

Brian Wainwright

Brian farms at Parkhouse Farm, Meerbrook. The farm has been handed down through the generations from his Great Grandfather onwards. In this interview with Sheila Hines in January 2017, he describes the changes in dairy farming over his lifetime.

Part One. Dairy Farming at Parkhouse Farm

SH: Brian would you like to relate a brief history of the farm?

BW: The farm was bought by me Great Grandfather back in 1925. He owned Red Earth Farm and he bought Parkhouse as well and set two sons up. He'd got more than two sons, but he set Uncle Jack on Red Earth, and me Granddad, he was Harold Smith, here on Park House and they farmed. But then, when me Grandfather was 53 he died, at the end of 1952, which left me mother and her brother, and me granny. They were going to sell the farm at that point, but me mother had already met me Dad and they got married in 1955 and it carried on with them. Then in the mid seventies, me mother became ill and she died aged 47, which left me Dad and meself and me sister, but me sister went in to nursing. I was 19, me sister was 16 and then it was me Dad and meself. Then when it got to 1989 me dad became ill and that's when I took charge then. Me Dad did get better, but then he died with throat cancer in 1998. I got married in 1997. Did something different, I married an Irish girl, so it was me wife and meself then and that's where we are up to now.

SH: So, going back to when your Mum and your Dad were farming, what kind of farming were they doing?

BW: Dairying. Me Dad was a cattle dealer really. He went to market most days.

SH: Where did he go in those days?

BW: Chelford on a Monday, Congleton on a Tuesday, Leek on a Wednesday, Ashbourne on a Thursday, Derby on a Friday and Uttoxeter on a Saturday.

SH: So how did he manage to get all his work done as well?

BW: Back then they'd always had a workman, so there would always be somebody at home with me mother like, doing the work. But me Dad, he wouldn't go to market every day. Some weeks there would be an odd day when he missed, but that's what he did really, he did go to market most days .

SH: Was he buying and selling every day?

BW Buying and selling, yeah especially in mid seventies. Yeh, sort of sixties, seventies. Me dad always had land away from home as well, rented land. He'd take land on anywhere and we did have a lot of cattle back in the seventies. With the dairy cows, we had 300 cattle all together, but then when me Mum died, he said if that was working hard and keeping a lot of cattle we would do less and we cut back, and we were never the same size again.

SH: Was it beef and dairy cattle that he dealt in?

BW: He always bought cows, but he only used to rear heifers in the early days, but then he went off that, went on to Herefords, put 'em all in calf to Hereford. So, he was dealing in store cattle then. He'd buy in, it was a lot easier to do then, buy 'em, take 'em to another market, sell 'em or he'd go up in the hills looking for cattle to buy. He used to have a man who worked for him back then, Geoff Goodwin. Geoff said to me that they'd go off up in the hills and see what they'd got, buy stuff off folk, if he could. If there was a profit straight away, he would sell 'em straight away.

SH: Was he good at it? Was the job lucrative for him?

BW: Yeah, I think it was much easier to do then, because you hadn't got regulations like they are now. No TB testing, no movement testing, it seemed easier to do. No paper work. I suppose back then, they were dealers, it was what they did. I suppose them that were good at it made the most money.

SH: Do you think looking back, we've got all this regulation that is supposed to make things safer on the movement side of it and everything, but looking back to that time did you see any problem with it

BW: There didn't seem to be any problems with it, I suppose.

SH: We didn't see a lot of disease or anything did we?

BW: No, I don't suppose there was really, the one thing with TB I suppose, they're protecting the badgers, that's made the TB more serious in recent years hasn't it?

SH: Were there any other things that your Dad was doing whilst farming that was obviously very different from now. What were you doing with the land?

BW. The land on the farm had dairy cattle on most of it. The top ground, which is 32 acres, its 121 acres all together, but the top 32 acres had the store cattle on. There were store cattle on the wood as well. There's 9 acres down there.

SH: So, was it heavily stocked?

BW: It was reasonably stocked back then, we used an amount of fertiliser as well, but not like some farmers used it.

SH: Was your grassland still what we call species rich?

BW: Yeah, I'd say so, yeah, I'd say it was traditional. Also, back then we kept some cattle out all winter. Now where I've only five or ten outside for the winter. I've chucked out hay up the fields. I remember at one time when I'd be about 20, I chucked hay out up the field to 104 and then went and chucked hay out for another 128 at Fold Farm down the road. I forgot we'd got Fold farm at that point then.

SH: Would you have to buy some fodder for that many stock or did you make it all?

BW: We made a lot of hay. We were seriously in to hay making. We rented a farm at Grindon for 7 years, but like I say, we had ground all round the place. We made hay at Cheddleton and at Norton and Grindon was 160 acre farm that we rented from

Arthur Mycock. 160 acres that was, and we made hay up there. I can remember when I was a lad, only 15 or 16, I brought 17 loads back meself from up there.

SH: Did you have much help with the hay making?

BW: Yeah, we did. I can think of various folk that used to helped us. Another thing with hay, he [dad] used to go to Chelford. He'd go and buy 4 loads at a time and send it back and no driver could leave until they'd all helped one another to unload. There could be 50 loads of hay in Chelford or more than that. Just buy 4 loads of hay; we could get through hay in them days. I can remember when in winter time, with cows inside as well, we'd use as many as 85 little bales of hay a day.

SH: Were you all in shippons then?

BW: Yeah, when first I started when I was 13, we were in the old cow sheds. I know what it was like to milk with units, carry them and tip it in the churns. It was New Years Eve 1974 when we started in the new building. We moved all the cows out of the old buildings into the new building, which tied thirty up each side. We had to scrape it out down the middle with a tractor and it was still all on hay back then.

SH: Well, you would think that was a vast improvement then?

BW: Yeh, I suppose it was and pipeline as well.

SH: And you weren't barrowing all the muck out.

BW: No, except we didn't have a scraper straight away, because we had a man working for us and me dad seemed to insist that he clean the shed out with a barrow.

SH: And how was your corn?

BW: We had got a corn bin. When we were in the old cow shed, me dad bought one of the first corn bins, I think it was the first corn bin that came round this area. J. Waterhouse and Sons used to deliver the corn into it. But then when we built the new building, we'd another bin, and we made a barrow. We had a big barrow, but we needed a bigger barrow for that shed so we got a 100 gallon water tank and made a frame for it, put it on wheels and that was the corn barrow, which held four hundred weight of corn.

SH: And how were your cows performing then? What breeds were you milking?

BW: Mainly Friesian, Friesian types. Not really into big tall leggy sorts like. I like a good Friesian type cow. I know some folk get 10,000 litres a cow, but if I can get five and a half thousand litres that will do me, if the price is alright .

SH: On a lower cost system. So, while you've been farming Brian, what are the big changes that you've seen and done?

BW: I suppose its mechanisation and technology, going into bulk tank and I suppose we made hay till about 1991 or 92, then we first made silage and then went all on to silage. Big baled silage. We're still on big bale silage. We make some round bale hay as well. I only make little bale hay if we've got some help. It's more of a novelty now

doing that. I've still got a small baler, but I don't use it. I think it's like vintage at the back of the shed now.

SH: Do you have a contractor in to do your small baling?

BW: Yeah, if we only do 400 bales, it isn't a big cost any way. We have some friends, Simon and Samantha, they keep a few sheep and some donkeys. I pay them with 30 bales of hay if we do 400 bales and they jump at that and they come and help us.

SH: So, what was the next change, I mean there were a lot of changes in the seventies, weren't there?

BW: The main change in the seventies for us was going from old cow sheds into the new cow shed. I suppose that continued till 1999 that did. After me dad had died, if I was milking in the shippon on my own, it's a dangerous job on your own. There were a few times when I was scrambling from under a cow that I'd got kicked by. So, after me dad had died, that's why I looked at putting in a parlour. It totally changed the system. Went loose housed on straw with a biggish feed area inside. I can put four bales of silage in, keep 50 cows in the main building the rest down the yard and I milk through an 8:16 parlour

SH: You've found that's been big benefit?

BW: Yeah, for my number of cows that's a big parlour, so I don't spend too long milking.

SH: How did quotas affect you?

BW: Folk were doing all sorts when quotas come in as I remember, drying cows off to get down to the quota. I think in the end though quotas were a good thing, because now quotas are gone again, it seems like some folk are going really mad at it and you get this flooding the market now. We've just had two years now of hard going, which is difficult when it's like that, but it is picking up now.

SH: For how long?

BW: That's the thing, I think there's going to be a lot of milk this summer, so the price will be coming down. So, we will have to wait and see again.

SH: So, in this recent severe down turn of the milk job, do you see any answers for a traditional farm like yourself, because it was a particularly difficult time last year wasn't it?

BW: What we've looked at and I've been helping with is something called Free Range Milk Marketing Board, which Nick Hiscocks from Somerset has been travelling round the country in 2016 organising the meetings. So, Noreen said should we have a meeting somewhere local, so we organised the only meeting in Staffordshire, which we had at the village hall at Meerbrook. He came along and spoke about it and then recently we've just been to a meeting at Withall, south of Birmingham, where he invited 45 to a media briefing meeting, which he speaks of as a campaign to get this milk going, free range milk, which is going to be marketed as Black Top milk with Enjoy

Milk on the top and on the label. Market it as Enjoy Milk. It is a campaign, it is being produced at the moment, but I think it must be small scale, but if consumers got interested enough and wanted it, then it will take off then.

SH: What's his major line that he's plugging

BW: That its free-range milk, where possible. Where some of them are saying the cows have to be out 180 days during the summer, he's saying cows inside for the winter, out for summer, but not specifying number of days; if the weather was bad, you'd have to put them in, particularly bad in the summer even. We've had an odd time, but we've never put cows in like that, but we're not overstocked. If you've got 200 to 300 cows going out and it lashing it down with rain for the week, it would soon get trodden up. Where we've still got the 50 or 60, we can get them out like we have for the past fifty years, not treading everywhere up.

SH: So, would you like to continue in dairy?

BW: Yeh, I love the job, but I don't like the situation where you're not paid enough. Since the MMB went, the power was given away. Certain buyers, supermarkets, have so much power now with control of it, whereas with Free Range Marketing Board, if Nick Hiscocks can get that going, it's the biggest opportunity at present time to get farmers together, but there seems to be some farmers trying to pick fault with it. Because the price has gone up now, Nick Hiscocks is saying he will pay 28 / 29p a litre for it, whether the price goes up or down. Some farmers are up on 28p now and they think they are going to get more, so they are not keen to move to the FRMMB.

SH: What sort of future do you see for this kind of farm?

BW: With the Free Range Marketing Board, if he can market milk from farms like this, if you can get enough folk together, that has a good future, if the rules are simple and there is a demand for it, free range milk. There will probably always be a demand for it. There will always be support for farmers. It's the way some farmers do it is referred to as factory farming. I like to think I am a traditional farmer doing the job.

SH: But, unless this kind of traditional farm is supported, it'll go won't it?

BW: If you're getting the right price, it will keep going, if the price is right.

SH: What about getting young people to take over on this kind of farm?

BW: We haven't got any young people to take over. A lot of young people these days have a variety of jobs they can choose. We have a young lad that comes on a Wednesday. He's into farming, but it depends when he leaves school how it looks and whether he still feels the same about it, because his brother has gone in to engineering and another brother helps a contractor. So, we will have to see when he leaves school what he wants to do or go into another job where he doesn't have to work seven days a week.