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 Three. Changes in Farming Practices and the effect on Wildlife

CG: Just thinking about one of the big changes in dairy farming, well in any livestock farming, has been the change in grassland management.

HH: Well, the biggest thing for us was when quotas came in. You were allocated quotas, cos I know it was a separate thing when we sold the farm, the quota was a separate entity. That was sold on its own. The more quota you'd got, the more you could milk. That was probably the start of people increasing the herd. I suppose that was the first nail in the coffin, really. Then getting rid of the Milk Marketing Board as well. Cos you just knew you'd got a cheque every month. Obviously, it did go up and down, it did fluctuate, the price, as it does now.

HH: When we were farming, we farmed and we didn't have subsidies. There were no subsidies when my Dad farmed, there were still no subsidies when he left. You shouldn't really have to rely on subsidies to farm, should you?

CG: Some might argue that very strongly. Would you like to see us return to something a little bit more self-sufficient in that way?

HH: My husband being a contractor and being in farming ourselves we get magazines and there's one that comes from John Deere. It's quite interesting, but it's worldwide. I can't get my head round why in Finland; they have thirty cattle; they've all got robotic milkers; they've all got viewing platforms and they can make a living. Yet here, you've got to have hundreds of cows to make a living. It doesn't make sense.

CG: So, just tell me about what you remember about when the traditional hay making changed? Did your Dad keep that going for quite a while?

HH: Oh, yeh he did, for a long, long time we were making hay. We always made some hay even when he was silaging. We made some hay because young stock do better on hay, it's easier to feed calves hay. Because ours was clamped silage. We always made hay. You only make hay on the hottest days, don't you? My dad was one of those who used to screw the baler up, so the bales were just like lead, I can never remember getting a bale out in the winter and it being mouldy. And yet some people say that's too green. It maybe green, but if it's young, like June hay it will be green and it will be the best hay that you'll ever have. You just want to eat it yourself, because when you open it up the smell is still there.

CG: I would really like to talk to you a little bit more about hay, because obviously this is at the heart of so many of our wildlife losses, and of course it's caused a lot of devastation to our pollinators, a wide range of insects and obviously farmland birds, which have hit an all time low throughout Europe and they are in desperate trouble now and the finger points in one area to the switch to silage. Is that something you've noticed at all as a young person?

HH: Um, while we've been here, we've made hay, but over the years its getting wetter, the ground is getting wetter, because it never stops raining. So, what we tend to do is make haylage. Your grass is cut, its wilted, its moved. So, you are putting the seed back, it's not like just cutting in the morning and picking it up at lunchtime, which is what they do. And also, this mass slurry, I don't agree with that. I walk the dogs a lot, and I walk on slurried ground and it' just dreadful.

CG: Can you remember when your Dad first started moving over, or even when the surrounding farmers started drilling or even ploughing up and losing the hay meadows and going over to silage? Can you remember when that happened?

HH: We used to plough. Obviously, we used to plough because we'd got crops, which you have to do. We never ploughed the hay meadows.

CG: But you did grow some silage as well?

HH: Yes, we did some clamp silage, but that was wilted. We had wild orchids on our ground. You know, nothing was intensive.

CG: What about the waders, did you get curlew and lapwings?

HH: Yeh, yeh, but we are very lucky around here. Every time I walk across our field, I put a snipe up. And there's some ground down here, which is now horse ground where there must be about sixty lapwing and they all hatched out down there. They're amazing. They come most afternoons and they are still about. We get Curlew down there, skylarks up on the top. We are very lucky round here, very lucky. There are so many birds of prey as well. I once wrote a letter into the *Countryman,* because there was an article where Tony Blair was blaming the farmers, but it isn't all the farmers. They protected the predators. Our bird table at one time was just like Tescos for the sparrow hawk. It was dreadful.

CG: I think badgers have done untold harm to ground nesting birds. I really think that's the case. But it's certainly true that the loss of our hay meadows, because we are now down to something like one percent of what was here in the 1950's.

HH: When you get the conservationists, all they want you to do is to get yellow rattle. We call it 'vampire grass'. It just takes over and it does kill out all the clovers and everything. I mean here, when I had my own cattle, it was very rare I used any vaccines or anything, because I think if you've got pure ground, which ours was, I think they can cure themselves if they're getting 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.

CG: The hay meadow is what we grew up with and it was just pure magic, wasn’t it? Magical places, all the buzzing.

HH: Here, every year I get the damselflies. I get the green and the red ones.

HH: When they were on about these massive farms, I said to my husband “I’m not totally against massive farms, because at the end of the day the massive farm has got to think about how much money, so the cows are going to be really well looked after”. The size that they were on about going, they’d have a vet, wouldn’t they there constantly, someone checking and they would probably be better looked after than some of the farms that I’ve been to with my husband.

CG: That’s what I’ve heard said, that you cannot run it on that scale without constant care.

HH: And they are all well strawed, because if cows aren’t comfortable, they will not milk.

CG: We’ve lost enormous numbers, the lapwing and curlew particularly are in terrible trouble. I heard my first skylark singing yesterday. They do get off in February, don’t they?

HH: It was two weeks ago I heard them. I was down on the track. I thought ‘spring is not far away, we’ve got skylarks’.

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?

CG: I spend a lot of time talking to people about how we join up, and that’s partly what this project is about in a way, is there being a greater flow of understanding and ideas between conservationists and farmers. How do you think that we can ever turn that dialogue around to make it a little bit more productive, because there is a lot of mutual antagonism, which you’ll know all about?

HH: But when you think back to my Dad, we didn't have subsidies, and subsidies do govern. If you do this, then you're not going to get that money and if you don't do this, you know, so. My father and his brother, they farmed responsibly. There was no carrot dangling on the end of a string at the end of it. You do what's best for you, don't you? And I think that if people are forced into doing things that they don't want to do, really. It's like one year when we first came here, we were in ESA. The ground is so wet, if you don't do anything with it, it just doesn't produce and you've got to feed your cows, so it's a vicious circle. So, we rang up and he said "I don't know about that". So, Jim said "well look, we've only got moss growing at the moment, so if you don't just let me go through with the chain harrows, just to…". Anyway, he did let us. But within half an hour of him going out, everybody was out with the chain harrow.

HH: This was talking to Natural England, Simon Huguet. He was one of the pioneers of ESA. You could talk to him. But some have no farming background, they don't understand. If he hadn't let us, we wouldn't have had any haylage, hay, anything for the cows. It needs livening up. It's like the top ground we've got. That was virtually dead. So, we had someone to come in, and he took the top off and we bought some old-fashioned seed and put that back on again. It wasn't in the ESA that ground. They wouldn't have let us do that, but I thought we were making it better, by doing what we did.

HH: You see, a lot of people think they're doing a good job, like on the tops, someone's put a lot of trees in. Well, you will not get curlews and lapwings if there's trees, because the crows and magpies sit in the trees and swoop down.

CG: That's right, it's having the right kind of open ground and where they know where they want to be is where they'll try and come back.

HH: I was amazed, because that ground down there where the horses are, it's just so trodden, it's awful. And the very first time I spotted them, they nested there, so the horses must have left them alone. But most afternoons they do come up here around the top and land on the field. There's about sixty of 'em.

CG: One thing that makes me feel very sad hearing what you're saying, the very first thing you said is there's no one left to take this on, and all that experience and understanding and knowledge and love actually, investment. What are we going to do without that?

HH: I don't know. There are lot of farmers sons that won't want to do it, because three parts of them you've just got to get a pen out, you know, they spend so much time ticking boxes, don't they? This country spends far too much time ticking boxes, don't they?

CG: Bureaucracy bedevils a lot of farms, doesn't it? It's just too much.

HH: But it's in everything, it's in all walks of life, isn't it?