

## **Arthur Slack**

Arthur Slack was born in 1931 at Reddish Farm in Whaley Bridge. He worked for Mr Lomas at Shallcross Farm near Taxal in his youth before moving back to work on his father's farm and then starting out on his own at Glebe Farm and then moving on to Overton Farm. Arthur is the father of Peter Slack and grandfather of Matthew and Sam Slack who also contributed to this oral history of farming in the South West Peak. Arthur died in September 2018.

Christine Gregory and Sheila Hine talked to Arthur in 2017 about his memories of growing-up and farming in the South West Peak over the past eighty years. This first section covers Arthur's early years growing-up at Reddish Farm near Whaley Bridge.

### **PART ONE – Growing up at Reddish Farm**

We reared a lot of stock and we had a lot of hens at home. We were milking by hand. We didn't have a milking machine. We didn't have electric until 1947 and then we had electric in at home. Of course we had a big milk round you see.

When I was a lad, one of the fellows that drove the churn lorry used to leave it in me dad's yard and I used to go with him. And we used to go to Stockport Co-op. Sometimes they used to say 'just take it to Congleton Co-op today' and it was just like another half a day's work in them days.

You see, when I went with the churn lorry when I was about 10 or 12, the most he had on was 770 gallons. He had 11 rows of 7 gallon churns. 770 gallons he had on and we'd go to about 30 farms for that. I mean, ours are doing about 750 gallons a day themselves. So all these farms that've packed up, they've just swallowed 'em up.

Cause you see, when we sent milk into town your only contracts were like little corner shops and then there were no phones. You'd get a telegram or a postcard on the Monday morning. 'Oh, it's Oldham wakes this week. Everyone's gone to Blackpool, we don't want any milk.' And of course this is why farmers' wives had to make cheese and butter. This was back in the 1930's.

I nearly chopped my hand off in a straw chopper. It had a big handle on it, two big blades and a big wheel and they used to chop it for the horses. Me dad had just sharpened it with a file. It just hadn't come up, like it had teeth to drag it through and me, like a fool, put me hand through and pulled it up and I nearly chopped my hand off. You don't go to hospital in those days. Me dad took me to doctor in Chapel just in the middle of surgery and I walked in and me dad had wrapped it up and he (the doctor) just said to them all in surgery 'I shan't be many minutes. I've just got a job on here' and he just put four clips in and put a piece of board under and wrapped it all up and gave me some tablets. In a quarter of an hour I were back home, no trouble. I couldn't use it a lot but it didn't trouble me a lot really. I were lucky.

In 1936 we had an Austin car at that time, me dad had it for the milk round. We had a churn on the back and if it were wet the churn went inside, and me two older brothers and me sister were at school and I hadn't just started. He bundled me in the car one day after we'd done the round and had a bit of dinner. Course, I didn't know, it were a ride out for me and we finished up at Tarvin near Chester and there was a fellow there called G B Ratcliffe and he was a pedigree Friesian breeder at Poole Bank Farm Tarvin. I always notice when I go past. My instructions were 'don't get out, don't touch anything, I shan't be

many minutes', not knowing what they were going to do. He disappeared in this house and about quarter of an hour later he came carrying a calf in a sack between them, me dad and this other fella. And of course, I soon found out why I was on this trip. I had to keep this calf quiet in the back, tied in the sack. I let it suck me fingers, anything to keep it from rambling about, you know. And that was why I was on the trip. And of course, you know what calves do when you put 'em in a sack. There was soon steam rising and smells. Anyway, we got this calf home. And he paid 15 guineas for it, a pedigree bull calf. Tarwin Gordon it was called and it made a right good bull, and local people got to know about it. Cos it were pedigree you see, and they brought their cows. Quite a number of 'em did, you know. They'd give us something every time but it weren't a lot.

It was a horrible job really, I remember this fellow from up here coming and all his hand were bleeding. He'd had the halter round his hand and the cow had him down on the floor coming through Whaley Bridge, you know, dragging him up the road. He'd rubbed his hands raw on the back. The trouble was, you know, they'd turn up with a cow and the bull wasn't familiar with this cow and they must have a scent themselves and you turn the bull out and of course the first thing the bull would do was tip the water trough up, the wheelbarrow over, tread on the brush and break it, and you had to clear all that away for a start. And then, he'd decide to have a battle with the cow. After about half an hour they'd decide to do what they should do, you know. We got some starvings with that you know, waiting on them in a bit of a gennel, waiting for them performing.

I've a lovely story. When the Foot and Mouth were on and the AI couldn't come round and they used to leave you a little syringe on the gatepost. My neighbour Walter Mellor, a very good farmer, he decided he wanted AI one day and he thought he'd try this. He was only a little chap. Of course the cows were tied up in the shippen and he stood on a box doing what he should do at his end and his wife was at the front with the cow's head under her arm talking to it and stroking it. After a while, she turned round and she said 'Walter, you're not doing it properly'. So, he said 'how do you know?' She said 'this cow should be smiling and it isn't'. Funny thing is, he served six cows and got five of 'em in calf, which was better than AI. But that was a learning curve.

We used to buy Irish heifers, I went with me dad. There was a fellow called Brocklehurst at New Mills, he used to buy Irish heifers. And we had this Austin car, and we also had a cattle trailer which was very rare, and there was a wheelwright lived at Whaley Bridge, made these cattle trailers, and we went down to see Matthew Brocklehurst. I was only a lad. Cos we were retailing milk, you had to keep a steady supply of milk you see. We were always either buying cattle or selling them. And we went and he showed us these Irish heifers. And me dad said, 'oh I'll 'ave that one' and Mr. Brocklehurst said 'take the other one too. They're a pair off the same farm you know'. Me dad said 'I'm going to have a job paying you for that one, I cannae buy two'. I mean it were only 19 quid. 'I shall have a job paying for that one' but he insisted, he said 'Mr. Slack, take 'em both' and me dad kept saying 'I can't afford to'. 'Tell ya what' he says 'take 'em both, I'll have ya trailer back for that other one' and he did do. And we called at wheelwrights and he said 'can you make me another cattle trailer' and he said 'well what's happened to the other one?' 'Well I had to sell it to buy a cow'. And he said 'well how you going to pay for it?' And dad said 'well I hope I'll have enough together by the time you've made it'. And he did make us another one. That's how they were. It was worth it to have 'em both, yeah.

We had some Irish cattle in the Sheffield blitz. Me dad bought some heifers from somewhere. These were Irish heifers and they were in wagons in Sheffield three nights in the blitz. And when they got them home you daren't drop a bucket or anything or shut a door. They were gone. And they wouldn't do a lot of good they didn't. They were shell-shocked. Oh they were nervous, you daren't drop a bucket or bang and they were three nights in the blitz in Sheffield.

The Irish heifers weren't ear-tagged in those days. Your pedigrees would have a tattoo. I remember having TB testing at Reddish Farm with me dad and there was this fella called Birtwhistle, he was a Ministry vet. He lived in Buxton, a pretty religious fellow. He came down and of course the cattle weren't used to people walking about with rubber aprons on, and he come down the shippen, it were a 20 shippen. He put all his stuff at the far end. Course you know how they have two injections. He'd got these two injectors in his hand and me brother says 'I'll just go up between them Joe and keep 'em quiet'. And of course, me brother went up between 'em and the first one jumped across and jumped straight on his foot. Well me brother let such a mouthful out. Birtwhistle came back out and he put all his stuff back in the window bottom. And he said 'Mr. Slack, did you hear what your son said?' 'Oh aye, did he say summit?' 'If he says that every time we inject a cow, I'm not doing any more'. I remember them doing that, testing 'em. But with us being milk retailers, they were very keen with us, testing the cows and always testing the milk.

A fella from Derbyshire County Council used to come round and he had three medicine bottles and they just held a pint of milk, three of them. And he put them in a brown envelope and sealed it with wax. He took two with him. He used to test them for water first thing, whether they had water in them, and he left one at the farm. And you know if there were any dispute you'd always got a sample to have it tested yourself. But you know they were pretty keen on producer retailers.

I left school in 46 there were 4 lads at home, and obviously we all couldn't stay at home and I went working on a big farm locally.