

## **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 Two. Helen's Generation**

HH: 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. 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: 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: As a teenager, how would you describe your life on the farm?

HH: I had an idyllic life really. It was great. I was never forced to do anything that I didn't want to do.

CG: How many siblings have you got?

HH: I've only got me brother. He's older than me. He went to University. He wasn't interested in getting his hands dirty. He's Bank of England. He's sixty-eight, but still goes in two days a week. He went into insurance first and went to Australia and then he was selling companies off that had gone bankrupt.

HH: I always had a job. There was a silk mill just down the road, well off our lane in the village. Langleys was a mecca for silk. Brocklehurst Wisden folded and then two Polish gentlemen, Marian Adanski and Frank Parker who lives at Flash and developed mushrooms now, they took it on and it's called Park Adams. So, I'd been to the dentist one day. I was working with me Dad on the milk round, but I mean, I love my Dad to bits, but we couldn't work together. We used to fall out. I'd just been to the dentist and I'm walking back and one of the bosses, well Frank, came up and said "Can you

type. Would you like a job". So, I ended up at the silk mill. But I could walk to work. I worked with me Dad for about twelve months or so, and I used to work at weekends as well just to give Mum a break. 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.

HH: When we got married, we couldn't afford to live around Macclesfield, because the properties were so expensive. That's why we came this way, because properties were cheaper. I mean, I just lived in a normal house and Dad retired and there was no farm to go to, it was awful. Me Dad said, "don't you think you ought to be looking for somewhere with a bit of land. "Ooh, yes, perhaps so". So, we bought this place.

HH: I mean here when I had my own cattle, it was very rare I used any vaccines or anything, because I think that if you've got pure ground, which ours was, I think they can cure themselves if they get ill, because they just know what they can eat to cure themselves.

CG: It's not for no reason that that little yellow clover is called black medic, is it? They self-medicate with the substances that are within those. Those mixed herbs, and certainly all those. Can you remember the range of plants? Did you get vetches and all those?

HH: Oh yeh. We have here. Even if you make silage out of it, haylage, you can still see them, because you let it wilt, you let the seeds go back into the ground and it's just like opening up somebody's pressed flower book, which is amazing really.

CG: That's a lovely way to put it.

HH: The only reason I haven't got any cows now is because I have arthritis in my hands. I can't do it. But when I first came here, I had Aberdeen Angus, big cows. But every year the ground gets wetter and wetter and before I finished, I ended up with Dexters. Basically, because they're smaller. I don't know how people can leave animals out round here all year round. Some do, but you'd have no fields left.

CG: Talk me through your attachment to this landscape. It's over quite a wide ranging area really isn't it, because where you grew up, how far is that?

HH: Macclesfield, about a twenty-five minutes drive. Me Mum's parents were at Wildboarclough, so we went there a lot.

CG: This great love that you've got, so what would you say about farming? What does it mean to you?

HH: It's a way of life, isn't it? It's a vocation. Nowadays, you talk to young ones and all they're interested in is what they're going to do with their money or where they are going at weekend. They're not really interested in what they're doing really. There was nothing nicer to me. I used to call the cows my stress busters. I used to go in and they're all cudding and they just lay there. And you walk in, and they just talk to you. So, it may sound very eccentric, but they did. And you just felt the weight of the World

lift. And you know, nowadays people are stressed up about everything. Paper work kills everything. My cows were just amazing.

CG: Do you think that to be successful in farming you've got to love your animals?

HH: I think so. To me, if I was in charge of anything to do with agriculture and milking, every cow would go into a parlour and walk on rubber. Have you seen a cow that's been splayed out when it's walked in a parlour, because it's slipped, because the floors so shiny. And once a cow's been splayed out, every time they go into that parlour, they literally shake. And if I was in charge, they'd definitely have grooves in the concrete. The size of their feet, there's not much of the cow's foot touches the floor, is there?

CG: Do you feel we've gone a long way from this relationship with animals?

HH: Yeh, I think it's just a business. It's not a way of life.

CG: So, what do you think about the way things are going in the future? Do you applaud the way things are going or do you think it's going to hell in a hand cart kind of thing?

HH: Well, some things are getting better and some things are getting worse. It's like my husband now, I don't know if he does any contracting for any real farmers. They've all got other jobs or they are getting older or people are just dying out and farmers can't afford to buy the farms, can they?

HH: My husband contracts. We had a new Valtra and he's a mechanic and after it was two years old all these error codes kept coming up. He's a mechanic, but he couldn't do anything, he'd got to get someone out with a laptop to tell what's the matter. I said to someone, "that tractor won't last long at our house". Sure enough, it went back. So, he bought an older tractor that'd got no electronics. And everybody said "Jim Heathcote must be in trouble, because he's going backward". No, I am sorry he wasn't, he was going forward, because he can actually mend it. You don't put electronics with cow muck do you, really? It's a no brainer. Cow muck rots everything and if it gets into an ECU, well!

CG: We haven't talked very much about this landscape, but it's a place that you love, isn't it? It's very variable. Can you tell me what it is you like about this territory that you have lived in all your life and that you have worked in?

HH: The ground where I was in Cheshire was a lot kinder than it is here, but there's no comparison in the people. Leek, it's an amazing town. It's probably the best town in the country I would say. You go in a shop people give you the time of day. If you go into Macclesfield, nobody knows anybody. Even in my village in Langley nobody knows anybody anymore, because they commute to Manchester, they commute to Birmingham. Nobody knows anybody anymore. Round here, I probably have more friends round here than I had in Cheshire. It's kept its roots, yet. Probably in time it will go the way of everywhere else. The only thing I don't like about up here is the amount of wet we get, fog, rain.

CG: Just tell me what it is that you do now since you've been here you felt you'd got to have a piece of land. I know your Dad said make sure you get some.

HH: It probably was because he used to come up, and he was tinkering all the time, but you miss the animals. I miss them now, but if you can't do it, you can't do it, can you?

CG: What have you got now? You've got no animals at all? When did you lose your little Dexters?

HH: Three years ago. Yeh, I'd got a really nice herd. I'd got my own bull and everything. I did everything by hand. I was a barrow and fork person, which is very rare. People do not use barrows and forks any more. They get the tractor out, belching out fumes.

CG: You really feel passionately about this, as being as low tech as you can be?

HH: Yeh. I do. I think it's the right way to go. I don't think you can pollute all the time. You need to be kind. People aren't kind anymore, are they? Nobody cares anymore. Nobody thinks about anybody else, it's all 'I'm alright Jack', isn't it? To me, there's nothing nicer, like this morning when I walked the dogs across the tops, and you just stop because the skylarks and everything. Wow. It's amazing, you know. On my phone, I've just got videos, the sound of lapwings and curlews, because I think there's just nothing nicer than hearing that. How many people hear that?