriculture course. A school prospectus in 1958 noted:

A new Technical Department has been established which admits annually to a three-year course some 15 to 20 boys and girls whose interest lies particularly in agriculture and the pursuits of the land. Their curriculum, like that of the Grammar pupils, leads initially to the Ordinary Level of the General Certificate of Education, with the difference that their approach to the sciences and crafts lies mainly through the techniques and operations of the School Farm.

The farm is equipped with machinery and implements to deal with the usual arable crops, including early potatoes, and it has everything needed to employ modern methods of grassland management and grass conservation.

Boys and girls were admitted at the age of thirteen and came from all over the country and from a variety of backgrounds. While some were from farming stock, many were not - on the basis that a farmer's son could learn all about agriculture on the family farm, while this option wasn't available to the sons of solicitors and plumbers who would struggle to get on to the first rung of the agricultural ladder.



One of the dormitories and the dining room in Bush House. Were you a 'Bush House boy'? If so, drop us a line with your memories of boarding school life and we will publish them in a future issue of the magazine.

Local children could attend the technical course as day boys and girls. For boys (but not girls) from further afield there was the option of being accommodated 'in beautiful surroundings and a high degree of comfort at Bush House under the care of the Housemaster and the Matron'.

Thirty boys could be lodged in Bush House at any one time and they developed a special camaraderie. Although a part of the Grammar School set-up 'the Bush House boys' were always regarded as a slightly different breed by the everyday school pupils and thus tended to stick together – not least on visits to Brown's Café in Pembroke which they would regularly frequent.

It was on the sports field where 'the Bush House boys' mixed most freely with the rest of the school pupils, and the presence of a succession of burly farmers' sons helped cement Pembroke School's reputation as the top rugby-playing school in Pembrokeshire for many years.

At the completion of their three year course, some farm pupils stayed on at the school to take 'A' Levels, while others moved to take 'A' Levels at schools nearer home.

Some went on to technical college or agricultural college while many simply returned home to help run the family farm and are now well-known figures on the agricultural scene in Pembrokeshire and elsewhere, fulfilling the

school's pledge to provide farmers of the future.

Other alumni have gained prominence in unexpected fields. Myles Pepper of Newport (admitted 6-9-66) now runs his own art gallery in Fishguard; David Llewellyn from Rudbaxton (4-9-72) became a top rally driver while Hywel James of Martletwy (admitted 2-9-71) is a TV presenter.

It was intended that the farm unit should be of both educational and economic value. Produce from the farm was used by girls studying Domestic Science in the school and also in the school canteen. Milk was sold through the Milk Marketing Board and housewives queued up to buy the turkeys.

The school gardens were also productive, with a head gardener and his staff of two (later three) cultivating salad crops for sale and running a commercial plant nursery as well as looking after the school grounds.

While the school farm enjoyed the benefits of a labour force of pupils which didn't have to be paid, it did have one problem not faced by other farms – the fact that this labour force kept disappearing for the long school holidays. Building the routine of a working farm around the school timetable was always a difficulty, but one which long-serving farm bailiff Eric Bowen and stockman Fred Cole became skilled at coping with.

Continued



The Bush House boys of 1956... School headmaster R G Mathias and Bush housemaster R Hewish are pictured in the front row, together with Bush House staff and members of Mr Hewish's family. Pupils pictured are (back row, left to right): Richard Morgan, Haydn Lewis, John Morgan, Michael Morgan, Jeffrey Owen, David Rees and Norman Fry. Middle row: Tony Smith, Mike Dyson, Bill Watson, Nicholas Tebbutt, John Pritchard, George Dickman, Robert Hammond, Norman Mowlem and Keith Lewis.

School for farmers

The farm survived the transition from grammar school to comprehensive in the early 1970s, but there were changes. The three year agriculture course was discontinued and no more boys came to board at Bush House, which became the school's music and computer block.

Instead of being the preserve of specialist students, the farm and gardens became available to all 1,400 pupils of the new school. Lessons in farming and gardening skills proved popular, especially with pupils who weren't particularly interested in an academic career and to whom learning to service a tractor or milk a cow was of far more practical use than studying French verbs.

Pupils studying horticulture learned about propagation and had their own allotments which they planted and tended, and they also helped maintain the grounds of Bush House in immaculate order. The farm's dairy herd grew to 45 pedigree Friesians, with a milk quota of 200,000 litres a year.

Evidence that the young students took their farming duties seriously could be found in the school's trophy cabinet. While most schools could only boast cups for sporting and academic achievement, Pembroke School's silverware regularly included trophies for champion dressed turkey, collected at the local poultry shows.

The beginning of the end for the school farm coincided with the arrival of a new headmaster in the early 1990s – a 'townie' from England with an academic background who, as Peter Isaac recalls, 'couldn't tell a heifer from a hedgehog'.

While previous headmasters had taken a pride and an interest in the school farm, the new man saw it as a drain on the school's resources. The farm had never paid its way commercially, but the education authority had always been prepared to underwrite any losses in the knowledge that the work it was doing was of lasting benefit to the county's agricultural industry.

However the arrival of the new headmaster coincided with the Local Management of Schools initiative which made individual schools more responsible for their own budgets.

"The farm and gardens were running at an annual loss of

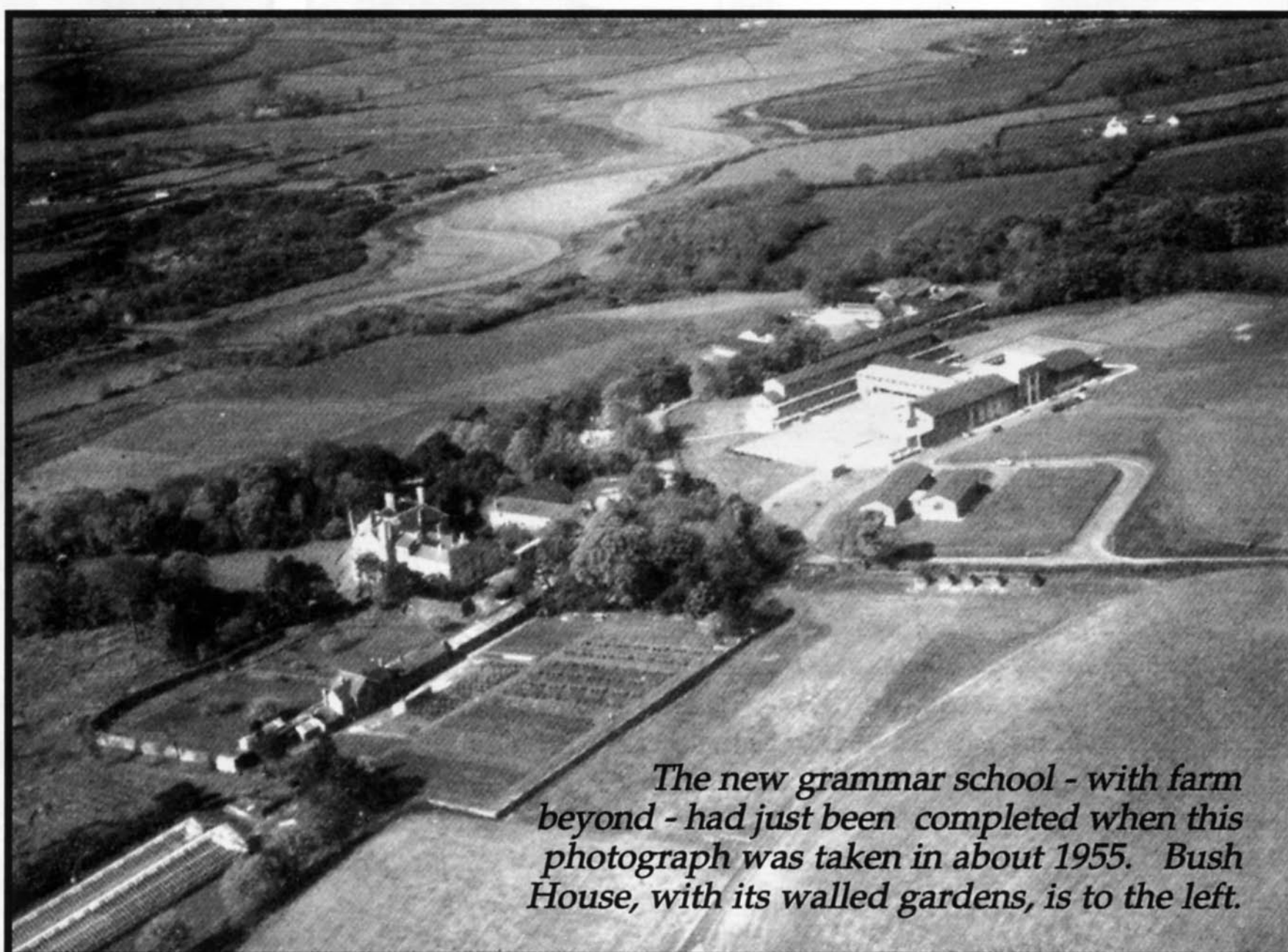
about £40,000 – down from about £80,000 when I started," recalled Peter Isaac. "This wasn't excessive when you think of the wider benefits, but the new head insisted that we had to break even – and now he held the purse strings.

"I pointed out that departments such as English or sport didn't break even and that the farm was a valuable educational resource not only for the school but for local junior schools which paid regular visits, but it was no good. The farm had to go."

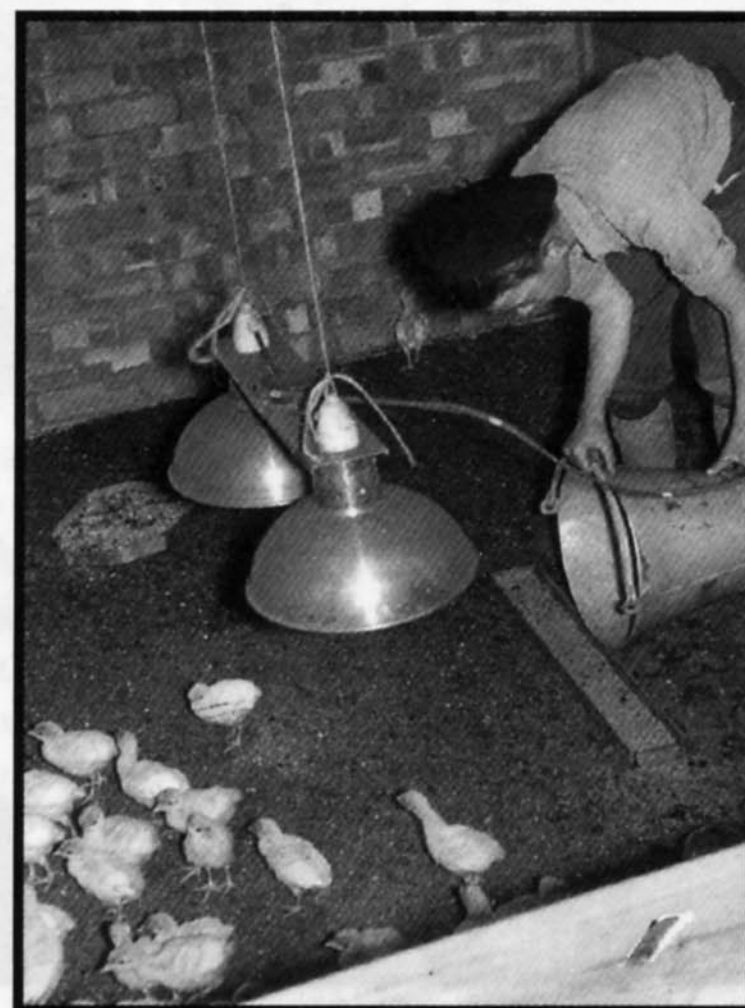
Plans by the school governors to sell off the farm and gardens were vetoed by Dyfed county councillors at a stormy meeting in Carmarthen, but the livestock and staff went and the unit was mothballed for a time. Eventually the walled garden was leased to a commercial horticultural concern and the farm became part of the county council's portfolio of smallholdings which it rents to suitable tenants.

And Bush House, after lying dusty and derelict for a number of years, was finally given a new lease of life as a residential home for the elderly.

• Pictures and additional research courtesy of Joel Pemberton and Wendy Campbell



The new grammar school - with farm beyond - had just been completed when this photograph was taken in about 1955. Bush House, with its walled gardens, is to the left.



Above: David Esmond feeds the turkey chicks on the school farm. Left: Farm school pupils are given a lesson in animal health care.