

Interviewer - *I'm currently in the home of Charles and Sandra Fagg at Reeds Mill in Kingston parish and Charles, who is in his eighties has very kindly agreed to answer some questions about farming in the area. Charles can I ask you how long have you and your family been living and farming here?*

I've been here all my life. My father came up here in 1913 and stayed until he died so we've been here almost a hundred years.

*Did you always farm from Reeds Mill?*

No, it was always farmed from Westwood Farm. My grandfather bought the estate from a John Derry who was of the Derry and Toms from Knightsbridge. It was Westwood Farm, Reed Farm and Little Duskin, and possibly a few other bits and pieces. We think it would have been about 250 acres. Little Duskin was sold off fairly quickly but I don't really know exactly when, possibly in the 1920s and the rest of it remained until my father sold Reed Farm in 1947, so that he could get some money to do the rest of it better. That was the theory.

*I'm going to ask a question about the sort of agriculture which is practised up here. You mentioned Little Duskin Farm which of course was apples, would seem to be the very limit of apple growing.*

It was. That was Duskin, Little Duskin was this side. There were apples there, that's why there aren't any longer. It was the limit or just above it.

*How high are you up here?*

We're almost 450 feet. Which I think is 153 metres or something.

*Over the time I've been coming up here over the last 40 years I've been aware that there's a lot of cereals growing up on what we must call the North Downs which intrigued me, so what sort of soil have you got up here?*

Very good. I think technically it's a sandy loam generally speaking right up on the plateau. You only have to drop off over the edge a few feet and you're on a fairly heavy clay, which is not so good and below that of course is chalk.

*So the pattern of agriculture probably has changed I guess over your lifetime, so did you rotate crops around?*

Yes, it was always done on a rotation. Normally (what was it? My memory's probably going to fade now) two crops of wheat, one of oats, one of barley and then some sort of a break crop. My father used to grow red clover for seed, which was quite a common thing. It could have been a few years of grass or root crops, kale, something like that.

*Did you have any cattle? I think you've grazed bullocks out here haven't you?*

I did yes, but my father didn't have cattle permanently, he used to buy store cattle in the autumn and keep them in the yard for the winter and sell them off again in the spring.

*1913, that's a long time as you say. Getting on for a hundred years. You're not a hundred years old of course but in your lifetime, have you seen a change in the way in which the land has been worked?*

Yes it's the sort of standard change as everywhere in farming. A small farm that would just about keep a small family going used to be about 25 acres now it's 250 and of course there aren't many people who can afford that and there aren't many 250 acres about in any case. So that's the biggest change probably.

*Thinking about the viability of farming, I think for example the wheat price went up last year for reasons that we know about globally. Does that temporarily raise the profit margin on a farm?*

I suppose it must do, I think it might also be the case that it puts in a profit margin instead of a loss. What had happened, the last lot of wheat that I personally grew fifteen or sixteen years ago – it was good quality milling wheat – I got a hundred and forty pounds a ton for it. Two or three years ago you would have got eighty to ninety pounds for it. That's just the way things are.

*Costs, fertilisers, fuel for tractors...*

All keeps going up. Fertiliser has got very expensive now because most of it is made from oil and therefore it's expensive. I think it's probably reduced the use of it quite a lot.

*I'm not an expert on agriculture but I'm well aware that on some land the yield is higher than on others but up here it was fairly good yield was it compared with others?*

It was always fairly good but by the standards of the time if you understand that. When I first remember my father talking about having a very good crop because he'd got twenty five hundredweight to the acre a good crop nowadays, a very good crop would be four tons to the acre. Mainly due to the plant breeders, the variety of wheat. Fertilisers and weed killers have a bearing on it. The biggest change almost certainly is to do with the fact that the old wheat just wouldn't yield any more than that whatever you put under it.

*I'm branching off here but I know that Wye College was researching presumably into higher yielding strains of wheat?*

Yes, quite a lot of places did that, Wye College is certainly one of them. Cambridge Plant Breeding Institute was one of the major things and of course a firm called Vilmorin in France because it's all become well, not quite global but it probably is now. It's all become European anyhow.

*Nowadays, is it the case that you have fairly local firms buying the wheat or is it national?*

It certainly used to be very local, well most of ours went to a firm called Harvey's at Nonington. Or Dennes who were millers in Thanet and various other places. And then it's tended, the wheat and the barley particularly in more recent times, tended to go to Tilbury but it was sold through the same people and there were one or two others as well. The same sort of thing. I don't actually know what goes on now to be perfectly honest. I'm out of it too far.

*Thinking of wheat and milling of course we're a few feet away from Reeds Mill, perhaps you'd like to say what's happening to the old mill building?*

Well it's been a hole with bricks round it for many years. Nothing else, nothing inside it, or very little. My son and daughter in law have taken it on and managed to get planning permission to use it as part of a new house and it's currently being repaired to a very high standard. They're putting timbers back in which are at least twice if not three times as large as they need to be but it's being done because that's what was there before and it really is

being done to an exceptionally high standard and will be turned into a house instead of falling down.

*When did it last work as a mill?*

It last worked in March 1915 in the middle of the First World War. The miller who lived here where we're sitting at the moment except that the house was the other way on, went out as it got dark or something thereabouts and set the fan gear on the back that keeps the mill turned into the wind, was broken. He set it into the wind and the wind went round completely the opposite direction during the night, blew up a blizzard and a gale and lifted the entire top off. The sweeps and the whole of the top. It sounds ridiculous now but my father was told that would cost £300 to repair it which he couldn't afford and also it was in the middle of the First World War with neither men nor materials available. And so they capped it with galvanised iron and it gradually got worse from then on until now.

*At least there is a building there because so many of them went up in smoke.*

Yes well of course this is brick, very thick brick and it never had a fire so it just got tail winded and lifted the top off.

*Thinking of the ownership of land about here. I know we've talked about the differences in the parishes. Perhaps you would just like to say how the ownership of farming land in this parish differs from Bishopsbourne.*

Well in Kingston virtually all the land was farmed by the owners, relatively small places, Westwood was probably the largest but it was nearly all farmed by the owners whereas in Bishopsbourne it belongs to the estate. And that does make a difference because that's tended to get bigger and Kingston's only got smaller bits.

*Whereas Bishopsbourne has extensive woodland, I don't think Kingston parish has, has it?*

No, we're more or less between the two lots. We're between the Bishopsbourne estate woods and the Covet Woods the other side, which belong to the Forestry Commission. There is a fair amount of wood in Kingston some of which actually goes to the Bishopsbourne estate and Charlton Wood, but I don't know what the actual acreage is. It's certainly a lot less than Bishopsbourne or Barham in fact.

*I'm aware that there's a fair amount of shooting goes on in the Bishopsbourne parish on the estate there but it's only very peripheral here is it?*

Well, a bit of the Bourne estate extends into Kingston and then there's a little bit at the western end.

*You mentioned Covet Wood, a beautiful area which I enjoy, but that's Forestry Commission therefore First World War or just after was it?*

I believe it was 1923 or thereabouts, it was formed partly I believe to provide work for returning soldiers because there's a bit along Stone Street, part of the West Wood up there where somebody planted and felled the trees which was very unusual.

That's interesting because there's a restoration project going ahead which I know about up in Covet Wood which is actually to restore some of the old heath land so possibly where we see woodland now there might well have been heath.

I don't remember the Covet as being (I've known it now for about seventy years) heath but there was certainly a lot of heather along the sides of the tracks and rides and that sort of thing so it was pretty close to being heath. It's very acid I think.

That's interesting because elsewhere you think of the North Downs being very chalky and alkaline.

Yes, we're a peculiar lot on the North Downs. We here have an acid soil, or it goes acid. It has to be limed because we're about ten feet above the chalk and lime never moves upwards it can only wash downwards.

*That interests me because thinking of the chalk pits of which there are many, it's always intrigued me because I thought why do you need chalk if basically the whole Downs are chalk but clearly what you're saying is there's often an overlay of a different type of soil?*

Yes. We've got at the top here somewhere about a foot of good sandy loam, then there's, it varies almost from yard to yard, but there's about ten feet of mainly brick earth and there's a bit of very heavy clay at the bottom of it and you find that as you go off the plateau would have been very flat and where the valleys have sort of been cut out many millennia ago you see the very heavy clay.

*Were there brickworks here?*

I don't know of any brickworks but it's probable that the old houses, certainly Westwood, probably Reed and probably Kingswood were built from brick dug up out of the garden effectively. They had itinerant brick makers apparently, because those places have all got holes which would be clay beside them and some of the others as well I'm sure.

*Perhaps we can talk more generally about the parish and your position in it here. Where did you go to school?*

Initially at Bishopsbourne. I didn't quite close it down; I think I left fifteen pupils when I left which was 1942 and then Simon Langton.

*That's the old school house on the way with the Matthew Bell sign on it, which was obviously built before the 1870 act. Matthew Bell was a fairly philanthropic man.*

It is dated, I've got a feeling it's '58 but I wouldn't be quite sure.

*He was very far seeing in a way.*

When I was there, there was only one room in use, a big one which went right through from back to front and one teacher and how she coped with, probably about thirty when I started, aged from 5 to 11 I'm not at all sure, but she did.

*So how did you get to the Langton from here?*

I cycled to Bishopsbourne up to Golf Cottage I think it's called – the thatched place and left the cycle there and went in on the bus. Ten minutes to go to school to Bishopsbourne and an hour to get home!

*It's fairly isolated in a way up here; you'd have known children in the other farms around?*

There were very few, there was one other child, a girl of my own age, and that was your lot up here. There were some at Langham Park which is a mile down the road and some at the Keeper's Cottage but other than that no. Although the story goes although I can't prove it,

that Little Westwood which is just along the road that at one time there were twenty children that went to school from there to Bossingham. I can't prove it, it's hardly big enough to get twenty people in standing up, let alone ...

*So there is a part of the parish which is more orientated towards Bossingham?*

Yes, it used to be more so until 1974 when they changed the boundary a bit to sort that sort of thing out.

*Now you were chairman of the Parish Council at Kingston. How long did you do that for?*

Too long! I was chairman for seventeen years I think and I think I was connected with the Parish Council as a member or with the Parish Council Association at the end for forty-seven years.

*You're quite a way from where they met.*

A pretty good two miles from Westwood.

*Moving on from that there must have been many times when you've been cut off up here with the snow?*

Yes I don't remember a great deal about the 1939/40 winter which was a very bad one. but I do remember being snowed up. I was at school at Bishopsbourne then. 1946/7 I was still at the Langton it was my last year there and I only went three days out of six weeks. They couldn't clear the snow. We spent a large part of that time digging snow out – drifts – because there was tractor-drawn wooden v-shaped ploughs but they didn't do very much.

*I can remember coming to the area in 1969 and I think that winter the snow fell because I had to walk into Canterbury to get to the school where I was teaching*

I think that was the year when we had an enormous amount of snow.

*I've got the impression that helicopters had to helicopter in food to Kingston?*

I think there were some helicopters yes, whether it was essential I don't know but I think there were some.

*Just generally to finish off with how would you sum up the changes in living in the countryside now compared with when you were a boy?*

Well of course people are much more mobile now almost everybody has a car whereas before when we didn't have a car for a long time, during the Depression times when I was very young and it was a case of walking or cycling. The other big change in the farming side to go back to that for a moment if I may is a lot less cattle about now in fact there are virtually none in either of the parishes now whereas there used to be two or three dairy herds, Langham Park, and (I don't know quite what it's called) Bourne something down the bottom of the hill there. There were several.

*I had a relative who was a tenant farmer on the Isle of Wight and he had about twenty-eight cows and I think he made most of his money from doing a milk round in Ryde on the Isle of Wight. Now, were those herds for very local consumption?*

Not when I remember no, it always went away in churns.

*The final question. We've talked about the size of farm you need to make a reasonable living. Are young people coming into farming?*

There are some but of course you really need a wealthy father I think. You mentioned Bob Akehurst just now. His son is coming into it. But of course they do a lot of contracting as well which is one of the things that goes with farming nowadays.

*Something I should have asked earlier on. I'm aware that you've got contract cereal growers who presumably will come in and pay for the use of the land?*

Yes. A lot of the land is what's called share farmed. It's owned by somebody who may or may not live in the farmhouse, they very often do. It's farmed by somebody else and then they share out any profit that there might be. There's no rent changes hand. It's shared.

*They used to call it share cropping in the States but that was something quite different and it was really poverty stricken but it makes every sort of sense to do it that way.*

It does mean that most of the land is farmed by big farmers with big machines which I don't particularly like. Alright they may have a lot of big tyres but they still pan the ground down rather up here.

*Charles thank you very much indeed.*

You're very welcome.