Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Dave Chappell (part 2)

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

And the pig kept the chicken warm, the pigs kept the men warm, they were next to the men, the boiler house kept the men warm as well, you know. All the waste had to go out there to boiled and the ducks and geese were kept in the little sheds and there's the potting shed and, you know, it must have been fascinating, it was a real, sort of closed industry, everybody, self sufficient spot.

And all, like the waste products from one thing...

All fed, yeah, all, self sufficient. They wunt buy, they'd buy little or nothing as regards fertilizer you know, there'd be muck out the yard that they chuck on to grow their spuds and, and their root vegetables, turnips and what have you and then after that they, you know, they'd have the old system, roots, barley, seeds, wheat, four course system would be, and then they'd have a lot of pasture, all the wet stuff, you know. They'd only be able to, on the higher land, you know, on the sand they'd, they'd grow crops, but all the wet stuff, as I say, it was just never, never ploughed, they just grazed it.

Did you ever, have you ever employed seasonal staff, things like, potato pickers and…

Oh, yes, yes and I used to have four men as well as myself you see. Mind I used to do haulage as well, so that took up one, but I had four men working on the farm and we still did contracting, because me dad started contracting I kept the contracting business going right until I gave it to my nephews in 1992, they took it over.

What, when you say contracting, tell me what you mean?

That's using tractors and ploughs and doing work on other people's farms, and other equipment. We specialised in growing potatoes and spraying, crop spraying. But all sorts of other things.

I wanted to ask you a little bit now about your ploughing, because I understand you ploughing's taken you all over the world?

It has.

Can you tell me a bit about what you do and…?

Well ploughing. The history of ploughing competitions goes back a hundred and fifty years at least to our knowledge, where, you see ploughing was the basis of all cultivation. If you ploughed the field well and buried the trash from the previous crop you cut down the carry over of disease. If you have properly sealed over furrow, will kill seventy to eighty five percent of weed seeds for instance, so you got less weeds and if you've turned it nicely and left a nice tilth on top, you got a better seed bed for you next crop, so that plough was, and the ploughman was really revered in agricultural circles, the

good ploughman. The plough for us had to be dead straight, because then it was easy for the horse, or the tractor in our days to pull. If you start going round bends you put tension on the front and back and it's harder to pull and also it stays exactly the same, so it had to be straight, every furrow, had to be like it's neighbour, identical twins if you like, all the way across the field. Every bit of the old trash buried and sealed over so there were no open holes for the weeds to grow through.

So it started off where one, one farm, farmer challenged his neighbour, 'Oh my ploughing's better than yours', and these competitions grew up and when, my father was young he ploughed in competitions with horses. My grandfather never did it but my father did, he was, like myself, quite competitive at it and he won a lot. So I grew up watching dad go and plough in these competitions, originally with horses, later with tractors and it was my ambition to, he took me to the world ploughing contest in 1956 near Oxford and I saw this guy from America come with his, hat on, you know and puffing on a cigar and pulling a great big plough behind him and making an absolute complete mess of it, but you know, we all took photographs of it, and it was my ambition to try and plough for the golden plough. The ultimate in ploughing is to plough for the golden plough, the championship of the world. And so I started when I was twelve, competing in local matches and trying to keep neat and straight. And if you go to plough a field you only need to look at any, any piece of ground, it's never like a billiard table there's always slight undulations. This variation, if you dig your garden, the soils not just the same, some's a little bit more clayey, or sandy, the textures change and that changes how the plough operates. So the ploughman's constantly trying to adjust his plough so that when the furrows are turned over they look exactly the same, they're all identical, there's no variation shown. So, you never can get the perfect furrow, you're always fighting against it. With a horse, you can see ahead what's coming and try and adjust to it. With a tractor you've got to look and guess what it does and adjust it, and look behind and then adjust it so that plough does it and changes in the right place.

So I'm constantly trying to get that perfect furrow. And to do that I went to local ploughing matches and then you start getting a bit of success there, you want to go a bit further afield. And then the British National moves around the country. So if you win your local one you can then go forward to the British National. And if you manage to win the British National, then you can go to the World Ploughing, which then moves around the world and the European, and so I've been fortunate enough in the, well in the last what, forty eight years to plough in every county in England, most in Scotland and several in Wales, every country in Western Europe and United States and Canada and Australia and all over, Africa, parts of Eastern Europe.

I went to the Czech Republic to plough, the European contest was held there in 1990. It was a great event for them, they'd only just got their freedom from the Soviets and they were allocated this European ploughing match and I went there as the judge from England, I was judging the European. Each country sent a judge. And the plough, the invitation came and the Czechs in their wisdom invited all the judges, if they wished, on the day previous, to plough in the Czech National. Now in the Czech National there were hundred and eighty nine ploughmen, all with identical tractors and ploughs off various cooperative farms and there was one mad, fool judge from all over Europe that was daft enough to have a try to compete against them. So there in the middle I was, with my little plough I'd taken over from England, it's, you know, you can't use somebody else's plough, it'd be like asking Schumacher to drive an old Escort. You've got to take your own that you've carefully nurtured up and improved. And they lent me a tractor, well this tractor that were for my little plough were two hundred and fifty horse power, and I needed one about forty horse power to pull it and so I quietly declined it. And they turned up then with an old tractor, nearly as old as me. It had big wheels on the front, little

ones on the back, so I was going up hill all the time and the clutch was smoking, so it nearly gassed me! And I went up and down the field, every time I got to the end, and think on, there were over thirty thousand people watching, there was a band, an oompah band, the sort of thing you get in Germany and Austria and those countries. And every time I lifted my plough out at the end to turn round the band struck up and all the crowd started cheering. So they came after a little while and allocated me another hour to finish my plot cause I had to keep stopping at the end and take photographs. And the interesting part about it was that I ploughed this plot to the best of my ability and, few mistakes as ever, and the organisers of the Czech National came to me after I had finished and said, just wanted a quiet word you know. 'Here are the results, you can see that you have clearly won by a big margin but we don't think it looks very good for our Czech National Champions to be second and third, do you mind if we give you third instead of first?' I said, 'I came for the enjoyment not for the prize', and so I have a nice bohemian crystal cut glass decanter that I won for that, wonderful day.

But being there, the opportunities that ploughing's had for a lad born in a council house in South Hiendley near Barnsley, to go somewhere like that, to go, a beautiful, in a horn of the river just outside Prague, to the north of Prague, and to be part of the scene there, to be told about how the farms have been collectivised and now they were being privatised again, to talk to the people who actually physically work there and to hear their stories about what it was like working there in that cooperative system and how excited they were about the changes, how some of the people dint want the changes, what a privilege that was, you know. And that came about through my interest in ploughing, in ploughing the soil. And it still, you know, I mentioned earlier what a thrill it is seeing crops grow. When you can drive across a field and think yeah, that's just about straight that is, you know, it's just about crack on, the pleasure you get then is tremendous, it's indescribable to be able to try and, and then, next one, oohh, made a little mistake you know, so you've got to try and correct it the next time across and try and get it better. It's a fascinating job and sometimes even in this country you know, you'll get invited to a competition, you'll go, down a road you've maybe many time before and then you turn into a little farm entrance, a field entrance and it's, it opens up into, there might be a valley, a lovely field on the side and trees along the edge, you know. The opportunity to go somewhere like that and plough a little bit of England up is, is special.

You say you were judging in Czechoslovakia?

Yeah.

Do you still plough competitively?

I still plough competitively, I was fourth in the British National again this year, and I won it three years ago the British National, ploughed in Canada. I was tenth in the world ploughing contest that year. But I've been the coach and the judge for the England Ploughing Team for the last twenty years. So I've taken ploughman to, all over Europe and all over the world. And during that period that I've been the coach, because the coaching and the judging are two separate things. When you judge, you judge in a team of three in the World Ploughing and the European and when you come to your own countryman, you have to stand back, the other two judge it. The coaching takes place in the run up to it. So although you've got the British champion, they still often need a bit o' guidance, what other judges are looking for, or what particular, how to deal with a particular soil type because it can vary in different countries and so that's been my job to look after the ploughman, make sure they were comfortable with what they're doing, they've got all the equipment they needed and help them. And during that period of

course, we've had eleven World Ploughing Champions, and we've had six European Ploughing Champions in that twenty years I've been doing the coaching and judging.

I'm quite proud of that achievement as much as I am of my own, competing. But when it comes to the, what do you like doing, yes I enjoy judging, yes I enjoy coaching, but the best bit is actually turning the soil over, sitting on the tractor seat, anticipating where it's gonna change and move, oh, done it in just the wrong place, or just got it right. Or walking behind a pair of horses and you know you can actually hear the creaking sound of the soil turning. When you get away, there's no road noise, there's nobody talking, you hear the horses puffing away, straining away and you can hear the creak of the soil as it turns over you know and then, and then I think about, it's not just right that, it wants just tilting over that plough a little bit and I get the spanner out and then I remember me dad's words in my ears, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa, thickness o' your thumb nail that's all I want you to alter it, no more than thickness o' your thumb nail!' You know, and that's the difference between a perfect furrow and one that's damn good, the thickness o' your thumb nail.

And you say you've been fourth in the world and you've won the British title, so...

Yeah, I've won the British title on three occasions and, and I've competed in the British National forty five occasions, and I've, I've won numerous local ploughing competitions, I don't know how many, a lot. But it's still a challenge every time I take the tractor and plough out to try and make that perfect furrow because it never happens because of the variations I mentioned and the fellowship and companionship and the, I mean, you might not speak the same language as some of these people, you know. I ploughed in Kenya, in Zimbabwe, and when you get there you might not speak the same language, people plough with a pair of ox. I've ploughed with oxen, ploughed with oxen in Kenya, ploughed with oxen in New Zealand as well. But, and I've ploughed with an old, in Spain, with an ass, pulling a little plough across and harrowed the seeds, sown the seeds by hand and harrowed them in with a branch, dragging a branch behind this old thing. So you might not speak the language but when people see the skill you are able to demonstrate that you can, you do understand the soil and you can do something, then there's a companionship, a fellowship that builds up between people wherever they're from. And the ploughman always ploughs in hope, you always hope the crop afterwards is gonna be a decent one or better than the year before or whatever it might be and that applies to every ploughman.

Thank you very much indeed.

It's a pleasure. I really do, I think it's a privilege to be able to do this job and I really love doing it and I wunt want to do anything else and I don't think about retiring cause I don't want to, my retiring, I want to be here watching the crops grow and seeing the animals grow, I'm not doing anything else.

'Cause, we talked a little bit before we started recording about the sort of, the people who come and put their horses here and so on, you sometimes think they might be townies, but…

Yeah, there's a bit of farming in everybody's blood int there, you know. And one of the things I enjoy is being able to show people the pleasure that I get, so although we've got thirty odd horses here and the owners of the horses, when we're rounding up the sheep, when we're lambing, we encourage people to come and see what's happening, be part of it and some of our customers are now firm friends of the family and they actually, you know. "Are we catching up? What are you doing?", you know. "When are we shearing 'em?" or "Do the sheep need catching and their feet need treating?", and they

help us to do it and I quite like being able to demonstrate what farming's all about to everybody who's here. And that has given us another dimension to the farm and to my life, is, being among all those people.

Farming can be quite lonely you know, you can spend hours, I mean, I still spend sometimes, twelve, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen hours, sitting on a tractor seat alone, all day and that can be the same caring for livestock, you can be on your own. And so sharing, but the pleasure's still there, but sharing that pleasure can be quite enjoyable and having other people around. And when we got down to just me part time on the farm, it was worrying whether we'd have to pack it all in and I was used to working alongside other people, now those people are alongside us albeit in a different way.

Cause it's not a, five day a week, nine to five job is it?

It's not, no, and I think, as well it's, it's not a job rather a way of life. And I think that was really demonstrated five years ago with the Foot and Mouth Crisis. I personally know one farmer friend who committed suicide and one other who attempted, who I know. So that, I think that demonstrates that it isn't just a job, that they saw their way of life disintegrating before them. The animals that they and their, often their forbears had developed and bred over generations to improve the quality, they saw them just being wiped out at a stroke and couldn't face that future without 'em.

Did it have any impact locally the Foot and Mouth?

We didn't directly have it. It did have an affect because we had lots of restrictions on the movement of cattle and sheep and what we could do with them, but we didn't actually have it just in this area. Thank goodness.

So you clearly love it.

Yes, I do, I love the job and I love the way of life and as I say, I feel privileged to be here, and to be doing it and the background to it all, I'd love to have been a fly on the wall and see what it was like here in 1846, or maybe 1850 when it'd got nicely established and who was doing what, and how they were doing it and, and see their sort of thoughts behind their system and what have you. I think it would have been fascinating to, we can only sort of read and guess really can't we.

Well for people who cheerfully say that they're working all through Christmas including Christmas day and treat it as… fun!

[Laughter]

Yeah, well it is, I mean you know, enjoy each part of it while it's here. But still I'm addicted to tea, I have to stop every two or three hours and have a cup o' tea. I think that's essential, or otherwise I think you, you could drive yourself into the ground and I know one or two farming friends who've literally driven themselves to nothing. It nearly happened to me in 1988 when I collapsed and they didn't know what was wrong, just simple physical and mental exhaustion.

Ooh dear. Do you think that, can you foresee the way that the nature reserve on the moor is developing having any impact or influence on your farm and your life?

Yes I can. I think the, their attempts to raise the water level could have quite a serious impact on our farming ability to grow arable crops that, their attempts to raise the water level there could have an impact here. Because, as I understand it, when the moors were left undrained and this area was drained, there were two ditches dug, all around the edge of the moor with a bank in between them and a track way on the bank and there are remnants of that on my farm because I farm on the edge of the moor. That was, two reasons. The ditch on the land side, on the farm side, to drain the farm land, the ditch on the moor side to prevent the wetness the water, and the bank in between, to prevent the wet on the moors, the marshy land, encroaching onto the farm. And I fear that because those have not been maintained for the last three hundred years that the water level raising on the moors may encroach onto the farm land and some of the land that we now farm might become too wet. Our water levels in our ditches might become too high for us to be able to farm, so I do fear there is gonna be an impact. Because what we mustn't forget is, yes we do want to preserve those moors for the reasons that have long be stated, for the wildlife and the plant life that's on there, we don't want that to be lost. But at the same time we must not lose sight of the fact that we need to feed ourselves at least, and we can feed ourselves in this country. I don't believe we should move to a system where we're prepared to bring food from all over the world, carbon emissions, the cost of it all, the cost of it to the environment, the cost in money is ridiculous if we could grow it here. And so I think that we should maintain an agriculture here and countrywide, nationwide, that's capable of feeding us at the same time as, and I believe that on our farm at Boston Park that that's exactly what we're doing.

We are, on part of the farm we're looking after the nature and the environment, on part of the farm we're growing food for, to feed the people. On part of the farm we're actually providing enjoyment and pleasure for people and the opportunity for people to come and visit. We do school visits to the farm as well where we explain the history of the farm and the geography of the farm and, and how we farm it. And we try to do that through our visitor attraction, as well, to explain to people what it is and what we've got here and what they are seeing in front of us. And so I think that, alright, we're only a small microcosm of the country but I do believe as a nation we need to do that and I don't want, I do want Hatfield Moors to be put back and preserved as best it can, nothing stands still, it will be different to what it was before, but looking after everything we can there. But also we must remember that we've got to feed ourselves. We mustn't let that overtake the fact that we've got to, we want to live.

You say you've got remnants of, you've seen remnants of this ditching bank. We've talked also about the remnants of the River Torne as well.

Yeah, you can see where the River Torne ran, you can see where the banks were at the side of it, through part of my farm. And on parts of the moor you can see the two ditches and the bank in between and a lot of places now the ditch that was on the moor side has been filled in, either by the quarrying people or the peat people or just by, cause parts of it were farmed, have been farmed since Vermuyden, parts that are now at the bottom of this field, that's now a lake, was farmed when I came here.

[Postman enters room]

*   Morning

Morning, thank you.

* I'll have to leave them because I've done the post offices.

Okay, I'll do 'em later, thanks.

* See you.

That's one of the advantages of living at Boston Park Farm, we don't have a hole in the door that the postman can put post through and we don't have a box at the end of the gate. The postman comes into the house, brings the letters and takes any that need posting for us. And if we don't leave money he posts them himself and asks for the money next day. Which I think is pretty good really.

Service.

And how it should be.

Well once again thank you very much.

No thank you, I've thoroughly enjoyed it.

[Recording paused]

Of course the history of the moors includes the history of RAF Hatfield Woodhouse, as it was, RAF Lindholme as it became. They confused it with RAF Hatfield down in Hertfordshire I think dint they, that's why they changed the name to Lindholme.

Oh right.

But part of the farm, was, became part of the RAF camp, during the war and after. And also part of this farm, the granary was used for a prisoner-of-war camp in the First World War and the, the, below the dovecote, was the boiler house where they cooked the food for them. The officers lived in the chaff part of the granary and the men lived in the main part. And then in the Second World War a field that we call Arc field, because it's higher up than all the others, Noah's Arc if you like, the next field to it's called Boat Field and the next one's Dicky Yates, I don't know who Dicky Yates was. That's not to be confused with Wild Bird Scrub or House Close, or Horse Close, they've all got names that, refer to what they were. But Arc Field was a prisoner-of-war camp for the German prisoners in the Second World War and Dicky Yates was a prisoner-of-war camp for the Italians and in between them there used to be an old cottage, there's nothing there now, where they cooked all the food. And so I've met two people, because after the war the prisoner-of-war camp was squatted in by squatters and I've actually met two people who were born in the squatters' camp that was the old prisoner-of-war camp.

But the other guy who has been here who I found quite interesting came over from Canada with a picture on a piece of paper drawn by a child. And this picture was of a house with three chimneys, one at each end and one in the middle, five windows and one door in the middle, three windows across the upstairs, two downstairs and he thought it was just a child's drawing, as a child might draw a house. But of course Boston Park, the house, is exactly like that. And he was born in Canada, but his mum was born at Boston Park. And he came back looking for it. He knew it was in Yorkshire somewhere and he was in tears when he saw that it actually was a picture. But his mother had told him that she was taken

there by his grandmother, his father having, his grandfather having left his grandmother with two daughters and she'd emigrated to Canada to be near some family. And his mother had told him that she'd drawn on some concrete they'd put down in the house somewhere, a picture of Boston Park. And of course, I was able to take him and show him the actual piece of concrete that his mother had drawn, the picture of Boston Park that was almost identical to the piece of paper that he'd got in his hand.

She was born here in this building?

She was born here, in this building, was his mother. But I could also tell him that his grandfather, the farmer, was taken by, old Tom Jackson, my predecessor as the tenant here, to Stainforth Station by pony and trap in the early hours of the morning with a big case, a box with him. And he went off to, he emigrated, he went to Australia and left his wife and the two daughters in the house, having already sold all the produce on the farm, pocketed it. He left leaving debts to all sorts of people round about, and the only thing he left behind was the bull in the bull pen cause they couldn't get it out, cause once all the cows had gone, it went pretty mad every time they tried to go in with it. So, so, some of the neighbours after discovered what had happened, that helped this chap's grandmother and his mother and his mother's sister to get the bull out and sell it, and with the money from the bull they managed to get passage to Canada and emigrated to Canada. So I was able to fill him in with a little bit of the history of his own family.

Oh, lovely.

So it's, and this farm you see was poor land and it had a history before Tom Jackson and myself came here of bankrupting several people because of the, the soil just weren't good enough. Our methods, because we were able to drain it when I came and we were able to use lime and different fertilizer to improve the soil, enabled us to grow some crops, supported by the European regime or the British government before that, through the '50s, we were able to, to make a living here, but now we're having to do something different.

Going back to prisoners of war, I know you weren't here...

No.

Then obviously, you didn't come till '75, would it have been Mr Jackson who was here then?

Yes, he was here. And this house, he didn't live in it to start off with because the house was used for training navigators. And the officers, the trainers, lived here and the men lived up at the camp and they shipped 'em in each day. But out in the front garden there, there was a, people billeted to guard it and there was also a search light and an anti-aircraft gun in the front garden. So this was quite an important part of the RAF station at that time.

And some of the prisoners of war, I understand, were used by local farmers?

Yes, they worked on farms, that was quite regularly happened that they went out on farms who were trusted and some, and one chap August Conan he never went back, he stayed here, that I know, well I know two German prisoners who stayed here and, and Tom used to tell stories of 'em, the Italians especially, they used to make wicker baskets and things and go round the pubs at night trying to flog

them to make a few quid to get some beer money. They were supposed to be prisoners of war, but apparently that's what they did!

And you say Mr Jackson didn't live in the house during the War?

Not to start off with no. They started off with, he did come in, in '42 I think it was, but in the first three years of the war it was being used for training navigators.

Did it still operate as a farm?

Still operated as a farm yes, yeah. Still farming around them and, it was being used for, but he held the next little farm as well, so he had a sort of base there. He used the buildings for the livestock, some of them. But not the house.

We don't seem to be that close to what was the airfield? We're close but…

Oh, we're a mile away in the house, but the top end of the farm you see, the north end of the farm is only what, be what, two or three hundred yards from the edge of the airfield zone. So that's what, we still come across occasionally curly lumps of barbed wire and the posts that were attached to it, get wrapped round your plough point, where they sort of put the guards, put the fences round.

We were talking about the ploughing the field, but something I did want to, see if you had anything to say about, was the bog oak and the difficulties of working with…of working the land when that's there?

Yeah, well bogs oaks still come to the surface each year, we get some, especially if it's been a dry year. We ploughed one up last year that was fifty two foot long. Fifty two foot long and it would have been, what, six or seven feet across at its thickest end. It was taller than me anyway.

Diameter?

Diameter yeah.

Crikey.

So, we, and we find lots of smaller pieces as well and they're really hard if you hit them. But when I first came here, we've got one field that we call Bog Oak Field, because we found so much in it. It was sort of, a low area, I think it'd been a pond or a small lake or something there, and we could find, when you were ploughing, a piece of bog oak every yard sometimes.

And how do you work with that?

Well plough 'em all out and take 'em off and burn 'em, out the way. And then after a year or two, we just find odd ones now, so it's not such a big deal as it was when we started off.

Can you see them on the ground then...

No, no you hit them when they're under the surface. Odd ones you did see on the ground when we

started but now they come up from lower down as the land shrinks, you see, the bog oak comes nearer the surface. And so you hit them with a plough or other implement and dig down and, or sometimes it might plough up.

If they're so hard is it damaging to...?

Yeah, it does damage the machinery. Significant damage sometimes, but sometimes the safety mechanisms take care of it.

And how do you get them out?

Sometimes dig by hand, tow them out with a chain, or sometimes with a JCB to dig round them, with the real big ones and get them out that way. I've got some quite startling examples of 'em.

And are they still rooted?

The roots have rotted away the thinner bits, it's only the thicker harder places and they're preserved. It's because of the acid nature of the soil, it preserves them in there, and they're very black and very hard. If there are other trees besides oak they tend to have rotted away, or they're not as old as that, if we do find other that are softer, but obviously they've not been there as long as the actual bog oaks.

And you say you've had some of them dated?

Yes, when I came here we ploughed so much up and I had a friend who was head at the junior school at Finningley and he did a project with some of the children and they took, they sent some to the British Museum to be carbon dated. About two thousand years those particular pieces were. Which fits with the idea that in some fictional stories that there was a, a battle at Osterfield and the Roman General Oster won the battle with the locals who lived in the forests around here and he ordered the forest to be set fire in a line roughly down where the 614 runs, and the wind blowing to the east as it did, is supposed to have burnt down a lot of the trees and blocked the water courses and changed the water courses and a lot of the trees were preserved around about Roman times which fits in with that two thousand year date of the, I don't know whether that's true or not, but that's how the story goes and there is a village called Osterfield, so…

Thank you very much.

[Recording Ends]