Geoff Tunnicliffe

Geoff and Margaret Tunnicliffe farm together with their son Andrew on Manor Farm in the Dane Valley. They also keep stock on the Roaches by agreement with Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, in addition to the stock kept at Manor Farm.

Part One. Farm and family

CG: I want to ask you about your family history on this farm and farming in this area.

GT: Me mother was the youngest of four children and she was left here, because the others had gone away farming on their own account, which can't happen nowadays. Me Mum and Dad got married and bought the farm in about 1952 off Crewe and Harpur estate. The farm then, Manor Farm, was about 125 acres and he built up. He used to milk about 30 cows and he had about 50 sheep and he always bought a new car. There was himself and a worker plus me when I got old enough, and that's all there is now.

CG: You said your Mum was left in the farm, because her brothers went off to farm elsewhere. Can you say a little bit more about that?

GT: Well, that's right, they'd got farms of their own. One went to Nottingham, another went to farming in Meerbrook and me mother's sister married a builder.

CG: Can you say anything about your Dad. What sort of background he came from?

GT: He came from a farming background at Winkle. His father was on a farm, but only a small farm. He was still farming obviously when me Dad got married, so he moved here. That's how it carried on.

CG: Can you describe the land round here, what your territory is, your one hundred and twenty-five acres that you inherited.

GT: There is some quite good land in the valley. We had then 30 acres of meadow land and then we'd probably another 30 or 40 acres of decent pastureland and then the rest was rough pasture. As I say, they made a living, they didn't borrow money, because you couldn't borrow money. As things have moved on, we start, you buy one piece of land and then you buy another. We own about 280 acres now, plus we rent another 700 acres, because we run on the Roaches estate. The farm is 900 feet above sea level and Manor Farm runs up to 1100 feet and of course the Roaches are 1500 feet.

CG: So, definitely you're an upland farm?

GT: Oh, definitely. That is one thing, you couldn't have a scheme that covered all farms, because you go a mile down the road and you're on all green land, very productive land. And same going uphill, you go uphill there are some farms up there they've virtually no meadow land now.

CG: So, you are right on the borders of completely different territory here. The geology of this area is very interesting, isn't it? This is the last jagged bit of the Pennines before you head off to the Cheshire plane. Can you say what you feel about this landscape?

GT: I think it's brilliant. I've been all over England and I've also been abroad and when I come over the top of the hill, coming this way, you look over the valley and the hills and you think 'fantastic'. And every corner you go round in this part of the world you

see a different view. Whereas some places you'd have to go 50 miles to see anything different.

CG: What would you say the main efforts are that your family have had to address farming in this landscape from the early days?

GT: The first thing I can remember when I left school, which is 55 years ago, we used to spend all our spare time, draining, digging stone drains, clearing them out and then we put so many pipe drains in, to dry the land out, so it'd make it more productive. And we used to do all our stone wall building. We used to put lime on and slag and as we built more cattle up we improved, we had more farmyard manure to go on, and we did improve it a lot. It made a big difference, one cow in them days would make a big difference, you see.

CG: Has any part of this area immediately around here ever had arable crops?

GT: During the war they had to grow corn. There was no problem growing it, but they could never get it right. Well then not never, mostly they couldn't get the corn right. And since then, we have grown fodder beet and very, very successfully, but if we take a field out for fodder beet, we have a field less for silage and then of course you've got to re-seed it again, so by the time you've finished, you're not a lot better off.

CG: So, you mentioned silage, but in the early days you were working with hay meadows? How many hay meadows did you have?

GT: Oh yeh, it was hay. We had about six hay meadows, about twenty odd acres then. And then we improved two or three pastures, we improved those and started making silage off those.

CG: So, have you lost all the hay meadows? Have they all gone now?

GT: Well, we don't make hay anymore.

CG: Can you say something about your memories of hay making?

GT: Aw yes, we we're talking about it the other day. We used to ted by hand. I remember when I was twelve, I was tedding in one field and a neighbour came out and shouted to his neighbour across the valley, because there were no phones, he says 'she's had a daughter'. There was more time, although we were busy, me Dad would think nothing of walking up to the neighbours and having an afternoon with him, you know, a good natter. But it doesn't happen now, we've got something we have to do, plan virtually every day. And not necessarily grafting, but either gathering sheep or injecting 'em or doing something with a machine, cleaning a shed out. You know we haven't got that sort of, 'well what shall we do today' type of thing.

CG: Your Mum and your Dad had about thirty cows. What did they have then?

GT: Shorthorns.

CG: Did you carry on that tradition?

GT: No, we went into British Friesians for twenty odd years, past thirty years, and then we bought a Shorthorn and we carried on and then we've gone to pedigree Shorthorns and I wouldn't have anything different. And then with a shorthorn you can put any bull on it you like, a beef bull, and you'll have a cracking good beef animal. Cos now on the Roaches we have to run a breed at risk. That's beef shorthorn and Derbyshire gritstone sheep. So, we have got quite a lot of beef shorthorns now. We're going down both tracks a bit. We've still got dairy Shorthorns but we also got Beef

Shorthorns.

CG: What made you make the shift back to the shorthorns of your Dad's farming days?

GT: I think we happen to go to the shorthorn sale when we, yeh, we were down in Cheshire moving sheep and went into the shorthorn sale at Chelford and bought a shorthorn cow and I remember saying the first time we milked it, "well milks same colour, anyway". We just went on from there, you know. I don't think you can beat them, they are more suitable, because they have to walk quite a way to the fields. It must have been the early seventies, I think when we went to shorthorns.

CG: They're strong cattle, aren't they? Shorter in the leg and less vulnerable. In terms of capacity, how's that?

GT: We get six and a half thousand litres. It's quite a lot for up 'ere.

CG: So, you think that they would do better than any other breed around here?

GT: Oh, definitely.

CG: You were talking about the post war years with a lot of drainage and you kept on going through the fifties, and those were the years when you were running an increasing herd of Friesians?

GT: You know, you kept another cow, it made a difference. And we improved the land so we could keep a few more sheep and as I say, you didn't borrow money, but if you made a bit, it stopped with you.

CG: Were those the years where you increased your holdings and buying a little bit more?

GT: No, it would be later on than that when we started buying a bit more land. We still had one hundred and twenty-five acres then. I think part of it was due to the fact that farmland, odd bits of land became available as the old farmers died off on the small farms. Oh yeah, in the fifties and sixties you couldn't sell houses round here because it was too far for them to travel to work even in Macclesfield or you know, they'd never think of going to Manchester, it was too far. So quite a few places were very cheap. Three or four houses locally went derelict for a while, because nobody wanted them. So, if you got a bit of land, it wasn't expensive. To buy a bit of land, it was reasonable money.

CG: The whole business of people thinking they could live in quite remote, rural areas and commuting hadn't kicked off really until the eighties, would you say?

GT: That's right.

CG: Let's go back a bit and remember the days of hay meadows, like the kind of graft that was involved in cutting hay. So, how did you tackle that?

GT: Well, I can remember mowing, mowing with horses and then me dad bought a tractor in 1947 probably. And, it used to be all hand work. My great grandfather planted a tree at the corner of every hay field for them to have their tea under. That was a total waste of time because green fly used to fall in the butties, but we used to make hay, loose hay, cart it back and put it in the shed. In them days you didn't ring the merchant up and say 'I want ten ton of hay'. You managed with what you'd got, that's why earlier on I said about improving land, if you can improve land, you can make a bit more hay.

CG: There was a sort of closed loop in farming in the old days, you'd be self-sustaining? As you say, you can have so many cattle and aim to keep, so you'd be

talking much smaller numbers, but is it possible to go back to that?

MT: You couldn't survive with that number of animals now. There wouldn't be the income, because we've got two families, haven't we to support.

CG: Can you describe the impact or when you first got the idea about planting silage. Did that come from government, or where did it come from?

GT: We got to a stage where we had to increase and if you're going to make hay you can't put fertiliser on, well it's very difficult, it makes it very hard to get dry. So, we would put fertiliser on, not necessarily nitrogen, we put a complete fertiliser on so you grew probably a third more grass which you could make into silage, which was a lot more guarantee than you did with hay. Cos the trouble with hay, you can mow a perfectly good crop and within four to five days it can be completely ruined by the weather, because you've got to have three to four good days to get it dry, and that was the big thing. Your silage was one of the biggest things to get to be more productive.

MT: In the eighties we stopped increasing the dairy herd and we increased the sheep flock. When our son was leaving school, we wanted to get more income. We put the sheep into the meadow in April so that there isn't much grass growing. We can only get one cut of silage from those fields, can't we?

CG: Is that deliberate thing to slow it down?

MT: No, it's just that we've got to have the sheep handy near the farm through the lambing.

CG: Let's go back, when you were planting a lot of silage and increasing your production, what was your herd going from in numbers?

GT: Well, we went from 30 odd. We put a new shippen up. We had a shed put up and we built all the walls and put all the boskins in. They were tied up in them days for 52, so we went up from 30 to 52. They'd be in for six months and out for six months. But then the in thing was cubicles you see, and parlour milking. So, we had another shed put up. We did all the work, me and the workmen, put cubicles in, because that was the 'in thing'. And we had a milking parlour. If you have cubicles you finish up with a lot of slurry so we had problems with the slurry being close to the river. We had one bit of a mishap, but we've done well since. But now we've gone to loose housing where we bed the cows down on deep bedding and we don't get the amount of slurry.

MT: We didn't increase the dairy herd because we're near the river and we didn't want the pollution.

CG: That danger, it's too awful, isn't it? So, your herd went up to 52, but never got bigger than that?

GT: Well, we're at about fifty or sixty now.

CG: Okay so you've kept that number for thirty years. That's a massive investment of your time, effort and capital in changing all these milking systems. Tell me about that?

GT: The building work, we wouldn't be able to do that nowadays. Fifty cows and probably a hundred sheep, hundred and fifty and we'd got time to do these things. We haven't now. The chap who worked for me Dad, he worked for him for fifty years and he was always here and he'd got his own small farm. We used to build with concrete blocks. We used to reckon to put a hundred blocks down in a day. We wouldn't have time to do that now.

CG: Going back to the days of hay making, but also doing this business of improving your farm and changing it, is there a bit of a cooperative approach around here. Was there in the past. Help each other out?

GT: The lad who we employ, he has a farm with his brother in his own right and he lives at home with his Mum and Dad and they farm and his uncle farms and they come here when we're busy TB testing and we go and help them and that's the only way you can do it.

MT: We help each other out, don't we?

CG: Do you think that's a common thing in the farming community these days?

GT: Not when you get out of the hills.

MT: It is round here.

GT: It'd be a very lonely place if you had to do everything on your own. Well, you couldn't do it, you know.

CG: If we think about it decade by decade, there were these big changes in the 70s and 80s when the herd increased, you'd got to have a more productive farm in terms of your grass. Is that the time when you got rid of the hay meadows?

GT: Yes, you couldn't afford to risk making poor hay, so you were pretty well guaranteed to make good silage. If you shut a field up, if you got it in hay, and you got the other half of the field in silage, for some reason they'd probably milk better off the silage than they would off your hay.

GT: There is one thing we haven't mentioned and that's we've always done other things to make a living. Before we got married, I started sheep shearing, contract sheep shearing. So, I used to go with my mates down into Cheshire, shear sheep and make a bit of extra money. And we've always done the snow ploughing round here since about 1950.

CG: Not so much money in that is there these days?

GT: No, there's not, there's none. And then I put the water turbine in six years ago and that's been a good income.

CG: Does that make you self-sufficient?

GT: No. When we put it in, we put it onto the farm. We had a grant to do it, and we found out that if you draw any other grants in the European funding, you can't get the special tariff on the electricity, so we took the wire out of the farm and put it onto the neighbouring grid and sold it all back to board. We get 23 pence a kilowatt for every kilowatt produced plus four pence the value of it going to the board. The average is about 8 kilowatts an hour. It can do anything between about 2 and 14.

CG: Coming on to your family you've managed haven't you in a way that's pretty amazing to now get a living for your son, Andrew. So, what are Andrews' plans Margaret?

MT: Well, he seems to enjoy the farming life and he's got his wife and family. We built a house for the son across the road, didn't we? Well, the oldest son, and then he moved away with his family and did another job and when Andrew was leaving school there wasn't enough work for three families and as far as we know he's happy to carry on farming and his son is nine and he's very keen to help with the farm.

GT: We built a house, a second house, which you could get planning permission for, because you can for a second house. Now me daughter and her husband have built a house on the farm, because we'd an old bungalow we lived in when we were first married, and we know the Peak Park didn't like it, so we did a sort of a deal with them, would they let us build a new house if we took the old bungalow down. And they looked, and they agreed. So, me daughters back on the farm. She's a school teachers assistant and Chris was a farmer, but he's come out of farming and he fits bathrooms and kitchens, so they've got a smashing house just up the field and you know it's worked well.

CG: So, you've got your whole family around you then. Your daughter and son all on the farm. How important is that to you?

MT: It's very nice to have them around yeah, because our daughter has two daughters who are working now. We don't see a lot of them, but it's nice to know they're there.

CG: Now your son and grandson that live here, your younger son works alongside you?

GT: Yes, he run's the farm virtually and his wife has a few horses, because she's horse mad you know, but she gets a bit of income off that. But it's only like a diversification, she also works two days a week on some computer at whatever.

GT: I had a heart valve in twelve years ago. I hadn't got a problem but the doctor decided I wanted one in. And then two and half years ago I had a new hip in and I thought it'd be great to have nothing to do, just sit and watch telly. I couldn't even survive in hospital more than about five days and went on't walk about. I went watching cricket. But that's one thing I feel a bit sad with me Dad, when Andrew was born we had to move out of the old bungalow, because there wasn't room and obviously we moved down here and it pushed him to live in Macc, which me mother loved it, but he was very reluctant and I can see why now. When you're busy you think it'd be nice to do nothing, but try doing nothing, it's no use at all. So, I get up in a morning as soon as you hear the milking machine strike up. I get up and I put the silage out for the cows, feed some cattle, feed sheep. Well, it's all do it with a machine you know. So, I am useful to them, because you don't feel any different when your 72 than you did when you were 25, up here.

MT: Well, we couldn't afford to buy somewhere away from here, because all the money that we've made has been ploughed back into the farm. So, I don't know in the future what Andrew's ambition is to carry on farming from his house he's got across the road, or he'll come to live here.

CG: How old is this house?

MT: Seventeen thirty-seven, is it?

GT: And they say that's when the house was altered. I don't know.

GT: My brother never wanted to be a famer. He only went to a secondary modern school; he never went to college; he did a college course at home. He used to sit there with his file opened on his knee and I'd be tearing about, putting cows out and looking through window. You'd say 'what's that so and so doing?' But he went to work for British Rail as a surveyor. He's never looked back. He's got a house in York and he's a flat in London, he's had a great life. That's what I'm trying to say, just because you're a farmer's son doesn't mean you're a thick head. They know what hard work is for a start, in whatever job they go into they're often very successful, because they've got

that work ethic.

CG: I think that's the other thing I'd like to say, what do you have to be to be a good farmer?

GT: You've got to like what you're doing. You've got to have pride in your stock, and like your stock and like whatever you're doing, and like the countryside and accept the weather. This wet weather, it's like a challenge you know. I think it's a great, great life. When I'm bringing cows in in a morning at half past six, there's cars going down to work. They probably work in Macclesfield, Congleton, Stockport or Manchester and when we turn the cows out at night at six o'clock, they're coming back and who's had the best day? And I think it is a great life.