

*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, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

### **Colin Pickford.**

Colin farms at Rainow near Macclesfield where he took over from his father. His family has farmed in the area over many generations. Like many other farmers, Colin blames the prevalence of TB on badgers. In this section of the interview, Colin and his son David talk to Christine Gregory about the effect of badgers on farming and other wildlife in the South West Peak.

#### **Part One. The effect of badgers on farming and other wildlife.**

CG: Colin, I wonder if we can start by you telling me a bit about your history, how you came to live in this area, if you've always been here and then we can find out a bit about your farming history on this particular farm.

CP: Well me dad lived on the farm next door and when they were going to get married, he bought this farm, Thornsett in 1963. He'd lived with his mother-in-law for a couple of years, when I was born. I was three years old when he bought Thornsett. That was 1963, and he was the last farmer in Rainow to buy a farm, since then there's only businessmen bought farms. Me dad was born in 1922 on Dane Bent farm next door, on his father's farm, which was a dairy farm. And me dad started off farming in his own right with poultry. He'd have day old chicks and rear 'em up into point of lay pullets. He had 12 hencotes, they were in Pilkington 12 foot by 8 foot Pilkington hencotes, and he had two or three hundred hens spread out all over the farm, free range hens. And he could just go round and feed them once a day and the hens as they grew up just roamed wherever they wanted to. They didn't have to shut the pop hole because there was neither foxes nor badgers native to this area. And in them days they could make quite a bit of money out of poultry and he was in it in a very big way. Not like the tens of thousands that they have now. And then one day, he went just on the other side of the oaks wood and there was feathers all over the field. And he didn't have a clue what had happened, somebody had to explain to him that it was a fox. So, from then on, they had to shut the hens in at night, and they got more and more and more, and it wasn't until around about the 1960s that he knew what a badger was. I mean, now everybody knows cause you can see where badgers are, where they have a sett, there's tons of soil there, you can't miss them. When they're on your farm you know

exactly where they are, but then they just weren't native to the area. But they've gone more and more and more and through my young days in the 1960's we had peewits, curlews, skylarks, snipe, hedgehogs, frogs, everywhere. When we used to mow the meadows, the hay meadows, it was like a blood bath. There'd be little frogs and things got chopped up in the mowing machine, unfortunately. But now there's nothing, nothing lives on the floor. The badgers have increased in numbers till about 2013 when I thought we would have about one badger for every five hectares, that'd be one badger for every two fields. And the whole area's the same and they've just killed everything. It wouldn't matter if they totally eradicate the hedgehogs, because it won't affect their diet because they live on grubs, worms, snails and things. And they're protected, we can't do anything about it. You know if we were to go and shoot any badgers you'd get locked up and they'd throw the key away. And they've just wiped everything out. I haven't seen a peewit chick for about twenty years.

CG: Did your dad come from a farming family all the way back.

CP: Yes, several generations.

CG: And what did they predominantly do in the past, was it a mix or

CP: Well, in Rainow here it is a grassland area, so there'd be grassland farmers, dairy, sheep, beef.

CG: Would you say it is a good productive area?

CP: Yes, its hill, you can't plough any of it. They did in the war, but it wasn't very good, they finished up having corn still waiting to be combined when it snowed in the autumn and winter.

CG: So, was it in this territory where your father's family have been for generations?

CP: Oh, yes, yes, and my mother's family, they were farmers as well. They lived just a bit nearer to Buxton, Macclesfield Forest, for several generations.

CG: So, your roots are absolutely embedded in this area?

CP: Yes.

CG: So, what's your feeling of attachment to this landscape?

CP: Aw just, it is my land, it is me, yeh.

CG: So let's hear about what you grew up doing as a farmer's son in your early years. What do you remember your Dad doing?

CP: Well, I just lived and worked with me Dad. I went to school because I had to go. I went to Rainow primary school and then I went to Macclesfield. I left school as soon as I could, probably before I should've done, and I've spent all of my life working on a farm. We had sheep, and we used to have cattle, but TB has come into the area in the wildlife, which for me is one of the biggest issues in farming. There's a very big divide between towns people, the authorities and countryside, farming people, and badgers are for me, probably the biggest issues that there is, because they're not rare, they're not endangered, they're not scarce and they're ruining my countryside. And it's

the people for me that are causing it, because they're protecting predators, not just badgers, all the other predators. And they've wiped out the wildlife, all the peewits, curlews, skylarks, frogs, hedgehogs, little mice, bees anything that nests on the floor, they're gone. If you listen outside now there's no sound, no cuckoos, nothing.

CG: That is obviously your observation of that, but what do you think about the other arguments about the radical changes in farming practice that have contributed to that, do you hold any store by that?

CP: We don't use any fertilizer, and for me, in my lifetime, I can't see there's been any changes at all. We've been in environmental schemes for 20 odd years and it hasn't had any beneficial impact at all, because they say it's environmental changes, and it's just words, they can't validate it.

CG: I'm going to copy this article that I read in a wildlife magazine, which does confirm a lot of what you are saying and that's been my observation as well, that the damage they do is extraordinary and unrecognized. There are naturalists and conservationists who've got real major concerns about badgers and the impact they're having, so it's not just all the conservation lobby.

CP: The Song Bird Survival Trust are now starting to say that it's predators that are keeping the numbers low.

CG: BTO are going that way a bit as well. Even on Spring Watch they were watching a badger swimming across to get to an island, you saw all that?

CP: With the avocets. It cleared out 20 nests. They're a rare bird and they're going to be a lot rarer if one badger empties 20 nests at a sitting.

CG: I think curlews, and as you say lapwings and skylarks, they've had an impact on all the ground nesting birds and the hedgehogs. I think there is a lot more agreement than you might think there is. People are beginning to understand, but there are other huge factors as well, but maybe not in your territory. There is quite a strong sentimentalist point of view rather than a hard scientific understanding of what is going on in the whole badger lobby, so I think a lot of rethinking needs to happen.

CP: They are not the only predators, there's crows. I've never seen a raven until this year, and then there was 5 ravens sat on a wall. They're huge, and again they're protected. Well, they are just wiping everything out. And then, what my point is, all these protectionists then turn round and say well it's loss of habitat, pesticides and intensive farming and for me that is the point, and that's what really annoys me.

CG: What about the combination of the two. The fact that you don't farm intensively here doesn't mean that there isn't an awful lot of territory, the White Peak, for example, where 95% has gone over to silage production instead of hay making, and we do know that we've lost flowers in the countryside at a rate that has caused a colossal loss pollinators.

CP: We make hay and always have done, and on David's farm it's all hay meadows. He's got orchids and everything in the meadows. It's still no different. We've had a hay baler all my life, and the buildings, they're not set up for silage, we can make big round

bales of silage if we want, but it wouldn't make any difference whatsoever to the peewits and the curlews. You tell me, when you go on holidays, you drive through the Peak District, the Lake District, up into Scotland, these hill areas what habitat has been lost?

CG: Well I think the countryside comes back to life the further north you go.

CP: Yes, in arable areas, yes, maybe it has changed, but not in the hills. Hedges, we don't have hedges, they've not gone. And fields being ploughed, you hardly ever see any fields ploughed, because we've only about two inches of soil, then it's stone, you can't plough it. And pesticides, we don't use any. If we spray thistles, I go round with a knapsack and I've been round this year. I had 200 thistles and just individually sprayed them. Fertiliser, we don't use fertiliser, apart from on one meadow to try and get some hay early, if the weather comes early. So, for me when these critics use these words, that's all they are, just words, that they don't understand and can't validate in this area.

CG: Well in this area, that's the point, it is your deep local knowledge that I really want to find out about.

CP: Well on this farm, I reckon to be an expert more than anybody anywhere in the world. And I might not be an expert all over the country, all over the world, but I know what's happened here.

CG: That's what this project is about, really. It's about recognising that the stewards of the land, the people who farm it are the ones who know. If you're the ones who've got the real story of what's happened decade by decade by decade, you are the only ones that know that, no one else can know that. The thing is, that in your territory it's very low impact farming, from what you're saying, you don't use any fertilisers, so what have been the biggest changes in your farming history from when you were working with your Dad, what in the '70s was that. What were the big things that your Dad talked about have changed around here?

CP: Well the biggest change that there's been in the last 2 years was when we had to get rid of the cows, because of TB. Me dad only died in 2005, he was 82 and still working till the very last, so, you know, we were still doing what he did apart from the fact that the cows have had to go. We could see TB creep through the wildlife. It came from Cheshire, it came up to Macclesfield Forest, came up to Torrs on the corner of Kerridge, it came up to Adlington, it was on three sides of us and then, you know, it slowly crept through and our cows first went down with TB in 2015. And we were just suckler cows, they're not beef, they're not dairy. So, when we can't sell the calves we've nothing to sell. You just have a big expensive bill. I'd been calving the cows in the spring and the cows were making good money. In the autumn we were selling calves up to £910, £920. The calves came straight off the cows when they looked their best and we just had the cows in the shed on hay all winter. And we never gave them much corn, they'd have hay all winter and a few brewers grains when they calved in the spring. But when they went down with TB we had to keep them and it was costing about £30 a week to corn the calves, and after two tests we went clear about January, February and I sold the best calves and they made £700, which had been £200 less

than they would have made in the Autumn and it cost me £300 a head to keep 'em. But financially you can't keep doing that. You have to produce enough fodder for say 20 cows, but if you've got to keep the calves then you've got 40 and if you don't go clear, you've still got them next year because you'd have to keep them two years to try and fatten them. Then you'd have 60, cos the cows keep calving, but there again if that year you go clear you'd sell them all and you'd make enough fodder for 60 and you'd only got 20. Well, you can't make plans like that, so I says, 'well they'll have to go'. We had the mothers, the grandmothers, they were all home bred cattle. You could give a better family tree of the cows than most people can of their own family. They were Hereford Limousin crosses, and they did very well on this landscape. We bred them up just the size of animals we wanted, they'd got good feet, good udders, good confirmation, good temperament. They've all gone now.

CP: These are three Farmers Guardians here, the last three weeks, every week in The Farmers Guardian there is something on badgers and TB, every week, never misses, front page, it's the biggest issue there is. You've got a mission statement haven't you, the South West Peak, which says they want to promote trust and understanding. Well we don't trust the Government, the authorities, the politicians, DEFRA, particularly DEFRA and Natural England. We don't trust them.

CG: Can you give us the reasons why that is?

CP: Well, TB is one of the big reasons, because Natural England are protecting the badgers, and I've been into it in a big way. Obviously, TB law came in in 1980, and the 1992 act, but under those acts, Natural England has the authority to give licenses to anybody if they wanted to kill any badgers because they are causing problems and it's been the same with other birds such as buzzards. And they won't issue licenses, the law says they should, but because it's sensitive they won't. In the law, there is farmers defence and it says that we should be able to apply for a license. I've got photographs I can show you, how a sheep if they get overthrown, that means they get stuck on their back, well around here, if they get stuck on their back the badgers eat them alive and I've got pictures of that from two years ago. But the authorities won't issue these licenses. I've had them out here, they've looked and they say, well try putting an electric fence round two fields. Well we've got 44 fields. They do not understand. I mean they've got people there, but they all come from the towns and the cities. All DEFRA and Natural England's big bases are based in the cities, and they are towns people with a country lover's point of view, and they, they will not issue these licenses. Won't issue one for me, even if the badgers are eating the sheep alive. So that's why we don't trust them. They and the authorities, and they don't understand, so the mission statement of trust and understanding, you know, that's a serious problem.

CG: What do you think, in an ideal world is the solution, because biologists and scientists actually believe that a cull as such, can't work because the chances are that you are going to get TB infected badgers moving in if there's an empty area and the disease could spread further.

DP: They have the TB map of England, well the red bits the infected area. Well, if you did the whole red area, the clean badgers would move in. Because nature's a wonderful thing and it fills holes.

CG: What do you think about the effort to inoculate them?

CP: Well that's gone. That's all in the past. They can't get the vaccine anymore.

CG: That's because the need for human vaccine is greater of course.

CP: To try and catch all the badgers, it's impossible. You know, you might catch a few that go into the traps, you might catch the same one ten times. If you, leave 1 badger or 10 badgers with TB, it'll just keep going. There's been no good reason why badgers should ever have been protected. They were protected to stop people doing badger baiting, not because they were rare, endangered or scarce, they've never been that, and they're certainly not now. They are the top predator there is and they're wiping everything else out.

CG: What do you think is the solution, then really? Do you think just lifting the protected status would be ...

CP: That would make a huge difference, a huge difference. Because then, we could sort it out ourselves. I mean, in the past they weren't protected and you could keep the numbers down. If you just gas the sett, the badgers would die in the sett and that was it, and it kept the numbers down, but you don't do it, because if you get caught, you'd be in serious trouble.

DP: You'd get locked up for longer than you would for killing someone.

CG: I can hear your swallows out there, are they doing alright?

CP: We've got dozens and dozens of swallows. See when we talk about predators. I love the wild animals, we look after the swallows. I mean every so often you get a sparrow hawk come in and you know we might have 50 young swallows round the yard. And the stone barns, they have the little arrow slits, we have kestrels nesting in them and for several years they nested successfully. And then last year a tawny owl took over the nest site and pushed a kestrel out, and again the crows attacked the nest even of a big owl, but not when I'm there. Then one of the owls dropped out one day, young owlet, so we took that and put it back in it's nest because it wasn't ready to go out, you know. I do look after them, but they're small predators. And in the owls' nest I've found young swallow chicks, because we could go and look at the nests. Where they came in the arrow slits, we've put pieces of perspex over so people could go and have a look like a viewing area. You could just look out of the dark loft and watch them coming and going.

## **Colin Pickford.**

Colin farms at Rainow near Macclesfield where he took over from his father. His family has farmed in the area over many generations. In this section of the interview, Colin and his son David talk to Christine Gregory in 2017 about the effect the distorted value of land is having on farming in the South West Peak.

### **Part 2 – Land ownership, subsidies, the EU and Brexit**

CG: Can you just give me an idea, a bit more about the farm itself. How many acres have you got?

CP: It's 97 hectares, 250 acres or so. It's all steep hill land, and we've got meadows. We used to mow about 20 acres of meadows, but now we've not got the cows we don't mow as much. We make it mainly into hay. If the weathers bad when we've mowed it, we do make it into big bales and wrap it, but they're mainly hay meadows. It's all permanent pasture, we've not ploughed, there's nothing been ploughed here for 30 years, so you know, the type of grass hasn't changed at all. We don't use fertilizer, that's too expensive, we just put one of these dumpy bags on one meadow to try and get some long grass if the weather comes at the beginning of June, 'cause it's frustrating trying to make hay if the weather comes in the middle of June and the grass isn't long enough and then when it gets to July it rains for a month, you can't make hay. We've managed like that over the years and been self sufficient in terms of winter feed. Most people round here make enough fodder for the winter.

CG: How many sheep have you got, have you got a large number and what breeds?

CP: Well, we've been on mule ewes, and I've put the Suffolk tup on them over the years, but now we're going more towards Texels. The mules are a Leicester Swale cross, but we're going over to Texels as it's what the butchers say they want, big and chunky.

CG: Are a lot of your lambs sold. Do they go as live sales, or are they exported?

CP: They all go to livestock markets. We try and keep the markets going, even though at the end of March our local market, Chelford market closed. That's a way of life gone. The next nearest market is Leek, that's about 20 miles. Bakewell is about 20 miles. After that, you've got Beeston, I hardly know my way there. It takes about 2 hours to get there. Shrewsbury, Oswestry, Market Drayton, Skipton, they're all 2 ½ to 3 hour drive away. Chelford was a huge market. It closed because they didn't own the site, so it's going for building. They was making a profit, but it'll go for development. I can remember we used to go down to Northampton, they had an old fashioned market and they built a brand new state of the art market. It was only open for two years. It was profitable, but then a supermarket bought it to develop on it. Gave them so many million for it. Development!

CG: So, let's move on to the size of the farm. Is it the same size now as your Dad bought back in 1963?

CP: We've bought one or two extra little bits. Three small pieces, when we could afford it, but there's been plenty of little parcels of land sold just a few years ago but, they

make 150 grand and you're going to make, maybe a thousand pound a year profit off that, so it's not financially viable to buy it.

CG: Ok, now let's hear about what's been going on in terms of land ownership and holdings. When did that pattern start happening around here?

CP: Well, when me dad bought Thornsett in 1963, he was the last farmer in Rainow that bought a farm. Since then, every smallholding has been bought up by people from outside, business people, wealthy people, and they used to buy the small farms and sell the land off. Now they're coming back in, these what used to be farms, they're buying them and they're buying land back now, and then they can have land round them that they can control and make sure nobody builds on them and does anything they want, because they've got the money. It's an investment, and the reason it's an investment is because they can say that they're the active farmer, just because they say they are, and they've got this guaranteed money coming from the Single Farm Payment, and that's just an investment for them.

CG: But, your saying that this distorted ownership has been going on right since the 1960s. Are you talking about people coming in and liking the look of a nice piece of farm, and buying it to live in, and what were they doing, selling off or renting land?

CP: Well, usually they'd come in, there'd be the farm house and a lot of buildings, and the buildings very often they got ESA grants to do them up, point them, put new roofs on and what have you, and then they'd turn them into a house. So, instead of being one farm house, the buildings were all turned into houses, or they extended the houses into them and sold the land off, and the big businessmen, we've got one particular business man in Rainow, he owns nearly half the village, he bought all the land as it came up, he bought a lot of the farms, small farms, did the houses and buildings up, sold them off separately, and kept the land. This guy, he was an industrialist, well he kept it, he still owns it all. He owns half the village, and he employs one man and he ranches it. At lambing time he'll go round about two or three times a week to look at the sheep, what they've done, they've done. He doesn't start lambing till the 7<sup>th</sup> of May.

CG: So really, this distorted business of ownership has changed the countryside fundamentally hasn't it?

CP: You see, all these smallholdings, it was a terrific labour force, because each smallholding had the family there to rebuild the walls, keep the thistles down, catch the moles, keep all the vermin under control and now they're not there.

CG: You must be immensely relieved that your son is a keen farmer, aren't you, because there are so many families where I've spoken to people who know they're the very last one, and that's it, finished as an enterprise and yet it can only really function well, if the whole family is committed.

CP. But, the finances aren't good. Its only that my wife works and David's partner works, she's got a good job. That's why we're looking after the baby today. She's an accountant and that's just what makes it pay. Over the last 10 years we've averaged about £8000 a year profit. That's including about £20,000 a year payment from the schemes. So in other words, that means we've been making £12,000 a year loss without that.



DP: See, if I go to look to buy a farm, which is something we have done in the past. You go to the bank and you say this is my business plan that we've put together. They normally laugh you out of the bank because, you put in the payments that you get and they look at it and go, we go out of Europe next week, then payments might stop, so you can't put that in. So, you've got no chance.

CG: When you were a lad, did you always work with your Dad right from the start. It never occurred to you that you'd do anything else?

DP: When I left school in about mid 2000, it was around the time when foot and mouth came for one thing, and there was definitely no money in farming, so there wasn't really enough money to stay on the farm, so I did a plumbing apprenticeship. I went to be a plumber for about four or five years, cause foot and mouth came and went and come back again and once we could get a farm to rent of me own was when I left the plumbing, to do what makes you happy in life.

CP: And David had rented up land of small parcels, parcels of land off up to 12 different landlords and he doesn't get a single penny subsidies, because that all goes to the landlords. It goes to the landlord, which is what they call the 'active farmers'.

CG: David, what's your farming operation now?

DP. We've had mules and we're just going onto pedigree Texels and pedigree Zwartbles. We've made it accredited, so all our sheep are health tested as well, which is something that we have to do every year, because we're renting the ground as opposed to here where we own it. Just trying to maximise our income as much as we can. We keep on building up better quality all of the time.

CG: Is this something you've loved doing, like your Dad did from when he was a boy. Were you right into it from the beginning?

DP: Yeah, I didn't particularly think of having pedigrees. I went working away lambing, and I went to a Suffolk pedigree farm in Norfolk and it just kind of took me as something that I would like to do and we're just slowly going towards it. You can't go at it all of a sudden, because it costs too much so we're just building up nice and slowly as we can.

CG: What's your thinking about coming out of Europe?

CP: Well I thought it'd been better if we'd stayed in and sorted out the problems that there were. I mean over the years, all my life, I've argued against the Common Agricultural Policy, it's wrecked farming, because more and more now, they're saying that these payments have got to go towards ecological things. It's anything but helping farming to be profitable and more productive. It's just paying you to be less intensive, less profitable, and it's definitely propping up all the old farmers. They're using it as a pension. In Switzerland, there was an article in this week's Farmers Guardian, they can't get any payments once you're above 65. Because now all the old farmers are in, I'm 58 and still haven't reached the average age of a farmer. All the old farmers are keeping hold of the land and using it as a pension and it's just wrecked farming and the structure of farming. So, over the years I've argued that it'd be better gone and we'd have to stand on our own two feet. All the inefficient farmers, all these

businessmen that have bought farmland would go out of business next year, straight away, and it'd be left to all the young farmers to keep it going, and they'd be efficient, and the efficient ones would start making money again.

CG: Do you think that can happen. Do you think that farming can function without subsidies, because they are very unclear so far about how much subsidy there's going to be.

CP: Well, if they'd have stopped it all over Europe, it would be the same for everybody, but if the UK leave Europe and the Europeans keep the subsidies going we won't have a choice, we'll have to be the same as them, otherwise it will be a very uneven playing field. We've not got a clue what will happen. It's more fearful now than it was before the referendum, because then we were the same as the rest of Europe. Now you don't know, we will be different.

CG: What are your hopes for the future on this farm. It's a beautiful place isn't it?

CP: Well, we should be able to keep going as things are at the moment, but it is the unknown of Brexit and what's going to happen, we just don't know, just don't know. Fear of the unknown.

CG: Do you talk to many other farmers in the area about what we've just been talking about.

CP: Yeh. Everybody says exactly the same thing. You won't find a farmer in the area that would disagree with me. The problem is, these payments, you can't make money without them, but straight away now all the politicians are saying that after Brexit, these things will have to be more pointed in environmental directions. Well for me, it's going the wrong way, you're trying to make farming less efficient and it won't pay for itself.

DP: If we leave Europe, when we leave, a country has three ways of making money: you grow it; you mine it; or you manufacture it. Well, the only one that's left is growing it and if they're wanting to make that less, then I think the country will fail.

CG: There are the other issues though, what's always called eco system services, but basically we've got climate change, we've got the carbon lock-up in the uplands, what you're talking about, your operation is eco friendly, most of your operation is entirely sustainable, therefore you should be rewarded as such. It's like we need the countryside to do quite a lot of different things really, it cannot all be about food production, and where it seems to me you've got the balance about right on your farm, that's absolutely as sustainable as it can be, but it barely sustains you, that's the problem and that's because of all these problems you've been describing, but we can't have one size fits all. Don't we need greater knowledge and understanding, it's about space for both things, isn't it really. About intensive areas for food production, that's making money, but the equitable side of that is how farmers are rewarded for their efforts to feed the country. Don't you think those are the ways we should be talking about it really?

CP: A serious problem is, these payments aren't rewarding farmers, these payments are going to the landlords, because it's these political buzz words. They say it's going to the active farmer, and to be an active farmer, that means you're not an airport,

you're not waterways, there's about three criteria, and the rest, if you own land, they say you're the farmer. They changed the law about two years ago, from it being the farmer, to being the active farmer, but it made no difference whatsoever.

CG: A lot of this, it comes from Europe, but the interpretation is down to the government, so really, that's one of the injustices you're talking about is that if you are a tenant you're always going to lose out, so that's one of the key problems around here. So, what would you like to see for your future David, I guess you're looking to come back into the farm?

DP: I just think that farmers need to be valued more. If you look at France, if the French farmers have a problem and they go protesting to France, say farmers march on Paris, they do occasionally, as we go to London occasionally. The police almost support the farmers and the public turn out and support the farmers. If we go for a march in London, you get the riot police and the army come after you, clear off home. You're just not supported by the country. So, for me they just need to value the farmers more.