

Kath Belfield

Kath was born in 1958 and now lives on a smallholding near Leek. Over the years she has worked in factories, as a coffin maker, at a slaughterhouse and knacker's yard. She even ran her own kennel business, but farming remained her passion and she was born to it. In this part of the interview with Sheila Hines recorded in May 2017, Kath talks about her parent's farming activities and the early years of her life before she took up farming herself.

Part One – The early Years

SH. Kath would you like to tell me where you were born?

KB. Yeah, I was born at Strines Farm, Upper Hulme near Leek. A little remote place just below Mermaid. Second to youngest out of ten. I had great parents, me mam and dad were reyt good folk you know, reyt hardworking, good character.

SH. What were their names?

KB. Arthur Belfield and Alice.

SH. And what was your dad known as?

KB. Taffy, Jack of all trades, yeh. His dad died when he was 10 so they had to pull him out of school when he was 13, and that was his job then to run farm. All responsibilities laid on him.

SH. Was that his family farm originally?

KB. Yes. Well, it was rented, part of the Crewe and Harper estate.

SH. And what sort of farming did they do up there?

KB. Sheep and milk. Me dad had Polio when he was 17 and he come out of hospital and he was in callipers and for get going, cause he couldn't walk uphill in callipers, but for get his legs going, he used to go backards up hills. First, he had to sit down to go backards, then he got going by walking backards on sticks, and that's what got him going again. And then he had a motorbike, cause he could ride a motorbike you see; then he learned how to drive a car with moving his legs with his hands and then he ended up taxiing, he used to sort of run... It wouldn't be an official jobbie then up in hills and that's where he met me mother running folk dances on Friday and Saturday nights.

SH. Where was your mum from?

KB. Me mother was from Smallshaw, which is a little place below where Ken Buxton used to live, you know where Buxtons are.

SH. So, when are we talking about roughly, when was this?

KB. Well, me mum was born in 1916. Me dad was older, I think me dad was born in 1908.

SH. So we are talking about 1930s, aren't we? How many cows would they milk then?

KB. Up at Strines, probably about 15 or 20.

SH. Quite a few?

KB. Ah, she was a good milker me mother was, because me dad couldn't milk with being crippled. But he had a thrashing box, because he could'na join army for national service, he ended up with a thrashing box. So, it tended to be me dad was out with thrashing box all winter and me mum did all the milking. Like me, when I was born, we were all born in the middle bedroom and she'd never been in hospital until she was 82, and had ten kids me mother. And she milked in morning, and she had me at 11 o'clock and she milked again at night. Folks say you've got it hard today, but they dunna know they're born really.

SH. And it's such an exposed place up there, isn't it?

KB. Well, the day after I was born there come a blizzard. I was born on 17th April and there come a blizzard and they were all out fetching sheep and lambs in cause they'd been lambing and they said they'd got sheep and lambs everywhere. They were in lofts, anywhere to save 'em, anywhere out of snow to save them. They said house were full, full of boxes. And the day after it got about 9 o'clock at night and lads were out with candles in jam jars looking for sheep you know, best they could, and the lads would'na be great ages would they? Our Ann come in and did a great ruck of snappin for 'em all and she said "that kids never been fed", and they reckon I had nowt to eat since 8 o'clock in morning, and never woke up, never skrieked nor nothing. But they said house was full of lambs and sheep and that, they said it was chaos they'd even got 'em up upstairs. Cos, then if you like lost a sheep you could end up losing everything couldn't you, you know what I mean. Like me mother was always very proud that she'd had 10 kids and she'd reared 10, cause not many did that. There was a lot of losses and there were a lot of folk couldn't afford to feed their kids, they had to farm them out. And like all our lads as they grew up and once they left school, in a way they were farmed out, they went and worked away from home and lived in and me Mam and Dad went round and picked the places for 'em to go. In a way they were farmed out to make way for us little ones.

SH. Cos there wasn't always space either was there in houses as well?

KB. Well, there was three bedrooms, mam and dad was middle bedroom, and girls were at far end with one bed and lads was first bed room with stairs going up and just a wardrobe to separate and they'd 2 beds. And when we was all at home, all lads were in two beds. And folk used to stop. When our Ann was courting Geoff, Geoff used to stop and sleep with lads, bunk in. But cause I was one of little uns, I was lucky really as I had 2 big uns either side of me, so I was always snug you know what I mean. But me mam reared us all, and I never had a cot. We all started life in a drawer, then you went from drawer to between two chairs and once you could get out of that you were big enough for bed. That's how we did us all. Happy days. They were good parents, good folk really.

SH. What do you remember about your child hood up there?

KB. Always happy really. There was always summat going on, we were always sort of busy, but its good busy when you're a kid in't it, stuff happening. And like the lads go off working, they always come home for their Sunday dinner and brought their wages; me mam had wages off them all, and then they all had pocket money. And that's how it was when I left school at 16. Me mam had me wage until I was 18 and then she give me pocket money and then when I was 18 it's like you paid board and lodgings then and were responsible for your own money. And our Carrell bought a motor bike, he saved up and bought a motorbike, so as he could pick 'em all up and give 'em an extra hour on a Sunday at home. They would come home, they'd all work and have a bit of dinner and go again. But they'd come home and happen bring you a toffee or summat, us little uns, so we were always pleased to see 'em.

SH. What happened to the milk?

KB. It went in churns in old van, I suppose when others were younger it'd be horse and cart, but me dad had a van.

SH. Where did you take it then, road end?

KB. No, it went to the top of Podmores drive, top of Cat Tor. It was a fair run. Everybody round that area left it there. There was a big stand there at top of Cat Tor and everybody took it up to stand like and if there was any messages or anything like that, folk used put notes under return churns; you'd leave your message under churn and churn man used to check. It was a bit like postman really.

SH. You had no phone?

KB. Oh no.

SH. Had you got electric? Anything? Got water?

KB. No, natural water at back door. I think there were a tap. There was spring water up there. No, there weren't a tap, there were a big trough at back door always running in.

SH. You'd use that for everything, drinking and everything?

KB. Yeah, yeah.

SH. Any more stories about the farming up there?

KB. When me Mum and Dad were up at Strines, me dad had bought his first Jersey cow, come from Jersey. He went to pick that up at Liverpool docks; seen that swing over in a cargo net. He went to fetch that. They called her Merrivale and for three months after she'd calved, me mother had to milk her 3 times a day and she give 12 gallon in a day.

SH. Twelve gallon a day? A Jersey cow?

KB. A Jersey cow, that' d be like in the fifties.

SH. Did you manage to keep breeding off her?

KB. Ah, they had one or two off her, but there were none just as good as her. They said she was a star turn and she wore for years and years and years.

KB. But, other than milking me dad could do every job, really. Because he'd had polio at 17, which left him crippled. He always said there's two ways of looking at everything, there's a lot of ways of looking at things and if you can't do something one way, if you think about it you can do it another, which I think in general most farmers are pretty good at anyway, as a breed they'll always work somat out. Like at shearing they would drive three stakes in and tie him up, us little 'uns would wind and big uns took sheep to him; he learnt all lads to shear on dead sheep. He started 'em very young but they all sheared dead sheep for to start with. Because anything died, they used to do with hand clippers. Wool was often worth more than the sheep then, so all lads learned to shear very young.

SH. So what happened with the thrashing box then?

KB. In 1947, it'd be when our Ann was five, because she was supposed to go to school, she didn't go 'til she was six, cause me mam could'na take her really, because me dad was in hospital. He was servicing thrashing box, because him and Billy Watter's granddad had a thrashing round, and it dragged him in and he went through thrashing box, and they said he come out knocked to bits.

SH. Normally that would kill people, didn't it?

KB. They said he come out, and the only thing he had left on was his collars and cuffs off his shirt and the rim off the top off his welly and that was the only thing left on him, it had knocked him to bits and he were 8 week in hospital. He come out, saw over that, because when he'd had polio at 17, they said he would never have children, so he had ten just to prove them wrong. Marvellous fella me dad, he had the patience of Job. If he were learning you how to tie your shoe laces, it didn't matter if you had thirty goes, he'd keep showing you. He showed me loads of stuff, he even showed me how to sharpen a pen knife, it didn't matter how long it took you learn it, he had patience of Job. I reckon that was with suffering and struggling. I always think out of illness or anything, like these para-olympians they come out better folk in a way, not that you would wish anything bad on anybody. And our Trevor was same, our Trevor had a very serious bad accident and he was unconscious for 8 weeks, and me mother saved his life really, because there were no drips, no nothing. Time was, his sort just died, but me mother were'ner losing none of hers. They fetched Trevor home and sent him with a wheelchair and me Dad sent them back with wheelchair. They all said, everyone round said, "He's a cruel old bugger, Arthur Belfield is not letting that kid have a wheel chair." He went and knocked orchard wall down, which was a big six foot high wall and he says to Trevor "Go and build that wall." "Eh dad I canna even get across the yard". He says "go and build that wall, even if you have to crawl". And within four months garden wall was up and Trevor was walking and doing and he went and led a very useful active working life; he worked for Bill Johnson for years and milked. He was up at four every morning milking. There were nothing Trevor couldn't do; don't get me wrong he fell over a bit cause his balance was shot at, but if he'd come home in a

wheelchair he'd have stopped in a wheelchair. And when folks saw how he turned out they said "By gum old Arthur knew what he were doing sending wheelchair away". You see, if you strive you always get somewhere. Like these Paralympics, they strive to do something, they are an example to us all really and I think that's been instilled in us all, in all of us. If you canna do somat try it a different way and you'll get there. If you work hard you get on a bit, I don't know if you do these days but you could then.

SH. So you left school at 16. Were your Mum and Dad still at Strines then?

KB. No, no, we'd moved to Padwick then, with electric and an indoor toilet. This is at Lowe Hill. (Leek)

SH. So, that was quite a turn up then, when you moved there, kinder country.

KB. Yeh, it was all very exciting, we got a bath and everything.

SH. So, you left school at sixteen?

KB. Yeh, I'd actually got a job at John Clark's on the farm, but me mother says, "You leave school on Friday?" I said, "Yeh, I start at Clarks on Saturday morning." She says "You're not." I says, "I am, I have been up and seen John Clark." She said, "We're not having you farming." Me Mam and Dad were dead against it. They didn't want us having a mauling life like they'd had a mauling life. She said "Eddie's got you a job at Halle Models in factory, you start there Monday." So, they wouldn't let me farm at all.

SH. What was your job there?

KB. I was an apprentice sewer, which I was very, very bad at. They sent you into training school, and I couldn't sew for toffee. In Halle Models there were about 3 girls who were top machinists, and my sister Edie was one of 'em, but I wasn't going to follow suit. I just couldn't do it. So, a job come up in cutting room, so somebody come up and said, try her in cutting room or she will have to go. Anyway, I went in this, it was the little cutting room, it weren't the big cutting room, and I were brilliant at that, I was absolutely brilliant at that. Now, our Edie was a top machinist and she were earning between £23 and £27 a week; and I'd been there 6 weeks and once I got on that piece work in cutting room, I was taking home about £38, £40 a week.

SH. So, that's mid 1970's.

KB. Yeh. Well like I say, our Edie was a top machinist and she'd worked there for two years. So, our Edie picked my wage up and me wage went straight to me mam and me mam gave me £2 a week spending money you see, which we thought was brilliant. So, I never got me wage, I always had me wage slip, our Edie always showed me my wage slip and she always used to say, "Don't tell anybody what you earn, whatever you do don't tell anyone what you earn, you don't do that in factories" and she says "You're earning too much, there will be a lot of jealousy". So, everything was tickling along tickety boo and then someone stole my wage packet out of our Edie's bag and it went over the factory what I was earning, so then on the Monday morning I was in the office "You're earning too much, you've got to slow down." Well, I couldn't slow down or the girls couldn't earn the money. So, week after I'm in the office on Monday,

this can't go on, so they put a time and motion woman on me. Anyway, it rumbled on for several weeks, and in the end they threatened to sack me three times for earning too much. So, I walked up Adams' at dinner time and got meself another job and give them a weeks notice and went to Adams'. Then they had to put four girls on to do my job. So, they were paying same amount of wages anyway.

SH. What was your job at Adams's?

KB. Just packing, catering packs. Brain dead, brain dead.

SH. How long did you stick that?

KB. About 18 months. Just brain dead. Shifts.

SH. Were you still hankering about farming?

KB. Well, I used to farm, I used to milk before I went to work, but with shift patterns I could either milk in the morning and miss nights, I could just milk once a day except at weekends. No, no I could work at home on farm, but they didn't want me farming farming.

SH. How many cows were you milking there?

KB. At home, at me mothers, only between 15 and 16. Saying that, you see it would take you all day to look after 20 cows on a little system. You could look after 100 in same amount of time, cause you've got more mechanisation, that was all wheelbarrows and

SH. Was your dad still living then?

KB. Yeh, yeh. I went working at Sigleys (Leek undertakers) and me Dad died when I was eighteen, when I was at Sigleys.

SH. What were you doing at Sigleys?

KB. I was a coffin sprayer, but I could fill in any job. I went for a job at Sigleys, Christine interviewed me, she was a lady from the youth club; I used to go to Millwood Hall youth club. And Christine says "There's a job going at our place if you're fed up with shifts." She really interviewed me and then Fred come in, Fred Sigley. He was a grey haired, goofy guy, biggish sort of guy with an apron on all covered with overspray and he looked like Worzel Gummage. He says to me, he points his finger at me and goes "I don't like women and I don't like women in me workshop, so as long as you don't speak to me, I'll pay you every Friday." So, I started there on the Monday and we ended up best mates, me and Fred Sigley did. So, I ended up I was a coffin sprayer in the end. But I used to do all the fitments, linings and handles for Sigleys as well. But I worked me way up, I could do every job in place, so I could make a coffin from start to finish.

SH. That's where you learned your joinery skills, was it?

KB. Yes probably, because me mother used to say "That's a nice piece of wood", because we used to take firewood home, which was all offcuts. She'd say "Oh, that

would make a nice little box” so then I’d make her a little box for to put sticks in. We’d bits of coffin furniture all over the house. Me dad died, which kind of impacted greatly on you, which it does when you’re young. So, I made me dad’s coffin meself. Fully lined it, very proud of that, lovely job. I fell out at Sigleys, which wasn’t my fault really. I fell out because they all wanted a rise and they nominated me to ask, and then when I asked, they all said they hadn’t. So, I said “I’m having a rise or I’m leaving.” Anyway, he give me a rise on me last day, but on principle, because he didn’t ask me to stay, I left. And then I went farming really, went with keeper Frank at Tidnock Farm, Gawsorth, cos me dad had died and me mother said you can do what you want to do.