

Helen Heathcote

Helen was born in the 1950s and her family farmed at Pyegreave Farm in Cheshire. She was the last farmer in her extended family and until recently she kept beef stock on the smallholding at Bottom House in Staffordshire where she now lives. Helen remembers how her parents' farm business kept going for decades with a high degree of self-sufficiency and no subsidies. In addition to sustaining the family, her parents' milk round helped sustain the local community by providing social support as well as the daily milk delivery.

Part One. Previous Generations

CG: Helen, if you could just tell me a little bit about your family background and living in this area. How far back does your farming history in this area go to?

HH: Well, I only realised in later years that my grandfather farmed just down the road here. You can actually see it in my garden. Well, he was born there. And my father's family are from Flash and Hollinsclough. Farming generations go back and back.

CG: So, your father's family you say were Hollinsclough and Flash. How have you traced that back? Is that by oral memory?

HH: Some of his uncles and aunties used to still live there and we used to go up for tea. So, I remember going up there.

CG: So, it's not just immediate family it's extended family?

HH: Oh yeh, yeh.

CG: So, what kind of farming were they doing? What is the furthest you can go back in time with some of those memories? What kind of things have they told you about?

HH: Well, they always had the cattle and the sheep, but they didn't keep many. One of my Dad's uncles, he used to keep just half a dozen cows. But when he died, his estate was vast. He owned no end of properties in the Flash area. And he never went anywhere, but he knew absolutely everything. Never had a TV, he only knew from the radio. So, it's quite bizarre really. Market day was probably the event of the year, because he didn't go that often. But he did sell corn from the back door.

CG: So, he had a few things going on?

HH: Um, but nothing vast, you know, nothing you'd think would make him a profitable living.

CG: So, he was more or less a subsistence farmer, but had a lot of land?

HH: Yeh, yeh, he'd got a lot of land, but they didn't have that many cattle or sheep, because they just didn't, did they?

CG: If we go back a little bit, can you tell me about your Dad's farming family when he was a child? What stuff did he tell you about and can we place that in terms of chronology, dates?

HH: When my Dad was young, they farmed at Rainow. They moved from Wildboardclough to Rainow. I mean now, where the farm was is now Lamaload reservoir. The farm was actually at the bottom of that, and his Mum used to carry him to school, literally on her back. But they moved from there to where our family moved to in Langley, because the weather was quite harsh up there and it didn't suit Grandma's health, so they bought a farm that was relatively sheltered.

CG: So, how high up were they? And this journey to school sounds amazing.

HH: Well, it's near the Goyt valley, and then going to Rainow school. So, it's quite a trek, wasn't it?

CG: So, did they have a small holding up there?

HH: It was a farm, Lamaload farm. I don't know how big it was. It was virtually all moorland around there, because it's all quite barren, isn't it? Not like Cheshire. I mean, when they moved to Pyegreave farm, because that's where I grew up, it was just beautiful. The ground, the soil. We even had our own watercourse that was so pure it grew watercress. My Dad used to gather bags and bags of the watercress.

CG: So, was that running through limestone there then?

HH: No, it'd be gritstone, because have you heard of Tegg's Nose country park? Our ground went right up to there.

CG: So, that's your Dad's family and that's where he started out. So, what did your Dad actually do?

HH: He always worked on the farm with his Mum and Dad and his brother and his sisters. They all worked there. The farm supported the whole family. There were five children and they all worked on the farm. The girls, as they got a bit older, they thought perhaps they'd do a secretarial course, but the boys stayed and they farmed together until my Dad retired and his brother retired. But we lived there when my grandparents retired.

CG: How did that divide up around the family?

HH: Well, the girls, they went and they got married. The farm, when my Dad and his brother bought it off grandparents it was just a nominal fee.

CG: But when they took it on, what period are we talking about?

HH: Well, when we left the farm in 1990, the family had been there for seventy years.

CG: So, right before the second World war. Did they ever talk to you about some of the massive changes that happened during the war and after?

HH: Well, during the war and when we left the house there was a long corridor that went down to the front room, the best room, and there was a door with a pane of glass, and I can see the crack now, and that was when a bomb landed somewhere and that was what it did. That was the only damage, but that crack was still in the glass, even

when we left. My Dad was in the Home guard or something, because I've got some badges somewhere. He did some sort of watch work.

CG: A lot of farmers were doing that, weren't they? That was the work that they could do, but they were there to dig for England really. So, what were they producing? You said they were self sufficient in terms of feeding stock, but what about the other things they were producing?

HH: There was always a big orchard and we had lots of plums and apples. We used to grow fields of potatoes as well. We sold the potatoes on the milk round and the eggs of course as we had quite a lot of hens. My dad didn't just sell milk. It used to take him so long to do the milk round, because he'd be turning people's mattresses, and taking Mrs Jones coal order to the coal man. When he retired from the milk round, when he sold it, they had a big party in the village for him, because he was just amazing. He went 365 days a year. On Christmas Day and Boxing Day he always dressed up and he made his own costumes. He would be Rupert Bear, he was the Mad Hatter. He was just amazing.

CG: So, your Dad then, did he develop the milk round?

HH: No, my grandparents started it off.

CG: So, how many farmers were doing their own milk round at that time?

HH: There was another one in the next village that used to do one. He actually bought ours when we finished. He did two villages and the outlying farms, because obviously by the latter end the outlying farms were bought by business people.

CG: This is really amazing, this enterprise. How common was that actually that you'd have a farm, a mixed farm like your Dad's that was supplying the village with milk? Was that a feature of this area?

HH: Well, the other farmer, I think he bought his milk in, but our milk was bottled and produced on the farm.

CG: Quite often, people have got a picture of farmers generally, particularly in these quite remote landscapes, of it being a lonely and isolated thing, but it sounds as if your Dad was at the heart of the community?

HH: Oh, he was. Before we had the vans, we had Toby the horse, and if he was too long at one place, Toby used to know when the next slice of bread was, and he would go on on his own. And woe betides my Dad if he was in a house and it thundered, because Toby would go home.

CG: So, your Dad was taking that on from your grandparents and they did that for how long?

HH: I don't really know when they started it.

CG: Because, when they'd have been doing it, there would have been the milk marketing board?

HH: Yeh, the milk marketing board, I can remember that. But my Mum's parents, they farmed in Macclesfield. Well, they farmed in Sutton and then they went to Macclesfield and they had a big milk round in Macclesfield, but they went round with the..., can you remember when people got the milk out of the churn and pour it straight into a jug. That's how Mum started, she used to go round with my grandfather doing that.

CG: What kind of cows did your Dad keep?

HH: It were always British Friesians. A closed herd. If we ever bought anything in, it died. We never, ever had TB. I can remember foot and mouth in the sixties, going to school with the straw at the end of the lane with all the disinfectant; putting your boots and changing your boots. That was awful.

CG: So, going back to your grandparents, did they keep Freisians as well. That was the beginnings of intensification. Because, before that you'd get Ayrshires?

HH: He had red and white Freisians though as well. So, we had some red and white Freisians, because people used to say oh you've got some Ayrshires, but no we haven't, because they were all British Freisians. Because the British Freisians are smaller and the longevity of it, they can go on for years. They are so hardy. Our young stock were never housed. We'd got some ground that was in the village. One winter we had a really bad blizzard. We had to get the Landrover out and go and find the cows. They were absolutely fine, because they'd gone down into a ravine near the river. There wasn't even any snow down there. They were under the trees. They were absolutely fine. They always made a big coat. I mean the Holsteins couldn't even produce a big coat, could they, because they're not made for that?

CG: So, if we go back to all these things that were going on on your farm. What was the acreage of the farm?

HH: About 250 acres. Pretty big, but it was enough because we did everything. We had sheep. We didn't have a large flock, thirty or forty. We used to buy the sheep from Chatsworth. They were mules, a cross with gritstone and mix with border Leicester, but we always put a Suffolk tupp onto ours. So, we had these lop eared, you used to have to grow in your skin lambs.

CG: But, in the early days, who was working on the farm? Because there was an awful lot to do with the milk round.

HH: Well, when my grandparents retired, we moved to the farm, Mum, Dad and my Uncle. Mum would do all the bottling of the milk, then when my Dad came back after lunch, she'd wash all the bottles, and she'd feed the hens, and weigh potatoes up. He used to sell cigarettes as well, so she had to go down to Macclesfield to the wholesalers and get those. On wet days it was awful on the milk round, because you'd go with the milk and they'd see you and they would say "can I have five pounds of potatoes?" So, you would go back, then you'd get "can I have half a dozen eggs?". Go back. "Oh have you got twenty cigarettes?" You're getting wetter and wetter. I worked with me Dad for about 12 months and at weekends as well just to give Mum a break.

CG: So, it was like we are open all hours?

HH: Oh, yeh we just did it.

CG: And that milk, was it separated at all, or were you selling it full cream?

HH: Oh, yeh it was full cream. It just went straight through the cooler, the old-fashioned sort, the water used to circulate through it. We were very lucky, because we had got a natural spring, so water wasn't a problem. We'd got in churn coolers, which was just water. Mum just had a wooden dairy, but we never ever had anything rejected. Because they used to come and do spot check you when Dad was out on the round take a bottle and sample it, but we never ever had any problems, never ever had TB. It was quite sad when it went really.

CG: So, the cows, you said they were out all year round?

HH: No, just the young stock. The milk cows were in for six months. When our cows were housed in the winter because they were tied by the neck we used to, especially when it was really cold, me Dad used to put something in the peep-holes, you know where you used to lift the latch up, you couldn't have drafts in the cows. It was just like a sauna. It used to steam.

CG: How old were your farm buildings?

HH: Our farm was fourteen hundred and something. My only regret is never going up into the loft and seeing the cruck frames. There were big bolts going right the way through. Tie bars.

CG: So, you lived in that beautiful house for how long?

HH: Um, until I got married, so we went there when I was ten, I think.

CG: But, you'd known that house all your life?

HH: Oh yeh, yeh, because it was my grandparents.

CG: And your Dad and his brother were partners? So, they shared all the work and where did your Uncle live?

HH: He lived in the village. He was the eldest brother, really he should have gone to the farm, but his wife didn't want to, so.

CG: So, talk me through what there working day was like, because it's an enormous day, a huge amount of things to be doing?

HH: Well, they didn't get up that early - seven o'clock to go and get the cows in to milk. Dad would come in. He'd leave his brother to milk. Mum, as soon as there was some milk ready, she would go down and start. She'd do all the bottling and then come up and cook a breakfast for everybody and then she'd go and do the hens. She was just working all the time. At the same time she'd got her Dad and his farm at Wildboardclough. Her Mum had died and she had some brothers there, so she used to do all their washing. She used to go up and clean for them. She's still living, she was ninety-one last week. She's amazing! She's doing for people all the time. She goes

to church and chapel and when it's harvest time, I'll say "what have you been doing today Mum". "Well, we've been taking parcels out to the old folk". They're probably all younger than Mum.

HH: Dad had to retire, because his hips went, because he just worked himself to death, but even when he retired, he retired from that huge house to a huge bungalow and he was working all the time. And then they moved to a little barn in Ipstone and you can see remnants of him now, because he was making signs for the road where no one knew where it was. So, he made a sign. Then there was another place where no one knew where that was. So, he made a sign for that. The churchyard, if it's still there, the watering can, the handle had come off, so he'd fabricate a handle. He was always doing.

CG: I mean, you'd have to be wouldn't you to keep a business going that's got so many elements to it from production all the way through to packaging, through to sales, to keeping the accounts. Not many people can say that anymore, can they?

HH: No. My Dad's brother used to do the accounts. He sorted all that out.

CG: So, can you talk to me about what things you were growing?

HH: Kale and turnips, the mangles as they used to call them, and potatoes. Probably carrots. You know, any root vegetables really, I would have thought. That was for sale and for themselves and the animals.

CG: Did they grow any grains at all?

HH: No. I can never ever remember them... But they did all their own silaging, well hay making. Well, now they've got these big wagons that collect the grass and people think it's a new thing, but when we had our farm sale in 1990 there was one of those there, a Duetz bar one. It wasn't as elaborate as they've got now. It had a rope top on it. It was ideal for me Dad used to come back from the milk round. He'd go and mow, and then perhaps he'd pick-up a bit, and then he'd do the milking, and then go back and do some more, and he did old time dancing as well.

CG: Going back to some of the big changes in agriculture. Obviously, production got very much more intensive. Well, if we start at the end and dealing with the cattle and milking them. How many cows did they have?

HH: We probably got up to about fifty, sixty.

CG: And at that stage they'd obviously got their machine milking going through to a bulk tank?

HH: Yeh, we had a pipeline put in. I can remember that going in. I don't know when, but I wasn't that old, because I used to do swinging over the top of it. I can remember doing that.

CG: But before that, did they talk about hand milking this lot or just using the little clusters or?

HH: I can't remember that. I can remember when the electricity went off, he used to get the tractor and put a belt so that it would run the motor to keep it going.

CG: Can you talk me through, just describe your farm to me?

HH: The farm was on a hillside, in a valley. The house was at the top of the yard and all round us we got coppices, woods, streams. It was idyllic really. There was a footpath that went right over to Macclesfield to the golf links. It was dry ground, it was not like round here where you are wading through bogs. We just had so many wild flowers all the time. There was always something growing. Birds, kingfishers. Where the streams were, you'd got the woods. It was very secluded. We got badger setts up on the top, but they weren't a problem, they didn't have TB, because we never had any problems.

CG: Did your Mum and Dad sell up then?

HH: Yeh, they sold up in 1990.

CG: So, they worked the farm right up until they sold it?

HH: Yeh. It was a very sad day. The worst part was the animals going, when the cattle wagons go and you get up the next morning and its deathly. It's like here when mine went, it was awful, absolutely awful, but if you can't do it. It's like my Dad, he was killing himself, because his hips were so bad. He was sixty-four. One hip was completely gone, so he'd got to have an operation. His brother, he'd got an ulcer. My son was too young to take it on and my brother was in London, high-flying, so obviously he didn't, so it just went. With all the generations, it's so sad to think, we are a big family, an extended family and there is nobody farming at all.