

I'm presently in the home of Brian and Anne Mummery, "Laughing Waters" in Brewery Lane in Bridge and I'm having a conversation with Brian who has farmed the land around the village for many years. Brian how many years did you farm around here?

We moved to Bridge in 1966 with three children under five and twenty-six years old. It was a rented farm belonging to the Marquis of Conyngham but subsequently that's been called Cantley Ltd so then we were tenants of the Marquis but in latter years we've been tenants of Cantley although I think the Conyngham estate is the main director of Cantley.

The farm was put out to tender when the previous tenant Gordon Collard died. We had a farm in Acrise near Folkestone and we had fifty-six acres which included the vicar's Glebe land and when this came up it was over three hundred acres so it seemed a big step and we didn't think we'd stand a chance of getting it. But things were different then and they didn't ask for budgets and all the rest of it. Since then we've learned that we got the farm because they liked my dog! So that was the deciding factor on the two people who were shortlisted that he liked my dog.

So that's three hundred acres, that's Great Pett Farm. Did the land of Great Pett Farm include what I know as Side Hill or Sixty Acre Field at that time?

Well we tendered and were ambitious because you tender to get the farm. We got the farm and the next day he rang me up and said they'd got Side Hill that Highland Court had given up and did I want it? They'd actually got somebody else who'd put in a bid and he gave me quite a hint as to what that was so we got that as well though it isn't actually part of Great Pett Farm.

No, I thought it wasn't and I remember you driving a tractor along Patricbourne Road where I live, on the way to Side Hill. It was Sixty Acre Field.

Yes, it's now two fields.

On that one, obviously I go past it many times in a week. I think it's down to cereals now but I remember Jennifer and myself I, watching a lamb being born there.

Yes, we had sheep on there and cattle. We used to drive them to and fro across the road. We've even take them through the village. We've had sheep, cattle and various crops there but it's in the same routine now, most big farms are arable based.

Just thinking about your life, when did you actually start farming? You started at Acrise on a relatively small piece of land.

I worked with my father first of all on his farm after leaving Dover Grammar School. I didn't go to farming college. When my younger brother was leaving school, he was coming back on the farm. The relationship with my brother wasn't always the best so my mother thought it would be better if I went on my own which I did and I got Acrise when I was nineteen. So I was farming when I was nineteen.

Interesting. I remember talking to Charles Fagg and he was talking about size of holdings and saying that back then one could live on a farm of fifty acres, but now probably not.

Well I consider I started as a small farmer and I finished as a small farmer.

Oh, so you reckon three hundred is small?

Three hundred is not big enough, nowhere near. The way things have gone, we've had to change and modify as we've gone along which is the right thing to do. If we'd stuck to the original plans we would be in dire trouble financially. No, I've always considered I started with a small farm and I finished with one so I didn't actually get anywhere. I kept pace with inflation.

Yes. The soil around here is not brilliant is it?

In the valley bottoms it's fine, there's a lot of Grade 1 land and a lot of Mount's is Grade 2 or Grade 1 but a lot of ours is Grade 3 or Grade 4 land like at the Butts and north facing banks are probably the same. But they were quite big fields, not like a small dairy farm with small fields. They're still quite big fields which lend themselves to modern equipment.

I see and that requires capital to invest in machinery doesn't it? Now your son took on more cattle is that right?

No, my son's a chartered surveyor and works at Paddock Wood. He's one of the senior directors of Lambert and Foster who deal mainly in local agricultural properties, selling and so on. He lives at Godmersham and he loves messing about with the cattle. He's still got his boots here.

So I haven't got that wrong; he has been involved with the cattle but his main work is as a chartered surveyor.

Yes. We're towards the end of our period but I've got the farm for another two years. The last three years have been on a short haul tenancy. Before I had a proper agricultural tenancy. Alan is a partner so if anything happens to me Alan will continue with that until the end of the tenancy.

Thinking about the village you came in to aged twenty-six, how has it changed? Silly question really, we know it's changed.

Well we came here after the explosion in development in the early sixties, we came just after that. Western Avenue, Dering Road, Riverside Close wasn't there. Bridge Down - all those were just taking place so the economy was based around agriculture in the village. Mr Collard employed eight full time workers on my farm but I replaced it with one. Even in those times I had just one worker who stayed with me all the time I was here. And that's what was happening then, the rationalisation was going on. But Mr Collard didn't keep pace with the times really, they were the gentlemen farmers.

Was he from Pilch Collard?

No, he was Young and Collard who had Lenhall Farm. Collards used to farm the land on the left-hand side going to Chartham where the oast houses are with that beautiful view. They were quite substantial farmers and it's amazing how a lot of those names have disappeared. We thought they were there forever but they've gradually disappeared one by one by one. They were gentlemen farmers. I remember one of the first jobs I did was at the Butts. I was cutting some tree branches back and this walker came up to me from Bridge and asked who'd got the farm. I said I did and he said "Oh, you're the gent then are you?"

I heard a programme on the radio about the wartime and the woman was describing various things about planes coming down and they were all Collard's fields. So, I've been here over fifty years and I'm not on the map yet! It wasn't Brian Mummery's fields it was still Collard's fields.

I guess that sort of era has well gone now because there's a lot of contract farming in terms of people specialising in sowing or harvesting and so on.

Well in 1992 when my employee retired we decided we couldn't really warrant having workers because you not only have to pay them and house them. I had two cottages at the bottom of Union Road (my daughter lives in one of them now) and there were three cottages on the farm so I had five cottages and one of the conditions of my tenancy was I couldn't let cottages; but when the Conyngham estate found out they were going to have to evict the tenants they said I could let the cottages.

After a while I did all the work for quite a few years but then, with the bigger arable fields, I let a neighbour contract farm it and he contract farms the whole of the arable farm now. I do a hundred acres of environmental land. He comes in with his big equipment and what I can do in two weeks he can do in three and a half hours.

And Side Hill is still part of the farm because it seemed last summer was quite a good harvest the trucks were coming by all the time.

Well Robert Spencer actually farms the land for me and he contract farms all the land from the Haywain to this farm. He will be working all the land from there. He's made a big investment in machinery. He does Tom McKeever's, Ash's, all Mount's, the land near the Haywain. He contract farms all that land. Not all the same agreements. It's a consortium that owns all the machinery but the more they work outside the consortium with the machinery the more efficient it becomes. There are other things you have to know, have quality assurance which means that you have to go through this process of box ticking which takes about five hours, well because most of my storage is fifty years old we were finding it hard to keep up with the assurance schemes but he does all of that.

How many children have you got?

Four.

And did they all go to Bridge School?

Yes, all of them and my grandchildren. We've just got a great grandchild as well. Clare was at the old school for a while but she's retired. I've got a daughter who's retired.

Yes, shakes one a bit. We moved in about five years before the old school finished. We used to see the parents coming down so you or Anne were probably there.

That's one thing I have noticed in the village, the different lifestyle of the parents. Picking up the children from school, it used to be a friendly thing, we used to chat. Now I take my grandchildren and you almost feel like a passenger, you don't know anybody - that friendly feeling has gone.

I think so many come by car a from South Canterbury and the villages around, that's the name of the game I'm afraid.

On to something totally different. You live within a few yards of the Nailbourne. We all know what happened in January 2014. Were you actually flooded here?

No. This bungalow was on the market for two years and we weren't considering moving. I had the tenancy of the farmhouse for the rest of my life. This was on the market for about a year when they reduced the price considerably and then after another several more months they reduced it even more. I used to come down and look at my cows. The For Sale board used to go to Sold then the next time I came it was For Sale. This happened about three times in a week. So, I went back to Anne and said it would be stupid not to buy that bungalow. Anne had already said this was the only bungalow she liked in the village, so it was really fortuitous. I gave them what I thought was a fair offer and the woman

from the estate agency asked if we wanted to look round. I said no because I'd lived here long enough to know.

But people couldn't get mortgages on it. They were awkward about it because a flood once every seventy years is quite frequent to them.

I hadn't thought of that, so it would be difficult to get a mortgage.

You couldn't get a mortgage. David Riceman lived here but Millie Jagers tells me that Bridge was flooded when they were building this and David Riceman put three more layers of bricks in and if you look this one is higher than the others around it. It's like an island. The water only came to the gates.

So, this was built in the 1960s.

It was built just before we came in 1966. I would say '59 – '60. Millie Jagers has lived here a long time and she says he put in the layers of bricks. Anne being disabled we found the steps coming in and out of the bungalow were quite high. I rang the insurance company the previous owner had had but they wouldn't insure it. It was only by twisting the arm of the NFU that we got it insured. The other insurance companies didn't want to know.

I know this from other houses in Bridge and it's been a nightmare for some people.

Yes, well we were cash buyers. Behind here they're building a mansion. They've pulled down the bungalow and are putting a house there.

In Bridgeford Way?

Yes. So, we got our retirement house. One December evening at the old house I was lighting the fire with a gas cylinder. The gas cylinder caught fire and the house caught alight. Anne's got advanced Parkinson's and was coming up the passage with the phone in her hand. She went outside in the dark and dialled 999 and I heard her say "Will you tell my husband to get out of the house please?" And if she hadn't made that phone call the whole house would have burnt down. She saved the house and there was only surface damage to one room and smoke. We were going to refurbish the house anyway.

Great Pett Farm itself, what is the age of the building?

The middle part, I believe it may have been two cottages. It's virtually the same as Mount's House.

Hode Farm?

Yes, the Hode farmhouse and or house are virtually identical. The Hode one is longer and it's only one room wide and there's a passageway that goes from room to room. It's bigger than ours I think but it's middle of the seventeenth century, but it's been extended. I think the porch is Victorian but I don't think anything's been added on since Victorian times. It's a very nice house. When we came here large farmhouses were a liability and one of the conditions of letting it was that the farmer lived in the farmhouse. You get a few people who just want the farm but you had to live in the house. But we didn't actually look at the house it wasn't of interest. If the same farm had come up with a two-bedroomed bungalow we would have gone for that. It was the biggest surprise of our life.

If I walk along the footpath coming from Middle Pett Farm I wonder what the view would have been before the railway was built.

Well actually I think I've got a postcard of that. Oh, no it was from the bridge. They were building ricks down on the farm. I'll look it up if you like.

That would be fascinating to get a photocopy for the archive.

I think it must be before the railway because that was built in the 1930s was it?

1870s.

Oh, it may not be then.

The question I always ask of people who've lived in Bridge for a certain length of time is about the building of the bypass. We all know what it was like before the bypass was built. That cut into the Sixty Acre field didn't it?

It made two fields of it.

It must have disrupted farming quite a lot.

Well it did while it was going. I don't know if you remember it flooded. Bifrons Park flooded. They all went home for a long Christmas break and the Nailbourne rose considerably and by where the bridge is now actually there was vehicular access to the site. They put in a few four-inch gas pipes in case the river ran too much. We were working on Side Hill on New Year's Day and there were sailing boats there.

I do remember talk about it now but I didn't know about the sailing boats.

Also, the contractors moved a lot of gravel because the Nailbourne is underlying gravel in the valley bottom and they used a lot of this gravel, so that's why there was such a big lake over there because they'd been poaching it. You couldn't get from one side of the road to the other. Because it's quite gravelly you can see it at the Butts in the middle of summer there are big scorched areas of the field where it's got no substantial base.

It's interesting what you say about the valley bottom being very good soil because in our garden you can put anything in the garden in Patricbourne Road and it will grow.

But not farther up the bank it wouldn't. I would say two thirds of that bank is very chalky.

What's the situation with set-aside now because I remember when the top of the field up there when the scheme was in force, but you don't get set-aside now do you?

No. We've got the Butts, Patricbourne Bank which are very similar soil types. They're not really economical to grow crops on. So I went straight from set-aside to what they call a higher level environmental scheme stewardship which means I have signed a ten-year contract which finishes the year I'll finish and I get paid a certain amount of money to carry out various things on it in a strict timetable and I'm not allowed to graze it and cut it. We went through the land that was set-aside then. Set-aside was a rotational thing but most of the higher-level schemes are permanent schemes. Part of it is moveable.

Walking around as I do I see a large number of fields that are fallow, are never ploughed and never have any animals on it. If you walk up towards Star Hill opposite the church, that field never has any sheep on it and is never ploughed.

The chap who does the scheme around her has written some very good books about the North Downs. He's called Dan Tewson. He's written some very good books about this. He works with English Nature and Natural England and he overlooks my scheme and he's always very pleased with us.

What they look for is a like a wildlife corridor and it joins up from the Butts then up to Lenham, then there's that big field they've got a higher-level where the cottages are.

Crows Camp.

Yes, the other side of the road. That's all in higher level. I actually sold my cows in August but I had somebody else's in for several weeks acting as lawnmowers because cattle are very good at eating the bottom out and eating the dead grass. I used somebody else's for that.

What's going to happen when we leave Europe?

Oh, devastating. I almost felt in mourning. I just could not believe it, it's ridiculous. It's done more damage to this country already. I was gobsmacked.

Just very briefly. I was invited to a symposium at Christchurch on what happens after Brexit and there was no one round the table who knew anything about farming. I don't know much but I live out in the country. I went to the NFU in Barton Business Park and saw Bob Akehurst and the man who runs it. And it was also the county NFU and they provided a huge amount of statistics which I passed on to Christchurch. Depending on what the Government does, but if they don't do anything it's going to be, I guess, the demise of a lot of farmers.

Well I think probably it will be. I think I've timed it quite well. They're so dishonest about what they're going to do (you know Mr Gove, they're not that honourable) and I wouldn't trust our Government with agriculture at all. Most farms don't make a profit that is greater than they receive from Europe, so if you remove that... But statistics show that more farmers wanted to leave the Common Market than stay in.

Yes. I have heard the phrase "turkeys voting for Christmas".

Well, I can understand the land owners doing it. The people who receive this farm payment, they're not only farms. Developers, supermarkets who own land. Dyson. He's got more land than the queen now.

Has he really? Yes, if you're in East Anglia and you've got thousands of acres you're going to be alright.

There are quite a few people who get over a million pounds each from these pay outs because they stopped being production based and so big farms did quite well out of it really. But I couldn't understand why they wanted to leave Europe. I can't understand anybody wanting to leave Europe. It just shows how gullible. The campaign of Gove and Johnson. If it was anybody else they'd lock them up for being dishonest. I must say, the poor showing of people like Cameron. They were arrogant. What they said would happen, has happened. Food prices have gone up. We've got a weak pound now and I think generally the other campaign was just based on fiction.

You mentioned the price of food in supermarkets going up. You didn't sell directly to the supermarkets, did you? Whereas someone who's producing lettuces for M & S is completely at their mercy I guess. The same with apples.

Unfortunately, and apples are a prime case of this and some apple growers have made a lot of money out of development land and what they've done is put it back in to buildings and to buy more land. This new money coming in to the production side, the new pack houses that are all pristine and so on has all got to be paid for by somebody.

That's very interesting because I've seen a revival of orchards but they're big companies.

Yes they are. There are about four people in Kent who are large growers of soft fruit, apples. In the area my son works, the Medway towns, a lot of development land has been sold. For established tenant

farmers if you have an inspector going around inspecting the standard of cleanliness of growing methods, the bar keeps going up and up because these people with this money, like you see on television, it's all beautiful shiny machinery, there's no dirt. It's all very pristine.

Just one final thing. I think it's the land you farm, beyond the Nailbourne and the paddock behind it. That field is usually down to crops I think. Two years ago, there was a wonderful spread of wild flowers, marigolds and so on.

That's up here. Marigolds, poppies, they are only annuals. You get a big show the first year. Poppies won't reseed unless they're disturbed. They won't establish. That was colour for the first year but now they've been replaced by perennials. Not so attractive but they are better for the environment. A bit showy that.

Brian, that's fantastic, thank you.