



David Bullock

After taking early retirement from the NHS, where he worked in finance, David decided to take up farming and moved to Cophurst farm, Sutton. Here, on this small holding, he started out farming cattle, but now he rents the land out and manages the land for conservation inline with the Higher Level Stewardship scheme that he entered in 2007. David spoke to Sheila Hine and Julia Cook in June 2015.

DB: My name is David Bullock, Cophurst Farm, Sutton, aged 73. I was born in Macclesfield, the old part of Macclesfield which used to be Sutton, on the old boundary. I was only born here because my dad's business was bombed out of Liverpool and he was offered a shop in Macclesfield.

SH: What was your father's business?

DB: Hairdresser, gents' hairdresser. For the first twenty-one years of my life, I lived on Cross Street. You probably don't know Cross Street, it's on the Leek road out of Macclesfield. So, I lived there until I got married at the age of twenty-one, moved to Preston for five years, then we moved back to Langley, behind the Methodist chapel in Forest Drive. I will skip forward then to 1994. I was in the NHS then, in finance, and it was the umpteenth reorganisation, so I decided, well it's time, I can go now, full pension. They were merging two regions into one, so somebody had to go. They gave me compensation and a full pension so that was fine. Sadly, my wife died with breast cancer, just before I retired actually. I was fifty-two and she died at fifty-one. I've got two daughters and a son and the middle daughter and her then partner, now husband, wanted to live on a farm. At this time, I was living at Rossendale Lodge, which is the lodge to Rossendale Hall, now part of the Rossendale Trust which works with people with handicaps. I'd lived there twenty-five years, well by the time I left I had. Anyway, they (daughter and partner) looked around for farms and as you will jolly well know yourself, they couldn't afford to buy one anywhere in Cheshire or nearby. So, because I was on my own, I said well look, if you really are keen, I'm prepared to join in with you and we could buy a farm together. So, because I was retired and local, I used to do quite a bit of walking in the area and one day I was walking the footpath just at the top of the field here and I spotted this place and I don't know what it was, but it spoke to me and it looked as if it wasn't being used anyway. So, I found out from local people who owned it: an old lady who had been living here as a widow for about ten years, having lived here for probably forty years before that, and I managed to contact her. As it happens, she wasn't living here. She was living with her daughter down in Macclesfield because she was quite ill. She didn't respond to my letter immediately, but I pursued it and I rang up one day and they happened to be here. It was a Sunday, I think, and they were here just visiting to make sure everything was ok and we arranged to meet; we met several times. Eventually

she agreed that she would sell us the place, at which point my daughter and partner decided they didn't want to go ahead any more, but being pig-headed I decided I would anyway.

SH: How big is the holding?

DB: Well, when I was buying it, it was forty acres and it always amazes me that anybody could make a living out of forty acres, but they did, didn't they? They milked cows and sold it. They didn't have continental holidays. I mean, the day at the auction was their day out and perhaps an agricultural show now and then was their annual holiday almost. Anyway, I decided I would go ahead, at which point the old lady wasn't really ready to move out, but we agreed a price for the whole thing and then we split it so that I initially bought most of the outbuildings and most of the land. I bought a caravan and I lived in the farmyard in a caravan for four years while the old lady and myself got on together, she cooked and I did the other things. At which point I decided I would buy some cows as well. We were going to buy Aberdeen Angus and we wanted pedigree so that we knew what we were getting, because I had no idea what I was getting really. The first auction was at Melton Mowbray, and we bought a few cows there and then there's a couple of local people who kept Aberdeen Angus. One is at Pyegreave Farm at Langley. This is typical of farming, all the different advice you get. He would buy the most expensive you could and told you to do the same, you see. And the other chap, who was at Adlington said buy the cheapest you can get. So anyway, I bought some from both of them and made a herd, which I suppose was about 30 cows and followers by the time I finished. I did that for two years. I was still single then, a widower, looking for a wife. Then BSE came along which didn't help much, but it didn't really affect my cows. But I decided I couldn't really handle a herd of cows on my own; they were out all the time, but if you had to have the vet or the ministry wanted to check anything you had to get them in and you can't do that on your own even with a bucket of corn, there's always one or two who don't come in.

JC: Did you come to these cows without any prior experience?

DB: Yes, I did.

JC: Did you take it upon yourself to get any training from anywhere?

DB: I read a lot of books and listened to people. The trouble is as I said, people will give you different advice and in the end you have to make your own mind up. So, I decided it was getting too stressful and I couldn't really cope, so I decided I would sell the cattle. The headquarters for Aberdeen Angus is at Perth in Scotland, so I decided that would be the best place. We arranged a special auction, produced a booklet and sold them. In the event it was wise to go to Perth because you get an extra premium for going to the right place. Other people sold in more local auctions and said that they didn't get the same.

SH: So, you had a successful sale?

DB: Oh yes, I basically got back what I paid for the cows, which was pretty good when you think of what had happened in between. But because they were pedigree, they kept their value. One of the things that I learned and you probably know this yourself, it's all in the name. The best price I got was for a cow that came from the herd, now is it Moore's that ran Littlewoods or was it Vernon's? One of the football pools anyway. He was into Aberdeen Angus and this cow had his herd name. It made a good price and yet I know it was the worst cow I'd got and yet because of its name it achieves the best price. So, you live and learn ...

JC: The vagaries of the market.

DB: So, some useful experiences there. The first being those first cows we bought at Melton Mowbray. I didn't think of course, when did it calve? But in January, in the snow. But they're hardy and they survive. You live and learn, don't you? I had a few mishaps on the way, but there you go. So, I sold the cattle, that would have been in 1998, I think. I more or less started straight away in '96 when I moved here, and kept them for two years and then sold in '98 or thereabouts.

DB: Initially I did try and get in the Countryside Stewardship scheme, but they weren't playing ball, 'cause the cows were outside all year and they were trampling the ground. So that was no good. But subsequently, in more recent years I've entered the entry level and then the higher level stewardship schemes. So, I have been in that since 2007. The ten year agreement comes up in 2017. I foolishly, I suppose, let my tenant claim the single payment subsidy. He paid me a rent and he got the subsidy, so that more than paid the rent. So, he was on a good thing there. Anyway, so I've now..., the farm you came through, he's having the land now. He's only got five on at the moment, but he's switching and changing all the time with different lots, but they're all Holstein Friesian heifers, different ages basically. So, they'll graze it. They came in end of April, due to go out end of October. They might go out earlier if the weather is not all that good, just depends.

SH: So, you haven't got any hay meadows?

DB: No, it was forty acres as I say when I agreed the purchase. In order to complete the purchase of the house and one remaining field, I had to raise some money, because I hadn't got enough. But as I say, I was looking for a wife and eventually I found one and she chipped in her share, but even so, I had to sell the two meadows down at the bottom and another piece up the top to a lady who keeps a horse. So, those two sales and the wife's money allowed me to then complete the purchase. And the old lady eventually moved out four years after I first came here and she actually moved into the house next to her daughter and son-in-law down in Macclesfield. We kept up a good relationship and she died at the age of ninety-three.

DB: Do you want to know about my interest in wildlife? As I say I am an organic gardener. For my sins I chair the East Cheshire Organic Gardening Group which meets in Macclesfield

on a monthly basis. I did the Cheshire Wildlife Trust Surveyors Course a few years ago, and they have now got me into doing wildlife surveys in different places that come along and for different reasons they want to do a survey of them. It's almost entirely based on plants, because you only go once for a couple of hours or so, and the chance of seeing much other wildlife is not very good. I'm doing the same thing for this farm in much more detail, because I know all the wildlife and everything else about it. The idea is that the areas surveyed are designated as local wildlife sites. They're nothing like a national nature reserve, but they have some recognition that they have a high wildlife value and they are then recognised by the local authority, which is Cheshire East in our case. So hopefully some good comes out of it. And a neighbour is already in the scheme as well, which I didn't know, and in Higher Level Stewardship, so that's pretty good. But of course, we benefit from the fact that it's very hilly, so in the past people didn't do much with it. They didn't do a lot of fertilising, they didn't do any ploughing. But my experience of the two meadows down there that I sold to a neighbour was that the first thing he did was plough them all up and reseed and drain them as well.

JC: How do you feel about that?

DB: Sick! Interestingly it's still full of buttercups and dandelions, so I don't know whether they survive all that... or what?

SH: There will be a seed bank in the land.

DB: And although he sprays his nettles and his thistles every year, they still come back just the same, so I don't see the point of it really. But the patch I now own, which is 25 acres, the whole of which Natural England describe as "semi-natural", because it's all had something done to it. Most of this is 'semi-improved'. 'Semi-natural' is distinct from 'semi-improved'. I'm just about getting my head round it. The flatter bit, they did make a meadow on the flattest bit up there and you can tell the difference. I'm not sure if they reseeded it but they certainly fertilised it and you can see the difference in what's in that couple of acres that they fenced off. It's got very few wild flowers in it. I've taken the fence down, but even after ten years it's still not showing much signs, it will take a long, long time to recover, if it ever does.

SH: So, what are your observations about your piece and the surrounding area as regards what's important round here?

DB: Well, you see I'm untypical because my livelihood depends in no way from any income from the land, so I'm able to treat it in a wildlife-friendly manner. But I can understand that those whose livelihood depend on it have a different outlook. They have changed the subsidies as you know, so instead of paying you for each head of cattle, as I was getting in '96 to '98, they then moved it on to so much for either the farm or the area you actually look after. So, I suppose in a sense that meant that people could be less intensive in their stocking of the land. But I think old habits die hard, don't they? One year I let this neighbour put some

sheep on, but he absolutely blitzed these fields and the next year there were no wild flowers, because sheep eat right down, and if you've got too many... But there are differing views on that. There is a chap who lives locally works for Cheshire Wildlife Trust, he thinks sheep are fine. Natural England don't like sheep.

SH: There has to be a middle way doesn't there?

DB: Yes, I'm sure there is, but I don't know what it is. I suppose if you have sheep one year and cattle the next it does reduce the possibility of disease spreading, but I don't know how long these things lie in the ground anyway.

SH: What have you got valuable on here do you think, that's worth preserving?

DB: Well, the mix of wild flowers, certainly. I've got a couple of flowers that I found are quite rare: Ivy Leaved Crow Foot and Meadow Saxifrage, but I mean you're talking about a patch of each less than the size of this room. But it's the actual diversity and the spread of it, isn't it? I mean, there are patches of quite wet areas. There's a mix. It starts as acid grassland at the top of the hill and becomes neutral when it gets to the bottom. It's quite strange, isn't it? My source of water, which they used to test quite regularly and not so often now, that's a ph of 6. Somebody from Cheshire Wildlife Trust tested my pond, which is at the bottom this year and that was a ph of 8. So that's the difference within just the same holding. It's quite amazing. But you can see that in the plants that there's more acid up the top. I suppose mountain pansy is another one which is right at the top. That only grows over about 1000 foot, something like that. There's a lot of that up there, which is very good. There's also a load of gorse up there. But there's plenty of diversity. I walked round yesterday with my son and we saw two brown hares. I don't usually see two, I usually see one, but there were two yesterday, so that's good. Plenty of rabbits. I'm feeding the pheasants all the time. I've been here since '96. I'd never seen a live rat till this year, and then blow me they appeared. I finished up with thirty rats under the bird feeder, so I moved the bird feeder into a more open space and that seems to have reduced them. I'm sure they will have just spread out, they won't have disappeared. Although they don't live for ever, do they? So, there's only two under the bird feeder now and one or two elsewhere; but it's amazing how things can change so quickly.

SH: Did you have a passion for the wildlife when you first came here or is that something that developed as you've lived here?

DB: Well, I've always been an organic gardener so I've always taken that interest. But I think it's in my genes somewhere; with a name like 'Bullock' there must be some agricultural background somewhere. Even as a child I always fancied being a farmer, but my father's view of that was it was a waste of education to be a farmer. In any case, I never in my wildest dreams thought I could ever own a farm of any size, because they are so expensive to buy into. Normally you inherit them and that's how you become a farmer, but I don't know whether it's chance or guidance or what?

SH: What threats do you see now? Do you see things changing?

DB: Well, both of the neighbours on this same track, neither of them are full-time farmers. There isn't a living to be made in the size of farms that they've inherited. The girl on the left, both father and mother have died, so she's running the farm. But she is also running a business in Macclesfield, so that's their main source of income. The older man at the farm here and his wife have just retired into the bungalow. He still potters about. The son has taken over, but he's got another job with a firm of accountants where he works part time - and his wife is a nurse. So, this is the problem, isn't it?

SH: So, there's nobody to do all the little jobs to keep the countryside tidy and ticking over?

DB: You've reminded me that as part of the HLS scheme - I didn't think quite as far ahead as I could have done - but I put in a whole lot of capital schemes. So, I've done a lot of dry-stone walling, hedge laying, dug a pond, bit of stone-faced hedge bank. I got most of that done with a bit of financial help. And to please Natural England I cut down half of the gorse. The gorse is probably a hectare altogether. I cut half of it down and I got paid £250 for all that. It took me five years, not full time obviously. So, it's not for the money [laughs].

SH: But like the walling and that, without financial input it's not going to be restored, is it?

DB: No, because that was a whole winter's job at a time, for several winters.

SH: You did that yourself?

DB: I went on a two day course up in the Peak District, run by a lady.

JC: Sally, Sally Hodgson?

DB: It could have been, yes. But of course, you go up there and do this bit of walling with stones that are almost like house bricks - lovely - and you come back here - some of the coping stones, I've had to get the tractor out to lift them - quite different. But there is something to show at the end of it. I'm not convinced about hedge laying to be honest. I've done quite a bit of it, but you lose all the flowers and berries for a year or two, to some extent. You do the hedge laying and you fence it both sides! I know why, but I mean... [laughs].

SH: What do you think about the future?

DB: Oh well, I will tell you about the future. In order to ensure that the protection lasts on what I have got left, I've left in my will, all except one field, to the Cheshire Wildlife Trust, so that they will be responsible for managing it. I don't know if you know, but they've seriously reduced their own involvement in keeping cattle at Cheshire Wildlife Trust. So, I said to them, you might as well take it over now - you're going to have to do it in the future... But then I discovered that in fact all they would do is find someone else to graze it. They weren't doing it anymore themselves. As part of their recent reorganisation, they're slimming down. Hence, I found my own tenant locally. But that then gave rise to an argument with my



daughter who wanted to buy the farm in the first place: “Oh well, if you do that you are stopping anybody else like you in the future having the farm”.

SH: I suppose they could let it on a tenancy?

DB: They would anyway. I don't see that as a problem, because Cheshire Wildlife Trust would love to have somebody in this farm in the future who is sympathetic, who wants to do things with the land. They'd be delighted, absolutely delighted.

SH: So that could actually be an opportunity?

DB: Yes, it wouldn't stop anybody doing that if they wanted to. You see what will happen, I would expect normally somebody who works in Manchester with plenty of money will buy it, convert it, possibly convert the outbuildings. I mean, I could make a small fortune letting the buildings to horses and their owners, but I didn't come here to be surrounded 24/7 by other people.

SH: Have you loved being up here?

DB: Oh yeh, yeh. Definitely.

JC: Would you have kept the cows if you'd had some help with them? You enjoyed that side of it?

DB: Yes, if I had been married for a second time at that point, and my wife had wanted to get a bit involved. It was not only getting the cows into the building every so often, but it was just the stress of thinking: “Oh, I've got to get them in next week and I'll have to get somebody to help me”. I didn't mind going round the field at midnight with a bottle, feeding a calf in some horrible weather. But it has made me realise that farmers aren't as lazy as I thought some of them were. Although, some do more than others, don't they? You go to some places everything is neat and tidy and things are done, and the opposite in some other places.