

NP372

# Ralph Whitlock

RALPH WHITLOCK, who has died aged 81, was a farmer, and a writer and broadcaster on rural life.

Whitlock was perhaps most widely known for his contribution to the BBC Children's Hour wireless programme, *A Visit to Cowleaze Farm*.

From 1945 until 1962 Whitlock wrote the script and

played the role of "Farmer Whitlock". Each month he would take listeners on a tour of the farm, accompanied by his dog Towser, commenting on agricultural life in his gentle West Country burr.

The programme was recorded at BBC Bristol and was at first broadcast only locally. After it found favour with a national audience, Whitlock was given his own series, *Farming Magazine*. He also recorded forest wildlife for the BBC Natural History Unit and became a regular panellist on *Any Questions* and *Slightly Quizzical*.

Ralph Whitlock was born on Feb 7 1914 at Pitton, Wiltshire, where his family had been shepherds and farmers since the early 17th century. The local register records the baptism of 22 Whitlocks between 1670 and 1700.

When the Depression thwarted his plans for university, Whitlock turned to journalism.

He began writing about village life for the local papers in 1930 and two years later was given a column in the *Western Gazette*, which he wrote for the next 50 years. In 1944 he was appointed farming correspondent of *The Field*.

Despite his farming and broadcasting commitments, Whitlock found the time to write such books as *Cowleaze Farm* (1946), *Round Roundbarrow Farm* (1948), and *Farming as a Career* (1959). He also wrote more than 50 books about animals and natural history for the Wayland and Priory Press's children's series.

In 1967, Wiltshire County Council evicted Whitlock from the 50 acres he had farmed for 23 years.

In an unhappy court battle, which went to appeal, he was accused of "bad husbandry", and the land was taken over



Whitlock (1988): visits to Cowleaze Farm

by larger neighbouring farms.

Whitlock protested about these "outrageous allegations". But the next year, despite having a further 140 acres of land, he retired from farming to spend five years travelling around Africa, India and the West Indies as an agricultural consultant for the Methodist Missionary Society. He advised peasant farmers, researched future books, wrote articles for *The Daily Telegraph* and used his dowsing skills to find water for a Ghanaian tribe.

After returning to Britain, Whitlock produced a torrent of books: *Whitlock's Wessex* (1975), *Gentle Giants: the past, present and future of the Heavy Horse* (1976),

*Everyday Life of the Maya* (1976), *Book of Bulls* (1977), *Thinking about Rural Development* (1978), *Thinking About Food* (1978), *Birds at Risk* (1981) and *Water Divining and other Dowsing* (1982).

In *The Lost Village* (1988), he lamented the passing of traditional country life. But he described his childhood without sentimentality, and gently mocked those who idealised the rural past.

"In my day it was very, very poor," he wrote. "The big change is that when I was a boy, if you walked down the street you knew everyone you met. When the bell tolled, you knew who had died."

Whitlock was married and had three children.

*No relation to our branch of the family but thought you might like the cutting*