

*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.

## **Matthew Slack 4/7/17**

Matthew Slack is the son of Peter Slack and grandson of Arthur Slack. Matthew and his brother Sam farm with their parents, Peter and Sylvia, at Overton Farm at Taxal above the Goyt Valley.

Sheila Hine talked to Matthew about the family's dairy farm in July 2017.

We moved to the farm in 1976. Me and Sam are the fourth generation to farm here at Taxal. We milk about 120 cows, 200 head of stock including all the youngstock; pedigree Holsteins.

We were in a Countryside Stewardship scheme until about 4 years ago but we came out of that and we've reseeded all the ground and improved a lot of it since then.

SH. So you've got intensive grassland now?

MS. Yeah, more intensive than it would have been historically but a third of the farm is moorland. We can't farm the moor so we just leave it for wildlife.

SH. Do you get any payments for that?

MS. No, we're not in any stewardship scheme any more.

SH. Would you like to go in a scheme in the future?

MS. Yeah, probably would like to go in a scheme but there is Right to Roam on the moor which is a bit detrimental really because all the wildlife and ground nesting birds that would nest there don't as people let their dogs run all over it and they walk all over it so it shoots itself in the foot really.

Five years ago, we put in a new milking parlour. At the same time there were East Midlands Development Agency grants being offered so we had a lot of grant funding for the milking parlour and cow health and welfare. We had a lot of mattresses, tipping water troughs to help keep clean water for cows and cow brushes to help keep them clean. We also had activity monitors which show high or low activity and so show cows in bulling.

SH. So those are on the pedometers?

MS. Yes and linked to the parlour by computer so that when the cows come into the parlour the pedometer put the cow's number into the individual computer at each milking stall, it feeds the cow, records its yield, checks the conductivity of the milk to show if there's any mastitis and shows activity.

Since then we have not increased the herd but over the next few years we want to expand up to 200 cows so that me and my brother can take a decent living out of the farm.

SH. Have you seen a benefit out of the money that you've spent?

MS. Yes, definitely. It's improved the yields; when I left school, the yields were about 6,000 litres per cow a year—we were milking 56 cows. Now we're 10,000 litres with 120 cows. Since we put the parlour in yields have increased about 2,000 litres. Cases of mastitis have dropped from about 40 percent to 11% last year. The milking equipment is far better; the pulsation is electric and not vacuum operated—it's a lot more consistent. The old milking parlour was 40 years old; it had had its day completely. Also the automatic dipping and flushing system disinfects each unit between the cows so there is no cross contamination at milking time which has made a big difference. And we have a teat preparation brush which cleans the cow's teats and disinfects them a lot more effectively than we did before.

SH. Have you seen any downsides on the increase in productivity of the cows?

MS. No, I don't think so. At the moment, we average 5.2 lactations before the cows leave the herd and their average age then is 7 ½ years. Things are pretty good; the replacement rate is about 22%. Because we have quite a lot of staff—there is my mum and dad and brother milking 120 cows; **we have a lot of time for the cows and always try to put them first.**

SH. What about downsides generally?

MS. Milk price has been really challenging over the last 2 to 3 years. Just after we put the parlour in we had a real good 18 months; milk price got up to 35p per litre for us then it crashed 2 years ago—we got down to 17p which is unsustainable for us. We drew 17.4p 12 months ago. It was pretty challenging for us especially because we had invested so heavily over the last five years. All the reseeding work as well; we spent £20,000 alone on lime in the last five years. But you still see a huge benefit with reduced feed costs from better quality forage.

SH. Do you see yourselves in the future wanting to get more species into your grassland instead of it just being ryegrasses?

MS. Yes, I definitely want to add some clover. I know another farmer who has trialled a diverse sward with a lot of different species of grass and herbs like plantain which interests me. At the moment we are cutting the grass about six times a year—we did 3<sup>rd</sup> cut 3 weeks ago and are aiming to do 4<sup>th</sup> cut in 10 days, mid July--cutting every 28—32 days. They are light cuts but we aim to get as high a quality forage into the cows as we can. The forage is actually analysing better than the concentrates that we are feeding at the moment. It comes

at a cost though; it's more expensive to start with but the quality and digestibility is far higher which has reduced our purchased feed costs and increased milk yield and quality.

SH. What other challenges do you see in farming now?

MS. The weather is always a challenge but it's out of our control. Brexit is going to be a challenge for the industry but I think the outcome will be positive. TB is a growing concern for us; we've never had a breakdown but it's getting closer and once it's in the wildlife it's only a matter of time really. The milk price can be really challenging as the last 18 months have been but we have a lot of confidence in ARLA and our future as farmer owners of ARLA.