

The Land that Made Us is the story of eighty years of farming in the South West Peak. Christine Gregory and Sheila Hine have collated the personal accounts of local farmers and land managers, many of whom have lived and worked in this often challenging landscape for generations. In their own words, the farmers recall the changes to traditional farming in this remote and rugged landscape in the decades since the Second World War. The interviews also reflect the much bigger national story about the changing priorities in land use and food production.

The book and associated oral history archive created from these interviews were undertaken in partnership with the Farming Life Centre and the Peak District National Park Authority, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

### **John and Janet Stone - Onecote Grange Farm**

#### **PART ONE – Dairy Farming at Onecote Grange Farm**

John and Janet Stone farm at Onecote Grange Farm. They have a large dairy herd and some ground in Higher Level Stewardship. Their son, Andrew Stone, has also contributed to this oral history of the South West Peak.

In this first section, John and Janet talked to Sheila Hine, in 2017, about their life as dairy farmers at Onecote Grange Farm from 1980 to the present day.

S: So would you like to say when you came here John because it was your home Janet?

Janet: Yes with Dad, I've always lived here.

S: So I presume you got married at some point?

Janet: Yes, went to live at Tissington for two years and came back when mum and dad retired.

S And your dad always kept pedigree Ayrshires and had done a lot of showing hadn't he?

Janet: Yes

S: So when you came John, what happened then?

John: I came in 1980--October 1980 and I can remember it being quite a wet year and I came from the White Peak, which is limestone land and I just wondered what I had come to because I noticed the cows the next morning after we'd come they were rather dirty. Well I'd never experienced that in the White Peak--grounds always dry there. I took it on the chin and decided that because it was going to be our own farm and Janet

had got no other relations to take it over--she was the only child so to speak; I decided that it was best to make good of what we'd got. I threw all my effort in to making it what we've made it to day. That is, when I first came we left a parlour system milking 110 cows to a tied-up system with a pipeline milking 60 cows. Of course, quotas did impede us a bit because we weren't able to expand but I kind of ignored all that and got away without any super levy and managed to build my herd up to 80, then we just progressed from there onwards and we managed 10 years in cow sheds, milking as I say 80 cows; making 80 acres of hay every year to feed them. I don't know how on earth we ever did that, because the weather now--I don't think I could manage 80 acres of hay a year with the weather at present.

S: Even with modern tackle?

John: Even with modern tackle we would struggle to make that much hay now.

S: Did you take to the Ayrshire cattle?

John: No I went to Holsteins, I came with Holstein - Friesians and then I bred those with Holstein - Friesians again and got a reasonable herd, we were averaging 10,000 litres.

S: So even though you were feeding hay you were reasonably intensive to get those yields.

John: No I must say Sheila, no, we averaged about 7000 litres when we were on hay systems but with better breeding, and then we changed to a cubicle system in 1992, and then the yields did actually go up. Then of course, with better mechanisation and better grasses which were obtained by ploughing the fields, we became a bit more modern. But when I look back, I think it is the way forward, yes, for younger people but we have got rid of a lot of wildlife, got rid of a lot of, shall I say, hay meadows, which I now look on as essentials in the farming mosaics around the Dark Peak. I can remember mowing the hay meadows in 1985 and seeing partridges flying out of them and seeing great big swathes of meadow vetchling, tufted vetch and field vetch, and once we ploughed the ground all those went. We used to have the cuckoo in proliferation around our area; that all went, so I think we are our own worst enemy, but we cannot stand still, so we have got to go forward. And those are the sort of things that we have to put up with. From there onwards, we became a little bit more building orientated and we put a silage barn up and went on to three cuts of silage per year. We ploughed numerous fields and became more of a modern farm.

S When you were in the shippons. Were there any advantages or were you really happy to move forward on to loose housing?

John: One thing I noticed about shippons, that cows obviously never went out in winter That really was not a good plus for the cows health, because, although they looked well and they performed reasonably well they always were short of exercise.

So they had stiffness and big hocks and stuff like that?

There wasn't particularly foot problems; I think that's come with modern cow housing but there were other problems.

S You are swapping one thing for the other basically aren't you?

J You are yes, the biggest problem for cows, well for my cows--the shippons that we've got were meant for Ayrshires so when we moved into Holstein-Friesian they were 200 kilos heavier. Lots of trapped teats, consequently lots of mastitis and lots of cows that were a little bit bad tempered and it was that in my opinion which stood out more than anything. Cows being not ruined but being like sort of compromised with udder problems and teat problems.

S So did that improve a lot when you went to loose housing?

J Yes we only had very occasionally a trapped teat. So although they like look on old fashioned systems with pride, and with shall I say with fond memories, I don't think that they were as good for the cow as systems now.

S. Did you have much help?

J. Yes we had a full time worker.

S. So that's more labour intensive obviously feeding the cows in the shed?

J Yes, we still have someone works for us now on the modern system but we have twice as many cows. Yes, we had one full time worker called Sid Moss; he was a dream to work with and we never had a wrong word all the time we have been here, He used to work with Janet's father of course.

Janet He came when I was two.

S You inherited him?

J Thirty six years, we inherited him and he worked on this farm thirty six years. We couldn't wish for a better person to work with; he kind of like treated it like his own farm.

S Pride in his work then? You hadn't been milking very long when quotas came in?

J No

S So did you have to buy milk quota or didn't you bother

J We applied to the tribunal for more quota; we did get some but not a lot, probably 4 cows worth. We didn't really bother about over production for the first few years but everyone did that and we had to look a little bit more at trying to meet our quota that was available. In other words we had to buy some in or rent some in

S. At the time did you find that tough?

J. Yes we did

S. With hind sight what do you think?

J. With hindsight I think it was probably the best thing we ever had.

S. It perhaps didn't come in fairly?

J No, probably didn't, that's right

S So what was sort of the next changes in the 1980s; obviously you were dealing with more shall we say intensification

J Yes, as I said, in 1992 we put a big shed up to actually go loose housing so we could sort of concentrate on getting more milk from the cows.

S When you say loose housing, do you mean cubicles?

J Yes, cubicles--they weren't tie stalls, they were free stalls, so to speak. And then we made silage because we got to the stage where we couldn't make hay; somehow the weather has become much wetter in the summer.

S Unsettled

J Since 1992, when we went to this cubicle system and silage system, I would say it's not been forced upon us, but it coincided with wetter weather when we found it was impossible to make hay, so it worked out to our advantage really.

Janet. We used to make big bales and let the cows to it.

J For the 2 years before we built the shed yes, we made big bales--we just couldn't make the hay.

S Big bales of hay?

J Big bales of silage; in 1990 we made big bale silage.

S Because that sort of only came in the '80s really didn't it.

J You're right. The first time we made big bale silage in 1989--1990, Janet's cousin, Des Alcock from Elkstone helped us. It was an Australian invention--big bales and he had just managed to get his big baler and he baled for us. And it saved our bacon, because I think we were just about to sort of reconcile a field to grazing, and it had been shut up right till the end of September and we mowed it on the Morrridge sheep sale day, and if we hadn't had Des Alcocks big baler we wouldn't have got that field, fifty acres.

S Looking back the big bales, they have been quite a revelation, haven't they?

J Absolutely.

S They have saved a lot of farmers haven't they--saved livestock feed and everything especially these unsettled summers.

J Yes, I think the unsettled summers, things go around and things come in cycles we have been on a cyclic weather pattern for the last 15 years since 1995, 20 years and it is very difficult to see when it will change again, but probably it will.

Janet Big bales give you three choices silage, haylage or take that step further and make hay.

S. When did you first have four wheel drive tractors?

J. We came with a two wheel drive tractor in 1980 and we had a four wheel drive tractor in 1992, about the same as when we built the new shed.

S Obviously that has made a big difference to farms

J Absolutely, yes

S But do you think that that has been all for the good or do you think especially like in the South West Peak, where soils are more delicate, people go on the land when they shouldn't because they can.

J well there is that, but they are a revelation, you don't get stuck and you don't make the mess and it is a heavier tractor; surface drains are affected but probably most of the surface drains in this area are blocked up any way they just need some deeper drains putting in. I mean things have come on since the horse and cart which hardly made any mess haven't they?

S So you have got soil compaction anyway?

J That's a big issue--soil compaction--bigger heavier tractors for silaging.

S Well all tackle is big now, it's all bigger & heavier

J Every farm operation uses heavier tackle doesn't it. The fields need to be drained so drains need to be deeper.

S It isn't just drains, it's compacting your soil.

J There is that yes.

S What happened to your farming in the 90s?

J We bought some more land, we expanded our herd up to 100 cows and we averaged 10,000 litres

S You were keeping the pedigree

J We always kept pedigree, registering all the cattle, which we've always done since 1980. We built up a good reputation for having a good herd; we used to sell a lot of heifers into market, made good prices though not always the best prices.

S Where did you sell?

J Leek Market and latterly in Uttoxeter. And then in 2002 Foot and Mouth came in and the Holstein Society were looking for whole herds to sell to those people affected by Foot and Mouth. We decided to sell our herd to a particular farmer--Mr and Mrs Newbold from Newsholme near Gisburn in Lancashire; they'd been affected by foot and mouth and they bought the whole herd and young stock as well

S Why did you decide to do that?

J I was Holstein-Friesian and I had this idea I wanted us to be pure Holstein.

It was a good way of purging all the Holstein-Friesian stock which would never be pure Holstein for many years to come and then starting off with a Pure Imported Herd, basically known as PIs.

Pure-Importeds pedigree Holsteins. We initially made some purchases at some farm sales with this PI in mind, as I say we sold our herd for a very good price. And then it's taken us 13 -14 years to be able to build up to our present numbers which are 150, which we have got today.

S Is that 150 milking cows plus young stock?

J Yes, and average 10,000 litres, I wouldn't say we have got a better herd than we had 15 years ago, and my wife will totally agree with that.

S How long were you actually not milking for?

J No, we always milked; we had a sabbatical, we got down from milking 110 to ten.

So we built numbers up from there onwards.

S. Was there a point when you weren't using fertiliser?

J Yes. We were using no fertiliser when we sold the herd, we never used a lot prior to selling the herd, but we used no fertiliser for 8 years.

S And what did you see during that time?

J Because we had contractors to make silage, I found that contracting costs were quite high because they were making a lot less silage and covering the same acres but they only did one crop; that was a bonus, we only had to pay for one crop.

With modern grasses even when we use less fertiliser they still needed feeding to get any prolific growth from them, so possibly the modern grasses wouldn't survive as well without fertilisers as the old swards with timothy and cocksfoot in.

S Did you notice a dip and then as your soil got into balance it improved or not?

J Yes, I would say after about five years it managed to bounce back and be able to manage without fertiliser.

S Did you put any clover in or anything?

J Yes, we have clover in all our swards, we love clover.

S And it does well enough?

J Yes, without fertiliser clover does better

S I'm thinking with it being wet and cold, but you do well enough with it?

J Yes. It seems to like no fertiliser and so it gets out above the grass.

S It's not just that it doesn't actually like nitrogen much because it makes its own.

J Yes, fixes its own nitrogen. I think if you can manage without fertiliser and take stocking down according, clover will do a good job for you.

S Do you think your cattle did well enough or better or worse on the forage that was grown without fertiliser as with it, or wouldn't you say there was any difference?

J Not much difference I don't think

S Have you gone back to using fertiliser

J Yes we have taken numbers up to 150 milked cows and we are averaging about 10,000 litres similar to the same as the herd we had before we went to Holsteins. We have a lot more young stock as we use sexed semen. A lot more heifers, we have more land so we are not more intensively stocked than before but we use more fertiliser to prolong the grazing season as much as we can and make as much silage as possible for a rainy day.