RALPH WHITLOCK

NP376 THE TIMES 30 NOV 1995

Ralph Whitlock, writer and farmer, died on October 22 aged 81. He was born on February 7, 1914.

RALPH WHITLOCK was the last of the great quartet of modern writers on farming and rural life — which comprised Arthur Street, Ralph Wightman and Rolf Gardiner — and with them he was heir to a tradition of writing which began with William Cobbett and which included W.H. Hudson and Richard Jefferies, Flora Thompson and Edith Olivier.

He owed his gifts of communication to his aptitude for learning and listening: listening to his father's reminiscences of life before the First World War, and learning, first at Bishop Wordsworth's School, Salisbury, and later in the hard school of experience writing as a freelance for local papers.

Whitlock began his writing career by spotting a gap in the market: community news in the local press did not include coverage of his home village of Pitton. He proceeded to make good use of this omission, writing in two, sometimes three, papers each week — to the not inconsiderable benefit of his family's finances. His knowledge of rural life and lore, gained at first-hand, distinguished his weekly columns and by 1932 Whitlock had embarked on a career which was to last more than fifty years, writing the *Western Gazette*'s countryside column.

In 1944 Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, Editor of *The Field*, invited Whitlock to submit a series of articles on farming, which led to his tenure as that magazine's farming correspondent from 1946 to 1974. Later he wrote regularly for both *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Manchester Guardian Weekly*.

Doubtless, it was this journalistic discipline which gave to Whitlock's writing the grace and fluency that facilitated his prodigious output. He wrote well over a hundred books, excluding new editions of earlier works. There was, indeed, sometimes a direct link between his press pieces and his books. Collections such as *Roundbarrow Farm* (1946) and *Letters from the English Countryside* (1992) were amassed from his journalistic cuttings. But in his writing, as in other fields, Whitlock had a gift for bringing his experience in one sphere of activity to bear upon others at first glance quite unrelated.

As a devout Methodist, Whitlock succeeded in many aspects of his life in demonstrating the Parable of the Talents. His radio broadcasts shortly after the war served as his apprenticeship for his BBC *Children's Hour* series *Cowleaze Farm*, which ran from 1946 until the end of *Children's Hour* in 1962, for his Radio 4 series *Farming Magazine* and for his popular appearances on the panel of *Any Questions* and on BBC Television's *Slightly Quizzical*.

In 1968 Whitlock retired from farming and spent the next five years travelling in Africa, the Caribbean and India, as agricultural consultant to the Methodist Missionary Society. Here, again, his talents afforded their return when an Indian blacksmith needed to know how to make a zigzag harrow, or the dowser's fork found water for Ghanaian tribesmen.

His return to England in 1973 allowed Whitlock to continue writing. This yielded the two latter volumes of his great trilogy of life in Pitton: *The Lost Village* (1988) and *A Victorian Village* (1990), among many other works. Through his generosity these and much of his professional library is now housed at a named collection in the public library at Salisbury. His last book was published in February of this year: his autobiography was Whitlock's one major outstanding project.

Ralph Whitlock will be remembered also for his role in the establishment of the Bentley Wood Nature Reserve in 1983. This 2,000-acre area of woodland on the Hampshire-Wiltshire border was acquired through a bequest of the late Lady Colman, and Whitlock was both a trustee and honorary warden.

He is survived by his wife, Hilda, two daughters and a son.