

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 third section covers Arthur's reminiscences of starting out on his own at Glebe Farm and then moving on to Overton Farm.

Part three – Being your own boss

I stopped with Mr Lomas 'til I was 20 and my brother had his fatal accident and I had to come home then.

My younger brother John got married and he went living at Branside next to Turncliffe. He got married in '56 and moved out then. And then me sister, she got married as well and she moved out to a farm. There was only me elder brother at home then and he weren't married and we had two vans on the road delivering milk and he had one and I had one, and then I got a tractor. We had got a tractor, but I bought one for myself and a pick-up baler and I used to do a lot of contracting. My wife used to milk at night for me and I used to go out baling hay for different people.

I had Friesians, me dad let me have 8 to start off. Of course, Al were coming in then and you could soon improve with that. I bought a few. I know I bought one in Leek market and Lloyd Lomas were bringing it back and we were loading it up and he said to me father 'how much did you pay for that damn thing?' and we said '91 pounds, do you remember when we used to pay 19 pounds for them?'

I was milking about 20 cows and we were on churns when I started then went on to bulk tank while I were there. It was a big learning curve you know being your own boss and buying stuff.

At that time there was a Small Farm Scheme and this was about 1970. There was quite a lot of help ploughing and you got so much help for ploughing up and lime, you nearly got that free. You only paid 8 shillings a ton and that was the spreading charge really.

I grew kale and that and tried to be pretty self-sufficient and we were very busy. I milked cows and we had this milk round to do and me wife had two little kids and she went out to work. She was at a school for naughty boys and she went there domesticating. There was a pub down the road and she went down there at night behind the bar at times. Oh she was a worker. I said to my lot now 'your mother must have been a hero the stuff she did'. I only had 31 acres and a funny thing happened. I had this 31 acres and the next farm came up for sale and it was about 40 acres and I toyed with the idea to buy it. And I got John Smallman from Bakewell to have a look and he went through the house and everything and I forgot how much it was at the time and I said 'what do you reckon John?' and he said 'oh it's too much money'. Anyway, I didn't buy it, another couple bought it and low and behold there was a knock on the door at night and a chap and a woman and two little girls were there. 'We bought Sitch Farm and we don't want all that land, will you buy it?' They

only wanted 10 acres and my brother and I bought the land between us, the other 30 acres. It just joined up to mine. It just worked out right you see. And then Foot and Mouth came along in '68 and the fellow on the next farm along, Crow Hole Farm, he bought a farm out at Pickmere but he hadn't moved everything. He left some heifers on this farm and of course come Foot and Mouth he couldn't come and feed 'em, so he got in touch with me. He said 'can you feed them beasts for me and I'll straighten up with you after the winter. Make a note of how much hay you use'. And I did this, and it came spring and he said 'do you want to buy that land?'. So, I said I was interested. So, I went to see Mr. Hampton in Buxton because me dad knew him through Flash Loyal Teapot Society and Brook Taylor's. So, I bought 35 acres for 3 thousand pounds I think it was. Of course, it joined up again you see.

I hadn't increased me cows, cos I was that busy all the time. I did put a Dutch barn up cos you got a lot of grant for putting up a Dutch barn. I put this two-bay Dutch barn up and being a bighead like I am, I said 'dad, come and see the barn I put up'. He just walked in the field and said 'oh hell, it's only half big enough'. And it was. You know I put another two bays on and another lean-to on the side. He said 'you must always think big you know'.

Anyway, things went on and the next farm came on the market. I'd been expecting it cos it hadn't been farmed very well and there was a bit of conflict with the father and the son. I know they didn't get on very well. Anyway, it came on the market. I said to my oldest brother, 'what about Overton Farm?'. He said, 'oh don't rush me, you know, you're going to get in bother you are'. And I said 'well I shoulda bought it 15 year ago, I had the chance and it were 12 thousand quid' and I kicked myself after that, I didn't buy it. You know me dad used to say if he could've borrowed money then he could've got on a lot faster. But you see, you couldn't borrow it and daren't borrow and that was the trouble. Anyway, I went to the sale and I never said a word to my wife, and me brother-in-law he came to the sale. And I bought it and my brother-in-law says 'I'll have to come home with you'. I said 'why?' He says 'your wife's going to shoot you when you get home'. Anyway, we went in and my brother-in-law were grinning. My wife said 'what you grinning at?' cos she didn't know where we'd been. Me brother-in-law says 'he's just bought Overton Farm'. 'I bloody hope not' she says, 'he wants to buy more concrete, never mind more grass'. Anyway, she calmed down and she said 'as long as you can pay for it, you can have it'. But it was one of the biggest mistakes I made. You know I should've taken a bit of mortgage out. I spent all me money and I couldn't really get going fast enough.

It was good farming. We used to grow potatoes on it. The fellow before me grew potatoes and wheat. Up near the farm there were 30 acres of dead flat land. It was at 950 feet, it is high but not as high as some people are. I bought the moor after. I bought Overton and I did pay for it with what I'd sold my own little farm for and what I had. I was short of capital all the time cos I put a milking machine in and it took me a while just to get going properly. But the first year, it was 1976 when I first moved there and it was that good summer and of course not being stocked up, I mowed every inch there was. It was just a matter of mowing it and baling it and I finished up with hay even in the garage. There were mains water in, there's a pump in the river but that's another story. Anyway, water was no problem and I had all this hay. Me dad just stood in the yard and said 'well if you've got it, you must need it'. I said 'what you on about?' He said 'if you've got it you need it and if you haven't got it you can manage'. And do you know, by the end of April we hadn't a bale of hay left. It was very good. The stock just ate and ate and ate it. He taught me a lesson that way.

The house had been split into two and I got a local lad to put it back. There were two staircases and two kitchens and he made it back into one.

There was a milking machine of a sort cos I used to work there when I was a lad. The fellow that were there, was Sunday school superintendent at Ferny Lee Chapel and if they were going to Southport or New Brighton on a trip, he'd get me to come and milk for him at weekends and he had this stationary engine. I was pretty familiar with it and I had been thrashing as well.

[Did the Ministry people come and instruct you what to do?]. There was a bloke, he used to come round on this Small Farm Scheme. He used to draw schemes up for you that he thought were the best. Of course, the trouble was we were ploughing up fields that had never been ploughed before. It started during the war. When I went to Glebe Farm I nearly ploughed it all, and a funny thing happened. I ploughed a field on the top after we'd got hay off it and I sowed it down and it was very dry. It must have been about '62 and it never took. Only a lot of rubbish came on it and I put some heifers on it and my wife was expecting Peter. I had to take her down to Stepping Hill Hospital cos we'd lost one girl previous to Peter and she had had difficult pregnancies. Anyway, we were in the car and there was a stirk laid in the gate and I went to it. I looked up the field and there's all these others laid out on the field. I thought 'what the hell's happened to them?' I rang me brother up cos he lived next door, and I said 'I dunno what's gone wrong, get a vet, stirks are layed out all over the place'. What it was in this field was what they call hemp nettle. It's very much like a nettle or potato top and it lies dormant in the ground until you disturb it like Charlotte does. Normally, they wouldn't eat it, but if there's nothing else they'll eat it like bracken, and they got this poisoning through it. Anyway, we lost two, two went blind and we managed to save the rest. We mixed a gruel and got a hosepipe and a tube and poured it down their throats to get them to take some. But that was a rude awakening you know. It was hemp nettle poisoning.

Half of my farm was ploughed up. There was a bit of permanent pasture left because some fields you just couldn't plough them. Up at Overton Farm, when I used to go up there as a lad hay making, it was all herby stuff, short stuff, and when it were dry it would rustle with all those pod things. It was really herby stuff, marvellous stuff. I mean that's all gone now. There is one field next door, Crow Hole, they only put manure on it. Fred Heeley gets hay off it, cos that's still a meadow, a flower meadow that is.

[What were the years when most of the hay meadows were ploughed up?]. It was during the war and just after. They wanted everybody to be self-sufficient, you see. It was a costly exercise to buy all your stuff in. We were siloing with forks and trailers and loading it by hand. I remember one day hay-making and my dad says 'it cannae be dry, look at water running in front of the wheels'. There were some horrible wet summers in the '50s, which started the siloing. We grew some rich corn down at Overton, oats and that. We got that green and that were damned hard work. It were grand stuff when it come out. We carted it green and siloed it in an open silage pit but it were grand stuff, it were just like wine when it come out.

[How much was left of the old pasture?]. Round here I would say there could be nearly 50% in places because they're either too steep or too wet in some places, so you're better off not ploughing them.

[What about land drains?]. There were drainage schemes early on in the '60s. It was all handwork really, there were no big machines. There were grants for it.

[What about hedges and walls?]. We had a few hedges down on Glebe Farm but most of them were walls. In the big field about half way down there was a wall and we did take that down. It's a big job taking a wall out. Well it was. I mean you've got diggers now, but then it was all hand work. There weren't a lot of making big fields round here really.

I was NFU chairman during milk quotas 1983-84, I was branch chairman and I had been for donkeys years. [What were the big issues then ?]. Well, we'd got guaranteed payments hadn't we when 47 came in. You know, you were guaranteed a payment no matter what your stock were if they were punched, if they got past the punch. And then, market forces crept in. You see when I worked for Mr. Lomas, he only took calves to market. He sent all his cows to FMC. And I used to say 'you know you'll get better money in Bakewell'. He said 'well, taking one week with another I'm not out of pocket. I don't fancy 'em going in Bakewell and getting knocked about' and he sent 'em all to FMC, no messing. I sold most of mine at Chelford probably or Bakewell. We didn't go to Leek much at that stage. Chapel had a market, Marple had one, Macclesfield had one and Hope had one. There were plenty of markets about. We always went somewhere.

We used to drive our cattle along the roads to Buxton to Brookhouse Farm in the summer, the heifers and stirks. You know my brother got killed with a cattle lorry and of course cattle lorries in my mother and father's eyes weren't allowed in the yard and we'd about 20 stirks and heifers and a bloke called John Prince had Brookhouse Farm and we used to take 'em up there. Anyway, we'd these 20 so we decided we'd set off and walk 'em to Buxton. We went up the old road up past Shookers. First night was at Laich Farm close to Shookers on the flat. Fishers were there then. We popped 'em in a field overnight Friday night and then when we'd done milk round on Saturday we went and picked 'em up and it rained heavy, in stair rods. I was stood in the road trying to turn them, and I got wet through. We went down into Buxton with them. In two days, we did 7 or 8 miles.

My Aunt Gerty used to tell me about her husband. He used to work for somebody in Longnor who said 'take those two cows to Leek today' and he had to walk 'em in the road. 'I'll meet you at Thorncliffe to get 'em into market', cos Leek market was in the middle of town then. 'And I'll come on horse and float and bring me wife cos she's going shopping'. He said, 'I'm going to Rushton to buy a bull'. So he says 'when me wife's done shopping you take her home then come back for me after'. Anyway, they got the cows in the market and this lady did her shopping, came back and he set off back with her and she says 'you won't have to be long going back, I'm in a hurry to get home'. They were going up Thorncliffe Bank. She'd made him rush this horse to get up there and when he gets to the house she'd had a baby in the float this woman. Never said owt this woman, never said owt. There were a servant girl in this house and he had to fetch her out, then he had to go with the horse and trap down to Hartington and fetch a doctor and come back. Then he had to go back to Leek, all with the same horse, and his boss said, 'where the hell have you been?' He said, 'Your wife's had a baby on't float!'. He said 'oh has it come?' This were 90 year ago.

[The price of milk has gone down and down hasn't it]. I went to my doctor and I'd heard he were leaving, retiring. He says 'yeah, I'm packing up. I've done thirty years here.' And I said 'why you packing up?' He was only a young fellow really. 'Oh' he says 'the paperwork and they're cutting my money down'. And I said 'well that's not what you read in the paper.

But I'll tell you something about cutting money down. My lads, now they've knocked tuppence a litre off on the 1st of January. That's the equivalent to 70 pounds a day and since last April they've knocked 10 pence off. That's the equivalent of 350 pounds a day. You know my son has two lads to pay. He's alright while they're courting but if they ever get married, they'll be sunk.

[Who do you blame for that ?]. Last spring it was opening up, the price of milk. We had a very good spring and people started investing more and more and they produced a lot of milk, I mean our lads did. They were averaging 7 gallons a piece, no trouble, you know on a pretty low corn regime, you know, silage and corn. And then they had this embargo with Russia, China did something, I don't know what it were. Of course, Ireland you know, they do a lot of milk and they're expanding all the time.

Me grandson were talking and he said 'Oh a lot will pack up grandad'. I said 'Matthew, they don't shoot 'em. Somebody buys 'em'. He were telling me this week about someone at Millers Dale, they bought a hundred Ayrshires on a farm somewhere. And everywhere you go, they're all expanding. The trouble is, if they've got commitments, they've got to find the money. My lads, they're in dairy co. They had a meeting down near Alton Towers and there were six farmers there and they were all milking 600 and 800 and they were all on rented farm paying the equivalent of 3 pence a litre rent. [Well rents gone up tremendous hasn't it.]

There were just over 30 thousand dairy farmers when milk board finished. There used to be 40 thousand and now there's less than 10 thousand producers.

You see this is what's happened. When cows were tied up in shippens you couldn't go any higher. You know if you'd got tie-ins for 30 cows that's all you could have. You couldn't build another one, because the only way you could build another one was stone. Then pre-fabricated buildings came out and breezeblocks and they could build anything they wanted then and of course they went off having them tied up. They went and put 'em in straw yards. They found out they started getting mastitis, all these cattle in straw yards. So, they said 'right, we'll put 'em in cubicles' and they soon found out if they put in 40 cubicles, they could put 45 in, you know.

I mean, I started off with bucket units. Then I put a round-the-shed pipeline in. You know cos I'd gone bulk. And then, I put a 4.8 parlour in and then I doubled it up to a 8.8 and then I put automatic cluster removers on it and then I put automatic feeders in it and I got to that stage and I couldn't go any further and we had that in 30 years or more. And you know I produced some milk in that. I'd done ever so well. Of course, our lot now, the two lads have been to college and they wanted to stop on milk and it meant putting a brand new set-up in. You've either got to keep up or fall behind, that's the trouble, and particularly if you've got younger members, you either keep 'em interested or else you don't. Matthew the eldest one is a very good cowman and Samuel, he's good with cows but he's good with tackle as well. By doing their job better and looking after tackle and feeding better they've done well.

[How important are family relationships to you ?]. When I come living down here, my wife had got arthritis very bad and Peter had got married. He'd got three children. You see my daughter died when she was 30 and she left us with two little girls. One was two and one was six months. The two-year-old had been living with my son because my daughter was so ill with cancer and the baby stayed with us. She's seventeen Heidi is now. She's living

with me now I've been ill. But the thing I noticed when I came living here was I missed being sat round the table at breakfast time discussing what we'd done and what wanted doing, you know. And I sort of missed out on that after.

I'm blessed with a very good family. My son's excellent and he'll ask me things. I mean he rings me up every day or he comes down and he never flaps and that's worth a lot that is. And I mean my granddaughter's the same. I've had two heart attacks while she's been here and she just calls the ambulance and gets everything organised.

My family are very active in things, like I used to be. You see, Peter writes plays for the Young Farmers and he goes out public speaking. Lydia his eldest girl, she did three years at Cirencester and came out as top student. She's now in London doing two years at London University. She's just flown to America. She's got a placement at the UN for the summer for four months. And she does a lot of after-dinner speaking all over the country.

I go out, I go to church, to two different churches, and very often I read the Lesson. I've read the Lesson twice in Derby cathedral when I was NFU chairman. I write for the church magazine, you know. They keep asking me to write local things. People know nothing these days, about what went off or what happened you know.

[Over your 80 odd years in farming, what do you look on as the toughest bits ?]. I look on the toughest bits when I retailed milk with my father. You know in bad winters '62 and '47. You know you had stockings on your hands. There were no such thing as gloves. It was damn cold you know. I went to a house one day and come back and said to me father 'by hell, it's cold in that house'. 'Why? What's up?' 'Well', I said, 'there's mother, father and daughter, they're all sat round with rugs off the floor on them. There's one candle where cold water comes into the slops just under the tap to stop it freezing up. No fire'. And he said 'get the sledge, let's go back to the farm and get some sticks and coal and logs'. I thought oh god Arthur, keep your gob shut, I've made meself a lot of work. But me dad were like that. He'd never be a millionaire cos he was too kind ya know. People, a lot of people were hard up when you delivered milk.