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Working Lives – Fine Feathers

By Daphne Chamberlain

Dorothy Ditcham came to East Finchley in 1911, when she was six. She still lives here, but has spread her wings in the interim. In 1924 she was in Essex, learning to be a poultry farmer.

She still has a red exercise book, filled with hand-written notes, her own drawings and cut-out pictures. It's a comprehensive manual and a mine of information.

The ideal egg for marketing then weighed about two ounces, which is exactly the weight of the large free-range specimens in my fridge today. Certainly in 1924 though, there was a wide range of breeds, different types of fowl (specialist egg-producers, general purpose, or primarily table birds), and marked variations in egg-laying. Some hens managed up to 110 eggs during the winter, and others none at all.

Intensive start

Dorothy's red book notes the introduction of artificial incubators and the beginning of intensive farming – though this was light years away from the later horrors of battery farming. On the farm where she worked the birds ran around at will in a large barn, with separate breeding pens. There were about half a dozen

hens to a cockerel, and each group had its own grass run and carefully regulated housing.

She learned to select, breed and rear the chickens, to feed them (the red book has a selection of menus), and to nurse them through winter colds.

It was work where you had to muck in (and out), and carrying two-gallon cans backwards and forwards across 10 acres proved a little too much. Dorothy strained her heart, and had to find other work.

When she had recovered, she had a couple of stints as a governess – one in the South of France. That child was "a horror," she says emphatically, "and I much preferred poultry farming."

If you would like to share your early or unusual work experiences with us, please let us know.

- The illustration above shows an extract taken from Dorothy Ditcham's little red notebook.
- The photo right shows Dorothy with chicks, 1924
- Both pictures by courtesy of Dorothy Ditcham



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