

A distinctive service: Ruth Uzzell, the National Union of Agricultural Workers, and the place of women in interwar rural trade unionism

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A distinctive service: Ruth Uzzell, the National Union of Agricultural Workers, and the place of women in interwar rural trade unionism

Abstract

This article analyses the contribution that Ruth Uzzell made to the National Union of Agricultural Workers in the interwar years. Born into a rural working-class family, Uzzell advanced up the hierarchy of the NUAW and sat on its Executive Committee for 22 years. She was a formidable campaigner and public speaker, travelling the country defending the rights of agricultural workers to decent pay and conditions but her name has largely been forgotten to history. The article assesses her position as the only woman in a leadership position of a male-dominated trade union. Who were her inspirations? How did she manage a family life and a life of union activism? What barriers did she face as a woman in the NUAW and how did she overcome these? The article considers how 'distinctive' her service was and what it tells us about the place of women in interwar rural trade unionism as a whole.

Introduction

At the end of 1945 the leadership of the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) paid warm tribute to one its leading lights, Ruth Uzzell, whose death it described as a great loss to the cause. Born into a rural working-class family in 1880, Uzzell served on the Executive Committee (EC) of the NUAW for twenty-two years between 1922 and 1944. She was frequently chosen as a delegate to represent the NUAW at the Trade Union Congress and Labour Party conferences and she was also a member of many deputations to Ministers and Members of Parliament to push for agricultural legislation. Her devotion to the cause of the agricultural worker was said to 'permeate her whole character and career'.¹ NUAW President Edwin Gooch pronounced Uzzell 'a truly remarkable woman', whilst the union magazine *The Land Worker* remembered her as a 'beloved comrade'.² The union concluded

¹ Museum of English Rural Life (hereafter MERL), SR NUAW, B/VI/10, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1946/7

² MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/10, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1946/7; 'Death of Mrs Ruth Uzzell', *The Land Worker*, December 1945, p. 7

that Uzzell 'had rendered distinctive service' to the movement, which was 'poorer for her passing'.³

Although the agricultural worker remained at the core of Uzzell's political activism throughout her life she crossed boundaries between organisations and juggled other roles that were rooted in her local community of Oxford.⁴ She was active in various Oxford organisations including the District Co-operative Society, serving on their finance and trade committees, and from 1937, on the management committee.⁵ From the late 1920s she also threw herself into local politics. Alongside her husband Harry she was a key member of the newly formed Labour Party branch for Cowley and Iffley, and in 1935 Uzzell became the first woman elected for Labour on to Oxford City Council.⁶ One of 19 women who were elected councillors in Oxford between 1918 and 1939, Uzzell served a three-year term between 1935 and 1938.⁷ Whilst Uzzell's background and politics set her apart in Oxford, where the majority of female councillors were from upper and middle class circles, she joined a small but growing band of women elected on to English councils across the political parties in the

³ MERL, SR 6NUAW, B/21, Annual report and balance sheet for the year 1945, p. 35

⁴ For an interesting overview of the way women navigated various responsibilities at the local level see Hunt, Karen and Hannam, June, 'Towards an archaeology of Interwar women's politics: the local and the everyday', in Gottlieb, Julie and Toye, Richard, eds, *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 124-141

⁵ Oxford History Centre (hereafter OHC), B39/A2/1-2 Oxford Co-operative Society, Management committee minute book, 1934-1947. On the history of the Co-operative movement and its links with the labour movement in the interwar years see Nicole Robertson, 'The political dividend: Co-operative parties in the Midlands, 1917-39', in Worley, Matthew, ed., *Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities and Experiences of local Labour parties and Members, 1918-1945* (Aldershot, 2005), pp.147-69; Nicole Roberston, ' "A Union of forces marching in the same direction": The relationship between the Co-operative and Labour parties, 1918-1939', in Worley, Mattew, ed., *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1890-1939* (Aldershot, 2009), pp. 213-30

⁶ 'Labour Gains in City Council Election', *Oxford Times*, 8th, 1935. Harry Uzzell went on to gain a seat in the same ward at the 1936 elections, which took Labour representation on the Council to 12 seats. Ruth and Harry were the first married couple to represent Labour (or any party) on Oxford council. For an overview of Labour politics in Oxford see Duncan Bowie, *Reform and Revolt in the City of Dreaming Spires: Radical, Socialist and Communist Politics in the City of Oxford, 1830-1980* (London, 2018)

⁷ OHC, OCA 1/1/PR2/17-30, Oxford City Municipal Yearbooks, 1918-1939

interwar years.⁸ Uzzell's election to Oxford City council opened her eyes to, in her words, the 'jiggery-pockery' of local politics; she argued that women had 'to try and clear up some of the damnable mess the men had made'.⁹ Lord Pakenham, who knew Uzzell through Oxford Labour Party circles, saw her as a role model with an enduring legacy. 'In every movement', he wrote in tribute, 'there are a few men and women who, in their lives and afterwards, are always remembered as patterns or models by their fellows. Such a one, pre-eminently, was Mrs Uzzell. She, if anyone, was the genuine article – the real Socialist'.¹⁰

Uzzell's place within the agricultural trade union movement and the Oxford Labour Party was acknowledged during her lifetime and commemorated immediately following her death. Since then her name has faded into history and her reputation is now uncertain. In his study of agriculture in the run up to the Second World War Alan Wilt claims that considering the NUAW's circumspect attitude towards women as workers and members, Uzzell's place on the EC was nothing more than 'a token appointment'.¹¹ Clare Griffiths on the other hand, whilst characterising trade unionism in the interwar countryside as 'predominately a male enterprise', classifies Uzzell as 'a true stalwart' who 'enjoyed much popularity within the union'.¹² Beyond these brief and somewhat contradictory views, histories of interwar women's political activism, agriculture and trade unionism overlook

⁸ Sam Davies, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences in the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900-1939* (Keele, 1996); Cathy Hunt, "'Success with the Ladies": An Examination of women's experiences as Labour councillors in interwar Coventry', *Midland History*, 32, 1 (2007), pp. 141-59; Karen Hunt, 'Making politics in local communities: Labour women in Interwar Manchester', in Worley, Matthew, ed., *Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918-45* (London, 2005), pp. 79-101; Anna Muggeridge, '“That so Ancient a City Should have Elected a Woman as Mayor is a Sign of the times”: Women and local government in Worcester before 1939', *Midland History*, 48, 3 (2023), pp. 352-368; Anna Muggeridge, 'Women and Politics in Smethwick, 1918-1929', *Midland History*, 47, 2 (2022), pp. 191-207

⁹ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/6, Report for the Biennial Conference for 1932; MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/8, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1940

¹⁰ *Oxford Times*, 9th November 1945

¹¹ Alan Wilt, *Food for War: Agriculture and Rearmament in Britain before the Second World War* (Oxford, 2001), p. 144

¹² Clare V. J. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside: The Politics and Rural Britain, 1918-1939* (Oxford, 2007), p. 197

Uzzells' contribution. This article addresses this lack of recognition. Whilst it offers the first detailed assessment of Uzzell's personal and political life, it concentrates on her service within the NUAW and her related work on agricultural wages boards, not her council or other committee work. It will focus on Uzzells' background and family, her inspirations and causes, to reveal the barriers faced by women involved in interwar rural trade unionism and suggest some reasons why Uzzell was able to overcome them.

To understand her influences and motivations, the following section below will sketch out her early biographical details, not an easy task for a girl born into the Victorian rural labouring class. As Ruth Davidson has shown, although working-class female activism could be ignited for a range of religious, economic, cultural, community and family reasons, women's activities and impulses are difficult to excavate as they are largely lost to the public record.¹³ Uzzell didn't leave any personal records so here a range of census and archival material will be used to piece together Uzzell's background and family life. How did these shape her path into agricultural trade unionism and public activism? Who were her influences and role models? The next two sections will focus on Uzzell's place in the NUAW, her position as a woman on the EC and the campaigns that she championed. What barriers did she face as a woman in a male-dominated union and how did she overcome these? How did she manage family life and a public, political life? Did she look to bolster female membership, defend women's paid labour and support issues traditionally associated with women, such as welfare and housing, or was her position more complex than this?

Focusing on these questions enables the conclusion to reflect on the union's depiction of Uzzell as 'distinctive'. Was she distinctive within the NUAW in terms of her gender, her

¹³ Ruth Davidson, 'Working-class women activists: citizenship at the local level', in Ackers, Peter, and Reid, Alastair. J., eds, *Alternatives to state-socialism in Britain: Other worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 2016), pp. 93-120

politics and the causes she fought for? Can she be considered distinctive in comparison to other female interwar trade unionists or political activists? What does her service tell us about the place of women in the agricultural trade union movement in the interwar years? The NUAW was an organisation founded, devised and led by men for men, with the place of women consistently challenged and undermined. Uzzell broke through layers of prejudice and numerous obstacles to become a prominent and influential figure at a time when, as Griffiths and David Pretty have argued, there is little evidence that women held any substantial roles at even the lower levels of the union hierarchy in England and Wales.¹⁴ Uzzell herself, although a supporter of women's rights, encouraged women to back their men in the fight for better pay and conditions rather than publicly supporting more women into leadership roles in the union. Her place within a rural trade union focusing on the position of the male agricultural worker therefore offers a different perspective on interwar women's activism.

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Ruth Uzzell, nee Freeman, was born on October 7th, 1880, in the south Warwickshire village of Tysoe, the second daughter of Thomas and Mary. Two further children, a son and daughter, followed in 1883 and 1886.¹⁵ Although we know little of Uzzell's early life, the environment into which she was born clearly had a lifelong influence. Tysoe, made famous by M. K. Ashby's autobiography of her agricultural trade unionist father Joseph, consisted of a trinity of hamlets, Upper, Church and Temple, the Freeman's being resident of Upper. In the mid nineteenth century the village was dominated by three religious buildings (the Anglican Church had been joined by Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist Chapels) and a new

¹⁴ Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside*, pp. 197-8; David A. Pretty, 'Women and trade unionism in Welsh rural society, 1889-1850', *Llafur*, 5 (1990), pp. 5-13

¹⁵ RG12/2468, Census of 1891, Tysoe, Warwickshire

National School, opened in 1856, with the green the 'great communal meeting-place' of the village.¹⁶ Tysoe was eleven miles from Barford, home of Joseph Arch and headquarters of his nascent National Agricultural Labourers Union. When Arch visited Tysoe in the summer of 1872, he was heralded by a brass band, and spoke on a platform cobbled together from boxes in front of a large crowd of labouring men and women from local villages, railway navvies and farmers. Arch spoke of 'the unnecessary misery' of his fellow workers, 'the workhouse future, the denial of manhood to labourers, the down-thrusting of their children' and pressed the labourers to stand 'firm for their rights'. The meeting ended with Arch emboldening men to join the Tysoe branch of the union.¹⁷

Both Uzzell's grandfather and father worked as agricultural labourers at the time of Arch's visit and although there is no official record, may have been present at the rally and signed up to be members of the union.¹⁸ Her father, who went on to work as a miller's journeyman and carrier, was branded a political 'radical' and was regarded locally as a 'rebel'. It was from him that Uzzell was said to have 'inherited a fearless and independent spirit'.¹⁹ In a 1924 speech, she drew on her background as an agricultural labourers' daughter who 'knew what it was to be one of six brought up on 12s a week'. Her upbringing and her early knowledge of hardship, she argued, underpinned her service to the union.²⁰ Thus, in common with other female working-class activists, it was childhood experience of low wages and poverty and a radical family tradition that inspired Uzzell's entry into political action.

¹⁶ M. K. Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe, 1859-1919* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 8-9

¹⁷ Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe*, pp. 59-62

¹⁸ Reg Groves claims that both Thomas and James Uzzell, Ruth's father and grandfather, were members of the Union. See Reg Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle! The History of the Farm Workers' Union* (London, 1949; 1981 edition), p. 231

¹⁹ 'Mrs Uzzell Stands Down', *The Land Worker*, January 1945, p. 3

²⁰ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/3, Reports of the 10th General Council Meeting for 1918 and the Biennial Conferences for 1920, 1922, 1924 and 1926

Nothing is known of Uzzell's education but her early working life was typical of young rural working-class women in late Victorian England, equipped with a rudimentary state schooling and few local economic opportunities. A growing reluctance among rural labouring families to send their daughters to work in the fields and an increasing distaste for fieldwork among young women themselves, alongside a burgeoning demand in local villages and towns for servants, led to the growth of female domestic work. Despite gaining a reputation among the rural working class as a better prospect than field work, domestic service was defined by low pay, long hours, and restrictive practices. The census of 1891 noted demand for servants stripped 'the rural districts of their young girls' and led to boys outnumbering girls 'in country places between the ages of 10 and 20'.²¹ It was in this decade that Uzzell began her working life, first as a servant in a local farmhouse before migrating into town, a path followed by thousands of rural girls. By the time of the 1901 census, aged 20, she was working as a general servant (domestic) for veterinary surgeon John Crowhurst in Stratford-on-Avon. She lived in his household, which also included his wife and three teenage children.²²

Two year later, in 1903, Ruth married Harry Uzzell, a boilermaker on the railways. They set up home in Harry's native Gloucestershire where they welcomed their first child, Kenneth, in 1905. Two daughters, Phyllis (1908) and Doris (1910), were born in Didcot (then in Berkshire) where the family was based until the late 1920s when they moved to Headington, Oxford. Marriage marked a transition into a new family life for Uzzell. Whether Ruth was involved in Labour politics before she met Harry is not known, nor do we know how or where they met, but her marriage seems to have provided the foundation of a

²¹ Census of England and Wales, 1891, General Report, Vol VI (London, 1893), p. 40

²² RG 13/2938, Census of 1901, Stratford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

formal political education and engagement. It was certainly the beginning of a lifelong supportive partnership which acted as a fulcrum to her activism. The Uzzell's were both members of the Independent Labour Party at the start of their marriage and they became acquainted with Keir Hardie, Bruce Glasier and 'other Socialist pioneers'.²³ In later life Uzzell reminisced about the 'old idealism' found in the ILP at this time, 'something of the spirit of the Old Tolpuddle martyrs. People felt they had something to work for', she recalled, 'and, if necessary, something to die for'.²⁴ Also significant was her first meeting with agricultural trade union leader George Edwards, which she described as a 'red-letter day' in her life.²⁵ These encounters with key political figures were formative. As Reg Groves argues in his 1949 history of the farm workers' union *Sharpen the Sickle!*, Uzzell was 'one of the many gifted working-class women who found in the Labour Movement a way to selfless and unswerving service to their class'.²⁶

Alongside her upbringing and early employment experiences, these connections launched Uzzell into working for the NUAW, firstly as a branch secretary, where she was said to have cycled up to ten miles each way to collect members' contributions. Her abilities were quickly recognised, and she later moved on to become a district committee secretary and then a county district secretary. Harry Uzzell was also very active in the Berkshire NUAW. He served as a branch, district and county secretary and in 1920 he represented the Appleford branch at the biennial conference.²⁷ He was described in 1922 as 'one of the best' local

²³ 'Mrs Uzzell Stands Down', *The Land Worker*, January 1945, p. 3

²⁴ MERL, SR/NUAW, B/VI/8, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1940

²⁵ It is not clear when this encounter took place but it is referred to in both 'Mrs Uzzell Stands Down', *The Land Worker*, January 1945, p. 3 and in Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle!*, p. 231

²⁶ Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle!*, p. 230

²⁷ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/3, Reports of the 10th General Council Meeting for 1918 and the Biennial Conferences for 1920, 1922, 1924 and 1926

organisers.²⁸ Together Ruth and Harry Uzzell addressed meetings across Berkshire, a county where union organisation was somewhat moribund after the war. They often spoke to sparse and sceptical audiences ('more likely to end in a duckpond than elsewhere') but their efforts began to pay off.²⁹ In June 1922 Ruth Uzzell was sent to the biennial conference to represent the Didcot branch of the NUAW. Her reputation was clearly mounting because at that meeting she was elected to the EC, coming second in the ballot with 26 votes. This was a seat she held until shortly before her death.³⁰

Impassioned and dedicated, Uzzell's childhood and early married life in rural Warwickshire and Berkshire were formative in igniting her activism. She appears to have developed her political understanding from influential male role models in her life: her father, her husband, and her political associates within both rural trade unionism and the wider Labour movement, networks which nurtured her route to the upper echelons of the NUAW. Her position and longevity within the NUAW will be analysed in more detail in the next section.

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The NUAW was the largest of the three main British trade unions for agricultural workers in the interwar years.³¹ Although figures are disputed there was growth in branch and membership numbers after World War One, buoyed by government control of minimum wages in 1917 under the Corn Production Act. In 1920 the NUAW recorded a high point of 2,735 branches, with around 180,000 members.³² These figures dropped in the early 1920s when state wage regulation was withdrawn. Branch numbers fell to around 1,000 in the late

²⁸ *The Land Worker*, February 1922, p. 10

²⁹ 'Death of Mrs Ruth Uzzell', *Oxford Times*, 9th November 1945

³⁰ 'Death of Mrs Ruth Uzzell', *Oxford Times*, 9th November 1945

³¹ Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside*, p. 185

³² MERL SR, NUAW, B/21, Report and balance sheet for the year 1945; Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside*, p. 187

1920s and 1930s, although membership stabilised somewhat when the new Labour government re-introduced wages boards in 1924. The NUAW was open to 'any worker employed on, or about, the land'. Although agricultural workers were its main constituency, in some areas its membership was more diverse, a reflection of the often fluid and dual nature of rural labour.³³ It was however overwhelmingly a male union: precise numbers are not recorded but in the early 1920s the NUAW estimated that women made up about five per cent of its membership.³⁴ Although women's agricultural work was most prominent in areas where union membership was weak, notably the north-east, in some regions such as Lincolnshire, where women made up about 15 per cent of agricultural workers, they were underrepresented in the union.³⁵ If, as Griffiths has argued, women's main roles in the union were ancillary, 'as caterers and supporters to the main players', how did Uzzell secure her position in the NUAW hierarchy, what obstacles did she face and how did she overcome these?³⁶

If the First World War strengthened the position of the NUAW and the male farm worker, it also offered women more prominent roles in agricultural work, most notably through the Women's Land Army, and in campaigning and committee work in rural organisations such as the Women's War Agricultural Committees and the Women's Institutes.³⁷ The place of women was often disputed and individual experiences were shaped by age, family life, class background and social status, but the war highlighted the capabilities of women in rural

³³ Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside*, p. 194

³⁴ MERL, SR NUAW, D/II/ 1, Historical notes

³⁵ Nicola Verdon, 'Agricultural labour and the contested nature of women's work in interwar England and Wales', *Historical Journal* 54, 1 (2009), pp. 109-30 (p. 115)

³⁶ Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside*, p. 196

³⁷ Nicola Verdon, 'Left out in the cold: Village women and agricultural labour in England and Wales during the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27, 1 (2016), pp. 1-25; Bonnie J. White, *The Women's Land Army in First World War Britain*, (Basingstoke, 2014); Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (new edition, London, 2015)

labour, administration and leadership. This context may provide an explanation for the emergence of women, albeit a very small number, into organisational and committee roles in the NUAW in the years immediately following the war.

Uzzell was not the first woman to sit on the EC of the NUAW. This honour belongs to Catherine Flory, who was elected in June 1920. Her background was similar to Uzzell's – she was born into an agricultural labourer's family in mid-1860s Suffolk – but unlike Uzzell she was married to an agricultural worker and had worked on the land herself. She drew on some of these experiences for a piece published in *The Landworker* in 1921. 'I have helped in the hay', she wrote, 'I have spread dung; hoed mangle; pulled and heaped all kinds of roots ready for the cart; milked the cows; fed the pigs; driven cattle and sheep to market, and have even driven them to the station and helped with the loading of them into trucks'. She compared agricultural labour favourably with other types of work, for its physical and psychological rewards, if not economic. 'I have worked in offices in London and in provincial towns', she concluded, 'but to me the call is the call of the land'.³⁸

By the time of her election to the EC the Flory's were settled in Somerset, where Catherine represented the Coombe St Nicholas branch of the NUAW and became a well-known figure on other local organisations, including the Chard Board of Guardians. She served on the Organising and Political committee of the NUAW and was granted the use of the union's 'lady's cycle' for her work. She was absent from the October 1920 EC meeting due to having 'met with an accident' whilst on union business.³⁹ Flory had inherited the bicycle from the NUAW's first woman organiser, Miss Gertrude Smith, who had been appointed in the summer of 1919. Despite being described as having 'the advantage of being a practical farm

³⁸ Catherine Flory, 'Give the woman a chance', *The Land Worker*, July 1921, p. 7

³⁹ MERL, SR NUAW, B/1/5, Minutes of the Executive Committee, October 1918 to December 1921

worker', Smith's tenure, for reasons not documented, was short-lived.⁴⁰ In August 1922 Flory transferred to the Finance and General Purposes committee, and for several months between September 1922 and January 1923 Uzzell and Flory served the EC simultaneously. The minutes of the February 1923 EC note Flory's absence and she never returned, possibly due to some irregular expenses' claims, although the records do not provide any commentary on her withdrawal from union work.⁴¹

After Flory's departure Uzzell was the sole woman in the NUAW's leadership. Elections to the EC took place at the biennial conference through a combination of votes from the conference floor and by ballot at branch level. Between 1922 and 1940 she consistently came first or second in these elections. Uzzell confronted an all-male environment at conference and committee. Monthly meetings were held in a foreboding panelled room in the union's headquarters in London (see Figure 1), and although some of the leadership were accompanied by their wives at conference venues, Uzzell was usually the only female on the floor.⁴² During his 1930 speech, the Minister of Pensions scanned the room and observed the 'men and the one woman' he was addressing that morning. A report on the 1936 conference noted the lack of diversity; 'few of the delegates were young men', with Uzzell 'the one woman present'.⁴³

Central to Uzzell's NUAW service was her work on the Organising and Political, which she joined soon after being elected to the EC in 1922. She addressed meetings at local branches, helped to set up branches in areas without one and fronted special campaigns. 'Never have I

⁴⁰ 'Organising Secretary's Report', *The Land Worker*, July 1919, p. 7

⁴¹ MERL, SR NUAW, B/1/6, Minutes of the Executive Committee, January 1922 to December 1925; Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside*, pp. 196-7

⁴² Edwin Gooch, President of the NUAW from 1928 was frequently accompanied by his wife Ethel who was an activist and local public figure in her own right. She was a Norfolk County Councillor, Chair of the Maternity and Welfare Committee, and became an Alderman and JP.

⁴³ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/5, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1930; *Reynolds News*, 10th May 1936

been in a fight when a finer spirit was displayed', she wrote of her visit to the striking farm workers of Norfolk in 1923.⁴⁴ Most meetings were less memorable, usually characterised by platforms assembled from farm carts, rickety chairs, and empty beer crates, in the open-air whatever the weather. These spaces were public, often outdoors and not very salubrious. Uzzell's presence contravened usual interwar gender protocols and challenged 'ladylike' codes of behaviour. She was exposed to banter and heckling from male-dominated audiences, and judgement about her character from both men and women. In 1932 the *Louth Standard* published a note from a Mrs R. A. Uzzell of High Holme Road, who wanted it to be known that she was 'not the Mrs Ruth Uzzell who addressed a Labour meeting in Louth a few days ago'. The politics and conduct of the two Ruth Uzzell's clearly did not correspond! Audiences in union strongholds like Norfolk and south Lincolnshire were however, usually large and appreciative.

Uzzell's services were much in demand, and she toured the country by rail. In 1931 she was requested to help in Wiltshire where the Wages Board had been given notice by local farmers that they were going to increase hours in June, but she was already booked for tours of Norfolk and Lincolnshire. In a period of four months across that summer of 1931 she addressed meetings in Shropshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex and Gloucestershire.⁴⁵ She told a meeting in Louth marketplace, Lincolnshire, in 1932 that she had visited 12 to 14 counties in the past year fighting proposed wage reductions, and in 1936 she was described by Labour politician Oliver Baldwin as 'easily the best woman outdoor speaker in the country'.⁴⁶ Uzzell therefore

⁴⁴ Mrs Uzzell, 'Thanks to the Women', *The Land Worker*, May 1923, p. 11

⁴⁵ MERL, SR NUAW, B/1/7, Minutes of the Executive Committee, January 1926 to December 1931

⁴⁶ *Louth Standard*, 11th June 1932; *Weekly Dispatch*, 23rd August 1936

accrued a national reputation for her campaigning on behalf of the agricultural worker, 'a speaker of unusual liveliness and interest'.⁴⁷

Her place in the NUAW was not undisputed however, and there were two main grounds on which Uzzell faced criticism. The first was based on the fact she, along with other members of the union leadership, came from outside the agricultural workforce. At the 1924 conference, where Uzzell had topped the vote, a resolution was put forward by delegate Craven from Lincolnshire that only 'bona-fide' agricultural workers should be eligible for election to the EC and 'there was sufficient knowledge even in their own ranks as agricultural workers to manage their own affairs'. Speaking from personal experience Uzzell argued that sometimes if there had not been a railwayman to act as a branch secretary, 'they would not have had a branch'. She pointed out that this was not because the agricultural worker 'was not capable' but because 'he was afraid' of being victimised by his employer. On her own position, whilst acknowledging that she was not an agricultural labourers' wife, she pointed out that her family background fitted her with the understanding to give 'her service heartily to the Union'. The resolution was shot down by other prominent names. Edwin Gooch, a printer, journalist and political organiser from Norfolk who went on to become President of the NUAW in 1928, argued he 'desired to give all he possibly could to the services of the Union'.⁴⁸

The second point of attack was based on Uzzell's gender. At the 1930 conference she had once again topped the vote for election to the EC. On supporting a resolution that election should be solely by ballot through the local branches and not at the conference, delegate Larter from Norfolk suggested that this was the only way of eliciting 'the true opinion of the

⁴⁷ 'Mrs Uzzell stands down', *The Land Worker*, January 1945, p. 3

⁴⁸ MERL, MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/3, Reports of the 10th General Council Meeting for 1918 and the Biennial Conferences for 1920, 1922, 1924 and 1926

people'. Uzzell's vote, he went on, represented 'after all, a great deal of sentiment'. In a robust defence Uzzell told conference that she 'resented the remark' that her 24 votes derived from emotion rather than reason. She claimed that she 'had never asked for preferential treatment because she was a woman', and that she could 'rightly claim, without fear of contradiction, that she had worked as hard as any man for the movement'. She offered to stand down if the floor believed 'her seat had been given back to her because she was a woman'. Mr Larter, suitably castigated, claimed he 'did not insinuate anything, and if he had offended the lady he apologised'.⁴⁹

How was Uzzell able to maintain her position within the leadership of the union, when the women who came before her had not? The first explanation lies in her personality, and her skills in debate and people-management. Uzzell was direct, humorous, and sharp. Far from being deterred or silenced by an all-male audience, Uzzell thrived, and she cultivated a confidence in travelling, in public speaking and in holding her own in a male-dominated trade union organisation. Descriptions of her frequently draw upon her character and temperament, highlighting her 'resonant voice', her 'quick understanding', her 'eloquent and pithy speeches' and 'her forceful, energetic and withal loveable personality'.⁵⁰ She often used wit as a method to silence hecklers and to win the confidence of the floor. She caused laughter at the 1930 conference when she explained her reason for being brief in her speech: 'because I know very well the married men want to hear their own voices here, even if they cannot hear them at home'.⁵¹ On being interrupted by a 'little insignificant man' at a meeting in Oxford who had asked her 'Don't you wish you were a man?', she replied,

⁴⁹ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/5, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1930

⁵⁰ 'Mrs Uzzell Stands Down', *The Landworker*, January 1945, p.3; MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/10, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1946/7; 'Death of Mrs Uzzell', *The Landworker*, December 1945

⁵¹ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/5, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1930

‘Yes, don’t you?’.⁵² She was not afraid to be combative but rather than being condemned for this, she earned recognition for being ‘a match for all the men’ (Figure 2).⁵³

Uzzell also won the trust and respect of the rank-and-file members, the agricultural workers themselves. She had extensive knowledge and sympathy of rural women’s lives, taking time to visit them in their homes and share their stories. ‘I love to get in touch with the actual conditions of our members and to make acquaintance with the women folk’, she wrote.⁵⁴

Her tireless defence of farm workers and her work to improve their conditions (the focus of the next section) meant they gave her ‘their confidence to the very end’.⁵⁵ She was able to establish her place and authenticity by evoking her own childhood and background; she was one of them. But none of this would have been possible without the backing of her family.

As Stephanie Ward has shown, working-class women activists had to negotiate the tensions between a public, political identity and a domestic, maternal self.⁵⁶ Unpaid union work demanded substantial time commitment and financial support. Uzzell’s union longevity was maintained by her husband, who was the sole breadwinner of the family and whose political activism supported and shadowed her own. Although political marriages were not unusual, as Karen Hunt has shown in 1920s Labour circles in Manchester, equally active partnerships, or partnerships where the woman outshone the man, were.⁵⁷ The age of Uzzell’s children was also significant, as they were teenagers when she was first elected to the EC and therefore less in need of supervision. She was not confronted by some of the practical obstacles of family life, childcare and having to work for a living that stymied other political

⁵² MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/8, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1940

⁵³ ‘Mrs Uzzell – alone – is a match for all the men’, *The Land Worker*, July 1930, p. 4

⁵⁴ Mrs Uzzell, ‘A Woman at Work in the Villages’, *The Land Worker*, April 1925, p. 1

⁵⁵ MERL, SR 6NUAW, B/21, Annual report and balance sheet for the year 1945, p. 35

⁵⁶ Stephanie Ward, ‘Labour activism and the political self in inter-war working-class women’s politics’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 30, 1 (2019), pp. 29-52

⁵⁷ Hunt, ‘Making politics in local communities’, p. 85

women. But her commitments to the NUAW, let alone other organisations, frequently took her away from home, and she was no stranger to personal tragedy. In 1929 the Uzzell's youngest daughter Doris died at home of pneumonia at just 19 years of age. Although she left no clues about how she juggled domestic demands with other responsibilities, her family situation and marriage facilitated rather than encumbered her politics and played a large part in her NUAW longevity.

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At the heart of NUAW's ambition to improve the lives of agricultural workers was the issue of wages. In the early 1920s the aim was on re-introducing wage regulation, and after 1924 when this achieved, it was on maintaining wage levels and benefits, and monitoring the operation of the system. The emphasis was on raising the employment and working conditions of men; this was seen as the route to improve the lives of all agricultural families, and although the NUAW claimed to defend the position of women, there was much criticism of female agricultural workers in the interwar years. This section will analyse Uzzells' campaigning work through her service on the wages committees of Berkshire and Oxfordshire. It will then move on to consider NUAW views on women and consider Uzzell's position in relation to these. What were her views on women's work? Did she defend a woman's right to work and encourage women to be active in the union? How far was she interested in other issues usually connected to women's welfare?

As set up under the 1924 Agricultural Wages (Regulation) Act, county wages committees were made up of a chair (determined by the committee), two independent members appointed by the Ministry of Agriculture, and equal numbers of representatives, usually between six and eight, from employers (nominated by the National Farmers Union) and

workers (nominated by the NUAW and the Transport and General Workers Union). A Central Agricultural Wages Board for England and Wales provided a largely advisory role.⁵⁸ The main duty of the county committees under the 1924 Act was the fixing of minimum rates of wages for all workers in agriculture, including an overtime rate. For the NUAW the system had two main weaknesses, the lack of a national minimum wage below which no committee could go and the essential powerlessness of the Central Board, which could not override local decisions. The union believed this played into the hands of farmers and their representatives, who, in contrast to agricultural workers, were often skilled and experienced negotiators.⁵⁹ Echoing the opinion of the EC as a whole, Uzzell described the 1924 legislation as 'a very poor thing indeed' and called for the restoration of a Central Board that would fix national minimum rates and 'have power to lay down conditions regarding rates, allowances, hours and related matters to which all county wages committees shall confirm'.⁶⁰

As well as serving the NUAW and touring the country in the fight against wage reductions, Uzzell sat on the wages committees for both Berkshire and Oxfordshire. She was one of only a handful of women who served on the interwar agricultural wage committee machinery. In the mid-1920s seven women were appointed across the 48 county committees, and only one woman, ex-Liberal MP Margaret Wintringham, served as a member of the Central Board.⁶¹ Uzzells' experience provides us with a window into the machinations of the county committees. Strategies had to be found so that bargains could be struck between the three

⁵⁸ For further background on the interwar agricultural wages boards see Alun Howkins and Nicola Verdon, 'The state and the farm worker: the evolution of the minimum wage in agriculture in England and Wales, 1909-24', *Agricultural History Review*, 57, II, (2009), pp. 257-274

⁵⁹ Howkins and Verdon 'The evolution of the minimum agricultural wage', pp. 271-2; MERL, SR NUAW B/I/6, Minutes of the Executive Committee January 1922 to December 1925

⁶⁰ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/5, Report of the Biennial Conference 1930

⁶¹ Margaret Wintringham, 'Women and Agriculture', *Time and Tide*, 24th July 1925. Wintringham had served as Liberal MP for Louth between 1921 and 1924

different groups on the boards, and, as Uzzell pointed out, farmers representatives 'did not quote the Counties that had got to pay more, but always those that had got to pay less'.⁶² Wrangling over the membership of the committees could lead to bitter contests. Uzzell told the 1930 conference of the case where a recommended workers' representative, who was the President of the Divisional Labour Party, was turned down by the committee and a local parson was elected instead. Uzzell did not know who the parson represented but from what she had seen 'it seemed he did not represent anybody but himself'.⁶³ She was angered by the members of the Transport and General Workers Union who sat on the Berkshire committee but never attended meetings. It was, she argued, 'high time' they 'cleared out' as the NUAW was recognised 'as the bona fide union for agricultural workers'.⁶⁴ Her skills in committee work and arbitration, cut on the EC, were also vital to her service on the agricultural wages boards. She understood that radical demands would immediately be vetoed by farmers' representatives, so a more careful, step-by-step approach was necessary. This meant progress could be slow, and she urged patience from agricultural workers. She wished workers could all attend a meeting of the committees, 'for they would then see that it was very much easier to say what they ought to do than to do it'.⁶⁵ Uzzell recognised that the question of workers' hours was crucial ('it was scandalous if they had to work 50 hours a week for what they ought to receive for 44 or 48 hours a week').⁶⁶ Progress was made on the Oxfordshire committee in particular: by 1934 they had succeeded in agreeing a 48-to-50-hour week, with paid bank holidays and in getting wages back up to 30 shillings a week for ordinary male workers'. But all this had taken robust negotiation and

⁶² MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/7, Reports of the Biennial Conferences for 1934, 1936 and 1938 (1934 conference)

⁶³ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/5, Report of the Biennial Conference 1930

⁶⁴ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/8, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1940

⁶⁵ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/6, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1932

⁶⁶ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/7, Reports of the Biennial Conferences for 1934, 1936 and 1938 (1936 conference)

had been done, as she put it, 'in the teeth of very strong opposition'.⁶⁷ Nor was this much to boast about for Uzzell. She looked forward to the day when men would get 'not a miserable wage of thirty bob a week, but a wage which was going to make it possible for the agricultural workers to have a better standard of life than they had had so far'.⁶⁸

Although the NUAW argued that since the restoration of the wages boards in 1924 the claim for better wages and conditions had included women as well as men, the union cultivated a sceptical if not downright hostile stance on women as workers in agriculture.⁶⁹ During the First World War the union's Council had resolved to 'strenuously oppose' the introduction of female labour into agriculture (alongside child labour).⁷⁰ Women's place during times of economic depression in the early 1920s and early 1930s was particularly insecure as, in common with other industries, cheap female labour was seen to undermine the position of male workers.⁷¹ Many in the NUAW focused attention on the campaign for a family wage so that it would 'not be necessary for the wife or daughter to do, at any rate, the dirty work of the farm', one member wrote in the union magazine *The Land Worker*.⁷² The conviction that farmwork was unsuitable for women on a physical, moral and sanitary level, was a throwback to the Victorian era but it was an attitude that endured and even strengthened in the interwar years. Another correspondent to *The Land Worker*, a Lincolnshire branch chairman, claimed that women, on the whole, 'would be better indoors', by which he meant daughters to go into service and wives to stay at home to do 'her work', whilst another argued agricultural work for women was a 'detriment to matrimony', led to the 'neglect of

⁶⁷ Ibid (1934 conference)

⁶⁸ Ibid (1936 conference)

⁶⁹ 'Women's rates on farms', *The Land Worker*, May 1939, p. 2

⁷⁰ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/I, Reports of the 7th, 8th and 9th General Council Meetings, 1913, 1914 and 1916

⁷¹ See Verdon, 'Agricultural labour and the contested nature of women's work in interwar England and Wales', pp. 109-130 for further analysis of this issue.

⁷² J. A. Purchase, 'Should women work on the land', *The Land Worker*, January 1921, p. 4

the responsibility of motherhood', and turned women into 'beasts of burden'.⁷³ When applications for new NUAW membership were received from three married women in 1927, it was deemed not in the 'best interests' of the union to accept them.⁷⁴

At the 1932 biennial conference, a motion was moved 'that the Union protest against the employment of women on farms while so many men are unemployed who are capable farm workers'.⁷⁵ Whilst this elicited some support, particularly in relation to married women, other delegates pointed out that many women worked in market gardens and others were employed as a necessity. Mr Craven (who was now a member of the EC), whilst declaring he was 'against women working on the land', knew that if he went back to his branch in the Holland district of Lincolnshire, where women's work was widespread, and told them the conference had passed the resolution 'he would lose every member he had got'. The way to get rid of 'this difficulty', as he put it, was to push for equal pay for men and women.⁷⁶ This argument rumbled on in the background throughout the remainder of the 1930s, particularly in relation to eastern England counties where women's casual and seasonal labour in fruit, flower and sugar beet fields remained critical. 'Land work is a job for men', A. E. Monks, the organiser for south Lincolnshire and EC member wrote in 1936. 'Our men should see to it that they organise their forces to demand such wages as will abolish the necessity for women working under the conditions that now exist'.⁷⁷ These comments from men like Craven and Monks, who sat with Uzzell on the EC and, in the latter case, chaired

⁷³ W. Porter, 'No women on the land', *The Land Worker*, May 1921, p. 6; W. Willmott, 'Women on the land', *The Land Worker*, September 1921, p. 4

⁷⁴ MERL, SR NUAW, B/I/7, Minutes of the Executive Committee, January 1926 to December 1931 (here June 29th 1927)

⁷⁵ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/6, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1936

⁷⁶ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/6, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1936

⁷⁷ A. E. Monks, 'Land work is a job for men', *The Land Worker*, February 1936, p. 3

the Political and Organising Committee, shows that the backlash against women workers came from the very heart of the NUAW leadership.

We have seen that Uzzell was quick to reject the accusation that she preserved her seat on the EC because she was a woman, but what was her perspective on these arguments about the place of women workers? Like her male colleagues, her attention also largely focused on married women. She was pragmatic, pointing to the economic necessity of women's earnings to some agricultural workers' families. Most women who went to work, she argued, 'do not do so from the desire to shirk the duties and responsibilities of the home, but are forced out to work owing to the rotten economic conditions of their lives'.⁷⁸ But although she recognised women's need to work she did not necessarily conceptualise women, particularly married women, primarily as workers or defend their position as such. In 1926 she moved that a woman at headquarters should not be re-employed after her marriage and in a 1940 debate, she supported a resolution on equal pay for men and women in agriculture, not for parity but as 'the best way to get women out of the industry, because so long as farmers could get women cheaper than men, so long would women be employed'.⁷⁹

Uzzell believed the key role for women married to agricultural workers was not in working outside the home but in encouraging and supporting his union membership. For Uzzell women's role as 'the wage-spenders' in the family meant unionism was 'quite as much our question as the men's'.⁸⁰ Uzzell envisaged a variety of activities for women: nudging men to join the union if they hadn't already done so, turning out for meetings and demonstrations

⁷⁸ Mrs R. Uzzell, 'A woman's point of view', *The Land Worker*, October 1921, p. 12

⁷⁹ Griffiths, *Labour in the Countryside*, p. 197; MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/8, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1940

⁸⁰ Mrs Uzzell, 'The Women's Part', *The Land Worker*, June 1922, p. 3

(‘we can take our place with our men folk’), arranging separate women’s meetings in their branches, providing refreshments (‘Much good can often be accomplished over the teacups’), distributing *The Land Worker* into cottage homes, and backing Labour candidates in their constituencies (‘Don’t let it be said that the women let Labour down!’).⁸¹ Ultimately Uzzell argued that women’s primary role was as ‘helpmate’ to men in pursuit of union victory.⁸² She made no appeal for the equality of women workers in agriculture or for women to join the union to further their own rights. Thus, she sits outside of the main thrust of women’s trade union activism in the interwar years which, as Sarah Boston has shown, was encouraged women’s union membership, and fought for equality in the workforce, particularly in pay.⁸³ Although Uzzell sympathised with rural women’s lives, ultimately her focus was the main union cause of better male wages and working conditions, not the cause of women. In a union whose culture and structure were focused on men, there were no organisational spaces in the NUAW in which women’s needs, separate from men’s, could be furthered. Uzzell supported women’s rights and had campaigned for the female vote, but she did not seek to improve the position of women workers or encourage women to follow in her footsteps into higher level union activism. This is not to argue that Uzzell was uninterested in wider issues connected to rural women’s welfare. She understood that the poor state of the existing housing stock in rural areas had an adverse impact on women. Agricultural labourers’ homes were dilapidated and unsanitary, hovels rather than homes, and she argued that decent housing, at affordable rents, designed with the comforts and convenience of modern family life was a right not a

⁸¹ Mrs Uzzell, ‘The Women’s Part’, *The Land Worker*, June 1922, p. 3; Mrs Uzzell, ‘It is our turn now!’, *The Land Worker*, November 1922, p. 14

⁸² Mrs Uzzell, ‘Thanks to the women’, *The Land Worker*, May 1923, p. 11

⁸³ Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions* (London, 1987), ch. 6

necessity. Women, she told the 1932 conference, deserved 'another room where they could get away from their work sometimes' but the reality was that there 'were many houses that women had to live in that rich people would not dream of putting their dogs into'.⁸⁴ Uzzell also championed education rights for rural working-class children, strongly arguing that agriculture should not be a 'beneficial' industry where children could leave school before 14 years of age. This often put her in opposition to rural mothers, who were compelled by economic forces to send their children to work as soon as possible to bring earnings into the home. She urged rural mothers to strive for a different life for their children than they had enjoyed, arguing 'it was a piece of imprudence' that 'the employing class' could tell the working class when their children should cease education.⁸⁵ Uzzell valued the experience of women as mothers and homemakers, but unlike other women activists of the labour movement, these were not her focus.⁸⁶ She never sought to push a women's welfare agenda in her union, which, in its culture, membership and hierarchy focused on men.

At the 1932 conference Uzzell put forward a resolution backing world peace. Women, she argued, bore the brunt of this, raising the children who were eventually conscripted.

Delegate Larter, who two years earlier had questioned Uzzell's place on the EC, thought it appropriate this resolution had been proposed by a woman, 'because the peace of the world to a great extent depended upon the attitude of the women, and the women were the greatest sufferers in the catastrophe of war'. Larter rebuked women for not using their

⁸⁴ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/6, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1932

⁸⁵ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/7, Reports of the Biennial Conferences for 1934, 1936 and 1938 (1938 conference)

⁸⁶ On women in the Labour Party more widely see Pat Thane, 'Visions of Gender in the Making of the British Welfare State: The Case of Women in the British Labour Party and Social Policy, 1906-1945', in Gisela Bock and Pat Thane, *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s to 1950s* (London, 1991), pp. 93-118; June Hannam, 'Women and Labour politics' in Matthew Worley, ed., *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-39* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 171-192; Pamela Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics, 1918-1939* (Cambridge, 1994)

vote wisely and it 'was up to the women to see that the Governments of the world should not be the menace to peace they were at the present time'. Uzzell however, did not see this as a gendered issue; for her the Socialist movement believed in peace and 'it was the Movement that mattered'.⁸⁷ Her overriding commitment was to the rural working class, the cause more important than gender or any individual person. 'Men might come and men might go', she told the conference, 'but the Movement would always go on'. If they kept on 'striving, believing in each other, working together', she believed that 'they would eventually win together'.⁸⁸

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Like other women trade unionists and politicians of the interwar period, Uzzell worked tirelessly and toured extensively for her cause. Her commitments to the NUAW, combined with the Labour Party, the Co-Operative and other societies, took a toll and Uzzell suffered from periods of exhaustion and poor health which eventually forced her to stand down from her public roles. She was not alone in this. Cathy Hunt's research has shown how Coventry Labour councillor Alice Arnold also endured periods of physical and mental ill-health, whilst the journals of other trade unions frequently 'carried reports of women organisers health breakdowns as a result of overwork'.⁸⁹ From the middle of 1942, Uzzell was regularly absent from NUAW EC meetings because of ill health. At the end of that year, she spent some time in hospital, recuperating at the home of a relative the following spring. She attended just one EC meeting in 1943, and in December of that year the EC sent her a grant of £5 in view

⁸⁷ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/6, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1932

⁸⁸ MERL, SR NUAW, B/VI/6, Report of the Biennial Conference for 1932

⁸⁹ Hunt, "Everyone's poor relation", p. 425; Cathy Hunt, 'Sex versus class in two British trade unions in the early twentieth century', *Journal of Women's History*, 24/1 (2012), pp. 86-110 (p. 104)

of 'her long continued illness'.⁹⁰ She did not attend the 1942 or 1944 conferences, or any EC meeting in 1944. Unable to stand for re-election, she resigned at the end of that year after 22 years of service. She did continue as Vice Chair of Oxford Co-operative Society and attended meetings into 1944 before her health forced her to step down from that role the following year. Ruth Uzzell died at home in Headington on November 2nd, 1945, aged 65, of cancer. Her final months were painful, and as one obituary put it, although her illness was 'heroically borne' she had 'worked herself literally to death on behalf of the Labour cause'.⁹¹

Uzzell was moulded by her class and rural upbringing, her path into politics paved by her family background. She enjoyed a strong marital partnership which enabled her to balance family responsibilities with a wide portfolio of activism which saw her criss-crossing the country addressing village greens, town squares, conference floors and government offices to fight the cause of the agricultural worker. Her compatriots within the NUAW delineated her contribution as 'distinctive' and in some respects this was a fitting evaluation. Uzzell was a one-off, the only woman who performed an influential, long-standing leadership role in the union during the interwar years. Her gender marked her out within her own union and her service for a rural trade union distanced her from working-class women's activism more widely where the focus was overwhelmingly (although not exclusively) on urban and industrial communities. But Uzzell did not seek to distinguish herself from her male colleagues in the NUAW in the causes that she fought for, nor did not seek to further women's rights separately from men's. Uzzell put class before sex. Although not uncontested, Uzzell's place within the union was acceptable to men as she pursued rather than challenged their interests and campaigns. She believed that women had a role within

⁹⁰ MERL, SR NUAW, B/1/10, Minutes of the Executive Committee, January 1941 to December 1943

⁹¹ *Oxford Times*, 9th November 1945

the movement, but she did not encourage them into formal activism or to follow in her footsteps. Ultimately despite Uzzell's leadership position, there was a very limited place for women in interwar rural trade unionism.

This article has shown that Uzzell made a significant contribution to the NUAW in the interwar years but as the sole woman in a leadership position in a male dominated organisation, she didn't advocate for issues that specifically concerned rural women, as workers, mothers or homemakers. In some respects, however, focusing on Uzzell's service for the NUAW compartmentalises her activism. In her work for Oxford city council in the late 1930s for example, she sat on the Public Health, Education, Old Age Pensions, Cemeteries and Food and Drugs, Maternity and Child Welfare, and the Property Management committees.⁹² Were her priorities in her council work similar or different to her union work? Did she face obstacles based on her class and gender as the only female Labour councillor when she was elected in 1935? Did her election act as an encouragement to other working-class Labour women to put themselves up for election? Answers to these questions will broaden our understanding of Uzzell's political life but they await further research.

⁹² OHC, OCA 1/1/PR2/17-30, Oxford City Municipal Yearbooks, 1918-1939



Figure 1: Meeting of the EC, *The Land Worker*, May 1932. Uzzell is fourth from left, with Brother Craven on her left.



Figure 2: 'Mrs Uzzell – alone – is a match for all the men', *The Land Worker*, July 1930, p. 4