

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 fourth part of the interview, Alan and Christine Gregory discuss the divide that exists between the urban and rural populations in the South West Peak, and the pressures on the countryside.

Part 4. Town and Country

CG: One of the things that is peculiarly British is the big separation between the rural and urban culture. You get people who want to live in the country, but we don't have markets, we don't have this sense of a link to where our food comes from. It feels to me like this is terribly important. There is a real disjoint between the stuff that's in the supermarket and the land and the people that manage it.

AD: Does that not start in school and education? You know if you go to countries like Canada, they have a lesson each week of agriculture. We don't, so where's a child supposed to learn? But the worrying thing is, I've heard one or two people say that, now perhaps, the children are a bit better and it's actually the parents who are worst, who haven't got a clue where anything comes from. They say the number of people who think potatoes come from trees, not actually grown in the ground. Frightening, but that's a poor excuse that they don't understand that, because potatoes aren't just a farming thing, they're a garden vegetable, but people just obviously don't have gardens anymore. They have patios, gravel, and decking.

CG: Well, as a 1950's baby with brothers who were war babies, what I can really remember was that out of our not very much money, with four children, is that food was the top thing we paid for. So, I'm always sort of saying that was the first call on the money. You didn't have things, you had food, and I've always felt that at some level if we could really come back to paying for food as a proper proportion of our income, not just the bit that you scrabble around at, but it's the main thing that you put out for, because that's what it was, that was my Mum's challenge. My Dad's challenge was to feed six people and that was the most important thing.

AD: Well, that was in the good old days. There was food on the table, a shirt on your back, coal on the fire and a roof over your head. And why aren't those important anymore? People are more worried about tickets to Alton Towers or a fortnight in Menorca or whatever. It's all laptops and how we change that I'm not sure.

CG: That's just what I long for. If we could just pay for food properly, we wouldn't be running dairy farmers into the ground, we wouldn't be running the landscape into the ground. But if we could at least understand where we're coming from. You know, it

was a horse and cart used to bring the vegetables around and Dad had an allotment and that sort of thing,

AD: If you can do it crack on. That's what I mean about the decking thing, if people actually grew some vegetables their selves, we wouldn't have such demands on the landscape. Then like I say, you don't plant it right or all the caterpillars come and eat all the lettuce, which is why we use the chemicals to stop it, because you can have a blight on potato, your crop can be wiped out overnight. And as horrible as it is, we have to treat them and I'm a great believer in things like cancers are from chemicals. But I believe more so after they leave the farm. You get potatoes, you buy a bag of potatoes, at one time what you had left, they sprouted and you put them back in the garden. Don't grow anymore... You could not get a bag of potatoes to eat and then use it to plant in the garden to grow potatoes. They just don't shoot anymore. That potato is seriously messed with, long after they've left the farm.

AD: As a farming person I can never understand why anybody just goes for a walk. What's the point? To me you always went round the field to look for sheep or check the cows or you're getting the cows in. I never went anywhere else, but I didn't need to, because I was always walking doing that. Whereas now people in an office, course to them they need to do that walk to... I can understand don't get me wrong, but when I was younger, I thought well why would anyone go walking? It's like people cycling, you know, mustn't have worked hard enough in the week. And basically, that's what it is, isn't it? It's their refreshment and detox or whatever. Get out, get a bit of fresh air, and go. So, I do understand where it comes from, but I don't know, it's just the way the world is. Footpaths originally came for children to walk to school, people walked to church on a Sunday, postman delivered the mail, and I suppose people went to see friends. Now, none of those, it's all about leisure. So, footpaths are actually misused, I think, and in some ways, it shouldn't be allowed. So, we cause our own problems. I mean what's wrong with people walking on roads? A lot easier for one thing.

CG: But then you'd be keeping the separation between town and countryside people?

AD: Do you think people walking on footpaths mingle with countryside people? Perhaps I'm just doing exactly what I'm criticising people for, of thinking of the few poor people who walk a certain footpath once a year to keep that footpath open and that's the only time they'll go anywhere near it. It's always a bit of a point. Yes, people are usually very good and the stile isn't very good and they'll find another way of getting over, which is sensible. Whereas others will raise a complaint with the highways, which makes it hard for everyone and of course it is the landowner's duty to maintain the footpath and the stiles, even though he never uses it and isn't bothered whether it's there or not., but you know, that's the law of the land.

CG: With this South West Peak project, one aspect of it is raising awareness of this beautiful landscape and the nett result then would be more visitors. Coming back to

the walking issue, the truth is the rural economy does depend on tourism and people coming and staying in holiday cottages, using the local pubs, cafes and shops and all the rest of it. It is essential, some of the farms would die without it.

AD: The difference here to where I came from in my home in Northumberland, it's so much more rural in Northumberland. Our nearest house to our farm is the school three quarters of a mile away. Here, whenever I see a customer in this sort of area, you go and look out the living room window, the kitchen window, you haven't got far for the next property. They're only a stone's throw or not much more than a stone's throw away. Much more densely populated round here. Whereas you can go to where I come from and you don't see people.

CG: There is a culture in the Peak District, which would be alien to you from the North East actually, of everyone knew the Peak District inside out. They'd been cycling there, walking there. People worked in the factories all week. The same with the whole access movement, it's not new, it goes back to the 1930's. The mill workers of Manchester and people coming in from Staffordshire, the steel workers from Sheffield joining up on Kinder Scout and walking the moors as their right. The moors and the hills are mine on Sunday, I'll graft in your factories, but I've a right to roam. So, it's not like one or two people turning up in their smart gortex, it's ingrained in the culture of this part of the world. We are facing all sorts of huge issues about how landscapes are managed for all sorts of reasons and how the rural economy...

AD: It is a conflict because I've just bought twenty-five acres. I've got footpaths across it. I've paid for that land and other people can come wandering across it whenever they want. I'd never dream of walking across your garden. You paid for it the same. Would you not think if I was trekking across your garden you would think 'what's he doing?' You know, I bought that bit of land but it's just accepted that people walk across it. I had a house in Leek with a garden and I wouldn't have wanted anybody walking across my garden. Well, where's the difference? 'Cos if we're gonna have open access, we have open access everywhere, surely. That is the problem, there are so many farms with a footpath going through the farmyard, which to me should be banned, stopped. Then there would be so many less problems, I think, if you move the path. Costs you thousands of pounds to reroute footpaths and you get the people who object to it. Let's just go round, what difference does it make. The footpath's going up there, the farm's here, let's just go round it and keep out of everybody's way. Great, and that should be done free of charge. And then I think everybody would say 'yeah get on with it, no problem'. I deal with this quite a lot in the NFU. Like you say, you don't like somebody walking past because everybody does look in the window when they walk past, don't they? When you're in the middle of your breakfast or, you know, you forgot to put your pyjamas on or whatever.

AD: And then the other thing, which really grates me, I know down at Stafford on the dual carriageway, you either go right to the M6 or left to the county showground and on there is a beautiful plot of land that's now all under a concrete building. There are enough areas in the middle of towns and cities that can be reclaimed and built on. Why do we have to keep going further and further into the countryside? It's putting more and more pressure on it. They say that thousands of acres every year are lost to concrete and tarmac, but there's this supposedly great need for extra housing. Where's all these people coming from? Because to move into a new house you've gotta move from an old one. So, you know, 'I need this new house, okay, but who's moving into my old house?' I do wonder if there is this great housing need that we say we have.