

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Dave Chappell (part 1)

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's Wednesday the 13th December and I'm talking to Dave Chappell. Good morning.

Morning.

I wonder if you could first of all describe where we are please, Dave?

Yes, well I'm David Chappell and I farm at Boston Park Farm, which the address is Bawtry Road, Hatfield Woodhouse, but we're actually on the south western corner of Hatfield Moor and the farm itself extends to about five hundred acres which all runs round the edge of the moor, the south western edge, so, little bit to the west and to the south, right up to the edge of the moor, up to the moor bank. So we're sitting here looking out of the window and we're about, what, three or four hundred metres from the edge of the moor and this house, Boston Park Farm was built on the edge of Greatgate Wood, which was a drier area, sandy area, slightly higher, so it didn't need draining in the time that the Vermuyden came here in the 1620s. But this house didn't exist in the 1620s, in fact on the 1841 OS map it wasn't here. It was built and completed in 1846 as a model farm.

What do you mean by a model farm?

Well, there was, if you start at the front of the house you'll notice that that has got floorboards, the back doesn't it had stone slabs, because the front was for the master, for the owner, the back was for the servants. There's two lots of stairs, locking doors connecting, so the servants could be locked in the back and then if you go out the back of the farm you'll find that the first building you come to is the, where they boiled the waste, the swill and the next one, next to it's where the farm men who were hired in for a year used to live. So in those days they used to hire them in for a year, they lived between where the boiled the swill and there are slots in the wall in that room where they lived and that was to tip the swill straight into where the pigs were in the next building and over the top o' the pigs were the chickens and then the other small buildings to the right were for the ducks and geese.

Then as you progressed around the farm the next place you came to on the right hand side, it's all in a courtyard square, was the cow shed for milking the cows. Alongside that, of course a building to keep the roots to feed them on and what did you need next to the cows, well you weren't gonna get any milk unless you had calves, so you needed the bull. So the next place was the bull pen and then there are loose boxes, three of them, for cows and calves to be situated in and then of course besides the pasture there were arable crops grown. There were horses on the farm. You can always tell how big the farm was by the size of the stable and the stable down there was a stable for ten horses, so it was quite a big farm. Alongside that of course another root house to chop the roots and to mix with the roots they used to put the chaff, so above that is a place where they kept the chaff and a chute, to chute the chaff down to mix it in before they fed it to the horses and then next along there, a building that faces out of the

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courtyard, doesn't face in, and that was the cart shed, to keep the carts and so on.

Facing in is a building where the young stock would live, the growing calves and strong steers that were fattening for beef. Up above a granary to keep the grain away from the pests, the rats and mice, and then a big hay barn on the end. You can always tell the hay barn when you look on a farm, the ones with the slots in the walls, they weren't to defend you, you know to put the gun through, that was to let the steam out of the hay as it cured. And then as you come round the left hand side you find another cart shed facing outwards and then quite an important building, the tall building, is the dovecote, because of course that was important, they cleaned up the waste seeds as we were threshing, carting the grain, they picked up the waste did the doves and the pigeons and they converted it into meat and eggs that were quite an important food source when you lived on this farm. And then another shed opened facing inwards for the real big stock that were nearly ready for beef and that takes you round the square.

But of course alongside that, if you look in the garden you'll see the remnants of the plum trees, the pear tree there, apples trees, because this was a walled garden for growing vegetables and an orchard round, because they tried to be self sufficient and so that's why it was a model farm.

Would the road, this road to Bawtry to be there then?

At that time there was a rough track led from here to Bawtry and there was a track led from here straight to Cantley Church and, to the west, and another one straight to Hatfield Church to the north. But the road that goes to Hatfield Woodhouse didn't exist at that time. In fact, back in the early 1900s, the farmer who was here before me, I've been here thirty one years, from 1975, and the previous tenant was here from 1939, although he'd lived here, and when I knew him he was in his eighties, he lived here on the next farm before that, so he'd been here all his life and he told me that the road that goes into Hatfield Woodhouse, which is now the A614 was a rougher track than Gatewood Lane, that is really rough now. But the powers that be, the transport authority chose to do that up so that traffic coming from the A1, as traffic got busier, avoided Hatfield, it only had Hatfield Woodhouse to deal with and so that road is, is sort of more, of more recent times and if you look on the Enclosures map it shows no road there at all. But it does show the bridal path, Gatewood Lane.

So we sit on the corner of the two arms of Gatewood Lane, one going north and one going west, we're actually right on the corner, so I guess that, that's where they went to church in their pony and trap. I forgot to say, the pony and trap lived underneath the dovecote and that's why the building's so tall.

You've mentioned that there were people, annual staff if you like, have you any idea of how many people would work on this farm in the 1840s?

In the 1840s there would be something like, twenty, twenty five people here. That, that's based on some records I've seen and talking to people who have memories back to before 1900, there were sort of twenty, twenty five people here. There's also a cottage across the road that some of the workers lived in that worked here and in fact the previous tenant, his wife, came here to work as a housemaid and her bedroom was in what's now our bathroom upstairs and so she gave us quite a bit of history. They met at God's Cross, if you look on the old maps, God's Cross is on the map and that was a meeting place back in the early 1900s I'm going to now, for people from Wroot and from Owston Ferry, from Hatfield, Hatfield Woodhouse and so on and it was a meeting place on a Sunday afternoon

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for youngsters who, did a bit of courting and what have you, met up, play a few games, I'm not quite sure what sort of games, and that's quite interesting God's Cross because, on here somewhere I've got a flint. In fact I've two flints that were found in God's Cross, napped flints and I took em to Doncaster Museum and they were found to be, sort of three thousand years old and come from a particular area around Brigg, to, out to the east of us. So God's Cross must have been used a long, long time ago.

It's one of the points on the Tudor perambulations of Hatfield Chase as well God's Cross, so it's an important place.

Well my farm ends, the south eastern corner of Boston Park Farm is Gods Cross, right to the point of Gods Cross and I've searched a few times because the lady I spoke about told me that there used to be a stone there, marked there, sort of, I think it might be the county boundary you know, I think that was the edge of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire and there was a stone they used to sit by or play by and I've searched a few times, but I think as the, perhaps as the river banks have been heightened, the ditches have been flared out, it must have been covered, because I can't find the stone. But we farmed right up to that, so we've, we've about hundred acres south of the River Torne, going from the A614 road, as it is now, out to Gods Cross in a long triangular field and then the rest of the farm is round, north of the River Torne, between River Torne and Hatfield Moor.

Not the best of land though you know, I mean when the Vermuyden drained all this he didn't get a price, well he got some good land out by the River Trent and so on, and some up round Thorne, some better quality more loamy soil, but a lot of this is very sandy and very peaty. It'd been underwater a bit too long. Land recovered from water wants to be recovered seventy, eighty, years after it's, every seventy or eighty years rather than much longer, it get poorer as time goes on. So I came here to peat and to sand.

Came here in 1975, knowing nothing of the area at all, I'm from near Pontefract, not from here. I got a bit of a shock because of course it's very different, very flat. We put, deepened all the ditches, or some of the ditches and put under drains under, to drain the land to grow arable crops at great expense to ourselves and the tax payer, we were encouraged, because of course I come from a time when we were trying to grow more food. I'm old enough to have a ration card, even after the War, food was in scarcer supply than during the War and so I grew up trying to grow more and, I came here because I saw flat fields and the possibility of growing sugar beat and potatoes that were needed and more wheat, which is what we grow. So we drained all the land in 1975, put the under drains in and of course it has to be pumped up into the River Torne, and ploughed it all up and started growing sugar beat and potatoes and wheat and barley.

What was it like when you came, you say you've had to drain it?

When we came it was really interesting because, it's a pity really that we weren't aware at that stage, I mean as a nation perhaps, of the value of what we had before us, because, of the five hundred acres, three hundred and thirty had never been ploughed ever before. It had been attempted to be ploughed during the War time, when two crawler tractors were, got stuck in there and it took 'em three years to get 'em back out, when it dried out enough, it was so wet and so low, and some of it is below sea level, we only sit twelve feet above sea level where we are now and some of my land is below were the old River Torne, course of the River Torne ran and we, we came here and we put all the drains in and we ploughed out old pasture that had been there from the time of the drainage, from time immemorial,

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from when the trees were cleared. We found lots of bog oak in it, I spent days and months and weeks clearing bog oak from that, which were trees preserved for two thousand years, we, we had them carbon dated some of them and so we changed the face of that three hundred and thirty acres at that time by ploughing it all out and planting crops on it, arable crops on it.

What kind of soil was it?

On the humps it's sandy, sort of like islands, in fact we've got one field that's called the Isle of Wight, because there was a cottage there named the Isle of Wight by the owner. And the previous tenant here before me, Tom Jackson, he could remember as a boy going with his parents and having tea there one Sunday afternoon, but all we see is a few bits of brick rubble and a few bits of pottery now when we plough that particular field.

In fact on this, map we had of the drainage period, the area around here was called Sandy..?

Sandhead.

Sandhead.

Yes, yeah, so we get these humps of sand, some of 'em are really, really light sand, they can blow away, others are gravely sand, and then we get areas of peat where the, where the low pisers have been, there's been water standing there, small ponds, pools, and then we can get areas of very heavy clay soil, where the actual river, old River Torne course ran, and it obviously washed silt down there and it can get very heavy. So every field can have a variety because when it was divided up we've kept to the same field pattern more or less that it was divided up by Vermuyden, of course they just cut across whatever was there so we, we got, some fields have got sand, clay and peat all in one field.

And how, how do you deal with the peat?

Well, we plough it, cultivate it and then it needs a lot of lime 'cause it's quite acid and we can grow crops on it but of course one of the things that peat does, it shrinks, each year you cultivate the peat shrinks about an inch a year, and one of the things that's happened here, I think I've been hear over thirty years, thirty one years, so peat shrinks an inch a year, you don't need to be a great mathematician to know that it's now in some places two foot six lower than it was when I came, because it's been shrinking. So then we're finding some clay underneath it and that gets mixed and that can become good soil. But the down side of that is as it's shrinking it's taking the drains down with it, so we've got areas now where we drain the water away and the drains ran out to the big ditches, but instead of doing that if they're sunk in the peaty places, when it rains it actually can make it very much wetter.

Alright, so are you talking about pipes?

Yes, the pipes underneath.

Pipe drains, so in fact the pipes are actually attracting water into the...

Into, they can in some instances draw water into the field instead of taking it away. But that's, we've turned that on it's head because, since 1998 we entered the Government's Countryside Stewardship

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Scheme, so parts of the farm we're reverting to natural pasture and we've actually chosen a large area where the River Torne ran, where there's a lot of this peat, where the drains have sunk and it's particularly useful for wading birds and the lapwings, the curlews and so on are using it for nesting and so we're getting a grant each year to leave that as natural pasture and we've not planted any grasses there, we've allowed the seeds which are in the soil, in the seed bank in the soil, to grow up and then topped off any thistles and so on and just allow the natural grasses to grow in there, so we're, we're coming back to what it was when I ploughed it out thirty one years ago in part of the farm.

I'm interested in the fact that this area, or the edges of the moor was drained by Vermuyden but none the less was still water logged and peaty.

Yes.

And so if you can just go back and perhaps mention this again. Parts of your farm are actually peat and clay and sand and you, just tell me again how you made it useful for agriculture.

Well what happened when...

Particularly I'm thinking in terms of, it's, it's not been warped in this area...

No, not, this hasn't been warped, no, and the ditches were dug in Vermuyden's time and cleaned out and then they were deepened back in the '30s and the '50s but they were not sufficient to dry the very low areas out, there would be areas in some of the fields, the sort of higher areas, the little islands, like the Isle of Wight, that you could farm, and previous to me coming here, people did farm certain patches in fields, not usually the whole field because there were parts of it that just, most of the year, laid too wet. So they left them grass and they mowed them or they grazed them or whatever. But I came and I deepened all the ditches and put the pipes underneath to enable us to be able to plough the whole thing up. It couldn't happen if it weren't for the water being pumped as well and so that was the big change, when I came in '75, was to deepen all the ditches and then put the pipes underneath, there were no pipes in before then. Apart from, near Gods Cross, where we found some old horseshoe drains, they're the ones with a flat plate on the bottom and a horseshoe on top. So they could be literally hundreds of years old, but we only found them in about a five acre piece, just at Gods Cross, again a little bit higher place, must have been a bit of an island there above the marshy area that was surrounding it.

So simply by ploughing and mixing?

Yeah, but we ploughed it and we put lime on because it was very acid and of course nutrients, principally phosphate and potash and then we just gave nitrogen each year for whatever crops we're growing and we planted crops like potatoes which are very good at breaking down the soil, to quite a depth, and sugar beat as well, and plough them in and we created arable soil from, and of course the old turf rotted away and rotted into it and that, that was useful plant food as well.

Is it noticeable that some of your fields are lower than others then?

Yes, yes, if you drive around the farm you'll see that some are really, six or eight feet lower than others.

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When you came, before you did that work, you say they were pastures? Were they, what kind of pastures were there?

They were just what we'd describe, sort of, water meadow, well some of 'em were very sandy meadow, but they didn't improve them in anyway, they didn't put any fertilizer on, any lime on, any slag on to correct any deficiencies, they just simply turned cattle and sheep into them and allowed them to graze what grew in the summer, so they were just grazed through the summer and of course even though it was wet, as I described, in every field there are higher areas that the cattle and sheep could find to, to stand on when it was wet.

Was it good grazing?

No, it was very poor grazing really. There were odd decent areas but mostly pretty poor because it had never been improved by, by liming or so on.

And were there some evidence actually on the ground of how the land was divided in the sense of the way that the fields across the road are owned?

Yes, that's true. We, some of the fields are quite square when you get a little bit away from the moor edge because the moor itself was deemed to be too wet and marshy the fields that are above the moor, you can get triangular ones and ones with curly shapes in the, in the edge, and also they were allotted to different people in Vermuyden's time and that's resulted in the one field immediately across the road, I guess the reason why, it's not owned by us it's a nearby farm that has that one, although we have the one to the left and to the right of it. So that's probably the history of why.

You came here in '75.

Yeah.

Can you tell me where you were and what you were doing before that?

Yeah, well I, I came from near Pontefract and I, I grew up, well I grew up in a council house originally because my grandparents had sold their farm, and my father contracted and then bought a small farm when I was nine years old. I was always interested in farming having ridden on the tractor with him from when I could walk, I used to wait in the pouring rain for him to come out after his lunch to go driving the tractor and then, I went to college and did agriculture at Leeds and then after that, I went and borrowed some money and bought me own little farm and I used to grow, keep hens, in battery cages in those days, and grow vegetables and stand on the market and, got me own, had ten acres of land, but I wanted to expand and that's, I tried to get good farms with good soil, but they always seemed to be, I couldn't afford to buy, I wanted to rent, they always seemed to go to people with rather more cash in their back pocket than I had and able to take it on. So I looked for a farm that was poor and needed improving and that's how I came to Boston Park.

Although your dad did contracting you come actually from quite a long line of farming background don't you.

Yes we do yes, my, and my grandfather, was, a man, hired in onto farms, in fact he, he was hired onto a

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farm out near Haxey, back in the 1800s and he, he moved, they used to hire him in for a year at a time, he moved a time or two and, and then my grandmother she came from a building family, a family of builders and she taught her uncle to read and write when he was, in his forties, and when he died he left her some money, a lot of money and they were able to buy a farm and start farming. So my father grew up in a manor house, out near Barnsley, and, but of course the flip side to that was, when he married me mother, a miner's daughter they didn't like that very much in those days, back in the 19.., late '20s, early '30s and they, they tried to pay my mother's family off.

But dad wouldn't have it and that was fine until my grandparents, my mother's parents died and then they took on, my parents that is, my mother and father, took on my mother's three brothers and a sister who were much younger than she, she was the eldest, to bring them up, against the wishes of my father's parents and my father was the youngest, the only one working on the farm and they chose then to sell the manor, sell their land and go and live in a cottage in the village and tell dad to go out and find a job. Which he did and that's how he worked on farms and then he went to his uncle and borrowed some money and bought a tractor and a plough in 1938. Started contracting, of course the War came along and he was ploughing land up for a pound an acre, playing fields, golf course, he'd tell you that the people at, at one golf course near Wakefield had a petition up and they were on their knees in front of the eighteenth green begging them not to plough it. 'I were on a pound an acre,' he said, 'I want gonna miss any'.

[Laughter]

So that's how he got going in farming and we eventually bought the first little farm when I was nine. So farming's been in blood all the time.

And you say you can remember going on the tractor with you dad?

I can, I can remember, before school age, riding on the old tractors without cabs on and all standard, we had, but then we got an E27N, called a Ford Longlegs, which was quite high, and I liked that because there was room on the foot plate for me to stand and I sometimes had to sit on the mudguard or I'd hang onto the mudguard but dad was so scared I would fall off so he used to tie my leg to his leg with a piece of string, which was great except when he put his foot on the clutch of course, and I had to dive forward quickly!

[Laughed]

'Cause it just about yanked me off the tractor. So it was, I spent my time doing, doing that, always, and the other job I had to do then, nothing to do with farming really, but typical of the time, he smoked woodbines as he drove the tractor, he never ever smoked indoors but as he walked out in the morning he used to put a woodbine to his lips and when he, he never took it out of his mouth to take a puff on it, it just burnt away, and when it got to his lip he used to take it out and light another one, all day. And my job, riding on the tractor as a little nipper, two, three, four years old, was to, when it got to his lip I had to take it out and light the other one up. So I sort of grew up having a few quick puffs before I gave it back to him!

[Laughter]

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Has that stayed with you?

It hasn't no, I've never wanted to smoke, I think I did enough before I were five!

So, you then followed a similar course by being interested in agriculture and...

I did.

Yeah, so talk me through that, tell me how it went from there.

Well, academically at school I was quite able, in most every subject, and it was against my mother's great wishes that I should, I should take up agriculture. She didn't want me to do that.

Why was that?

The hours were too long, and the returns weren't good enough and you never spent enough time with your wife and family and she just didn't, she wanted me to take up some other occupation but, and that, was with me until I was about, when I was eleven I was listening to my mother and I was going to do everything at school and get through and get some qualification and do something else, I don't know what. Then when I was eleven I, because I've always been a bit inquisitive, I got too inquisitive and I had an accident at school and fractured me skull and spent a couple of months off school.

How did that happen?

Well, just messing about with some other kids and I tripped and fell on some cast iron on a desk and...Anyway, the result of that was quite life changing really because, I recovered from the fractured skull. I were playing rugby again three months later, but I found when I got back, you see until then having passed the eleven plus as a year underage, at ten and onto grammar school, and always needing to be first in every subject it was a real, it mattered to me so much, I'd got to be the best in every, I've always been competitive. But I found when I got back that nobody was complaining at me that I could come in the first sort of half or the first ten in any and every subject or higher in some, especially maths and geography, history, without really trying at all, without doing anything. I could, I never, I never ever studied for an exam from that day to this. I just, I sat down for them and I gave the answers that were in my head and that was it, and nobody complained. So it had a life-changing effect on me because what it did during that eight weeks I was off after two weeks in hospital, I spent the following six weeks in the farm yard and often because dad was contracting he was out with the tractor, so I spent my time caring for the livestock, tidying up, doing whatever in the farm yard and that just gave me the wish and the will and the want to spend my life with growing crops.

I mean, it's hard to explain, you live here, I grew up in a council house, I walk out the door and I'm in the fields, I see the animals, you've seen the calves there in the yard there, the horses and so on. But the thrill that I still get today, and I'm sixty years old, from, the wheat across the road is just nicely up through, you can see the rows, I planted that, I ploughed the field, I harrowed it, I planted it and the thrill I still get when I see the crop come out of the ground. It's life, it's real, that is, you cannot buy that, that is just something special that I get, and I still get it today.

The thrill I get, we keep sheep and we start lambing in another four weeks time, I can go out the door,

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four, five o'clock in the morning, whatever, and I can tell you when I walk out the door if there's a sheep in trouble because the bleat is different. If she needs help, she's having trouble lambing, and we never leave them above a couple of hours, if she's in trouble I can tell by the bleat when I open the back door. You go out there, you go up to her sometimes, if she's been in trouble for a couple of hours she'll maybe just stand still or even come to you. Sometimes you might need to catch her and then sometimes you maybe have to put your hand in, pull at the lamb, it's got a leg back or it's head's twisted or something and you might quite easily get it. Wipe its nose, it takes a breath, and you get the thrill, you know, when it breathes and it's alive and it would have died if I hadn't of been there. Sometimes you might spend even one, two hours trying to get that lamb, it's backwards, it's twisted, it's quite small, you've got to get it into the right position so that it comes out with it's head between it's front legs or, or whatever you need to do. And then when you get it out it doesn't breath, you clear it's nose, shake it, people talk about swinging 'em round, I don't do that, but what I do do is get a, what my granddad did, my dad did, get a small piece of straw and just poke it up their nostril and irritate it and when it sneezes, it dunt always happen, sometimes it dies of course, you know where there's life there's always, where you've livestock you've dead stock. But invariably, majority of times it does sneeze and it breathes and the thrill that you get at that moment, that, you cannot replace that, you can't buy that.

So that's why I still farm and it's very difficult to farm, has been in the last few years. I'm a tenant farmer, so I've a rent to pay, don't own the place, quite a big rent, so I've got to make that before I make anything for ourselves. Three out of the last seven years we have actually made a loss on the farm, but we've not sat back and hoped things would improve, we've not packed in and gone off and got a job doing something else. We've actually tried to do something about it on this farm, use the assets we've got here. People have been farming this since it was drained and even before, I guess there were wildfowl and so on. We want to make a living here, I want to be able to enjoy living in this countryside, walking onto Hatfield Moors, hearing the birds sing, seeing what's around, so we've done something about it.

We have the Maize Maze where we have visitors come to the farm. We build a maze in a crop of, a field of maize that people can get lost in. We also have animals for them to see, cattle, sheep, the pigs and ducks and geese and so on and we charge them to come in, so we make a little bit there. And we have horses and we've used the old buildings, instead of knocking the old buildings down that I described to you earlier, the cowshed the stable, the loose boxes, we've converted a lot of those into stables and we've got people paying us to actually keep their horse here. So we're using the assets we've got so that we hopefully can make a living and stay here and enjoy this life in the countryside into the future.

How big a livery business is it?

We've thirty six horses here at the moment so, it's big enough. We don't have any problem with the horses at all, I'm a farmer and a livestock person, it's just looking after the people who own them that's the trouble!

[Laughter]

And you've just described a visitor attraction really.

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Yes it is and that something that, we started seven years ago and just a maze, but we've extended it to include the animals and also, I mean one of the things we do is a sheet on the, we provide cups of tea and ice creams and so on, and on the, people can bring picnics and they do through the summer they come regularly the visitors and on the picnic tables we have a sheet, look for these song birds that you might see around the farm, and people do they come and look round and round, there's so and so, there's so and so. Although I'm not a naturalist as such, I do enjoy the fact that there is all this life around us.

When do you operate this sort of visitor site?

That opens mid July and we close at Halloween on the 31st October, and that's great people go round in the dark scaring one another!

[Laughter]

And you describe that as being part of your business?

Yeah it is.

What do you still do on the farm?

On the farm we're still growing sugar beet, potatoes and wheat. So, the sugar beet's going for British Sugar Silverspoon, potatoes for processing into crisps and frozen chips. Wheat we grow for Kingsmill flour which is based near Pontefract and rapeseed, again, we grow a special variety of rapeseed which McDonalds are starting using to fry their chips in because it's purer even than olive oil so that, that particular variety, so we're growing for a particular market. And also we're growing, of course some maize that we feed to the animals, we chop that and feed that to the animals, silage. We also grow millet for, for budgie seed and for bird seed generally, the stuff that people put in their feeders. Because this country imports twenty thousand tonnes of millet so it can be grown here, so we're growing some millet as well.

We try to grow crops that are needed and the way we grow them is not organic, that people call organic, although people growing organic do use chemicals, they don't tell you that, some they like and some they don't like, but we grow things in what we call a wholesome way. We try to, we use an agronomist that walks round, a qualified person as I am and my daughter is as well, and check the crops on a, sometimes daily, but at least weekly basis and if there's any disease any problem in there we will use a recommended brand of medicine, or chemical you might want to call it to, to cure the problem that it's got, and it's applied in a careful way, it's recorded what we use and we've records going back over ten years of everything we've done to every field.

You say both you and your daughter are qualified, you said that you went to university, just briefly, how, tell me...

At Leeds yes. And my daughter went as well to Silsoe which is the great research place for farming down in Bedfordshire, to Cranfield University and she's further qualified as regards the spraying of crops and the use of the spray that you do and also the recommendations to that. And we're constantly updating our qualifications so that we, we're abreast and aware of all the developments and we know

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what is the latest technology, how to use it carefully and properly and safely.

You've mentioned some of the livestock as well. Are they part of the farm or are they just part of the visitor attraction?

No, the sheep are part of the farm, the sheep are scavengers. They tend to eat the waste from the potatoes, waste from the sugar beat, the stubbles after we've harvested, they'll go across them. So probably eight or nine months of the year they're living off, off waste products from the farm. And then we grow some grass for the other parts of the year, and we try to produce fat lamb and wool. Mind the wool at the moment's not worth as much as it costs for us to get it off their backs.

Do you shear them or do you...

I still shear one or two each year, but not too many, I still get, it's nice when you manage to get done. We make a real day of it you know. When we shear the sheep there's ours and a couple of neighbour's and we get the guy who shears them, worked for me when he left school, I taught him how to shear, and he comes along and the neighbours come, bring their sheep and the family come and help and some of my children are here to help wrapping up and we all have a picnic in the farm, we help to gather the sheep in and catch them and we have a picnic there and cups o' tea as the day goes on. It's a real countryside event, you know. It might not sound much to some people but we love it. Everybody's chatting away, pulling each other's legs, you know, and then of course you always get the new boyfriend that's come along and he sees how easy it is for the shearer to shear the wool off and 'would you like to have a go?' and of course that's a source of great fun for everybody watching him struggle with the sheep and the sheep always wins!

[Laughter]

You've mentioned your family, you've got quite a large family I think.

I have, I've six daughters and two step daughters and a step son, so plenty of us.

And do any of them still work here?

Just one daughter, Lucy, number three, she works on the farm. She's been plant breeding down in Cambridgeshire since University but she came back here last year to help dad out since we've had the horses. So we got down to, we used to employ four people on the farm, twenty five, thirty years ago, we got down so there was just myself and I was even working part time as well, because we were losing money and my wife was working. But now, the farm since we've started the Maize Maze and the horse liveries the farm's supporting the three of us, my wife and myself and my daughter Lucy, we all work on the farm. So, it's good I think, that, in the countryside here we are able to provide work again.

If you, if you didn't have the visitor side to it, and say the livery side to it, if you were just back to where you were when you started in '75 basically, could you make a living from this?

No, not on this sort of soil. You see we're having to stop growing sugar beat for instance. The price of sugar beat come down, seven years ago it was thirty seven pounds a tonne, now it's twenty one, next

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year it's going to be eighteen and unless you are on much better soil than this where you can get, because the inputs are the same to grow an acre of sugar beat here as on better quality soil. Our running average yield is about seventy and a half tonnes to the acre. If you go to land, for instance, by the side of the Trent, not very far away, other side of Epworth, you can get yields, twenty five, twenty eight, certainly fifty, sixty, seventy percent higher for the same input. They can perhaps survive at eighteen pounds a tonne, we can't so we have to adjust what we grow in future. Hence the growing of the rapeseed for McDonalds and the millet instead of the sugar beat.

Do you want to...

Do you want a break?

If I can just stop for a minute.

[Recording paused]

I did mention the Isle of Wight dint I?

You did.

We still call field the Isle of Wight.

Do you?

And we've got fields like Wild Birds Scrub, you know, that shows you what the quality o' the land was like dunt it.

It tells you something about what they, what it was used for and things like that.

Yeah.

I was wondering actually.

That's going down towards God's Cross, Wild Bird Scrub.

You said you grew millet and I wondered if you had any interference shall we say, if the local wildlife appreciated your millet?

They love it, they love it. The, the people who do the shooting, shoot the pheasants and partridge, they'd love us not to, not to harvest it at all, just leave it there, you know and that's not what it's about, you know, cause it's full of wild birds. But one thing we've done as regards the wildlife that I didn't mention, is the, we've done a grey partridge count on the farm, every year, now, I think it's six years is it, five or six years anyway. So every spring we go round at sort of twilight and we count the grey partridge that are on the farm. And when we started we could find five, two pairs and one single, grey partridge on the farm. Now they've gone up consistently we've never had a drop each year, this is when we first started the countryside stewardship scheme, where we got lots of strips of grass, round the edge, every field's got a strip round it six metres wide just reserved for the wildlife and we get a

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grant from Europe to compensate us for that. But the number of grey partridge has gone up so this last spring, from two pair and one single, six years ago, this last spring we had seventeen pair and three singles. I mean, that's incredible really, and that in itself just shows what's happened to the wildlife.

So from me ploughing out all those pastures back in 1975 through '76, now it's reverting to it. So perhaps we had an impact on the grey partridge, I don't know, 'cause we dint count them then. But certainly what we're doing now is increasing the numbers and that seems to be for lots of wild birds. I mean songbirds, the place is alive with 'em. You know, and I, don't ask me to name them all because I certainly can't. But I do know that when I stop for me cup o' tea and stop the tractor that you just have to look around you and you can see lots of different, a variety of different song birds around.

Are these partridges to do with the neighbouring shoots?

No, these are the grey English partridge that are wild. They're not, we don't, we don't shoot, we don't put any down, we don't rear pheasants and partridge for shooting. They're just what breed naturally on the farm.

And do your neighbours have those kind of shoots?

There is one to the south of us but certainly not just right next to us, no. I mean, there's one or two that shoot an odd day a year on Boxing Day but I don't think they have a great impact on numbers really.

I was going to ask you about the stewardship scheme and what that meant.

Yeah, well, areas in the country you can apply and there are basic things that are wanting to be improved that the, Europe, or our Government within Europe, have targeted to improve. One of the things for this area is the sort of, water meadows, the low, lying meadows and to improve the lot for wading birds and give them nesting areas. Lapwings have become particularly scarce over the last few years and curlews and this type of thing, and so we had to make an application, the farm that is, to do certain things on this farm and what we applied to do was to improve the lot for, particularly for wild birds.

Now if you're looking at wild birds the first thing you need to look at is their food source. So we needed to look at the base, the insects, the beetles, the butterflies and so on. So what we did was we looked at, we got deep ditches, and some of those are part of a wider Site of Special Scientific Interest because of the water plants in them. We didn't want to be applying any fertilizer or any sprays close to them, anyway. So we looked at putting six metres of land aside, at each side of 'em that we wouldn't touch. We would allow the natural grasses to grow because they'd be right for the local beetles and the butterflies and so on that would be the right feed for the local song birds and what have you and wading birds.

So that's what we did to start off with and then we looked at Hatfield Moor, the River Torne and then Gatewood and long plantation to the south, the woodlands that are around us that are away from Hatfield Moors on the slightly higher areas, on the sandy areas. And so we looked then at linking the moors with the woodland and with the river, so we made corridors through the farm, so these six metre strips, if the ditch ended, we then extended it by putting a twelve metre strip of wild bird cover that would carry this corridor on through to the woodland and to the river and so we've created corridors all

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around the farm. And then alongside the woodland, wherever we've got woodland or a hedgerow, we've planted a small area of wild bird cover, an acre, two acres depending on how much woodland there was there. Which we replant every two years with a variety of crops that the wild birds will feed on. Then of course we've got to think then wider about the beetles and the butterflies and bumble bees and so we planted then an area of about three acres of what I call bumble bee mix, but it's nectar, pollen and nectar mix is it's official name, that we planted in quite a low lying area, so that is just left for the grasses that, are there, that grow there to feed the beetles, bumble bees, all those sort of things that feed on the pollen and nectar from wild grasses. So you don't see flowers in there, yeah, you'll see an odd one or two, but mostly it's grasses that are grown, and then in the really wet area, where the River Torne used to be, we've took an area of forty acres out there. It was a big lump out of a five hundred, nearly ten percent of the farm out. It's bounded by ditches, it's very low in the middle but then there's the sand banks that were the banks of the old River Torne that are very, very sandy, so you've a big variety. I mentioned earlier the peat shrinking, so there's some quite wet areas in the low part and we fenced that off, completely separated it from the rest of the farm and on that area we allowed the grasses just to grow. We've topped it for a couple of years to kill any, thistles and noxious weeds, and then what we do with that each year, we graze it with sheep and cattle, we don't spray it with anything, we don't spray to kill the weeds, we don't put any fertilizer on, we don't even supplementary feed the cattle and sheep, they can only graze on what they find there. So we're creating an area there of natural grass land that's right for the wading birds. I mean this farm's got loads and loads of lapwings on it. We've got curlews, we've got golden plover in the winter that you don't see many of elsewhere, because this is what we've brought in last few years.

And do you have someone who advises you on this?

Yeah, well the government have, through Natural England, as it's called now, they have advisors there, but we, personally researched it, my wife and Lucy my daughter and myself, what was possible and what we could do and there's the, there are groups that will fill the forms in and make the application for you, but we, we chose to do our own that fitted our own farm. And that was accepted incidentally in it's entirety, not varied at all by the government inspector and they come every year and have a look and see what we're doing and how we're doing it and there's certain rules and regulations.

The other things that we do on top of that. We leave stubbles over winter so that the, the birds and the insects and the dormice, your field mice rather, can go and hibernate there, that we don't touch those stubbles right after harvest, right through until the following March. And then twenty acres in March, we go and simply cultivate it and then leave that so that the ground nesting birds can, they've got an area they can go and nest on there, that's not gonna grow a crop, fill up with wheat, or potatoes or something, it's just gonna be left that twenty acres. Then the other stubbles we plough and plant with spring crops. Spring crops aren't as high yielding as autumn sown wheat for instance, spring sown barley or wheat, but we do get a compensation, so much an acre for leaving that over winter.

And do you have to have, you said you were a tenant, do your landlord, does your landlord have to agree to all this?

Yes, landlord has to approve that. But, the agreement I have is for a ten year period then you've to reapply, if you want to reapply, you don't have to.

Re-apply for stewardship?

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Yes, re-apply for stewardship after that period.

How's that sit with the management of English Nature, so, Natural England's Management of Hatfield Moor, do you work alongside them?

Yes, I think it's complementary, the one and the other. Because one of the other things I didn't mention, because we're wanting to keep for instance the low meadow wet, we put sluices in the ditches. So during the winter we take those out and the water can be pumped to keep the fields that we're growing crops on from being waterlogged and killing the crop. But in the spring we put the sluice in the end of various ditches and hold back the water so it keep it wetter. That's an advantage for the lower lying areas for the wading birds and so on, but also it's an advantage to us on the slightly higher areas that perhaps some water permeates up to avoid so much irrigation and we may hopefully get slightly better crops. So we, and that fits nicely alongside what English Nature are trying to do on Hatfield Moors of keeping the area wetter and encouraging this sort of thing. Of course we can't, we're not encouraging baulk, but we are encouraging the water plants and insects in the ditches and the birds on the wet areas.

I want to take you back a little bit to the actual building of this house, we talked a little bit about that. You said it was built in the 1840s?

Yeah, on the 1841 Ordnance Survey map this is a field here, there's no house at all, but it was completed in 1846, so it was a, built on a greenfield site, quite unusual, most farms were really, there'd been something there from a long time before and they gradually evolved but this was built specifically for that purpose.

And why would it, why would it have happened?

Of course the Corn Laws that came in, in the 1780s, that prevented grain being imported into Britain until the price of British wheat had reached eighty shilling a quarter, which is sixteen pounds a tonne, made farms very wealthy during that period, and in fact there was a lot of argument and fighting and the famous chap who repealed the Corn Laws, in 1846, incidentally, the year that this house, this farm, was completed, was Sir Robert Peel who started the police force. And that, he started the police force, that had little or no effect on his party, the Tory party, but the repeal of the Corn Laws meant that the Tories never got back to power for the next thirty years because they, they argued and fell out and it was such an important thing. Cheap food or profitable farms in the country, which do you want?

So were there quite a few farms built in that time?

There were up and down the country there were a lot of farms built in that period, in that sort of sixty year period, before the corn laws were repealed but then farming went into the doldrums in, after that, various recoveries of course, during War time farms always, farming always comes better because we need the food and it's not as easy to import it and that's why we had the big improvement in the 1950s. We were desperately hungry.

So it, this farm was built on the wave of high farm prices because of the Corn Laws, because of restricting imports until prices reached, you said sixteen pounds a tonne?

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Yeah.

Could you set that into some perspective?

Well to put that in perspective, it's currently about eighty pounds a tonne, but in the last three or four years it's only been, fifty, fifty two, fifty five pound a tonne and we're talking two hundred years later, so that just shows you what a high price that was.

And it was built on the wave of the high prices, quite coincidentally is built on, finished in the actual year that the...

In the actual year the Corn Laws were repealed. We'd better get the bread out of the oven 'cause with being a farm house, you see, we still bake bread everyday.

Do you?

Seven days a week, yeah.

[Recording Ends]