

Graham Turnock

Graham was born in 1958 and has spent his life farming at Dun Lea Farm near Onecote. He and his brother David joined the family business at Dun Lea Farm when they left school. He now farms here with his wife Carol, his brother David, and his two sons Andrew and Carl and their partners. His lifetime of farming reflects the general drive to expand and intensify, thereby increasing inputs and yields. Sheila Hines interviewed Graham in January 2017.

SH. Graham would you give me a brief history of the background of Dun Lea Farm.

GT. Me dad was born here. Me Grandad farmed here before him. He was born at Dairy House and then moved up to here, me Grandad. Then me dad was born here, so it's been back a few years. I were born in 1958.

SH. What kind of farming was your Dad doing then when he took it over, and how big was the farm then?

GT. It was 84 acres, he'd got 6 cows, so many pigs, a few sheep, hens, a few of everything. Half a dozen pigs. It was just a family farm. Making a living. In the early seventies he started to expand. He put in a bulk tank, and the cubicle shed went up in 1969 and after that he started expanding. Before that he had shippons, tied, never had a pipeline, but he went from milking in the buckets to the parlour, that was about 1970. We were quite early in having a milking parlour, really. I think he was one of the first to have a parlour, not the first, but one of the first to have a bulk tank in this area. He was milking around 60 cows then, which were quite a big herd in them days. I can remember going to Mold with him, buying cows from North Wales. He liked that sort of cattle, they were small, Welsh type cattle, which suited us up here. They were Friesians. I can remember shorthorns here, blue ones, red ones. I remember the first crosses from the shorthorns, then the Friesians started coming and the Holsteins.

SH. You said about poultry.

GT. Yes, he used to have hen cotes scattered round the farm. He used to breed poultry, there was one or two around here did it. He bred pedigree poultry, mostly Warrens. I remember brown hens running about on the front meadow. Foxes used to get in 'em a bit, I remember that. It used to be kids job shutting them in. We used to get them in at night when it were dark, round the fields, frightened to death, cos it was dark and we weren't very old. We'd be at little school, in the first school, we would be eight, nine, ten. Looking back, it were fun like, but not at the time. We were frightened, cos it were dark. Then in the '60s we put these cages in, battery cages. Two sheds of them, 2000 in one shed and 600 in another. Dad used to collect the eggs. We helped collect the eggs and feed them when we were little and grade the eggs. We had a little grader with eggs on. Me mum used to do that.

SH. During the seventies, did any of these things drop off and you concentrated more on the cows?

GT. The hens would go mid '70's, cos I wasn't keen on them and cages were going out, so we got rid of them. I think me Uncle John had the cages and we stopped the hens. No one seemed to like them. Things were changing, the eggs were harder to sell, we didn't have enough of them. They used to go to Staffordshire Egg Producers, the eggs did and a few local shops. I think Staffordshire Egg Producers packed up, went out of business or something, and we struggled to sell them then, so they went, and that was that.

SH. So what else did you keep?

GT. A few sheep, about 30. We used to go down to Wales, Craven Arms to buy Cluns. He put a Suffolk ram on them. They were proper fat lambs, good lambs, quite good sheep,

SH. They've gone a bit out of fashion, haven't they? Did you keep any pigs or anything?

GT. A few pigs, a few sows. I can remember putting them in these crates, farrowing crates. He used to fatten 'em and take 'em to Newcastle market. Loading 'em into a bit of a trailer, screaming like mad and carting them off down there. A bit of everything. A few beef animals.

SH. What breed were those?

GT. I can remember some Charolais. They were coming in in the '60's. We used to call them donkeys because they were that colour.

SH. Were they what you bred yourself off your own cows?

GT. Yes. There were one or two of them, plus the heifers we used to rear.

SH. What was the next big change then?

GT. We kept increasing the cows. I remember the hundredth cow on the place, a big thing, that's a good while ago. That would be early seventies.

SH. Were you still buying cattle in then, dairy cattle?

GT. No, we reared all our own from then on. They're all home bred, but we have bought a few this year, because we went through a spell of not having many heifer calves. So, we had to buy a few in this year that's all. Kept buying land from the seventies. Me Dad bought a neighbouring farm, which took us up to a hundred and twenty acres and a bit of land off the next neighbour. Just kept going from there.

SH. You've never given that up, have you. Is it an addiction?

GT. Well, when it joins up you sort of buy it don't you.

SH. Would quotas affect you in a big way?

GT. Yeah, they hit us hard when they bought it in. Eighty-four was it? Based us on a year we were expanding. We did get 70,000 litres, they allocated us. Then we got scaled back on that, so it was a bit, not a lot. We bought 1.5million litres of quota in the next ten years. First lot we bought were thirty pence a litre. We used to lease in,

that got to twenty odd pence. Stupid price. We did buy some at 70p. Then we bought some later on, it started coming down, about 18 to 20 pence.

SH. Do you think with hind sight that was the sensible thing to do, pay that sort of money to buy in quota, when you could have just kept less cows? Do you think you did the right thing?

GT. I think so, but looking back it wasted a lot of money, especially on leasing, but we had to do it, needed to do it to stay in, we were expanding, what else can you do. We had to do it, I think, but it was taking a lot of money all the time, every year. They (quota) finished in 2015. The last 5 years, they weren't there, were they, because the country was under producing as far as quota went for the last few years.

SH. Generally, do you think it was a good idea for the dairy industry. Do you think quotas were a good thing for stability?

GT. They have kept the price of milk up. I don't know if it were a good thing or not. I think they was, looking back, but as soon as quotas ended look what happened to milk prices. On the floor. So, I think they was a good thing. The last five years were better, because the country was under producing and we kept a good price, didn't we, and wasn't wasting it, spending it on leasing.

SH. What other things do you remember about the 1980s. Were you putting your sheep numbers up then?

GT. Yeh, late eighties we started expanding the sheep. Two next door neighbours wanted us to rent the land, so we rented it and put sheep on. But since then that lands gone, but we bought our own, so the sheep are on our home land now. We had about three hundred and forty sheep in the early nineties, now we are up to about nine hundred breeding ewes. Mainly mules. We do keep a few Texel cross mules each year, ewe lambs, they come into the flock. We like our mules, cos they are good mothers. They just have too many lambs.

SH. Do you finish your lambs or sell them as stores?

GT. Stores. October, November, December, we sell them as stores. We get a good price; we are happy with the price; they are kept quite thick on in the summer; we just want them gone off the farm then. We want the grass for the ewes, to winter them, through the rest of the winter.

SH. So what was the next milestone? You said BSE affected things badly.

GT. It did, because we had a few cases of BSE in home bred cattle. They were born seventy-eight I think, them cattle were. It was a shock really. We were hoping we didn't get any. To see them, it was horrible to see these cows, all one group. One year, these calves we reared 'em on straw. We had this advisor saying rear them on straw and give them these protein pellets, which we did. Then two years later they went daft. It was all one group of these cattle, most of them went with it, they went and then it was cleared up. We've never seen it since, thank goodness. Wouldn't want that again. Once seen never forgotten. Barren cows especially. We used to take them up

Redferns, it was a waste. Nothing were proven, no connection. I can remember that Professor Lacey coming on television saying we were all going to die. Where's he gone? That's one thing sticks in your mind, frightened us all to death didn't he, it's not just us, its everybody. It makes you very worry about what you're being told. I go to market, I have breakfast down there, had bacon and sausage every week, now its toast, but I'm still living.

SH. How many cattle have you got on now. What are you up to?

GT. The cows and the beef animals and the young heifers, there's around seven hundred. Three hundred milking cows, then there's about 100 beef animals and the rest young stock, dairy replacements.

SH. Obviously you've had issues with TB like everyone else in the area? Is that one of your biggest problems at the moment?

GT. It's always at back of your mind, but we are free at the moment. We are due for a test, which last time, two years ago caused us a lot of problems. You get a test, you do it, it takes a full day to inject, same to read. After, you always get a few abortions, after the injection. You have an inconclusive or a reactor, test every two months until you're clear. It's alright in winter when the cows are housed, but in the summer, you need a day rounding up before the test, you need a day to test, it's a lot of work. It's the best part of a week gone by the time you've gathered them twice. It's upsetting for everyone, everyone gets stressed, upsets everyone. Get a few abortions, that makes it even worse. If you get these reactors, it's even worse. It does affect a closed herd, cos its cows go back generations. You can lose some of them, you can lose bloodlines. Most cows go back to those me dad bought back from Mold, years ago.

SH. We are going back into NVZ regulations now. Do you find your slurry is a problem or do you treat it as a valuable commodity?

GT. It's a fertiliser, ain't it. It used to be a problem with the slurry, all winter, getting it out, getting it on frozen land, we always wanted a frost so we could get muck out through the winter. But now we try and empty it in September. We've got two big towers storing about 1,200,000 gallons. We get it out in September and then we can store it right through to March. The lads want to get it out in October and I won't let 'em because I say it is wasting the muck.

SH. You don't just get it out in September, because obviously you are putting it on the land in the spring and summer, don't you. You want to make sure its empty in September?

GT. Yeh, we are spreading it all the summer. After third cut its empty. It grows grass for the sheep so, we store it until the middle of March and then we start pumping it out.

SH. Do you think there is any point to all the NVZ paperwork? Obviously, you're trying to make the best use of your slurry for the farm and not waste it. I'm guessing you don't mind the dates, you can live with the dates, but do you think there is any point to all the paper work?

GT. It's a waste of time, like a lot of paperwork. If you're a good farmer, you want to look after your land, which means putting slurry on it at the right time and you don't pollute the rivers and the streams, you do it when its growing. It cost us a lot of money doing the towers, but it's the best money we've ever spent, there's no headaches through the winter, and you can keep your slurry for when it's needed.

SH. I suppose in a way you are fortunate that you can afford to spend that money, whereas perhaps some small farmers would struggle to put the infrastructure in place.

GT. You spend your money, but you save it on fertiliser, that's how I look at it.

SH. Would you call yourselves fairly intensive farmers?

GT. We are not over intensive, because we've got a fair lot of land. So, I wouldn't say we were very intensive. We're intensive, but not very intensive.

SH. You're farming in a big way but not very intensive. Obviously, there is quite a lot of family labour involved, have you got much extra labour?

GT. It's mostly family. There's a couple of lads, Jack does two days, it's more part time work.

SH. Do you have a succession plan in place with the youngsters?

GT. We've two sons, they're very interested. One's more interested in the farming, the other one's contractor minded.

SH. That's another thing we haven't talked about, you do quite a lot of contracting. What slurry spreading, silaging?

GT. Slurry spreading, silaging, muck spreading, baling, anything really. A lot of baling, round bales and square bales.

SH. You have a self-propelled Forage Harvester?

GT. It's a pretty new one, 2 years old. We do about 3000 acres in a year, including our own. That's enough for us with doing the farming.

SH. Do you do any contracting?

GT. No, not a lot, I'm a runabout when they're silaging, if anything breaks down, its fetch me this. I like seeing the machinery working. Got to keep up with modern stuff. I just like keeping the machinery modern, because it's changing all the time, its more efficient.

SH. What do you think about the size of the tackle nowadays? Obviously, the land in South West Peak is quite delicate isn't it? Do you think sometimes the tackle is too big?

GT. It's getting heavier, but we do tend to put it on bigger tyres, and the rigs we use are bigger so you're covering more ground in a row, and you're doing less passes. It's the only way we can get round wetter ground, you know the tender ground.

SH. In this area we have a beautiful landscape, with in places lots of little fields, and the big tackle isn't really very good in those, is it?

GT. What's the answer to that one? Everyone wants it doing yesterday. The weathers dodgy. We need the tackle to be that big to get the job done. We do long days, we can do about 150 acres on a big day, but mostly some farms maybe you'll only do 70 or 80 acres a day because they're small. Depends on the fields. Everything has to be right to do 150 acres. Some farms you're limited at the silage pit, or there's a limit somewhere. You get in some big field with a big rake, but in your smaller fields if you have a big enough rake you soon do a small field, twice round and up the middle and it's done.

SH. What do you think of how we keep the South West Peak, keep the special qualities of it, keep it working in a sustainable manner?

GT. Bit of help from the government. Grants help, along the lines of the old ESA scheme with hedge planting, wall building, stone building restoration and a bit of payment to help the farmers along on the grassland, the grazing.

SH. Do you think you should be paid to look after what few hay meadows we've got left, the flower rich ones?

GT. Yes, they are nice to see, it makes nice hay. There ought to be a future for 'em, be nice to see. I would love to have one, if I'd got one, because they're nice to go and look at in summer. I like to see the butterflies and the bees and all that. I like the wild birds, I feed them. Yeh, nice.

SH. Have you got any land that might be described as species rich, with old grasses and herbs and flowers and things.

GT. No, but we never had any.

SH. So would you say all or most of your grassland is just grass, ryegrass?

GT. Not all of it's ryegrass. No, it's more the old turf.

SH. You still got some old turf, because you do quite a lot of re-seeding don't you?

GT. But, that's meadow land. We still got old pastures. They're good because they're on wetter land and it carries the stock better. It doesn't become nesh.

SH. But do you think there is a place for having a wide variety of species for livestock health?

GT. It's best for the sheep than ryegrasses, they seem to do better. We used to put them on better land and we used to have a lot of dirty lambs scouring. It was too rich. Then we used to get maggots and all that sort of bother with that. So, we keep them more on the traditional land now, the traditional pasture, and they keep clean, a lot better for sheep. Well we have found that out over the years. So, the lambs stay on the moor, the old pasture as we call it, with low inputs.

SH. Have you got any wildlife on the farm apart from badgers and foxes?

GT. We've got peewits (lapwings). We had 6 nesting pairs last year. They're on the old pasture, what sometimes gets trod a bit and we tend to spread bedding muck on that for them. That is what we was told in ESA, so we did it. We top the rushes, especially for the lapwings, but the disappointing thing is, you can see these little chickens start to hatch, they start running about, then they sort of disappear. We had two lots survive last summer.

SH. What do you think has them? Do you think its crows or badgers, or both?

GT. Both. It's a shame really, you do all this sort of thing and they just disappear and we get the blame, farmers get the blame, but it isn't all the farmers.

SH Have you got many hedges?

GT. We've got more hedges than we had, as some of the land we bought has got hedges on it. We did plant some hedges on the ESA scheme. You know when you think about it, we did more than what we thought we did in the ESA. We did plant some hedges.