

Alan Dickinson

Alan works for the National Farmers' Union as the Group Secretary covering the Staffordshire Moorlands and is based in the local office in Leek. He comes from a farming family in Northumberland and used to shear sheep for a living. He now owns a small farm of twenty-five acres, renting a further thirty acres at Rushton Spencer four miles north of Leek. In this first part of the interview, Alan talked to Christine Gregory about his current activities, the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001 and the price of milk.

Part One. The challenges facing dairy farmers.

AD: I live in Rushton Spencer, which is fifteen minutes away from the office. I've been up there twelve months now, just in a very small way, twenty-five acres. We have eighty sheep and about a dozen cattle. It's a fulltime job outside the fulltime job.

CG: So, you are fulltime for the NFU, and you've only been there for a year. Would you describe yourself as a farm, or small holder or a bit of both?

AD: I hate the word smallholder, because it gives the impression of, I'm gonna contradict myself here, being a hobby farmer, which I keep saying, 'mine's an expensive hobby', so I suppose I am one. But a smallholding you think of the five acres and a couple of pigs and a couple of hens and a couple of sheep. I'm farming on a small scale, and doing it the same as I would be if I had two hundred and fifty acres or whatever. But as I keep saying, I'm living my dream. I've always wanted to farm again. I come from a farming family in Northumberland. Used to shear sheep for a living, do various different jobs on farms, left school at sixteen to work on a farm. So, I'm getting back to my roots, again.

CG: So, you farmed in the Northeast, your family did. What sort of farming was that?

AD: That was beef and sheep as well. It's on the National Trust estate called Wallington Hall. It's near Morpeth, beautiful part of the Country, God's country. The family have been at the farm since 1933 I think it was. I had the chance to take the farm over, but decided to work elsewhere. There wasn't income at the farm at the time and my brother took over from my father at a later date. I can remember, I think I was thirteen and our bank appointed an advisor, so we had to sell all the cows and plough the land up into crop and it broke my heart as a thirteen year old. I loved the cows. So yeah, I know all about the ins and outs of things. That'd be the eighties, early eighties.

CG: So, this is something that you've very much lived with. So, moving in to working for the NFU, how did that come about?

AD: I had a serious road accident back in 1997. Didn't work for three years afterwards, recovering from that, and I always remember an NFU club secretary used to come in his 1.6 Ford Capri. It was a two litre or whatever and then eventually he came with this 2.8 injection special. I don't know if you can remember Ford Capris? They were great cars and I thought that must be quite a good job and you know, away from that money

side and all that stuff, it always interested me. And the job, I think for most people, isn't quite what you think it is. You think it's NFU and that's it. You hear that they do a bit of insurance as well, and in fact you do a lot of insurance and a little bit of NFU. Varying amounts of NFU work. I tend to do a lot more than most. Work with farmers is core work for me. In different areas, some NFU officers will perhaps be fifty percent what we call the core market, which is the farming, and fifty percent wider market. We're more like sixty-five percent farming. My actual job title is NFU club secretary, cos I'm employed by the NFU and I'm self-employed for NFU Mutual with the insurance side, so I work on a commission basis for that.

CG: But you are also working hard on your twenty-five acres with your sheep and cattle as well. So, does anyone help you with the farm?

AD: I've got a girlfriend, and also Becca works in the offices, my girlfriend's daughter, she comes and helps quite a bit. Another club secretary locally, he comes and helps me. Very fortunate to have people. They love doing it as well.

CG: So how long have you been doing the job for the NFU?

AD: I came down here in 2000. It's fifteen years now. We have four branches, so I stayed with the River Dane near Rushton. I live just on the edge and then kinda Leek down to Waterhouses and across to Longnor, to sort of Buxton, that's as far as we go. The fortunate thing for me is in this area we're talking livestock. Go to other areas and people have arable, they have vegetable, you know, market gardening. It's purely grass here, dead simple. It's what I understand best.

CG: So, in fifteen years, there have been huge changes?

AD: Not long after I started, I started in May 2000, and then in February 2001 of course we had the big Foot and Mouth epidemic. That always puts a shiver down my spine whenever I think of that, cos they were horrendous times. We couldn't go out the office. We worked purely from here. We had a lot of customers came in. In those days it wasn't emails it was faxes, and people had streams and streams of pages of movement licenses for moving cattle and sheep and things. And people came to use our fax quite a lot. We were the shoulder to cry on sometimes. There was the Addington Trust Fund where people could get a bit of financial assistance, and people struggled. In fact, it's amazing how many people kept going in those times. We were very fortunate; we weren't affected in this area. You go to Uttoxeter and further over they did have Foot and Mouth, but we didn't actually have any here. But it was equally as bad in some ways that we didn't. My brother at home, he was within one farm of it and in some ways he thinks now, perhaps he'd have been better off if they'd been culled. He fought to the end not to be culled. His neighbours who were culled had good compensating packages, they had new sheds put up, new vehicles. In some ways it was more financially ruinous not to be able to shift and sell stock.

CG: Foot and mouth, that was the first huge thing that you had to deal with when you started working for the NFU, but what would you say were some of the biggest issues in the early part of the 21st century for stock farmers in this area?

AD: Your livestock prices were very poor. Livestock was perhaps away from the main holding and you couldn't get them back. There was a scheme where a lot of stock were culled. That kept some people going. People got paid on a set value, it didn't matter how good or bad they were. People say a scheme's a scheme, some people benefit from it. Some people would be embarrassed and ashamed to admit they'd done that. Only recently I remember hearing of some very good farmers who put some stock on it and they got rid of a lot of the rubbish. Which you know, it's only them to keep and that, but it is human nature almost and I think it was mainly the poor livestock prices, people struggling to get back on their feet again. It went on for a couple of years afterwards. There were some people restocking after foot-and-mouth, but they weren't costing a great deal. They'd still get them fairly cheaply compared to the compensation packages they had. Cos of course, the values were paid on a percentage basis. So, you know, the auctioneer comes and values your stock before they're slaughtered. If he's on five percent or whatever, he wants that value as high as possible, cos that means he gets more. Bit of a silly way to pay a man, that's Government.

CG: Do you know of people who went out of business because of foot-and-mouth?

AD: It's amazing how people keep going. You know, difficult times at the moment. They keep saying how bad dairy farming is but as yet, there are not many gone out. There are the odd one getting to that age where people are thinking of packing in anyway, age getting the better of them. It's now a good time, cows are still making reasonable prices, so why trudge on making nothing. You may as well get rid. So, there are the odd one doing that now.

CG: When did milk prices get so depressed? We hear that it is twenty years that milk prices have not gone up.

AD: We had a meeting with our local MP last week, Karen Bradley, a Tory. One farmer was very open on his business and accounts and all the rest of it. And his example was, he produces about a million litres. So, he said easy numbers to play with, and compared to what he was getting just over twelve months ago, on the price he'd be getting from next month, it means a hundred and forty thousand pounds per year less. Now that's quite scary. I mean you could look at the fact of him doing really well in the past, which he'll admit, it was the best year he'd ever had. But at the same time, you know all that investment he was wanting to do, and was gonna do, and that money was letting him do. Cos, it is a fault that's thrown at farmers quite a lot, but they do like to spend their money when they have it. Not many of them hoard it up. They will buy that new tractor or put a new parlour in or put another shed up. They all want to keep going on. There are not many of them stand still.

CG: Can you explain what the structures are for setting milk prices?

AD: Well, the supermarkets do keep putting it on the shelves at a very low price to try and allegedly get customers in. I've always struggled to believe that it does work, but it must do, otherwise they wouldn't keep doing it. It's a loss leader. And you know, do they really need to keep using..., would it not be fairer if they kept changing what they use? Whereas milk does seem to keep being the one target. But at the same time, milk was a pound for the four pints for a good while. Some have dropped it to eighty-nine pence. So rough mathematics, roughly it's eleven per cent, give or take a bit. The milk price for the farmers have dropped down a lot, a lot more than eleven per cent. So, someone's making money somewhere. But they're still knocking more and more off all the time.

CG: What's the prices the farmers get currently.

AD: It's always a bit behind, but I know for July it was something like 23.2 pence or something like that. But now each month it keeps going down so actually today, it's probably twenty-one and a bit or something. And there's some only getting teens of pence. And then it's artificially propped up by those on the supermarket contracts, the dedicated supply contracts, where they're still above thirty pence. So, you've got some people on over thirty and some on under twenty for exactly the same product. And some, like the farm I went to last week, his milk gets picked up by Wiseman and he's on I think about twenty-three pence. Well on the same tanker, the Tesco Wiseman gets picked up, which is paid at thirty-one and a bit at the moment. To the same standards and everything. Even those that are saying, like Tesco, this big headline of 'we pay our dairy farmers a sustainable living so they can pay themselves a wage and money to reinvest' and all the rest of it, but there's only a certain percentage of their milk is actually from the dedicated supply contracts. The rest comes from the farmer we were at whose milk just gets chucked in with it.

CG: Does it tend to be the big people who get those contracts?

AD: As a rule, yes, because it's all about keeping costs down. So, if they can stop and get twenty thousand litres from one farm, it costs them less than getting five thousand litres from four farms doesn't it?

CG: So, who are the ones then who are surviving. Is it the big ones?

AD: Well, I would argue the big ones are probably struggling as much as any in some ways. It's all about which contract you're on. If you're on a good Tesco or Sainsbury's contract, you haven't got any worries.

CG: There was a demonstration last week, where farmers were saying that they are producing milk at their own losses.

AD: Yeh, I say those on teens of pence will be. One of the last remaining farmer cooperatives is First Milk, and they're struggling financially. Each farm has to pay four pence per litre that First Milk take back off them. It's not investing in the company, it's paying the wages and probably paying their month's wage check the next time. So if

you're only getting perhaps seventeen/eighteen/nineteen pence and they're taking four pence off you, you're left with half as much as the man on the Tesco contract. You've no chance.

CG: What do you think should be the minimum price level?

AD: I think twenty-five would be a reasonable amount. Cos it is a three hundred and sixty-five day a year job. And towns people don't understand, when you say 'I've gotta get up every day to milk the cows'. It's three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Those cows want milking twice a day every day of the year. And it is a major commitment. Yes, I'm sure dairy farmers, most will agree that when the circumstances are right, they can make very good money. But they've had to earn it. And there's a massive amount of investment. If you've got two hundred cows or whatever, might be averaging fifteen hundred pound a head or whatever, you are talking about an awful lot of money just in the livestock, let alone milking parlours that probably start at about fifty thousand up to a hundred and fifty thousand now. If you want a robotic milker, they're about eighty or ninety thousand each, which only milks sixty cows. So, there's a lot of costs.

CG: What's your view on animal welfare in dairy farming?

AD: There's good and bad in whatever you do, you know. There's some very good farmers and there's some very bad ones. Not gonna deny that. The only problem is the small minority who are the bad ones spoil it for the majority who do a very good job. But I say you'll find that in any walk of life.

CG: When I lived in Youlgreave, I saw one farmer after another giving up.

AD: Well, if you've got no family coming through, you might have had three daughters, they all go off and get a job somewhere. Is there any point in carrying on? It's all about, I always remember there was the Lambing Live programme, I think it was last year or the year before and there was a guy on there who said people who say 'Oh I'd rather me son went and got a bank manager's job or you know worked in industry or as a solicitor or whatever', he said 'Absolute rubbish. You slog your guts out, you're wanting to pass this down to your next generation' and of course you are. That's the sole reason you do it. It's all about pride, you want to say 'I've done a great job, here you are son, have it, carry on the tradition'. Cos most families do keep going a very long time, you know on the same farm for a lot of years.

CG: A thing that speaks very loudly to me is that the families seem to be a very essential part of any farming enterprise.

AD: Going back to what you were saying about the big farmers doing well, they will struggle because big farms have big costs and families can't run big farms as a rule. You're paying outside labour. Milk price goes down, the employees still want their wages. You wouldn't expect any different. Whereas you have a family farm, you haven't got the costs, a lot of the business expenses kinda come out the farm, which

also pay the sons living expenses and all the rest of it. And you can sort of batten down the hatches and make do. You don't need to keep perhaps renewing the machinery, you manage cos it's your family, you do without a wage, you live, you don't go hungry but you don't have a holiday. Personally, I think the medium sized farm will probably keep going the best.

CG: I was terribly aware of the shift over to beef and people just buying cattle to fatten them up a bit, which has become quite an issue in the area I know, with people not knowing the stock and them being quite dangerous, especially around footpaths. Are there many people who have come out of dairying and switched?

AD: A few have said that it's cattle and cows just the same, but totally different. Dairy cows are so quiet and calm. You get the beef animals, cos they're not handled as much, so they are very temperamental. On the insurance side we know a number of issues with people getting injured on footpaths, but partly because of bad education. People go walking with a dog and to me, if I was with a dog or without a dog, you go into a field where there's cattle, I don't care where the footpath is, you walk around the outside of that field so if they do come to you, you can hop over the fence. But people are walking on the footpaths. Then of course the cattle come and we've had one where instead of letting the dog go ... the dog will get away ninety-nine times out of a hundred. One lady lay on the dog to protect the dog. Of course, the cattle hurt her, and it's just... no hope.