



## THE OXCROFT SETTLEMENT

Although coal mining, together with the Coalite smokeless fuel and chemical plant, dominated the local economy for much of the 20th century, farming remained important in the rural parts of the parish. Snippets

The most distinctive feature of farming in modern Bolsover was the creation of an estate of smallholdings intended to give unemployed men and their families a chance to make a living from the land. The Oxcroft Settlement was the only project of its kind in Derbyshire, and one of only two in England initiated by a county council (the other was at Duxbury in Lancashire).

### **Oxcroft Farm**

In February 1936 Derbyshire County Council bought Oxcroft farm (399 acres, about two miles north of Bolsover) from the 9th duke of Devonshire, which they proceeded to divide into 40 smallholdings. The county council leased the estate later the same year to the Land Settlement Association (LSA), itself one of the initiatives of the Commissioner for the Special Areas, which established similar estates in other parts of the country.

At Oxcroft the LSA erected glasshouses and meal houses on the holdings and adapted some of the existing farm buildings. By March 1939 all 40 holdings had been developed, on which 37 families had been settled, with 20 men in training. Each holding had a semi-detached, three-bedroom house, with a piggery. Each tenant was allotted 5 acres, of which 1 acre was initially used to grow top and soft fruit and 2 acres given over to market gardening. The other main activity was pig farming: each household had two sows and 30 baconers. The remaining land was retained as a 'central farm' or 'estate service depot' managed by the estate manager.

*The venture* did not get off to an entirely easy start. When the scheme was explained to 'a large gathering of unemployed' at Chesterfield there was a 'lively discussion and some criticism', although 105 applications for the 40 tenancies were received. The first batch of trainees, who arrived in March 1936, included miners, ex-Army men, labourers, electricians, a grocer, a

stonemason and a basket-maker. After training the men were joined by their families, not all of whom settled to hard, outdoor work in a slightly remote area after years of unemployment in close-knit villages or towns. In October 1936 the Unemployment Assistance Board (UAB) questioned the recruitment of men at Oxcroft, some of whom had come from parts of Derbyshire not designated as 'depressed'. The UAB and the Ministry of Labour agreed that a few men could be drawn from other areas but there was to be no wholesale recruitment outside the coalfield.

The surviving trainees eventually became tenants, although they continued to receive practical support and advice from the estate manager. The original aim of the scheme was disrupted with the outbreak of the Second World War, when the emphasis switched from resettling the unemployed to maximising food output. Tenancies were given to men with a farming background, which gave the estate greater social cohesiveness. In addition the stock of pigs and poultry had to be greatly reduced because of the shortage of feeding stuffs. The number of tenancies was reduced to 26, so that both the land and the glasshouses could be divided among the remaining occupiers to compensate them for loss of income from livestock. Despite this setback, in 1941 fifteen of the tenants achieved a cash income of £200, four made over £300, and three more than £400. A challenge cup was awarded for the best cultivated holding. An optimistic but not uncritical account of the estate in 1942 spoke of the 'breezy, happy men and women, and bright, healthy children' living there, a striking contrast to the 'depressed and delicate group' who had arrived early in 1936. The venture had had its problems but in a small way had improved both the economic prospects and 'social and moral conditions' of those involved.

By the 1960s there were problems, which include a poor tenancy rate and air pollution from Coalite (Bolsover) and Staveley works – so much so that tomatoes were reported as having a taste problem. The estate was closed in 1968 – the land and buildings were sold off.