In 1917 the British home front faced a test of endurance and its most obvious expression throughout the year was the ‘food question’. It was a year in which ‘good corn day[s], wind and sun’ were assiduously counted.\(^1\) Amid long term political and cultural debates on agricultural decline and the emptying of the countryside, the British government was suddenly forced to acknowledge that dependence on distant lands for cheap staple food was an inappropriate assumption in total war. In particular, the sinking of ‘wheat ships’ during the unrestricted U-boat campaign unleashed in February 1917 raised the spectre of the calamitous undoing of the soldier’s sacrifice as food scarcity threatened prospects for victory. Until the harvest and beyond the crisis conditions of ‘food security’ led to an unforeseen addition to the essential war industries. On 11 February 1917 the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, told Lord Riddell, ‘The nation knows that food, ships, coal and transport are vital, and that we have now reached the point when these industries can be no further depleted.’\(^2\) In March 1917 the War Emergency Committee of the Royal Agricultural Society of England pondered the effects of the U-Boat campaign and asked its membership, ‘Do those who live tucked away in quiet corners of England fully realize that one of the most potent ways of combating this danger and thus avoiding disaster is by producing all the food possible here—now and at once?’\(^3\)

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War had come to the fields. Throughout the spring months Board of Agriculture reports described unsatisfactory sowing conditions in Britain, especially in the west where re-sowing was necessary. Food producers, especially skilled ploughmen, became essential war workers, as the nation was implored to ‘Eat within your tether’ and ‘Spare at the brink and not at the bottom’. As gun and shell output required National Organisation in 1915, so ‘All hands to the plough’ suddenly had a similar resonance in the lexicon of ‘all-out’ war. As debates on citizenship were intertwined with the raising of Kitchener’s New Armies in 1914–15, so the emergence of an agricultural army in 1917 drew attention to the ever widening implications of total war. The conditions necessary for the eventual decisive blow became endurance, social cohesion and the management of privation in civilian societies on the home fronts. As a precondition of victory, the new importance of sowing and harvesting positioned the tractor, alongside the tank, as mechanical expressions and eventual icons of ‘late’ remobilisation. The strategic importance of food production in 1917 was accompanied by the clamour of exhortation, for example, ‘making effort and sacrifices commensurate with the interests at stake’.

It was the relationship between exemplary activity and regulation in the broader context of voluntarism and compulsion in food production which will be the focus of this essay, with particular emphasis on managing agricultural labour. In April 1917 the draft Corn Production Bill announced the government’s statutory framework for increasing home agricultural output in 1917. But by the time that it was enacted much had been done that arose from direction tempered with co-operation and precept matched by example, especially in translating national interest into local action. For example, in 1917 the food crisis became a ‘reasonable excuse’, within the education acts, to release children under 12 years from elementary schools for agricultural work, until a letter to magistrates from the Home Office in conjunction with the boards of Agriculture and Education, dated 17 August 1917, deprecated the numerous local instances of children being kept away from school for employment on farms.

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