

Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society  
Production : Lark Rise  
Date : 16<sup>th</sup> May 2026  
Venue : Coleshill Village Estate  
District : London District 12

© NODA CIO. All rights reserved

Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's production of "Lark Rise" in the Poultry Yard at Coleshill Village Estate. Director Debbie Lock somehow found time for a chat before the show, and Society Chair Carolyn Taylor sought me out during the interval. Oh, and Bex Hutchings found me at the end ... but more about that later.

Debbie told me that this production came out of a moment of inspiration when she saw the Poultry Yard for the first time, and realised that it would be the perfect setting for Keith Dewhurst's adaptation of Flora Thompson's "Lark Rise to Candleford". As she rightly observed, this tale of life in a quintessential Oxfordshire village in the late nineteenth century was written about a place just like this. What could better than a gentle rural idyll on an early summer's evening? And that was pretty much what we experienced, although the audience wisely chose to huddle together for warmth, with picnic chairs unfolded under the gazebo to escape the chill, damp breeze.

Any personal discomfort was soon forgotten as the company transported us back almost 150 years to the first day of the harvest in the village of Lark Rise. The story is told from the personal perspective of the author, renamed Laura Timms in the play, and it takes the form of a series of brief scenes based on her recollections. The narrative thread isn't especially strong, so the success of the piece depends on its evocation of time and place, on the rapid establishment of character in the context of short vignettes, and on the forging of a tight-knit community which draws the audience in. The last of these, of course, is something which Faringdon Dramatic Society does particularly well.

The Poultry Yard is a generous space ringed by single storey, stone-built walls and outbuildings. No direct use was made of these (apart from as a home for the bar during the interval), but the context they provided was magnificent, and of course the stone walls helped tremendously with the acoustics. As the evening drew in the lights around the yard (lighting design by Gary Bates and Ian Chandler) highlighted some of the stonework and shrubs to magical, memorable effect, while most of the action played out under a handful of stage lamps in the area immediately in front of the gazebo.

Kiara-Skye Rowley gave a remarkably poised and polished performance playing Laura Timms. She understood her role perfectly, that children in this time and place were expected to be passive, obedient, seen but not heard, and by studiously avoiding any hint of overacting she came over as entirely convincing. She also knew her lines thoroughly, and delivered them with clarity, conviction and admirable pace. She might perhaps have taken a little more time over some of her scene-setting narrations which felt a little hurried, but this was probably just nervous energy kicking in and her enunciation remained clear, and she was also careful to address every section of the audience. Kiara-Skye moves well, uses gestures sparingly but appropriately, and has excellent stage presence. This was an impressive portrayal of this critical central character.

Liam Hoyland provided Kiara-Skye with strong support as Laura's brother Edmund. The relationship between the two was convincingly that of siblings as they played, ate and shared adventures together; they didn't bicker much, but children back then probably didn't have the energy for that. With Kiara-Skye, Liam was able to bring out the very different expectations of boys and girls in late Victorian rural communities: young men grew up to be labourers, enjoyed their independence and ruled the roost, while young women went into service, and did whatever was expected of them. He too knew his lines well, and projected a youthful innocence in keeping with his character: playing happily and asking endless questions. Both Liam and Kiara-Skye ensured that their characters showed proper deference to their elders, notably their grandfather, showing that they were listening by keeping their attention and gaze on whoever was speaking.

The children's mother, Emma Timms, was played by Abby Valentine. Abby captured something of how hard life must have been for wives and mothers, bringing up children with little practical or emotional support, striving to put food on the table, and struggling to close the gap which had opened up between her and her husband. There was a real maternal feel to the way in which she dealt with her children, as she softened her voice and gave them whatever reassurance they needed. But you could see the strain of it all in her eyes, and never more so than when she attempted to communicate meaningfully with Albert, when her shoulders would slump as she turned away from him with a regretful shake of her head. Abby ensured there was plenty of tonal and emotional variation in her lines and she consistently maintained a persuasive rural Oxfordshire accent; Emma only seemed truly happy, albeit momentarily, when spending time with other young mothers.

Emma's husband Albert, played by Andrew Slater, was a suitably distant character as he is a stonemason from outside the village. He works all day before going to the pub all evening, and his emotional attachment to his wife and children has frayed almost to breaking point. The tension between him and Emma was palpable, a longing tinged with regret. Andrew sustained a businesslike formality in the family home, but you could tell from his undemonstrative demeanour and tired expression that his relationships there were deeply unsatisfactory.

The extra-familial groups in Lark Rise appeared to be predominantly single sex. It was the first day of the harvest, and the scything gang, led by Nick Morris as Boamer, was out in the fields. There was some joshing and good-natured chat amongst the group, and I liked the way in which the topics of conversation mutated once the youngest member of the gang had run off to play. Some assertions drew a response from the others, but it was often a bit too disciplined and structured, although I appreciate that the sort of chaotic chatter you would expect to hear in such a context is incredibly difficult to reproduce, at least without the core conversations becoming indistinct. The quality of the singing was impressive though: Nick has a particularly fine voice, especially in his upper range, but all of his gang could hold an unaccompanied verse of a song. The scything was nicely choreographed in the manner of chain gang, with the sweeping of the blades matching the rhythm of the songs.

The gang members also popped up in different guises. Matthew Warner, playing Pumpkin, also appeared as the characterful Jerry Parish, hawking his fruit and veg, while Jeffrey Slater, playing Bishie, also took on the role of the itinerant trader Cheapjack. Both salesmen might have made a bit more of their patter, but then a market trader's patter is a dying art. Richard Lock and Duncan Sinclair played up to their senior status in the gang; Richard also portrayed Emma's father, providing her with every support short of actual help, while Duncan appeared as Twister, the village sex pest who is prone to drop his trousers in front of passers-by. Queenie's observations about Twister reminded us that such sexual inappropriateness, and indeed domestic violence, date back a long way.

The groups of ladies proved just as characterful and companionable, and of course the actors were often helped by having something else to do at the same time, such as reading or embroidery. Such activities usually contribute to notably natural and convincing performances, as we had already seen with the harvest gang who were at their best when eating their lunch and speaking with their mouths full. Bex Hutchings was as assertive as ever as Mrs Spicer, capable of intimidating the menfolk with a penetrating look; Sarah Couzens, as Mrs Miller, was distracted from her book for long enough to make the odd pithy comment; while Amanda Linstead and Verity Roberts made it clear in their expressions that they enjoyed their moments of escape from their domestic duties as Mrs Blaby and Mrs Peverell respectively. Alison Morris as Mrs Beamish did a wonderful job of plaiting Martha's hair while simultaneously giving her comprehensive instructions about what she needed to say and do at the Big House, and all the ladies of the village were in agreement that Mrs Andrews, played by Andrea Forgione, was a particularly good gossip. Stand-up gossips always stay the longest.

It would be almost impossible to mention every character and performer here, and please forgive me if you have been omitted, but amongst the supporting cast who made particularly strong impressions were Carolyn Taylor and Gary Field. Carolyn, playing Old Sally, demonstrated once again her talent for scripted reminiscence. Her accent was both consistent and persuasive – “awkward” pronounced “orkard” and so forth – and she punctuates her monologues with little laughs and shrugs in a manner which is both natural and convincing. Her story-telling is so authentic and engaging: I could have listened to her all evening. Gary Field, wrapped up against the cold as Mr Sharman, protested loudly but in vain when forcibly removed from his home “for his own good”, an uncomfortable reminder that all these years later we still don't always treat the elderly with the dignity that they deserve.

Mike Fraser as the squire is no doubt still lording it over the village; Joan Lee as Queenie Macy is probably still chasing her swarm of bees; and Tatum Rowley, as Martha Beamish, will almost certainly have found a position in service. Is the Old Postie, played by David Couzens, still the best-informed person in the village, inspecting every packet and parcel for clues about the residents' lives? Somehow this relic of a bygone age encapsulated the changing nature of rural life.

David went on to appear as the Rector in the final scene, set some 30 years later, reading out the Roll of Honour from the Great War. Familiar surnames feature prominently, until finally we get to E. Timms. The idea that this young lad who we feel we have come to know, playing innocently in the fields of rural Oxfordshire, should have met a violent end, perhaps in the trenches of the near continent, is both shocking and poignant. Once again, this company had drawn us into a community and its story, and made us a part of it before reminding us engagement and belonging can actually entail. It was another moment which will stay with me.

The emotional heft of the play was enhanced by the incidental music: for example, the reading of the Roll of Honour was preceded by the company quietly singing “The Day Thou Gavest”, accompanied on an accordion. More generally the singing was supported by Jon Lane's folksy violin playing, with the strong voices of Vixz Edmonds and Bex Hutchings setting the standard, although it should be said that the overall quality of the unison singing was very impressive, with many members of the company demonstrating that they could hold a line and shape a phrase when singing on their own. There was also a bit of harmony singing towards the end of some of the songs.

The Poultry Yard setting was of course wholly authentic, but the properties, supervised by Vixz Edmonds, had been well chosen to maintain the period feel, and Vixz herself led the stage team which rapidly set them in place to recreate the Timms' kitchen table, the local pub and so forth. Cheapjack's

cart was particularly good, laden with a modest selection of bric-a-brac which clinked and clanked as the cart was dragged over the bumpy ground before Cheapjack tried to pass off his wares as “quality”. I was pleased to note that there was real food to eat, although I hope nobody ate that bloater which looked as if it might have been in storage since “Ladies’ Day”. Pewter tankards and good miming broadly disguised the fact that the pub was pretty dry.

The costumes, designed and created by Jeni Summerfield, Joan Lee and Jane Cadogan, were of course critical to time and place, and there were plenty of smocks and pairs of trousers secured with string amongst the agricultural workers, even if some of the smocks were suspiciously clean. The women wore full skirts in natural fabrics and muted colours, sometimes topped off with white aprons. But the costumes were also very effective at establishing class boundaries: Albert’s status as a stonemason was accentuated by the fact that he wore a coarse suit to work, while the housekeeper at the Big House was amongst those sporting the brighter colours that those with a bit more money could afford. It was obvious that a lot of thought and care had gone into the costume plot, as the various outfits said so much about status and character.

While the Poultry Yard was a superb setting, it did bring some practical challenges which for the most part were overcome very effectively. Debbie had ensured that the whole cast projected their words clearly, and while there were moments when pace and realism would have benefited from sharper cues or people talking over each other when appropriate, at least we didn’t miss any lines. The Yard is actually quite big, so entrances, especially from upstage left, could take quite a long time. To some extent this was compensated for through techniques such as inserting music between scenes, or improvising dialogue as people moved into place (although these exchanges could be hard to hear simply because the performers were so far away), and I realise that such issues often don’t become apparent until you are actually working in the performance space. It could be argued that unhurried scene changes properly reflected the pace of life in Lark Rise, but to my mind there was a danger here that the continuity and flow of the piece could be disrupted.

The Roll Call wasn’t quite the end. The evening closed with a Circle Dance performed by the whole ensemble, with the audience invited to join in for the reprise. There was no way I was doing that, but then Bex’s gaze fell on me and I realised that resistance was futile. With Bex and Debbie’s support and guidance – the sort of support and guidance that brooks no argument – I was talked through the steps and promenades, and suddenly realised that I was having a terrific time. The company had succeeded in drawing me into their world, in making me a part of their community, and suddenly I understood with new clarity what it must have been like to live your life in a place like Lark Rise.

I think I may have remarked that a previous production by Faringdon Dramatic Society was community theatre at its finest. This presentation of “Lark Rise” continued what is becoming a proud tradition.

Andrew Walter  
NODA Regional Representative, London District 12  
17<sup>th</sup> May 2026