

Interviewer - *I'm at present in Waterham Farm, the home of Mrs Anne McKeever (nee Mount) who lived and farmed in the Bridge area. Mrs McKeever lived at Renville Farm in Bridge parish, with her husband Willie McKeever, and four children, and farmed Renville, Hode, Bifrons, and Little Barton Farms. She is a member of the Mount family who of course have a long history in agriculture and the life of Canterbury and indeed, Bridge. So if I can ask you a few questions Anne, if I can call you Anne? When did the Mount family first come into the area?*

Early 1900s, Spencer Mount came into Hode Farm, which is rented from the Marquis of Conyngham's estate.

And where had he come from?

His father grew roses in Harbledown originally, so he came from the area.

What sort of enterprise was it at that time?

At that time he came into the farm, there was hops and pigs and general agriculture. As Spencer Mount was trained in horticulture it was gradually changed over almost totally to fruit.

We're talking about the beginning of the twentieth century, the 1900s?

Yes, you're talking about 1901/1902. My father was born in 1908 and they moved into the second farm that was bought, which was Little Barton Farm in 1931 and he then farmed all that area right through and it's been in the family since.

Is it right to say that probably that period of time in the twentieth century was a good time for fruit growing?

Yes, it was a license to print money after the war. Very definitely there was a lot of money made in fruit growing. That gradually disappeared as the imports began to take over and it became more difficult to grow the fruit that the British public wanted at that time. But yes, after the war (the Second World War) there was a lot of money made.

One knows from looking around Bridge that that has changed considerably over the last few years. When did you move to Renville?

About 1962/1963. We bought the farm off the Marquis of Conyngham. It was originally part of the Conyngham estate. It had at the time Guernsey cows but we decided to go in for Jersey cows and started the dairy in that area as father wanted to branch out into another form of agriculture at that time. I was trained in dairying, I'd done a degree in dairying and so I took over the herd for a bit and then I married and moved away and after a year or two, my husband Willie McKeever and myself, we came back into the farm and joined the family.

You had the building of the Canterbury by-pass which must have had an impact?

Right through the middle, yes. That brought the traffic a lot nearer to us at the time and I suppose at the time of building it was a nuisance as they always are. But one gets used to these things. One of the reasons because we had a dairy on the farm at the time we were allowed to put in the extra bridge. Because we had to take the cattle over the bridge because it was pointed out to the motorway people that we weren't able to walk our cattle up the motorway and over to the other side. We did have to go to law to get it. We had to spend quite a bit of money to get it.

It's hard to see how the farm could have functioned without the bridge. So how many acres did you have, roughly?

I think Renville was about four hundred acres.

Your children went to the local school I believe, so you took part in the life of the village?

Very definitely. I can remember walking down the hill to play tennis with the W.I. people and we used to walk down the hill with the dog tied to the pram and two children in the pram and one walking alongside up and down the hill to Bridge!

I seem to remember that you were a horsewoman as well?

Yes, we all rode at that time and the children all rode.

What sort of routes did you take?

You've got a bridleway going right through Bifrons Park which is very easy going through there and you can go right up on to Highland Court and right across the top there. And you still can do that, there's still a bridleway there. And then from the Renville side you can go right across into the woods going towards Lower Hardres and Nackington.

Obviously the railway had gone?

Yes. We actually bought our part of the railway; it's entirely owned by ourselves. There's no right of way through that part of it at all. It's rather nice because it's left very much as it is and there's a lot of wildlife down there, which is very pleasant.

So your childhood was at Hode Farm?

No, Little Barton, on the fruit farm. We were very lucky as children we had ponies, we could ride through the fruit and we used to in those days, which would be highly illegal now, you had the old Ford tractors with the big wide mudguards and we used to ride on the mudguards as they brought the fruit in. So that was really great fun. We used to go down with the tractor drivers when we were young. There was an awful lot of freedom for children in those days.

This was after the war I guess?

This was in the war and after the war.

So you do remember part of the war?

Yes, one of the things we used to love doing was collecting shrapnel, it's extraordinary, just one of the things you did. I can still remember listening to the trains because the coal at that time, Little Barton was right beside the railway line and the coal was not a very good coal and it's an uphill pull from Canterbury through to Bekesbourne and you could hear the engines going chug, chug, bshoo...as they skidded and there would be a spark and then chug, chug, chug as they pulled up the incline. And of course as children we used to put pennies on the line and all the things that we all did with steam trains.

Were any of your family involved in the war?

Father was in the Fire Service and he was there right through the war and whenever Canterbury was bombed or anything like that and I remember him coming back after one of the big raids almost in tears because they'd run out of water. They'd had to let Canterbury burn. The other thing which I can always remember as children, we were sent away at the

very beginning of the war, but we came back actually in the middle of the war to probably the worst of the bombing. But the view from our house right over Canterbury, there was a very good view of the cathedral straight through the garden and I remember coming back after we'd been down in the shelter one night after a very big raid and we came up and we walked out to the front to have a look and you could see the red glow over the whole of Canterbury. In the middle of it you could see the cathedral standing. I remember that feeling, they haven't got it. I remember that one, that was very vivid.

Your father was a retained fireman?

They were the auxiliary fire service, he was called out regularly. He was also of course in that famous Home Guard where nobody knew what they were doing. He told mother, "If we're invaded" he said "I shall disappear, but I'm not telling you where".

So he might have, if they'd come in, he might have been in that Secret Army?

Yes, he was because he actually took us down as children and taught us how to shoot with a pistol on the firing range. He used to go off regularly and practice bombing and things and blowing this up. They had a wonderful time at the end of the war because they let everything off. He was in the Secret Army very definitely. At the time he hoped to fly but he couldn't because his ears had something that he couldn't fly. And he was in a restricted occupation in farming. They needed a certain number of farms. But he did everything else and he also ran the Cadet Force. He had a lot to do with the Canterbury Cadet Force.

So in a way, living where you did at Little Barton Farm, you had connections with Bridge but also very much with Canterbury? Where did you go to school?

Yes, we were actually in the Canterbury boundary then. A whole mixture of schools. Several private prep schools in Canterbury, then I was at the Simon Langton and then it got bombed. We were bombed out of the middle of Canterbury. Then we went over into the "loony bin". It was fun and games because you used to get locked into the classrooms by mistake because they had these self-locking doors. I left there and I went to a boarding school after that and the Langton of course moved up to its new premises.

You had a degree, you studied dairying. Then you and your husband set up home in Renville and you became very much a member of the Bridge community?

Yes, he ran the Horticultural Society for a long time. He was chairman of it. And the W.I.

You became involved with the school and you were a governor, and chair of governors? How long were you a governor?

I was never chair. They don't know, we can't remember. I started either at the old school or just after they moved up to the new one. The children of course all went to the Bridge Primary School, one after the other.

We're talking now about the 1960s, you don't live in Bridge now but you know Bridge. How has it changed do you think in the last fifties years?

I think what changed it a lot although we didn't realise it at the time, was when they put the bypass in. Because when they built the bypass it really was very difficult to cross that road and it made a very big difference to Bridge when the bypass did go in because it made it more like a village again. That made a huge difference. It's gradually expanded; you've got the bit up the top, Bridge Down being built. I don't know whether it's changed that much as far as I'm concerned.

Just to talk about your husband whom I did meet. He was very much involved with the National Farmers' Union. He was president?

He was chairman of the Kent branch at one point. Certainly of the Canterbury branch and then of the Kent branch. I think you do a two year stint if I remember rightly. It's one of these where you do two or three years. And then of course he was very heavily involved with the Kent Show up at the showground at Detling and he was chairman there for three or four years.

You must have seen big changes in the fruit industry? You must have seen big changes in agriculture over the time?

Yes, very big change. Fruit became more and more difficult for us to grow the right type of apple because the Cox wasn't red enough at that time. They were trying very hard to breed it, which they gradually have now, to put a bit of colour into it, but it takes time to change a breed of fruit. They were trying to introduce other varieties. Father started different varieties. We had Katy, Discovery, they all came in at that time with colour which was what the British public wanted and the Cox gradually just died a slow death to which it has stopped I think. I don't think it's increased in quantity since but it very definitely changed the fruit areas. There was also a grant given to you if you wished to grub fruit at one time because it was realised there was a dire problem in the fruit industry. A lot of us took the grant to grub the fruit and then we went back into other things like dairy, corn and everything that you see now. The dear old Bramley survived. The Bramley orchards remained.

Were Mounts involved with East Kent Packers?

No, they joined with Homegrown Fruits. Father started that one up. It was rather like East Kent Packers but you packed in your own pack houses rather than East Kent Packers who used their own huge facility. Homegrown Fruits was a group of farmers who had their own pack houses. We all sold under the same brand and had commercial sizes and all that sold as an entity.

I think you said your father was the first one to experiment. How did that work?

Grandfather. Spencer Mount. He went across to America to get the idea because it was originally in America. I'm not good on exactly how gas stores work and scrubbers and things. You take out the oxygen and reduce the oxygen and increase the CO₂ level, down to a certain level and then you keep them cold. Of course you had to have the lining in the stores and you had to have the means of removing the oxygen and his was one of the very first stores that was put up in this country.

How long could you keep apples in stores like that?

In those days it was a struggle probably to go much beyond February. Of course that has now changed and you can go almost round the year with certain varieties.

I think we've had a very good talk. Is there anything else you would like to say?

An interesting fact that makes you realise how life has changed. In the late 1950s when we first had the beef herd down at Bifrons Park we used to buy the cattle in Ireland as two year olds. They would come across on the boat and then by train to Canterbury West Station. They were unloaded on a Sunday morning and with the assistance of the drovers we walked them right up through the middle of Canterbury, right down the main road to Bifrons. Makes you think doesn't it? And that was late 1950s was the last time we did it.

Just something about land ownership because you rather surprised me saying who owned what.

I'm surprised you didn't know because the Marquis of Conyngham is the person they all have to deal with when they put up things like the school and the doctors' surgery because he owns all that land along the river.

I did know that Brian Mummery farms some of Conyngham's land.

He has the top bank and where he is.

And you're saying that Hode Farm still belongs to the Marquis of Conyngham and Great Pett Farm?

I think it will, if you ask Brian.

Thank you very much indeed