

When children formed their own army of tattie howkers

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It was back-breaking work for pickers who took the chance to earn extra income “tattie howkin”.

Schools closed during the Second World War to allow schoolchildren to supplement the labour supply to get the vitally important potato crop secured.

From first light, children were out in frosty fields but they and their families were happy for the money – and a hard worker could make a decent day’s pay.

Cyril, Sandy and Grant Caseby worked for local farmers in Newmills in Fife to provide extra income for the family.

Cyril, now 90, who lives in Aberdeen, said: “Our father had been invalidated home from Africa and coupled with his war injuries, was not in a position to do full-time work for a long time and it was hard for our mother to bring up our large family, especially financially.

“Therefore, any extra income during this spell was welcome.

“The twins and I were involved in a lot of farm work during the war, not only tattie picking but starting with planting the tatties, then helping with bringing in the hay, then the grain harvest and latterly, the threshing at the end of the year.

“For the first two years of the war, healthy schoolchildren were given time off school to help when most able-bodied men were away at war.”

The mums, too, relished the chance to earn extra cash and often theirs and the kids’ money helped pay for winter clothes.

Mums would take even the youngest of their family into the field with the smallest children wrapped up in blankets and laid down in the drills.

This was before German prisoners of war were allowed to help in picking potatoes alongside the Women’s Land Army, which was resurrected in 1939 and put to farms.

Cyril said: “When I think back I had just turned nine when the war broke out and our secondary school was turned into a military hospital and the playing field was ploughed up.

“My education until I moved on to Dunfermline High School was in the village hall, which was divided down the middle with a partition with 50-plus pupils in each class.

“The older pupils, including the twins, Sandy and Grant, who were 18 months older, continued their education in wooden huts.

“With time off to do the farm work and the time off because of the air raids, I often wonder how I

managed to qualify to go to high school.”

Cyril said where he stayed in Fife at the time became known as “Hellfire Corner” as a result of night air raids when the noise of the anti-aircraft guns “was horrendous” and the lights in the sky and flashing bursting shells “was said to look like Hell itself”.

“One night our dad let us come out of the air raid shelter to see a German bomber in flames spiralling into the sea followed all the way down in the searchlights,” he said.

“Our first tattie howkin’ trip was in October 1939, when I had just turned nine.

“The war was not long started and a farmer near High Valleyfield said that he needed help to lift his potatoes on a Saturday morning, so off we three boys went.

“All went well and we were paid 1/9p each in old money which was 5/3p in total.

“On the way home, we got an ice cream each leaving 5/0p (25p in new money).

“We proudly handed it over to mum and she cried.

“I thought we had done something wrong but it was something to do with her wee boys growing up.

“As the years followed we were regulars at tattie howkin’ during the two weeks holiday in October.



“At first all farmers only used horses and the break was comfortably long, giving you plenty of time for a seat after you picked your tatties and he came round again.

“But the dreaded tractor started to arrive and had to be avoided at all costs as it went round too fast.”

Tractor usage in the tattie field increased during the Second World War, with mechanisation helping increase food production in times of labour shortages.

Cyril said: “We got to keep some of the money to ourselves and one year I became the proud owner of a second-hand bike.

“Sometimes the weather was not good in October and the work was not so enjoyable.

“The frost was so bad one morning some of us had to piddle on our hands to try to bring them back to life.”

Cyril said it was an early rise in the morning with long walks through the fields then a long and tiresome journey home.

“We were allowed to take some of the tatties home,” said Cyril. “Thinking back it was a back-breaking job in sometimes terrible weather but the company was good and you certainly slept well during that fortnight.”

At its post-war height in 1949 nearly 44,000 Scottish schoolchildren flocked to the country’s potato fields.

The 1950s and 60s brought men, women and children flooding into the fields of Angus and Perthshire from Dundee and Fife.

Cyril left school aged 14

to work in Rosyth Naval Dockyard before he got a job with the Coal Board in its maintenance and building department.

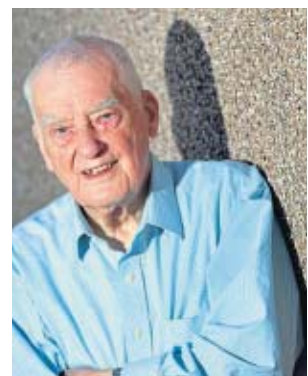
The future of the coal industry was uncertain when he gave that up to move north with his family when his father answered the call to take up the charge at Drumoak Parish Church on Deeside.

He soon found a job with Wm Briggs & Sons Ltd of Dundee (later Briggs Amasco) in its Aberdeen contracting office and was to spend the next 40 years with them.

Cyril’s brothers Sandy, Grant and Charlie have all since passed away. His sister Margaret also died. But his younger brother Ronald is still alive at 84.

Cyril’s own tattie journey went full circle following his retirement.

He said: “In recent years I had the opportunity to travel on a potato harvester and a combined harvester and marvelled at the progress that farming had made in my lifetime.”



Young brothers Sandy, Cyril and Grant Caseby and, right, Cyril, aged 90, as he is today.



BACK-BREAKING WORK: Hand-picking tatties in the farmers' fields was tough but the camaraderie was good and extra money always welcome.