

Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Richard Lyon (part 1)

Date: 15th December 2006

Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's Friday 15th December 2006 and I'm talking to Richard Lyon. Good morning, oh, good afternoon.

Good Afternoon.

Before I go on to actually make a formal start, could you just describe to me where we are in terms of, you know the name of the farm and where we actually are situated?

Well it's Lindholme Grange Farm and we're in the northeast corner of Hatfield Moors, which is on the Yorkshire Lincolnshire border.

Can you tell me where you were born Richard?

Well I was actually born at Fairfield Nursing Home in Doncaster on Christmas Eve, 1951!

[Laughter]

And ever since then I've lived, first at Lindholme Hall, and then when I got married we lived at the cottages at Lindholme Hall and in 1985 we moved here.

So your parents lived at Lindholme Hall?

Yes, yes. My grandparents came there in 1930. Previous to that they lived at Don Farm which was also in the Lindholme Estate. They got flooded out about nine years out of ten, couldn't keep going like that so they asked the landlord if they could try somewhere else. Lindholme Hall had been derelict for, well, empty for several years prior to that so they moved in there, rent free I believe for quite a number of years. The farming company, Lindholme Estates eventually went bust in about 1947 I think it was so they bought the farm and, so we've been there ever since. My grandfather, who was also Richard Lyon, died in I think it was 1938 so my grandmother and her two sons, my father Jack and his brother Harry formed a partnership then as M Lyon & Sons in I say 1947, I think it was and been farming under that name ever since.

Why was it M Lyons?

That was me grandmother's name, Minnie, Minnie Lyon, so, yeah, been established as M Lyon and Sons, since then.

Can you tell me a bit about what it was like growing up in Lindholme?

Well...

Can you describe first of all where it's situated in terms of...

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Well Lindholme itself is a gravel island in the middle of Hatfield Moors. Before the Dutch came and did the drainage it literally was an island and even in our early days and school days you daren't walk on many parts of the moors because it was too wet and you would sink, well over the boot tops anyway and certainly over the head in some places. Since then of course they've done a lot of drainage on the moors, obviously the peat cutting has drained the moors and no doubt farming round and about improved drainage, has drained the moors as well.

So what would it have been like for your parents as farmers?

Pretty tough I think for the early years. I know my father said that in the early days they lived on rabbits most of the time because the, the island, down there, Lindholme Island was mainly just grass and it was sort of overrun with rabbits. So it was a two fold exercise, they got rid of the rabbits and it also provided food for them because the farm had been, as I say, derelict for a number of years before they moved in and I remember father saying that the old tractors the old standard Fordson tractor, one of the chaps working on it in one of the fields they could just see the exhaust pipe and his hat above the thistles as he was working along it. So it was a, a bit awkward.

So how big's the actual island itself, the upland..

The island itself totals about, well it depends where you draw the boundary, but about eighty, eighty acres thereabouts of which about thirty five or forty were arable and then the rest was, there was a big grass field and then sort of bits of woodland and obviously the house and pond and so on.

And did they have land that extended off the island itself?

Yes, yes, well, well as I say it was rented for the first few years and there was part of the, of the moorland that had been cleared in the, well the first experiments I believe were in the 1830s or 1840s, where they cleared the vegetation from the moors and experimented with warping. Not the normal sort of warping where it's flooded from a river and silt is allowed to settle as it's slowly drained off, this was actually dug from the old riverbed, of the old River Idle, which after the Dutch drained it, that was, it was obviously left as a dry river bed and they dug the silt from there by hand. And that had a little railway laid along, a steam railway. They winch the wagons up, as far as I'm aware, they winched wagons from the bottom of the warping pit, up an incline and then they had a, a railway to pull the wagons out onto the land and then it was, well, there's a couple of variations of ways that they could do it. They either had a temporary track way laid and then tipped the wagons over and sort of spread the warp by hand, or we believe they may have even tipped it into carts pulled by horses and they would take it out and spread it by hand. But if you can imagine spreading soil at eight inches deep by hand, you know, a cart load doesn't go very far. When they've done three, four hundred acres it's amazing how they managed to do it in those days. And it's probably not surprising that company that did it, again, went bust and we have, have seen a sale catalogue when the warping company sold all the bits and pieces, the railway engines, the tracks and wagons, all sorts of things, it was quite a big concern and they, that's about it I think really.

And the warping pits are they still there?

The warping pit is actually now, Lindholme Fisheries.

So it's flooded?

It's, it's, well it was reputedly flooded overnight, and apparently, the legend goes, they were supposed to have lost quite a bit of machinery down there. Again it, some people think that there's

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supposed to be one of the railway engines still down there, whether that's right or not I don't know because there was two advertised in the sale, so, unless it flooded between the sale catalogue being printed and the actual sale, it's unlikely that they're there I think. I know in the, in the local papers the chap that's there at the moment has done quite a bit of excavation to try and find these old engines and he's come up with some line he's found lines and bits of chains and other bits and pieces but no, no engines of yet.

And the warp itself how deep is that, because it's on the land that you farm now isn't it?

It's only, it's only between six and eight inches on top of the peat, so there's not a great depth of warp there, there's a much greater depth of peat. You might, have already spoken to Phil Westwood who would perhaps know what sort of a depth there was originally and of course now they're finished with the, with the peat cuttings there's just the minimum depth left. I know during the war my father said that they, I think it was Leeds University came and put test rods down, testing the depth of the peat with a view to perhaps making petroleum from it or at least some sort of fuel and they got down, I think thirty or forty feet in places and, without touching the bottom. So originally it would have been quite a, a depth of peat.

So the eight inches of warp sits on this huge blanket of peat then?

It does on our bit, it's not, we're not as deep as some parts of the, of the moors, where I mean some of the, some of the dykes in the bottom of the dykes what are sort of five, six foot deep you can see sand in there so you've obviously got four or five foot of peat. But other ones they have peat right down to the bottom.

Can you describe to me what the warp layer looks like?

Just like ordinary soil really, it's basically, as I say, the silt from the old dried up riverbeds. So it's, it's virtually stone free, we don't have any stones in the soil. It's just fairly good reasonably well yielding soil. It's not particularly heavy clay, it's not, not sandy soil, it's a medium loam as it's called in agricultural terms. It grows good potatoes and it grows a good selection of weeds as well! We have some of the chemical, the spraying companies come round doing trials, because we have such a good variety of weeds they come to do trials to test the chemicals out, see which works best and what rates work best.

And the weeds are there because of the nature of the soil?

Not because of the nature of the soil, it's just that anything that blows in is likely to grow. It's fairly, we don't need to leave it bare for long before it's green over with something or other.

The reason I asked you that is because I've seen some of the river warp which is actually in very thin layers like a slate.

Well that, that's it, when it's flooded warp it comes on, and then they do say it puts a penny's thickness on each, each tide, but no, because this was dug by hand it's sort of one shovel full at a time like, or a cart load at a time and then as I say, it was spread by hand so there's no, no structure to it as such and of course we, we plough pretty much the full depth of it. Not every year but perhaps every other year on average.

That's what I was going to go on to say actually, is that enough, the eight inches enough for you to do what you need to do in agricultural terms?

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Yeah, yeah, you don't, we try not to get into the peat too much with the plough, because you have to put, obviously if you get the peat into it too much it turns it acid and then you have to put a bit of lime on to bring the ph back into balance. So, and of course if you get through that into the peat and it's a wet time basically the warp is the only thing that's holding you up, if you get through into peat, you can disappear if it's very wet. You've gotta know what you're doing if it's, if you get into a soft spot in the field with the tractor, gotta know when to stop.

Oh that sounds very interesting, tell me a bit more about that. Explain what you mean.

Well I mean if you're ploughing or whatever with the combine or whatever and you can suddenly feel it start to sink if you do it's no good sort of trying to back out of it and, all you do is dig yourself a bigger hole. You've to go and get a chain and another tractor and get pulled out.

So think you're in a field, but every so often the bog reminds you that you're in a peat bog?

Oh yes, yes, you don't need reminding yes!

[Laughter]

It's a, you know, you don't have to be here too long before you're reminded one way or another, you know.

In what way?

Well as I say, especially if it's a wet time, obviously although it looks flat any slight undulation or where the warp is a little bit thinner, which it tends to be in lower spots, you're a lot nearer the water table. Cause we're only, well the building, there's a bench mark on one of the farm buildings and I think it's I can't remember whether it's either nine or eleven feet above sea level. So when you take the meter off that it already is above ground level and when you go down off the buildings into the fields you can imagine the, you know, not very far above sea level at all, so, being fairly low-lying, you've got to watch out for the soft spots in the, you know in the...

How does it drain if you're so close to sea level?

Well, in the seventies we, because there were grants available for drainage for farming and we had all the major dykes dug out and a drainage system put in, the old style clay pipes laid and from there it drains into the main ring drain which goes right the way round the moors and then just across the way to Sandtoft about half a mile or so there's a pumping station.

I was going to ask you if it was pumped

Yeah.

Can I take you back, a little bit, to growing up on Lindholme. What kind of things were your mum and dad able to grow on their farm because presumably they'd got a mixture of environments and soils.

Well there's only two real types of the soil the warp as I've said and on the actual island of Lindholme it was just fairly gravelly soil, didn't grow a great deal of anything much, sand and gravel. They had a bit more variety then than we do now, in that they would have grown wheat,

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barley and oats, beans, beans for combining, for cattle feed and potatoes and sugar beat, that was about it I think. Obviously in the early days oats for the horses when horses were on the farm. But as things have progressed obviously with, the oats have gone, because the horses have gone, the beans have gone, well we changed to peas rather than beans because they're a bit easier to grow, a bit easier to get on with. We dropped the sugar beat because, well that was dropped at the time just before we had the, all the drainage scheme done and as I said before in a wet time it was savage amusement my father used to call it. They had a, I can remember him saying they had an old lorry body, no wheels on it just the chassis rails and a wooden body, pulled behind a caterpillar and he was reaching down into water to find the sugar beat, he's pulling 'em out chopping the tops and throwing them in the lorry body and that's how they had to get them out for a number of years, so.

Almost farming by boat.

It was getting close to that way, yes, yeah. I mean even in, when I started working about 1970 I think on the farm a lot of years you had to be very, very careful and some years you had to leave two or three fields that were perhaps three quarters under water, couldn't do anything with them. So it was a bit difficult those days.

And how far away were you from your nearest neighbour?

Well apart from the farm cottages that were about quarter of a mile away and there was a an old boy that lived there at the time and then apart from those, about a mile, a mile and half I guess. In any direction really, either, the farm here where my father's cousin lived then, would be about the same distance as the other neighbours going out, sort of onto higher ground near Hatfield Woodhouse.

And how many people lived on Lindholme, at Lindholme Hall?

Well there was, me and me three brothers, mother and father, my uncle and my gran, most of the time. That was the sort of family. We all lived together, it was a fairly big, big house, most farm houses are I guess, it's about six bedrooms so plenty of room, running about room sound for us kids.

And what about man power on the farm?

Well again in those days there'd be, well as I say me father cousin lived here at Lindholme Grange, he worked on the farm and there was probably five or six other workers then.

Day workers?

Yeah, yeah, but going back a bit further in one of the census records, I think it's 1871 or eighty one I think it was, I happened to come across Lindholme in one of the entries and it was, it was actually the, Waring, John Waring and he was the man that had been in charge of the warping. He lived at Lindholme Hall then and it was family and there was several of his family, just let me refer to my notes a moment.

Yes, the 1871 census he was shown as farming six hundred acres at Lindholme with seventeen labourers, fourteen boys, and twelve women as well as the family. There was his wife, one, two, three, four, five, six children, his widowed mother, a governess, a servant and groom. So there's a, there's a small village living there in 1871!

You did away with the groom and the governess did you?

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We, yes!!

[Laughter]

You managed without them!

Yeah, yeah.

And how, just remind me again how big was the, was the farm in comparison with that one that you just read out?

Well not far off the same. As I say me brother's down there at the moment and there's about forty acres of land there and then we've got about four hundred and fifty, so, we're about four hundred and ninety, five hundred acres now. There was another little bit of land that has since, sort of gone derelict, it wasn't very good land and it wasn't anywhere near the rest of the farm so it was a bit awkward to get to so I think in the fifties it, we stopped farming it, and it's gone back to nature, so that'll perhaps account for the difference.

Well Lindholme's quite a famous place from quite a long way back isn't it?

Yes, yes, nearly all the local history books, Tomlinsons and Millers and all, the, sort of well known local history books all mention it and in sixteen, late sixteen hundreds Abraham de la Pryme, in about 1680, Abraham de la Pryme he was a local historian and diarist, he visited Lindholme and, this account is sort of readily available, as I say, in all the local history books and he describes what he found there was 'nothing more than a modern cottage but with a floor that looked like that of some ancient chapel and in the midst thereof a large grave stone.' Well the, again the story's sort of well known in local history books that in 1727 George Stovin who was a local JP along with Samuel Wesley and John Wesley and some others went across to find this grave stone at Lindholme and they, one of the people that was with them, Oughtibridge, Mr Oughtibridge drew this sketch of Lindholme, the old cottage that he found there. So yes it's been known about for a long while but because of the difficulty of getting to it, prior to the drainage certainly, and there's not many people that have visited.

And did they find the grave?

They did find the grave, yes, and again it says that with the, 'consent to the present inhabitant, a Richard Howlgate, they managed to the lift the grave stone and found under it a tooth, skull the thigh and shin bones of a human body, all of very large size and they also found a peck of hemp seed and a piece of beaten copper.'

And who do they think it was?

Well it was supposed to have been the legendary hermit of Lindholme, Billy Lindholme, who was supposed to have been a, well variously described as a giant or a wizard, conjurer, all sorts of things, weird and wonderful descriptions for him and some wonderful things he's supposed to have done. He was supposed to have been left in charge of keeping the sparrows off the corn at the farm while his parents went off to Wroot Feast, which is a village at the other side of the moors about a couple of mile away. And of course Billy was not very pleased at being left to do such a mundane task while his parents went off to enjoy the delights of the feast, so he rounded all the sparrows up and locked them in the barn and then went off to the feast as well and of course they gave him a

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good telling off when he got there and he said 'well it's alright I've locked all the sparrows in the barn'. And when they eventually got back again they opened the barn and the sparrows that hadn't died of fright were all supposed have turned white with fright and there are reports of white sparrows being seen round about at Lindholme, I've never seen any but, certainly people in the, up to the sort of thirties, twenties, thirties, forties have seen the odd white sparrow about. Whether anything could do it I don't know!

And when you were living there did you ever see any evidence of the sort of old things?

Well yes, cause, there's another story as well When we were young and one of the old granaries there was this, these few bones that were supposed to have been Billy Lindholme's bones and as kids do unfortunately they just got scattered about and you know, long since disappeared, but in one of the old history books again, well it's actually reprints of the Doncaster Gazette from, I think about 1860 or so. There was a chap called Harwood Brearley and he wrote a piece in the Leeds Mercury Weekly supplement, for 1901 about his expedition to Lindholme in 1895 and he was going through the history that we've already talked about and so on, and then he describes about, the characters that he met at Lindholme. The farm bailiff, he says, 'could read his bible but not a letter or a newspaper and the bailiff's son showed him round the estate' and it was a Mr Wright, that was the farm bailiff he talks about. He was breeding pheasants and guinea fowl that the young son had charge of and then he took him into one of the out buildings and he describes a repulsive looking character sat beside a hot fire, 'him I set down as the calf doctor'.

Anyway he was shown up some creaking wooden steps to the granary where this basket of bones was brought out, including a skull, no sorry the skull he was told had gone to a Manchester museum but not before the chap that he'd described as the calf doctor had danced round with the skull of Billy Lindholme on his head. And this Mr Brearley asked how they knew it was the bones were that of Billy Lindholme and they said, well about ten years before the old boy's brother and another fellow had thrown these bones out into the stable yard one night. Anyway about midnight they were woken up by a ghost that had ordered them to get up and put the bones back where they were, where they belonged. So of course they did and he were certainly convinced that they were Billy Lindholme's bones.

And these were the bones you were playing with when you were a boy?

These were the bones that are supposed to be still there yes, yeah. And I do remember taking one of 'em to school once but where they've gone, well disappeared as things do over the years. Unfortunately, it would have been nice to have thought there was at least one still there.

And I understand you dad was a bit of a collector.

Yes, yes, he collected, well more or less anything and everything. It started in his early teens in, when he were about fourteen, with a German bayonet, first world war bayonet that he'd found. And any farm sales, he'd always have a look round the scrap heap first, because in those days you might find an old shotgun or a sword or something thrown away in the scrap heap. He wouldn't bother buying the pile of scrap himself, he'd be watching, seeing which of the scrap men, scrap dealers bought it and if they'd paid a fiver for the heap of scrap he'd go along and say 'I'll give you a couple o' bob for that', and buy it off him whatever it was. Old farm implements, old farm tools, old horse ploughs anything that was going, that sort of thing. So yes a collection of all sorts of things, so we got to the stage a few years ago where we got all these sorts of old things that were taking up all the sheds and all the new farm equipment was stood outside. So we had to have a bit

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of a rationalisation and had a sale a few years ago and had to let most of the old things go, so we could, make some room for the stuff that was actually being used, to get under cover.

I think some of the vehicles are well, quite well known locally as well aren't they?

Well we had a, used to have a couple of steam rollers, they also went in the sale. Yeah, we used to take 'em to the local shows here, Thorne, Thorne Farmers show and the Festival of the Plough at Epworth, used to take 'em there, those sort of things. Yes, got well known for his collection of all sorts of things and a few old tractors as well. One of them has gone, went locally in the sale to Epworth and has since been restored and we see it at, at the Festival of the Plough, nice to see it back in operation.

So you lived quite a long way away from, even the nearest village. How did you get to school?

Well we had to rely on either mum or dad taking us. It was almost three miles to the main road and as it happened the Hatfield Woodhouse Primary School then was more or less straight over the road from our road end, so we had to have a taxi there. It all depended what was going on the farm, when it was harvest time and they were busy we'd, because, summers always seemed better in those days and it was nice and dry so we'd set off walking when home time came and once or twice we managed to get home before the, before the taxi had set off, so. But, no, usually they came and picked us up.

And did you actually do work on the farm?

Oh yes I've always worked on the farm. I went to college after leaving school. Well I had a year on the farm first then went to college for a couple of years, but other than that I've always worked on the farm.

Did you have jobs when you were a youngster?

Well you di'nt have a paper round!

[Laughter]

No, no, again used to help out in the school holidays on the farm. The rules weren't quite as strict then as they are now, you could drive a tractor and trailer for the combine or the potato harvester or whatever. So even though we were perhaps only twelve, or thirteen, fourteen, whatever, certainly gave you good ground for learning to drive and I managed to pass my test first time.

I did think when you said, that you know, when it was harvest time that you were going to say that you didn't go to school, you stayed behind and helped out.

No, no, we always managed to get to school. Well there was only a few times we didn't go to school. There was once for a week or two, I think it would be the sixties, I mean, when we had a very bad winter and we were snowed in for quite a few days. People think because you're a long way off the main road you must get snowed in, but if we get snowed in here the rest of the country's snowed in as well. It's not like you're up in the Scottish mountains or something. So that was, that was one, maybe missed school for a few days and another one, again in the early sixties by coincidence, was, in summertime, it would have been June or July I think it was and cause the peat moors then, weren't, hadn't being cut down as much as they, at all really. Any of the peat cutting was done by hand in those days and one of the biggest dangers of course was fire, cause once the

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peat gets a fire on it, you can't put it out it has to burn out and it doesn't stop at the surface either, it burns down and down and down and keeps going more or less forever it will do. And there was one day a fire had broke out across back of Lindholme Airfield as it was then, before it was a prison and there was a, about an eighty mile an hour gale blowing as well so it wasn't long before all the moors was up in flames and we couldn't get down the lane for a couple of days. In fact they were standing by to evacuate us and, the, the RAF Met Office said 'no, the wind will change in about three hours time', and almost, to the minute it did. So we were clear of the smoke then, that was quite exciting as well.

So did fire happen often?

It did in those days it was a fairly regular occurrence and as I say the, on the moors was, there was a lot of bracken and heather, not so many tall trees then but certainly a lot of bracken and heather, and once it got hold it would soon sweep across and of course you couldn't get any fire fighting equipment it was down to, to bush beaters with the old besoms that you perhaps see in the national parks now, sort of beating it out. But again you could only put the surface out, once it got into the peat it would just burn down.

And you say they were digging peat by hand then, do you remember them digging peat by hand?

Well not actually by hand, well again part of me father's collection was one of the old peat cutting spades that they had. They would be doing it by hand but I don't remember it. The earliest I remember is, as I say, as we're going to school, obviously going, driving through the moors and we could see what they were doing there on the, the first bit of mechanisation with some Dutch machines that cut the peat out, pretty much as they had done by hand and cut it out into blocks about two foot by six inch square and it, and it was just cut out of the two foot deep by two foot wide trench and left on the top alongside it. Then they had, casual workers, women, to come and stack it and turn it alternate ways to let the air go through, get through it to dry it. So there was, it was fairly, an intensive, labour intensive operation then in those days.

And did you have any connection with that or any contact with that?

Not, not really, no, no. My father had a few friends to, on a rough shoot on the farm and they used to shoot over part of the moors which, the peat works would let them and they would sort of use our road a bit, so there were a bit of give and take both ways, and they would come and repair it a bit, because it wasn't tarmaced or anything, just a stone road, so we had quite a bit of road maintenance to do and they'd help out with that. But nothing, no sort of official connection with them.

And did you ever go and watch them or chat to the old chaps or whatever?

Not, not really. We used to go down t'lane cause they had a little tram way, well they still do, to bring the peat in off the moors up to the factory and again in the early days when we were at school they had, it wasn't an engine it were horse drawn, they had a couple of shire horses pulling the trucks along tram ways so, you know, a nice day, you'd go and have a walk down the lane and go and watch the horses pulling the tram way trucks along.

And would you, could you see that from the lane that links you with the main road?

Yes, yes they had a crossing, yes, it came across the lane, no gates or anything it was just a little narrow gauge tram way and even up until, well a couple of years since when they stopped digging the peat there'd be a diesel, little diesel tramway, they used to come across, I don't know, six, eight

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times a day I would guess, coming backwards and forwards with the trucks. So, it wasn't far away from the house so you could, well certainly with the diesel engine you could hear it chugging away in the distance, yeah.

I'll come back to that in a minute, cause I wanted to just stick with you and the farm for a minute. Tell me what happened when you left school. Tell me what you did.

Well as I say I worked on the farm for a year, I think we had to have a years practical experience before starting at agricultural college. So basically just working on the farm, tractor driving, ploughing, drilling, spraying, everything.

Who else was there with you at that time?

At that time, obviously my father, my uncle was still alive at that time, the old chap who was the, sort of the farm manager here, and then there was another two workers, two or three workers with us then. So, an average number of employees I guess for a sort of five hundred acre farm, which was, about the average size I think, perhaps slightly bigger than most farms round and about, just an average farm really.

Now we're not on Lindholme Island and we're not at Lindholme Hall now, can you tell me how you came to be here?

Well, when I got married the old chap was due for retiring here, so because it was obviously a remote location he wanted to, you know, for security, have, have someone here, so.

So this is like, where is it in relation to the, to Lindholme Hall?

It's, well Lindholme Hall is about a mile, mile and half away, in a southerly direction from here and where we are here is right on the edge of the moors and the road as you come in is, that's the ring dyke that surrounds the moors that you've come along side of, so we're right on the edge of the moors. In fact the field here is a lot of, mainly sand, so, you know, we're right on the edge of the moors. This one hasn't been warped, there's just sand, and then as you go further inland then the peat gets deeper.

So you had someone that belonged to the farm who actually lived on this, this end of your land?

Yes, yes, me father's cousin that lived here yes, Tom Broadley his name was and his daughter actually still lives in the cottage just over the other side of the drain there. He died quite a number of years ago now, as I say he retired more or less the same time as we got married, so, it was the sort of natural thing to move out and we moved in.

So did you live in that, the old...

No, no we were going to but when we started looking, it was going to cost quite a lot to modernise and do up so, and we started to doing the sums, it was cheaper to start again and build than it was to do that, so that's what we did.

So can you describe to me your, you've described some of it, but can you describe to me your farm now?

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Now, we grow, well basically we grow anything that will go through the combine, because there's only me and Steven Oldfield, a lad who works for me, and we just grow wheat, barley and peas and then and just the lane- the road that comes in from the peat works there, alongside is one of the newer crops, willow, and that's grown for energy production, for the power stations. So, we've just planted, well a year last march, thereabouts, and in about twelve months time it'll be ready for it's first harvest. It'll be cut and chopped up into chippings, blown into the power station boilers along with the coal to help with the government's non fossil fuel obligation. And on a similar tack we've just also signed up to start, harvest 2008, to grow wheat for bio ethanol. There's a new plant being built at Immingham, well intended to be built if all goes well, and we will be growing three hundred tonnes of wheat to go there, to, again to go into bio ethanol production for again, same thing, for the non fossil fuel obligation with the road transport fuels. There's a requirement by 2010 I think for at least five percent of road fuels to be from renewable sources, so, that's another help.

And will your willow go to the power stations locally because you've several haven't you.

Yes it's, a few years ago there was a power station that'd started being built at Egborough that was a straw, well wood and straw fired power station and it didn't get far down the line before, it was either the building of it, or the company that was building it, whatever went bust, so they've come back with a different tack now rather than building purpose built wood fired power stations, they're using a small percentage of wood in every power station now. Well either wood or myscanphus, the elephant grass. So that rather than having dedicated power stations with a completely new fuel, a new system which obviously is going to cause a few problems setting up and if they put a small amount of renewable fuel into every power station then it doesn't need a great deal of fine tuning in the boilers etc to make it operate efficiently. That's the thinking. Similar with the bio ethanol that, you've got small amount of it in the fuel, isn't going to need any modification to the car engines, it's just a plant to produce it and you've still got a usable waste product in that the after it's being, cause it's basically a brewing process to get the alcohol, the ethanol out of it and the sort of grains that are left are still usable as animal feed or packing, even for burning fuel again for the power stations, whatever. So, it's, as regards our, going back to when my father started and sort of growing oats for, to fuel the horses, we're now growing wheat to fuel the cars, so, sort of come full circle!

So you farm more or less the same land as you've grown up on.

Yes, yes, exactly the same yes.

But actually just the focus has changed or the locations changed, you're now on a different boundary?

Well no, it's the same boundaries really, as I say, where my father started was with half the farm and then he, his uncle was actually farming here where we are.

Oh, so you're uncle farmed here and your father farmed at Lindholme. [nb it was Richard's father's uncle not his]

That's it yes, Lindholme Hall yes and when the farming company that they were renting it from went bust my uncle that's farmed here had the opportunity to buy the farm but didn't take it up, so my father did. So, he obviously increased the size of the farm and quite a number of years later, there was another couple of fields that were farmed by another neighbouring farmer, actually where they'd previously been farming at Don Farm where the warping pit was, they came up for sale so bought them and it, they just made it a, one unit and then we don't have to go out onto the main

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road at all. We're completely self-contained and, of course the down side is that we've have to maintain all our own roads as well.

Yes I was going to say, I was going to come onto that, I mean I've just driven here down a very long and partly flooded track today, cause it is rather horrible weather and then you cross over what you say is the ring drain around the moor and from where we're sitting you actually feel that you are sitting in the middle of the moor. I mean you can see the trees and the, all the peat and so on.

Yeah, yeah.

You obviously therefore, I mean leaving aside, you know, the whole business of, you know, your farm is sitting basically, floating on the peat in a way, you are actually really in the centre of it and how do you, what connection do you have with the actual moor land and the natural environment?

Well..

I thinking in terms of, for your interest and you know how you feel about the natural environment.

Yeah, well, as I say, when we, in school days, obviously a lot of our friends used to come down at weekends on their push bikes and as I say it was obviously great for kids, like, plenty of room to run about and you're not gonna get run over by any traffic, cause there wasn't any within two or three miles, you're fairly safe there. On the other hand we'd quite often go walking across the, the grass fields, as I was saying, down by the Hall or across the moors and you could come across adders, curled up in the grass on a hot sunny day, of course being Britain's only poisonous snake like, you've gotta just watch out for them, not step on them accidentally and again we used to walk across the moors.

There was, because we were, it was next to Lindholme Airfield there was quite a few planes had crashed during the war so we'd go across the moors and find the crash sites and perhaps come back with a bit of twisted aluminium from the plane and as I say it wasn't, wasn't perhaps a hundred percent safe, because you never know whether, you know, one bit of peat might not support your weight, you might sort of disappear, but it's not something you think about at the time, when you're kids. So yes, from that point of view we sort of had an interaction with nature and again before the, peat cutting was mechanised, as we were going to school down the lane, especially in the spring and summertime you'd see, it would just look like a field of snow across the moors, because it was the cotton grass, just one field of white blowing in the breeze and looked a lot better than the sort of brown desert it turned into a few years later.

As I say, if, you had a good reasonable selection of wildlife as well although to be honest I think there's perhaps more about now than there was then. Most of the wildlife then that we would see, obviously you'd see rabbits down the lane all the time, and pheasants and so on, the occasional fox, badgers, they were about then, and there'd be kestrels, and that would be about it really for the sort of usual sights. Although having said that we did down at the Hall, well it's still there, have a stuffed osprey that my dad's grandfather shot in nineteen ten or thereabouts, when they were considered pests. Slightly different now, and that was on the ring drain actually, further round. So yes there was different sorts of wildlife. Whereas now, we see quite a few larger birds of prey, buzzards, we think we've seen a red kite about, there's the harriers, hen harrier, although we did occasionally see those in the early days as well and I suppose the biggest change is the deer, there's quite a lot of roe deer now on, well on the moors and on the farm that we see them. There's not many weeks go by when you don't, don't see a few Roe Deer.

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And are these natural?

Depends what you call natural.

I'm thinking of history, cause this area was part of a big hunting chain, so are they the remnants of that, or are they...

I don't think so, no, I think, because we never saw any at all in school days, at all, no I think a lot of these are what have escaped over the years from parks and farms, where deer have been farmed in more recent years. But, they, they obviously are wild now and naturalised and as I say we've got quite a number of them. It's not unknown to see a dozen or so, well not in one place, because they are solitary creatures, or in pairs at the most usually. But yes, you can drive round the farm at dusk in, in the right sort of conditions and sort of see ten or a dozen quite easily.

Do they cause you any problems on the farm?

Not really, not really, they do, in the, obviously the cereal crops, the wheat and the barley they do, you can see the tracks, you know, coming with the combine you can see where they've been running about. Because they do tend to follow the same tracks across a field and then if, if they've perhaps been having a go at each other you can see a bit that's been paddled down, but you know, we'll let 'em have a few hundred weight of wheat to see them.

Did you have a particular interest, I mean were you a bird watcher or anything like that..

Not really, no, I suppose it's the case of, you know, with being in the middle of it, you sort of take it for granted. No I, I mean even now I, I'd struggle, you know, I can tell a robin, can tell a blue tit, but going much further than that I, I can't really say that I would, you know an expert on certainly the smaller birds at all.

Some of your, the fields that you have, as you say, they're just covered with warp and they're peat underneath, was it ever, was it ever considered to take the peat out and sell it as a product?

Not, not by us really, no. I know the peat works have sort of expressed an interest, well not, you know, over the last twenty years or so. They did a survey a few years ago with the geophysical, towed one of these, or two of these sensors behind a little quad bike up and down the fields and, sort of, to get an idea of the depth of peat, but, well I suppose with the, sort of environmental issues now, I don't think they would, it would be feasible probably, I don't know. It's not something that we've really considered at all, it hasn't really, you know, come up in conversation.

So they weren't sort of, after your bits of land and so on?

Well no doubt they would have been, yes, I guess, if, you know, if we'd ever decided to sell the farm, as I say perhaps not now, but a few years ago I guess they would have been in there at the bidding, but, no the situation didn't arise, so.

And you touched briefly on the change that there were from the old peat diggings to the new processes. Can you tell me something about the, you know, what you saw in the impact of that?

Well, as I say the early days when we were going to school down the lane you'd see tens, perhaps even hundreds of people out on the moors, stacking the peat, turning the peat and then load it onto the wagons and so on for transport to the factory and the way they cut the peat, even when, in the

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early days of the mechanisation when they were cutting it with these machines that cut it out in the block and put it up on the top where the workers had to turn it to dry it. They'd sort of do one section of the moors and they'd sort of finish that and then they'd move onto another section and to another section and so on, so it gave, obviously once they'd finished one section and cleared it, it gave it time to recover all the, all the animal and wildlife, plant life and so on, grew up and recovered and the way it was done as well with the, where they've cut out, obviously being at the bottom, obviously low down it was always wet and the tops of the banks, cause they couldn't cut every piece at all, they had to leave somewhere for the machine to run on top so it was all sort of stepped up and down and so as I say it was always wet in the bottom or was dry on the top, whatever the season, whatever the weather conditions. So in a way I guess it actually helped the wildlife, there was always water and they were always dry parts.

When they got onto the later methods of working they used, basically a rotivator, they cleared the top vegetation off, they had a big, leveller, peat leveller they called it, a big machine on tracks with like an auger, a screw across the front of it that took the, the trees and bracken and the took six inch or so of peat and leaf mould and so on, took the lot straight across. So it was just left with a flat peat surface and once all that lot was cleared then they just went along with the rotivator and loosened the top up and basically sort of hoovered it up. So it was already milled if you like, as they were taking it up and, and they, well I don't know whether it was done intentionally or not but my, my theory was that the, they sort of went round and cleared all the lot in one go, in a relatively short space of time. You know, perhaps thinking well if somebody's going to object, if we've already cleared it there's nothing, you know, nothing to, that they can sort of stop now for then, if once they'd got it cleared that was it and of course it didn't do them any favours as regards PR from the, you know the environmental, on the conservationists side it didn't do them any favours at all I think. I know it's sort of economics but perhaps they could have gone about it in a different way and perhaps, again, done different sections at a time to give it time to recover in between, but probably economics determined that they needed to clear the lot in one go and work it all in one go. But as I say, it didn't, it didn't help their course I don't think.

Well what was the impact on you?

Not a great deal to be honest. It...

I'm not just thinking in terms of economically and physically, I'm just thinking in terms of how you felt about it and what you saw on the moor.

Oh it was, it wasn't anywhere near as pleasant to look at, I mean even the peat cuttings were interesting, because you know, we had a variation in landscape and the, as I say you'd always got water down the bottom, bottom of it and once the stacked peat had been left to dry for a few months, or whatever, it was taken away and it sudden grew vegetation again, you know it was soon back again to, well, not a natural landscape, but it looked natural to the untrained eye. Whereas once it'd been all cleared and all levelled in one go then there was, you know, there was nothing there at all, not even a blade of grass. No wildlife at all, that you would no about, there might be something running about but nothing you would see. So no there was, not much to see at all really.

Since the peat extraction, or peat milling's stopped and the restoration process has begun, has that had any impact on you and your farm?

In a round about way, well, we're hoping it will do. In that, obviously English Nature, or Natural England as they are now, have taken over the restoration they're, they're looking for, or rather local people are looking for larger premises and the old farm house, as we said is derelict at the moment

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and we're, we're hoping that, if everything goes okay, then we can, we can get a grant towards converting it to offices and as I say the local people are very keen to, come into...

The local Natural England office...

Yeah, yeah, so, I mean we've already got planning permission passed for the plans for a conversion to offices, but for the grant you need the end user to say, yes we agree, we will, you know, move into here at this rent and then it can all go through. But with them, merging with the other, it's a rural development agency I think, and, is it Countryside Commission, I think.

It certainly is.

Of course all the budgets are in one pot and until it's all sorted out then we don't really know what's what. But we're hoping that that will come off, we've still got a few years to run on the planning permission but unfortunately the grant I believe runs out the end of this next year, I think, so we're hoping something can be, can be done before then.

The change, the restoration of the moor will obviously change the water table or change the hydrology of the area, I presume it's had some changes in the past as well with various ways people have operated on it.

Yes.

Does that affect you?

Well yes, I, obviously when they started the mechanisation of the peat digging on the moors they obviously had to drain it to get the machinery on, which helped us, because obviously being low lying you're, as I said earlier, susceptible to the water table. Of course when they drained they're bit it obviously helped, helped us as well, this is the only concern really with the, with the restoration obviously they want to rewet it and it's, well it's already having a little bit of an effect in that some of the fields on the boundaries sort of towards the middle of the deepest part of the moors are over the last couple of years have been fairly wet like, so it's just a bit of a concern whether, how much wetter it's going to be and whether it's going to be a regular thing, because we, you know, farming's on a bit of knife edge at the moment anyway and we can't really afford to, to sort of be losing too much to, you know, unfarmable land that's too wet. I say, that's the only sort of downside as to, as to the rewetting of the moors. But, we are working with the local, the English Nature people so we hope that we can come to some arrangement.

My question's on the tip of my tongue and it's just gone out of my head!

[Laughter]

Oh that's right, do you actually use the whole of your land or is any parts of it, sort of, under any sort of schemes or set aside or anything like that?

Oh that's right, do you actually use the whole of your land or is any parts of it, sort of, under any sort of schemes or set aside or anything like that?

Yeah, yeah, well obviously every farm has to have a bit of set aside.

Oh does it, how does that work?

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Well when I say have to, it started off, you didn't have to go into the set aside scheme but if you didn't, you didn't get any money, so, there's an incentive and it's ten percent at the moment, so ten percent of your area has to be set aside.

And what does that mean? When we say set aside what do we mean?

It, it means that you, agree to keep it in good agricultural condition but not grow any food stuffs on it, you can grow industrial crops, for example willow, although they aren't on set aside, but you could grow them on set aside land. Or the other main one is the oil seed rape for industrial uses rather than for feed, for machine oil that sort of thing. So, yeah there's that. We also joined the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, five years ago now, which is, is a scheme whereby you have to agree to manage certain parts of land in certain ways and it was a, I don't know what the right way of describing it is, but you had to sort of apply for it and it was up to the, the, DEFRA's people to come round and inspect it and say 'yes, you can, you're okay, you're eligible for it', and at the same time there was, new rules came in as regards spraying and the distance from water courses, that you could spray. Certain chemicals were okay, you could spray right up to the dyke side, other chemicals you could spray within a metre, other chemicals you could spray within five metres but it's a fairly complicated procedure, you had to decide how big the water course was, which chemicals you'd got in the sprayer, whether you were using a full rate, or half rate or quarter rate, as to far away you had to be from the dyke side.

Well we tried it, I mean, not so much tried it, but these rules say that if you go through all this rigmarole and decide you can spray so far to the, you know, so close to the dyke then you're okay, but if not you can sort of play safe and say 'right well we'll leave the five metres to the dyke and not spray.' Which is the easiest way round really. So we did that and tried it for one year, not spraying at all within the five metres and as I said early we can grow every sort of rubbish there is, so what we didn't spray, well there was nothing worth combining it, it was just once mass of weeds, so we thought well that won't, that won't work but at the same time the Countryside Stewardship Scheme allowed you to leave a six metre margin round the field, plant it with grass, or leave it to naturally regenerate with grass, cut it once a year and they would pay you in effect for leaving that six metre margin round the field. Which did two jobs at once, you didn't have to worry about how close and which chemicals you had close to the, close to the dyke side, you could leave a six metre margin and that was it finished with. So we joined that and that's been quite a success.

Obviously because we are low lying, nearly every field has got a dyke round it, so we had to have these margins round each field and although it doesn't sound much just leaving a six metre margin round each field, it adds up to forty acres out of, you know, out of the four hundred and fifty that we've got. So it's quite a chunk out of the, out of the farm. And then a couple of years ago we joined another scheme, and a sort of an updated one, the Environmental Stewardship Scheme, which is a similar sort of thing and that one, if you apply for it you're guaranteed to get in so long as you've, you've basically got to do certain things and they get you so many points and if you get a certain number of points then you're okay. So basically we, we leave a few bits and pieces, like wet corners of fields that are a bit low and a bit, you know, or don't grow a lot of anything, if there were a wet corner you can leave those, either leave 'em to grass or put wild bird cover in and agree not to cut the hedges more than once in every two years, agree not to clean the dykes out too often, agree not to cut the dyke sides more than once in two years and by doing, agreeing to all these different things you can rack up the appropriate number of points and so long as you do that then you're, you're in.

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So we did that as well, so, that doesn't take too much, too much doing, cause most of what you're doing you would be doing anyway as regards say, you know, we don't we're not gonna clean the dykes out every year anyway, so I mean, we physically haven't got time to go round all the dykes and cut them every year, so as long as you just take account of where, you, which dykes you've cut and which dykes you haven't you can work round the farm without too much interference in the every day running of it so it works out very well.

And thank you very much indeed.

Okay.

[Recording Ends]