

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 recorded in May 2017, Kath tells Sheila Hines how, despite her parent's advice not to, she moved into farming after her father's death.

Part Two – The Farming Years

KB. Me Dad died when I was eighteen, when I was at Sigleys. I was a coffin sprayer, but I could fill in any job. 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 fall out really. And then I went farming really, went with keeper Frank at Tidnock Farm, Gawsworth. Cos me dad had died and me mother said you'm can do what you want to do.

SH. What were you doing down there?

KB. Milking, sheep and a bit of arable, really. We used to grow our own barley and stuff. So, I learned how to plough, we'd never had tractors or owt like that, so I learned a lot. I suppose in a way Frank gave me basis for more modern farming, if you know what I mean. Like we were brought up with milking stool, mind you me mother had got machine then at Padley.

SH. How many were you milking at Franks?

KB. Generally, between 45 and 55.

SH. What traditional cattle then, would it have been?

KB. Yeh, yeh a lot Ayrshire cross. In a way and this not down crying Frank at all, Frank carried on farming exactly as his father had. And I think Frank's father was a very progressive farmer, he were first man to have a tractor and first man to have a baler, but Frank kept everything the way his Dad had done it. He'd sell his calves, but if owt had got shits or a gimpy leg or summat, Frank 'ud keep it. If it were a bull, well that 'ud do for bull. So, a lot of cows left a bit to be desired. They were a bit allsorts and Frank were very happy with three gallon. Well, I wasn't. When me Mum and Dad were up at Strines, me dad had bought his first Jersey cow, come from Jersey. He went and picked that up at Liverpool dock and they called her Merrivale. And for three months after she calved, me mother had to milk her three times a day and she gave 12 gallon a day.

SH. Twelve gallon a day? A Jersey cow?

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

SH. So that made you want to progress things a bit at Gawsworth?

KB. Yes. Yeh. He was a very good boss, he were very good to me. We used to go to the farm sales, and I used to buy an odd one or two, and bang 'em down to Mr Barber; and he'd always stand by them. And we bred heifers off that and I started

having Al and anything good, we put Friesian on or Friesian Holstein on. Holstein's were just coming in then, but there were some good Friesians about. Me mam always used to chuck us-- well she would chuck our Chrissy a calf every year. So quite often a little Jersey heifer would come. So, we got quite a few Jerseys. Well, these Jerseys made Frank's look silly, so. Over time we sort of bred up and then he'd always had Hereford bull like for beef bull, then I got him on Belgian Blues and then we sort of got on a roll, you know. First five Belgian Blue straws (semen) we had, we had seven calves off.

SH. Two lots of twins?

KB. Aye two lots of twins, aye. First ones I took to Chelford and they were decent tidy calves and Roy Waller tried to start 'em at £100 a piece and he got 'em to £140. So, I says, "Take 'em out, I'll take them home thank you very much." "Oh, hang on a minute." he said "Fetch em back, fetch em back." I said "No, I'm taking 'em home." "Fetch em back." he said" I'm in at £200." And they made £240. Very best calves then were making £300's, that was normally your Belgian Blue bulls, they were just hitting that £300 mark. But for twins, they were very good calves. I know they was heifers, but they were very good calves, but they were certainly not £140 models. I could value a calf then to an odd pound. And to be fair to Frank, I'd started looking after calves and he had gone from making 30 to 40 pound with his Herefords to making £110/120 so he says "you better take calves to Chelford, you are doing a better job with them than me". He were good like that, you know, let you bob out and sell calves. Some weeks he'd come, some weeks he wouldn't. Cause calves, I'd got 'em right, they didn't have scour in them. I mean to be fair when somebodies on their own and they have got everything to do, you canna just be doing everything.

SH. No, you can't keep up with everything.

KB. So, extra pair of hands you see, calves could be mucked out every week and not just all bunged together. I made some calf pens up and got job summat like, you see. Because calves, each time it was a big lump of money.

SH. Still is.

KB. It is, calf money was a big lump of money. Well going from £30 to £40 a calf to £120 and £130, that extra hundred quid, especially if you'd 2 or 3 a week going. We had a lot of spring calves and it starts rucking up to paying wage really, so it was worth letting me go. If I went and sold them and stood, because we always stood with calves for a bit of luck, I could get 20 pound more than Frank. So, he said well you've reared them, you may as well stand with them for another 20 quid. But then when we get on them Belgian Blues, well he almost had a heart attack Old Frank did when we come back with first Belgian Blue calf cheque.

SH. Did you have any bother calving them?

KB. No, vet told us, we had a very good vet from Charters at Biddulph. He used to tell you everything, vet did. He talked you through like you were a trainee vet. I learned ever so much of that fellar, he was grand. And he come over something else and Frank said "about these cows with the Belgian Blues, what thy think, what thy think".

He says "they're less trouble than what you've here now". He said "they're short in neck and calve very easy". I think all years we had Belgian Blues, we only had vet to one calving, but we got an easy calving one which chucks nice calves and we bought just a batch as straws. We never did have no trouble. Vet told us, if you look at 'em, they are short in neck and he says they come out a lot easier and they always did for us.

SH. So, what happened next then?

KB. We plodded along at Gawsworth, we got things built up quite nice really. I suppose with two of us being there we caught up. We got all hedge laying done, all draining done, all fencing done; built stock up better, built sheep numbers up. Cause I don't know, I suppose it's more hands really and just keeping boss of job, ground started carrying more stock. Extra hands like and our Christopher was dead keen on everything, he was a little tot, so we had a few pigs. We could rear pigs. We had a lot of spring calvers and always bought pigs in for the beastings, so you could rear a great ruck of pigs for next to nowt which Frank was very good, let me have a shed so I kept pigs. Always had a few turkeys at Christmas and he let us have a few hens about.

SH. So, what happened then?

KB. Frank had bought Whiteshaw at the Swythamley estate sale.

SH. What made him buy that?

KB. Cause it was a council farm at Gawsworth, so he always knew he would have to move. Course, I went working for Frank when his mother was alive; now the tenancy was in his mum and dad's name. Well, his dad was already dead and after I'd been working for him for, cause I worked at Leek market and I jobbed for several folk, I did Norman Barber a day a week, Frank's brother, and his mother died, so he had to reapply, the farm didn't automatically turn to him, so he had to reapply for the tenancy, which they didn't want to give him with being a single man. So, strangely enough we said we was getting married and so they give him the tenancy. Cos they had seen the farm improving, they come round every year, they had an agent and they had seen the farm improving so. We had to go down to Chester, it was a big formal affair; they all sat round a great big table, a monstrous domed, big hall and everything.

SH. This is County council?

KB. Yeh. You went in, heard every foot step, you know, you had miles to walk, and there were six up that day and only Frank as got his tenancy. But he decided, plus he said at 65 that he'd have to be off and so he bought, Swythamley estate was up, so he bought Whiteshaw with a tenant on, which is owd Smith, but anyway owd Smith died, so he asked me to move up to Whiteshaw you see, which was virtually derelict. I don't know if you ever saw it. There were muck in sheds, they'd had to dig door holes out for t' get the cows out, it were lifting all roof tiles. Mind there were some muck about.

SH. There was a lot of work to do then?

KB. Aye, there were a lot to do, there were a lot to do.

SH. Did you move stock in?

KB. No, we got the house ready first really; we mucked all out, cos there were only garage, two bits of pig cotes, two what you'd call loose boxes that had been pig cotes at one time and tie-in for seven and tie-in for eight.

SH. Tie-in for 15 altogether.

KB. Yeah, and a few like pig cote, loose box things, but the house, the house was, I don't know how they'd lived in house really.

SH. He was on his own, wasn't he?

KB. We moved in on Christmas Eve and Dave Swinson called and he were born up at Old Hay Top and he said it were first time he'd ever seen smoke go up that chimney, cos he never lit the fire. He had a single bar electric fire, and all the windows were out on the front, facing west.

SH. What had it got over 'em to stop weather coming in?

KB. Nothing.

SH. It was open?

KB. A lot of it. I think there were four panes of glass left. Where kitchen was, mind you that was a back room, so they'd shut door, there were no window in there at all and he had this single bar electric fire and they reckon he only switched her on when he wanted to light his fag and as soon as he lit his fag, he knocked the bugger back off.

SH. How old was he when he died?

KB. Only in his sixties I think. But you see, if you think back to when you were young, when folk were in their sixties they were old weren't they, and when they were in their seventies they weren't far off it. Folk were worn out, they were absolutely worn out with work. I look back at what my mother's done. I mean I'm worn out now, I'm fifty-seven, but I'm tired. My mother had got school children and still running a farm.

SH. Yeah, she was amazing, wasn't she? So, when did you move cows in?

KB. Christmas Eve, we did water bowls and bought the heifers up. We did lot by Christmas Eve.

SH. Did you have to put another shed up before you could start milking.

KB. No, we didn't milk there for 2 years. No, we just kept young stock there.

SH. So, you were still milking at Gawsforth?

KB. We had to run down Gawsforth twice a day for milk. We did Shaw up, we did the house up and some of the fencing and then that winter we got rest of fencing done.

SH. This is the early 1980s, isn't it?

KB. Thirty years ago.

SH. Thirty years ago is 1987. So, milk quotas had come in then?

KB. Yes, they had just come in. We put in to Peak Park to put some sheds up, we did, and they messed us about and then we found out we didn't need planning permission, they could not stop us putting three sheds up so we put two sheds up and then there come a big storm and one of the big sheds at Gawsworth blew in, wall blew in, so, council didn't want to do it up, so they asked Frank to leave. So, then was a big scurry to get another shed up with enough tie-in and milking facilities for the first of April.

SH. From Christmas?

KB. From November.

SH. 'Til the first of April?

KB. Yes.

SH. In winter?

KB. In winter and it was very hard. Week after week after frost; we just couldn't build, we couldn't do concreting, we were having to pour a patch out, cause it just buggers your concrete, frost does. We were pouring a patch out, mixing what we could in the day and then sheeting it and sheeting it. We put boards up put a sheet over it and straw on top. It was a terrible job, terrible slow job. And we bought bosgins from a farm sale at Whitelee, bought all these concrete bosgins, a pound each. And then we moved all the cows up from Gawsworth and Frank and all. It was a hectic week or two, I couldn't do it now, but you do it when you're young, don't you? I was still milking at 2 o'clock in morning, but we sort of saw over it and we hadn't got water coupled up and so I watered up then, set to watering up and at half past six I started milking again and we went like that for nearly a week. I worked the clock round, because when I finished milking it were watering time.

SH. And did they see over it?

KB. Saw over it champion, I couldn't believe how well they did. And of course there was a lot of spring calvers then. So, they all sets to spitting calves out and we had an absolute month from hell, some road.

SH. I suppose if they hadn't calved though it was the right time to move them in a way, because you weren't knocking the production were you? So, they'd just about settled. So, they did alright then?

KB. Yeah, it all come good. Cos by then they had been used to the buckets, so for to let 'em out and run 'em through, cause they'd just brought it in then as you couldn't milk where your cows lived. So, what I did, I just got this passage way bit, I got me bosgins in with enough tie-in, but I'd got this odd space, so I put half a parlour in, so for cows go from being tied up and milk where they stood to being let out...

SH. I suppose it was like an abreast parlour then, was it?

KB. Just a half an abreast parlour. They all stand on one side and it's surprising about three milkings, they got as they enjoyed being let out from being tied up all winter. But the watering was the biggest job and by the time you'd fill bulk tank, we had to wait for tanker to go, for fill bulk tank with water. We was filling barrels all time you know; it was easier to fill bulk tank than carting water. But by time you'd watered everything

up, you only had about two hours start putting water bowls in, if you know what I mean? If we hadn't got to water up, we'd have had water bowls in a lot quicker, but we still had to water up.

SH. So, was this just you and Frank or was Jo helping as well?

KB. Well, everybody did a bit and mucked in. It's all hands to the pump ain't it really.

SH. And did your family, some of your family members come and help?

KB. No not really, because just at that point everybody's working; you're at a time in your life like.

SH. You're all flat out, aren't you?

KB. Between your thirties and forties everybody is flat out, aren't they? Don't get me wrong, me mam's always been brilliant and when she knew you were flat out, she'd always send pies up.

SH. Well like that, you can't cook when you are working for your cows.

KB. Absolutely, and me mother was still milking then herself. So, for her to send pies up, and Jo's mum sent pies up, so we was always well fed, if nothing else. They were always very good like that, cause when we first went to Shaw, we were bloody penniless, cause we had put all our house in to it and I wouldn't say we were penniless, we was less than penniless and really we lived on 'taters and eggs them first two years. We lived on taters and eggs, but like my mam and Jo's mam, they were really good, they'd always give you a real good Sunday dinner, Jo's mum did Saturday dinner, my mum did Sunday dinner, so we always had a bit of meat. You can have a million meals of taters and eggs and some milk, you don't have to have the same meal twice.

SH. So, you got things settled down and everything was going alright?

KB. Grand.

SH. Then what happened?

KB. Then what happened? We were doing good, we got all our own breds, complete home breds then, tickety boo really. A few pigs, a few sheep, a few sucklers, everything just bob on really.

SH. You said to me, you didn't want to be a big farmer.

KB. No, I never ever wanted to be a big farmer.

SH. But you wanted to farm?

KB. I always wanted to farm. My big farm was 45 cows. I never wanted more than 45 cows really, but I always wanted a few sucklers, a few sheep, a few pigs, rear me own young stock, a bit of beef, you know? Beef us own. Just a bit of everything, then everything is right for job. We'd got us own hens, us own ducks. Meat wise we were self-sufficient. Self-sufficient, we never bought no meat.

SH. So did Farmers for Action come next then? There was obviously a down turn.

KB. Well, what they did, they did us all when Milk Board went. Milk Marketing Board went.

SH. That was the start of things going wrong?

KB. That was the start of things going wrong. Well, we stuck, rightly or wrongly, I thought we should all stick together, so we stopped with Milk Marque and most folk jumped ship for a penny and then we all lost 10p and the job went just downhill and we cut back. And you can only cut corners so far. We repaired where we could, but I wasn't prepared for stock to suffer. I thought if we start punishing stock, we definitely, we are not farmers any more we're on wrong road altogether. So, I took a job and went working up at Redfern's.

SH. Abattoir?

KB. At the abattoir.

SH. What were you doing initially up there?

KB. Lairage initially. Moving stock about, loading crush, shooting box and booking cows in once killing had finished, and mucking out. All sort of lairage duties. Calves were on cull then. Thursdays and Fridays there'd be between two and three hundred calves come in. Heart break, criminal really when folk are starving in world and there we were killing stuff for burning.

SH. That was BSE, wasn't it?

KB. Yeah.

SH. So, that's what had caused that up there, the over 30 month scheme had come in hadn't it?

KB. They did a calf scheme.

SH. Was it just Friesian bulls?

KB. No any calf, so anything weakly or sickly or.....

SH. And you got paid £90 didn't you? Like you said it was criminal what was wasted wasn't it?

KB. It was all waste.

SH. And the fat cattle that were wasted. You'd see it all up there?

KB. Oh yeah, especially all your native breeds you see as you couldn't get away in 30 months. All them native breeds which is your best eating.

SH. And it was all for nothing, wasn't it?

KB. All for nothing. All for nothing.

SH. So they were very busy?

KB. Oh aah.

SH. So when did Farmers for Action come in, then?

KB. Yeah, I was picketing, we used to.....

SH. So you were milking at home?

KB. I was getting up, milking at home, had to be at Redfern's for 6, (am) my cows were all milked and done. I also reared a few calves for a guy at Tideswell. I had a few spare sheds, so I reared a few calves for somebody; milked me cows; Redferns; I used to finish between 2 and 3 o'clock; get back; get some jobs done; milk; go out picketing most nights; well, we used to go 3 nights a week demonstrating.

SH. Where were you demonstrating at?

KB. Tesco, Muller, Heinz. We did Heinz 57 up the motorway.

SH. How many people were turning out?

KB. Ooh 150, 200.

SH. There were good turn outs?

KB. Good turn outs. Good turn out from Wales.

SH. How long did this carry on?

KB. I bet nearly 2 years.

SH. That long? Do you think it did any good?

KB. No.

SH. So, does foot and mouth come next then?

KB. For us, no

SH. Foot and mouth was 2000, 2001.

KB. In 2000, we decided to go into kennels.

SH. So did you let the cows go then?

KB. Well, we started doing kennels up and as cows calved I sold 'em.

SH. So, what made you make that decision?

KB. Money, money. I was working, putting a wage in, Jo was putting a wage in.....

SH. She was milk recording, wasn't she?

KB. Yeah, and I was doing other odd jobs beside for folk to put money in and we still lost £5000.

SH. Trying to milk cows?

KB. So really, I'm not only give me milk away, I paid for it to go. So, we had to apply to the Peak Park to convert the buildings to kennels and they said I could only convert the buildings to kennels, they could only be 50% of me income, the farm had got to still be the main income. I said "well, I lost £5000 last year and 3 jobs went in to that". I says "have I got to lose £5000 on the kennels as well?" He said, "it sounds like you best do the best you can". It was a strange thing, I weren't prepared to lose the quota, cause I'd bought the quota, we physically worked for that and bought that. Frank had bought a bit of quota, but because he improved cows even more, well you got such

better breeds coming, I'd bought quota and council had kept quota with the farm you see. I think Frank were allowed to bring a little tiny proportion, but the council kept the quota. I had actually bought the quota, so I weren't really prepared to lose that. So, I was still paying for it a little bit. So, we made a decision that the cows would have to go.

SH. I suppose at that time with the value, you could have leased it out?

KB. Well, we sold it. I managed to sell it with a bit of profit, actually. We made a bit of profit on it, just as it was.

SH. So, you started getting the kennels going?

KB. Yeh, we had to convert all the sheds, so working at Redfern's and selling cows and we were still doing a bit of picketing at the time, not as much, cos it was dying out a little bit, if you know what a mean. They bought them Welsh lads off. They give all them Welsh lads £5 a sheep to get them off the picket line. Them Welsh lads were backbone of picketing, to be fair.

SH So foot and mouth came and you were up at Redfern's.

KB. Yes, yes, because we got kennels going and until kennels did well, I stopped on at Redferns to keep bring a wage in like. And foot and mouth come, so I lost me job. Redferns just shut down, cause all animal movements stopped. But then obviously, they called on Redferns and any slaughterman in country to go out round farms killing.

SH. Doing the slaughtering?

KB. Doing slaughtering. Cos there was livestock trapped up, cos they shut all animal movements. They brought in a welfare scheme, so that people could, if you had got sheep away from home and you couldn't feed 'em or you couldn't get to them, they just brought in a welfare scheme in, so people could get rid of stock on welfare grounds. They had to come through slaughter houses. So, all slaughter house staff, I wasn't qualified, but I was slaughter house staff, so I was called back in to work at Redferns, and I suppose I'd be one of the seniors really. Cause all the experienced lads had gone and we were down to like young boys and just a handful of us really. So, they said you'd best have a slaughtermans licence, cos these lads are just a bit young really. So, we ended up killing on welfare, which was a real bad job.

SH. Cos you saw some terrible things, didn't you?

KB. Terrible bad things. New born, lambs born then you'd got to shoot them, new borns.

SH. And that was just regulation that made you do that?

KB. Just regulation. Even vet, the 'owd vet, he was a good vet, even vet said there's got to be another way. There's just got to be another way.

SH. There were a lot of people milking it as well, weren't there?

KB. Unfortunately, there always is. The people as worked hard with farm animals tend to be the people that reaked the least out of it. People that abuse and rough house and deal and muck about always seem to have a better deal out of things.

SH. What made you decide to pack up?

KB. What made us decide to pack up? Tiredness more than anything. The kennels are very demanding. You're very full on, its 7 days a week.

SH. And dealing with public...?

KB. If you're busy trying to get a job done, they will want to stop and talk to you for two hours and starting and stopping a job starts to blow your head.

SH. And you've still got livestock, you're still doing your farming?

KB. I think that's what got too much, doing the kennels and the farm, I could see both things slipping away from it, cos I just couldn't physically keep up with it.

SH. So, anyway you decide to pack up?

KB. We packed up, aye. I'd had enough.

SH. So, you continued farming?

KB. Cos we was up for auction you've got to have a stock date. I mean auctioneers say oh no keep taking bookings, but you can't wreck somebody's holiday, can you? So, we had a cut-off date, so we stopped.

SH. But what made you decide to sell the farm?

KB. All me life I've seen and we took one on, farms where farmers have stopped too long and they go downhill and I think it's the saddest sight and I could see ours going downhill and I had put a lot in to it, to get it good and it had gone back to what it was and I didn't want to see it go any worse. It always was a two generation farm, cos it was so run down. It always was a two generation farm. So, hopefully we passed it on, so someone else can have a go. I didn't want to be the person that let it go to wrack an' ruin. And you've seen them and I've seen them, so many do.

SH. There's more and more getting, ain't there?

KB. There's just not the money in farming.

SH. Or the labour.

KB. The skills are dying out. The skills are so dying out and until they put some more money in farming, cos I don't care what anybody says, college is a fantastic thing, but it doesn't learn you what farming is. You know when you walk in a shed before you open the door, you know when there is something wrong. You can't put it in a book, you can't tell anybody about it, it's a feeling, but you open that door and you know when you have got a mess the other side of it, don't you? And you also know the day you touch that door and you know everything's good. Is it a noise, is it a smell, what is it? It's there, but we all know it. You can cast your eye across a field and there can be 150 cows in it, you can't physically see it, there's a dead cow there; you can't sniff it in the air, but you know it's there. You can't describe the shape, you can't tell anybody about it, but you know it. You see an animal and you think there's something wrong with you, I can't put me finger on it, you can't read it in a book, you can't video it, you can't even explain it, you've got to be sort of born to it some road, be amongst it to get everything.

SH. This project is about how do we support farming in the South West Peak. The land is very tender, isn't it?

KB. The land is going worse, everywhere you look the land is going worse, and it's because stock's going less.

SH. In some instances, but on some they are upping the numbers a lot. Some farms are getting more intensive and some are getting run down. So, what do you see as the answers? How do we keep any of these traditional farms going?

KB. It's got to be value, it's got to be value. My father, all my life from being a kid, don't get me wrong, I lost me dad when I was eighteen, but all my life he always said milk and beer were the same price. For twenty years, milk and beer were the same price. Now let's have a think, what sort of price are we getting for a pint of milk. We will have to think of a litre, cause we've gone metric. So, happen on a good day you would get 26, 28 pence, happen, on a bad day you get 15. Now then, let's go to a little pub somewhere and buy a pint of beer.....

SH. Anything from £3 to £4.

KB. Blimey oh Riley, for a pint not a litre. Well, I don't care what anybody says Country's well off.