

Harry Gee

Harry Gee was born in 1923 at The Hayes, Reapsmoor. His family moved to Ridge Farm, Longnor where he remained for the rest of his life until he passed away in January 2018. In this interview with Sheila Hine in June 2015, Harry describes some of the changes that occurred in farming over his lifetime.

Part One. Farming since the war

HG: During war everybody had to try and plough a bit. They were growing kale and what have you before war, then during war there was a lot more ploughing done. There were placards up and down: dig for Victory and all that you know, and they expected you to plough a bit. A lot of these little places were in wettish ground, they still got some on 'em do a bit of ploughing. Some contractors would come in there. A lot o' these places where it was wettish land, well, if it came dry enough, they did it and if it didn't, it didna get done, did it?

SH: Do you think that was a good thing, all this ploughing round 'ere?

HG: I think it was, yeh. It's the same thing now. I mean, there were a lot of land ploughed up during war and kept it up for quite a bit after. A lot of it wasn't properly seeded down. Yeh, it were seeded down with a short term lay, not a long term lay. Well, that weren't the right thing to do and some on 'em didna get touched again. Therefore, it didna do as well. It's same now, I mean these silage men, I bet you do it, after so many years, you plough it and reseed it.

SH: Not much. When did you have your tractor and pack your horses up?

HG: It were nineteen forty-eight or nine.

SH: And that made a big difference?

HG: Oh, ay it helped. The only trouble with these Standard Fordsons, you're alright in th' summer time, but in winter time if you wanted to take th' muck out and it were frosty 'n' icy, eh, they wouldna go til this four wheel drive come in, you see. You had to leave it in the muck hole 'til it were dry enough to do sommat with it, you know. But when four wheel drive come in, well it were different ball game alt'gether. You could get anywhere, really.

SH: So, when did you let your horses go? Did they go straight away?

HG: Not straight away, we kept 'em a year or two after that, 'cos there were odd jobs we could do with them. We'd got a horse rake. People did raking up then. They donna do it now. Horse rake, I can remember using horse rake and horse lots and lots of times in these meadows down roundabout 'ere after we had tractors. Then when tractors come in the first thing we had were a new trailed mower off West, John West at Leek were it? On Derby Street there. Oh, it would have been forty-nine or fifty when we first had a trailed mower behind standard Fordson. Then in nineteen sixty sommat, I bought a Fordson Dexter standard from Bassett's garage down at Hartington.

SH: Going back to the fifties, you were still on rationing for a while, weren't you? Did that make it difficult for you?

HG: Not too bad, we were like more or less self-supporting. We'd got milk and me mother could make butter; she made no end of butter. You could get a bag of flour; made our own bread. Thursday were baking day. Me mother and our Margaret, Thursday, they baked enough bread t' last the week.

SH: Course you'd got cheese factory next door, hadn't you? So, did you have cheese from there?

HG: Aye, you'd have cheese from down 'ere in Hartington cheese factory, that was going.

SH: And your farm was still rented then from Harpur Crewe? When did you buy the farm?

HG: Nineteen fifty-one.

SH: So, at that time it was still rented. How did you get on with them? Who was your agent?

HG: Pemberton at Alstonefield.

SH: And how did you get on with him?

HG: Not too bad. Some people couldna get on with him, but he wasn't too bad.

SH: When did you get water in the house?

HG: When we first come here there were three little stone troughs, pig troughs if you like, at this end. And there were another one, that were fairly shallow, but it were fairly big and there were another one right under the spout. Well, we hadn't been here so very, very long as we kept getting a few more cows and calves about. Well, if water were lowish, coming slow you know, you were waiting for 'em, to water 'em, you know? They could drink it faster than it come. And so, Sam Johnson, handyman, he made a frame, put it in situ. While we were doing it, he turned water back up field there. He got down to it and dammed it up. He made this frame, filled it with concrete, fixed it all up and got that going. The dates still on it, nineteen thirty-four. Oh, we could water the cows then! At one point we had a pipe out of it at the bottom, across the yard here, properly done, and we'd got a fridge int old dairy here and we could take milk into a little receiving pan and milk run out of this receiving pan and down this fridge and into your churn.

SH: And did you have to fetch water from there for the house?

HG: Yeh. Eeh, I fetched buckets and buckets of water from there. If cows had been drinking a good while, my mother didna like yer getting water out of trough if cows had been slobbering and drinking not long before. "Catch it at the spout" she used to say. Eh, I've caught buckets and buckets of water there.

SH: When did you get water in the house?

HG: Oh, a good while after that. The first water we had in the house was when I had this in (taps the stove), just after June and me were married. We'd hot water on the sink, hot and cold water. It'd be in the fifties.

SH: You didn't have water in the house until the fifties! And when did you have electric on?

HG: That were in fifties, later on. End of fifties.

SH: So, what did you do before that?

HG: Tilly lamps.

SH: So how did you milk your cows in the fifties?

HG: We were milking 'em by hand, in the fifties.

SH: How many?

HG: Well, when we come 'ere, there weren't a built in 'ere, only that big shippen, that four shippen at end, that weren't a on, and that one just below, it's a double shippen now. Well, that tied ten; five in that other shed below; and there were a loose box at one end of that. Me Dad had always got a mare and a foal in that, in spring. And there were another shed down yard 'ere that tied eight stirks. Oh, and there were a little lean too back of coal place 'ere. You'd get five or six little calves in it. That's all tie-in there were. Oller barn, we used to tie up there; ten or a dozen. Up 'til we had that four shippen built. Well Crewe's did it. Stone for that came out of Old Emmers. That were a little 'ouse at Reapsmoor.

SH: How many do you think you were milking then, in fifties? Well at the end of the war?

HG: At end of war, not many, cos we hadna the tie-in for 'em. Perhaps ten, fifteen and then we used to have two or three tied in that bottom shippen as I call it, first calf heffers, if they werena too big. We should a been milking about eighteen, twenty then.

SH: What breeds were they?

HG: Shorthorns mainly. We were starting a crossing 'em a bit. I got me Dad to buy a Friesian bull calf from somewhere. Where the 'eck did he buy it from. Oh aye know, it was something to do with me Uncle Jim, Jim Arthur at Nettle Tor. Anyway, they went and bought this Friesian bull calf and reared him up and he turned out to be a nasty little sod. I know I were na very big at the time and it was my job when cows went up inta Oller inn (?) in daytime, and they come back at night, and I went a fetching these things. I walked down Bigin Ole and cross footpath and over wooden bridge there into what I call first field. I was shouting these cows, and I were in first field, and this Friesian bull, he picked his head up and then he started coming towards me, then he started running. I thought I'd better move quick, I dunna like this you know, and I jumped over wall inta lane and went and stood on bridge. He'd a bloody had me. Course I stood there. I shouted cows, they started coming, they kept coming one be one and so on and I never got off bridge 'til they'd gone out of sight. I told me Dad about it. "Oh 'eck" he says, "he's not stopping 'ere long". They were nasty devils some on 'em, especially them Friesians.

SH: So, what did you do then about breeding your cows?

HG: He had a white shorthorn, I remember. Whether that were about that time. That were from Chelmorton. He had 'im, he used 'im a time or two. He were a nice quiet bull.

SH: So, you got some good cows, and reared your own young things?

HG: Oh ah, we did na buy much in them days.

SH: Had you much mither with TB?

HG: Well, you'll never believe this, but after I left school, I hadna been left school very, very long before this TB came about. It were voluntary thing at first. If you'd have a test and you

went clear, you got a bit more for your milk. We had 'em tested and they all went clear, and touch wood, we've never had a bad test.

SH: In all them years. Cos when did you leave school, what year?

HG: I left when I were fourteen. Well, I was thirteen actually when I left. Mr Bolton wanted me to go again, another term or two, but I didna want to. All as I wanted to do was get here and work. Soft bugger, like I were. Eh dear. If only you could put the clock back.

HG: Then we had airline put in and milk units come in.

SH: Was that before electric. Did you have an engine?

HG: Yeh, before electric

SH: So how did you feel about that change from hand milking? Was that a big help?

HG: That was an improvement. It freed June up. That were in fifties. Arthur were born fifty-one and then when she were expecting Heather, I can always remember we used to talk about having this airline and having some milk units and doing it that way. "I wish you'd hurry up, it'd free me off!" June were a good milker. I mean, when they were at Badgers Croft, they milked by hand all t' time she were there and were right up to when Mr Grindey left Badgers Croft and went down t' Wigginstall he were milking by hand he were, and Mrs Grindey. Aye it were all hand milking with 'em. That were your only, your main income, what you could get from selling milk in them days. Aye, I've seen a few changes.

SH: Course, you'd start getting capital grants as well in the fifties, wouldn't you?

HG: That's right, yeh. Them helped. The first grants as come in, come in during war, the calf subsidy. That was the start of the grant job, calf subsidy on these bullocks. There were nothing on heffers were there. It were on bullocks. And I think if you took heffers on and finished them off, I think you got something on them then.

SH: But did it make a big difference to farmers.

HG: That were start of things going up. But a lot of 'em couldna see it. Same with me Dad, he used to say to me many a time, "err a lot of these farmers they're their own worse enemy". Doing daft things. Increasing milk production. That were main income. I mean, sheep and lambs were alright, pigs were quite good. Me Dad were big on pigs, he used to keep a fair lot of pigs. He'd have a couple of breeding sows, sell wee ones off and all that. Sometimes you'd do better than others with 'em. It were all swings and roundabouts with them blumin things. Sometimes you could have a good litter and they'd do well, and sometimes you'd end up with two or three. I mean, look at milk job, doing all sorts of daft things when bulk tanks come in. Well, folks were putting all sorts in; the first milking; it didna matter if it'd got blood in it. They just did owt, and that's when the rot sets in, but they couldna see it, could they?

SH: So, was there anything else in the fifties that you went for in grants, that you did to the farm?

HG: At one point there were quite a bit of grant on draining. We did quite a bit, in two or three places. They called it War Ag and they'd draw you a scheme up and tell you what it

would cost you when you'd had the grant off it. There were one bloke used to be on, his name was Gregory. And there were a chap, his name was Lovett. He drew me one or two schemes up. Bill Cope at Moorside, he married me elder sister, Margaret, he did him a scheme or two.

SH: Around 1960. What was happening then?

HG: There come these more grants on building alterations. I think there were grants on parlours, if you were doing a complete new set up. If you put a new building up and put a new parlour in, on what they called a green site, there were a grant on it.

SH: So, in the sixties did you do a lot of changes here then?

HG: I took the middle wall out of what we call double shippen and made it tie five more cows, that were ten cows there, ten here and four up there. And in what I call new shippen there were six there, a loose box at the top end of this stirk shed down 'ere, that pole shed down yard, that's put up with second hand timber. That were about when Arthur were leaving school. Neville Fletcher and Arthur did that. Second hand timber, telegraph poles and planks and what have you.

SH: So, did you have any grant on buildings?

HG: No, not 'til seventies. During seventies I put that first shed up at back of that building 'ere. And we were doing some digging out at back. Hay shed was up and one of the ministry men came round and he wanted me to pull hay shed down and put a complete new set-up at the back there. Well, I put that hay shed up in forty-nine. I got the stanchions off Charlie Critchlow; I got Harpur Crewe to put the timber up, apex timber; I bought tin, and I managed to get Jim Kitt to put it up eventually.

SH: So, going back to the seventies you put the shed up, with the grant?

HG: Ahh, about seventy-six I think it were. Two or three people come "aye you want to put boskins in that. You're doing wrong thing, if you don't do that, you want to put cubicles in". Course we put cubicles in. And Fred Redford says "aye it'll be alright, but you'll find you'll have more injuries". And you do, on the whole. Slippery concrete.

SH: So, where did you milk your cows then?

HG: We milked them in double shippen.

SH: So, you ran them in the cubicles, but milked then in the shippen?

HG: Yeh. There's cubicles for forty. We've got double shippen here, five each side, a widish doorway out of double shippen into a passage way. If you turn right, you go up a little slope and that's feeding area. At bottom of cubicles there's a block wall, in it double gates. When we're milking, we shut that, drive cows out of cubicles into this feeding end 'ere. When we're milking come down this slope 'ere, into double shippen. And when they go out, they turn uphill, 'n' they soon get used to it.

SH: And is that when you raised your cow numbers?

HG: Yeh. We had a deal of forty then.

SH: And is that the most you kept, forty milkers?

HG: We got more than that, we got up to about forty-four or five.

SH: You'd already gone onto the bulk tank?

HG: Oh arr, we went onto the bulk tank when churns finished. Heather were eighteen. It'd be about seventy-two. Bulk tank were a good thing. It helps you a bit with this testing business. When they were testing out o' churns if it was too warm your tests werna very good. It had got be cooled hadn't it, for get best reading and you were paid on them figures, whether they were good or bad or what they were. And not only that, when you'd got bulk tank and your night's milk was in, when you went in in a morning, started milking, you switched everything on, it was cooling straight away.

SH: So, when did you give up milking?

HG: End of nineteen nineties or just beginning of two thousand.

SH: What was the reason you give up?

HG: Price. They'd hammered it and hammered the price down til it were 13p and then it got down to 11p. And there were one or two more round 'ere, they all said the same thing: "if mine ever gets down to 11p, that's it, I shall finish".

SH: We've talked over quite a long time, right back to the war. Which was the best time you thought you were farming?

HG: During fifties, sixties and seventies. Things started picking up in the fifties, sixties and seventies and into th' eighties. Was it Macmillan told 'em, never had it so good? What year would that be when he were prime minister?

SH: In sixties

SH: What were really good things that you thought?

HG: I dunna know. Its just which things you like doing best, in't it really? Cows, milking that's always been considered one of the best incomes, because its regular income seven days a week. You were paid by the buyers. Machinery side of it, I know it's cut a lot of the labour force out, and it's also improved... Mechanisation, it dunna matter whether you're milking, beef, sheep, pigs or poultry, I dunna care what part of it it is, it all revolves around machinery now.

SH: And you think that's been good?

HG: Well, it's got t' be, hasn't it?

SH: So, what about the down side then. What's the bad things?

HG: The down side of it is some of these high up men as have got these jobs, concerning agriculture, they dunna know enough about it. That's the downside of it. What good are you talking to a bloke if he dunna know much about the situation?

HG: What beats me Sheila is, all my life, I were about seventeen when me dad took me to th' bank at Leek and put my name on the cheque book. He says, "Here, its your's now." He says "I have to have a big operation. I shonna get over it." He says, "You and your mother

must run the farm.” He says, “Keep your numbers up.” Of course, I went on from there. Eventually he went and had this operation; stomach ulcers; they removed half his stomach. He was ages and ages, he didna do anything. He was on ever such a strict diet, and running up to Stepping Hill every so often for a check-up.

SH: You're 92 now? It isn't long since you've not done much is it?

HG: This last three or four years.

SH: You'd do it all again, would you?

HG: Well, that's what people say ain't it? But of course, if you can't do it over again, no. It's just that phrase ain't it? You dunna know any different. That's how it comes about.