



## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Bob Akehurst  
Age: 67  
Location: Clipgate Farm, Denton, Canterbury  
Size: 300 acres  
Type: Arable/Machinery/ Airstrip and hangar/ Caravan club/Trucking

Interviewed by: Anca Mamaische  
Date: April 22, 2015



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*I: First I would appreciate if you could tell me a few things about your farm for example what type of farm you have at the present.*

BOB: At the moment we are an arable farm, and we grow a rotation of wheat, beans and rape in a four year rotation so it's: wheat, beans, wheat, rape. That gives a decent gap between crops for disease control. We've also over the years diversified to get an income stream because we're not a very large farm, starting with when I left school I started the contracting business doing work for other farmers with our machinery to make it more cost effective to have the machines to do our own. Then in 1983 the first aircraft landed here. You know we have an airstrip with 15 aircrafts hangared here, operating from here. Then in about 1986 we opened our caravan club site which has also grown and we store up to 30 caravans which brings money in for the farm to keep it going. The latest addition is, last year my son came back to work on the farm and he's bought, we've bought, a lorry which is operating, he is carrying bulk grains and that sort of materials.

*I: Right, so what happens with the produce, yeah... with your crops?*

BOB: With the crops, we grow... the oil seed rape is sold fairly swiftly after harvest and that goes into oils for food production, and is sold directly to British oilseeds. The beans, they go for human consumption if they check out alright, because you can get a little weevil that makes holes in em' and they don't like them and they would go for animal protein. And the wheat is sold as either animal feed - depending on its quality and that all depends on the weather you get in the year - or biscuit production. That's our main crops.

*I: And do you work with the local market, the UK market or the international market as well?*

BOB: Most of it is sold through Grain Harvesters in Wingham. So you would call that basically local, but they are an international firm, you know, so it's fed into the larger firm.

*I: Yeah.*

BOB: But we normally deal with the local firm.



*I: Yeah. And the beans, do you work with supermarkets or with ...*

BOB: No! *[laughing]*

*I: Local markets?*

BOB: Do I look silly? *[laughing]* No, they all go through Grain Harvesters, which is a co-operative, or it was, its now been bought out by Frontier, and they go into the main portal of feed-beans or human consumption-beans which is then sold on the world market.

*I: Have you ever worked with supermarkets?*

BOB: No!

*I: Right.*

BOB: I have looked from the outside and decided that they are too dangerous for me.

*I: Could you maybe tell me a bit more, why do you think they're...*

BOB: Well, in the time that I've been farming I have also been chairman of the local branch of the NFU, National Farmers Union, and I've also worked on the Technical Services Committee in London at the NFU, and the number of times I had to try to solve problems between producers and supermarkets, where supermarkets are—I'll be careful what I say here—but they operate in a very sharp manner, and they're not for the producer, they're for their own shareholders and profit and you tend—if you get stuck with them in a big way—you can't be having a diverse market. So if one market lowers, you couldn't be putting your produce in a different direction. You've got to keep, if you specialize in business, you take a very dangerous route, especially in farming. Because if that product goes out of favor or if the person taking it from you suddenly decides that they can get it cheaper somewhere else, you are left with a farm full of produce that you can't sell, and probably a packing shed full of people who you can't pay their wages. So, I've decided to go the easy route and deal with the public directly, as per the caravan site and the airplanes, and sell into the open market.

*I: So when you're selling to the local markets and you're working with the local farm shops, do you have similar problems or are there any limitations?*

BOB: No... 'cause that... no that tends to... You might not get... the thing about supermarket is that you either get a good price because things are short or you get a very bad price. But going into the open market with an operation like Grain Harvesters you..., they, tend to flatten your problems out so you get a price, whether its... like this year, wheat is only 110 pounds a ton at the moment, where last year it was nearly 200. But that's farming and you get swings and roundabouts. If you can't take a joke, don't join *[laughing]*.

*I: Right, could you maybe tell me what's a typical working day on the farm for you, and then for your employees?*

BOB: It depends on time of the year. During the winter months we do quite a lot of maintenance work on machinery we've got and sheds, and also there is contract work comes in that I do for other farmers. This time of year, I spend quite a lot of time driving the spraying machines spraying other people's crops, and my own, and doing other jobs. In a week or two's time we should be - sort of end of May-April, [correct that] end of May- June - the hay making will start and we'll do a bit of that - although it's less at the moment than it used to be in the old days, I used to do quite a lot, and then



harvest starts. Then you go full tilt to get all the crops gathered in and into the shed and dry them, and start preparing the ground to get next years' crops planted in the autumn. And this is where farming has changed. When I started - when I was fifteen - most of the crops would have been spring crops, sown in the spring (barley, wheat) and you would have only had one or two fields that you put into winter wheat. So it spread the workload. Also all the farms had more animals. We had a lot of animals here when we started. We started with pigs and we went onto sheep and cattle, and the workload was spread because you spread the manure on the fields in the autumn, then you get the hedges down, and then you'd plow the ground to sit over the winter for the frost to work on and in the spring you plant the spring crops. But nowadays everything is rushed-up because you're trying to get maximum yield...

*I: Mhm.*

BOB: ...which you can't get from the Spring crop. You know, unless it's got that growing length of time from the Autumn, it doesn't seem to do the same. I know they're looking at new varieties to try to improve the Spring...spring production, but until that happens...people are able to grow Spring corn because the weather's changed a little bit, but it's not as stressy as people say, but you got to be pretty slick to get it in the autumn without it turning wet on you these days. There again, it's machinery that has changed: our tractors are all bigger. Believe it or not, you can't work as long with big tractors as you could with a small one because you could get on the land in wetter conditions with smaller tractors and keep going. So, although one man can probably plough 30 acres a day, when he was pushed to do 10 acres with a small tractor when I started, in the end it all levels out because the weather stops you sooner with a bigger machine cause you damage the ground.

*I: Right. So I suppose it would be almost impossible to maintain the traditional way of farming or would it be...*

BOB: It would be lovely but sadly you go into business, it's... chances you'll change. And that's mainly because to be in supermarkets... When we started farming and had the pigs, there was a cattle market at Ashford, Canterbury, Sandwich, Lyminge occasionally, and now there's only Ashford. Everybody put their animals into those local markets instead of straight towards the supermarkets as most people do, and therefore all the local villages had butcher shops in them, and they went into the Canterbury market to buy the animals that they required for that week. And the meat consumption has gone down because people have gone... you know, this new dietary business where people want to live forever and all the rest of it, but now scientists are slowly coming round to saying that you need a certain amount of fat because it's good for you...and in the end it all comes back to where we were 50 years ago *[laughing]*. Things just change and there's nothing you can do about it. You know, if you don't go with it you go down.

*I: I am a bit surprised to hear that meat consumption is going down. I suppose in... in those developing countries where they become a bit richer, they start to consume more meat. In developed countries maybe meat consumption is declining.*

BOB: Yes. Well, they had a great scare. I tell you, this is the trouble. Politicians are not that good for agriculture are they? Because they went and made a scare about eggs and salmonella. ...Well, I can remember as a boy, even before we came here in the 50s, when we were having chicken for Sunday dinner my father used to have light a range with a cold fire, you know, it was a cooker with a cold fire but it was safe, it didn't matter and I remember him saying, "I'd better start the fire earlier because we have chicken and we need to cook it well". And when you cook it well it gets rid of the salmonella but everybody just stuffs it in the microwave or just quick flash cook and then that's where the problem came from. And when you're traditional ways of cooking things going down, these problems arise, and of course they overreact. It only needs one person to fall ill and the whole lot's stopped.



And that's the reason when we first came here we started with egg production. That was our first enterprise, chickens. My father...

*I: When was that?*

BOB: We moved here in 1955. That is the first ten acres we bought and that's the letter saying it [see picture no. 4].

*I: Wow...*

BOB: It was £1200.

*I: Could I maybe take a photo of it?*

BOB: If you put any documents that you want, I'll get a photocopy before you go.

*I: Thank you so much!*

BOB: And my father was an insurance agent, selling insurance on a rounds, and he was selling his eggs, in those days they graded them, you know, large eggs which were a certain weight, 70 grams, were 5 shillings, which is 25p now, and the mediums were 4 shillings which is 2... what's a 10p piece, so it's a 10p. Hang on, you're going to wind this back, that 10p. No, what's... You see I am old and decrepit, you can see that, [laughing] but they were 4 shillings and 5 shillings. That's 12 old pennies and 5p; it would have been 20p and 25p. Sorry about that confusion.

*I: That's alright [we laugh].*

BOB: It's the same problem working in acreages and hectareage. It's 2.47 acres in a hectare.

*I: Yeah [we laugh]. So, what made you become a farmer?*

BOB: Well, I suppose, I moved here when I was 7 and I enjoyed the life, I loved it as a child, riding the bike around the farm, and helping on the farm. When I was 10 actually, about '58-'59, my brother – he's older than me, 10 years older, and we started working the farm with the pigs, with dad - was called up to do his national service, which means he had to go in the forces for two years. So then I was thrown into the deep end, I had to do things like plowing and cultivating and...and helping father get the crops in, because father was too busy with his other jobs and for two years I was sort of the mainstay; Tony used to help if he could get home at the weekends. But... so, I was sort of brought up with it really, and haven't known anything different.

*I: Right. So how many generations before you were in the farming business?*

BOB: It was just my father who bought the farm. Yeah, and it's me and there's Alan, my son's come in to it. I hope that one day he'll get married and have grandchildren, and they'll carry on but ah, ... [laughing]

*I: That would be lovely... Ok... You mentioned politics. I'd like to ask you how has the Russian embargo affected you?*

BOB: It hasn't.

*I: It hasn't...*



BOB: No, not as far as I...well, it might have caused the depression in this wheat, I suppose if I'm honest, but that could have been just one of those things, ...but I'm not a hundred percent certain, but that would have been the only thing that it would've affected—the price of feed-wheat—because we used to export a bit... So this is where it's all gone very volatile because you only need a drought in either America or Russia to make a lot of difference to our pricing, cause the world, I think, is on quite a knife-edge with its' food production. You got war raging nearly everywhere, so that's not helping food production. And it's a sad time really, it's as bad as I've known it, I've never... There's always been skirmishes around in the world, but never quite like it is at the moment.

*I: So why would you think that this is happening now?*

BOB: God knows *[laughing]*. They just... people can't live with one another can they?

*I: Yeah.*

BOB: But that's another story.

*I: It is, yeah. Erm... what is your view on organic?*

BOB: Organic? I have actually worked, contract-wise, for people that grow organics, and it affected me at the early days in the fifties when we haven't got any pesticides or anything to keep the crops green. We used to grow, when we first started here, we used to grow sugar beet, which is a beet which they take... they used to take it to a local railway side which is in Aylesham, put it in a carriage, it's like a....like a... very much like a parsnip and they take that and they produce sugar from it, but that used to become covered in weeds, and we had a lot more labor then, family labor and other people used to come and pull it by hand, whereas nowadays I would go through them with a spraying machines and keep the job quick. I'm open-minded about what pesticides do and don't do, but farming wouldn't be the same without them. The yields in organic are very suppressed. If you get a ton and a half of wheat to the acre you are a lucky person, and if you get two tonnes it is an exceedingly good year. It's... it's like everything in this world, you can do it, as long as you don't mind going backwards.

*I: Right. Hm! Do you think that there is a growing market in organics?*

BOB: I think it's... I think it's sort of plateaued out.

*I: Alright.*

BOB: Yes, there are certain group of people that live and swear by it, but I think that people are realizing that we're not the ogres the press makes us to be or some people make us out to be. We are not trying to kill you, we just try produce you the food as cheap as we can and as best quality we can. For instance, apples, the orchards have gone for me because the supermarkets have taken a trade in importing and you have to produce apples to such a standard that you get a lot of wastage because of a little blemish...the modern age wife doesn't like it...but it's got no problem. A little scab on an apple is not going to do you any damage at all; you peel the skin off and away it goes, but they've all got to be shiny in whatever color they want them, red, green, yellow. At the British set you got to have a lot of apples thrown away.

*I: Yeah, that's really sad. Do you think that happens with local markets as well or people are a bit more... [interrupted]*



BOB: I think a local market is more amenable to using their common sense. And if you are talking about farmers markets and things like that... and the grain market. We all have to produce the grains to a certain... It's all tested, every load that goes in, for moisture, protein and specific weight. But I think buying... you know, what you're taking about, its fruit and veg and eggs which they sell in local farmers markets now. I think people go in there and make their own opinions and buy, and they're quite happy to buy decent potatoes with a scab on it.

*I: Mhm, yeah! We have already covered quite a few of the... Yeah. What does farming mean to you? How do you see it? Do you see it as a source of income and nothing more or is it a passion as well or...*

BOB: It is a passion, it is a source of income, hopefully *[laughing]*, but nobody could say that they don't enjoy living where we do in the countryside. You know, you wouldn't do it if you didn't like it. There's also, because we diversified, we meet a different lot of very nice people. It's... yeah, no... it's a far... it's an income and a passion. It's a joint venture. Sometimes the income is better than others, and other times it's a bit close to the... *[laughing]*. So as I said before - if can't take a joke don't join.

*I: Erm... Is it a full time job?*

BOB: Yes, it is.

*I: I am not sure if we covered this. How many employees do you have?*

BOB: At the moment it's family run business...

*I: Family members.*

BOB: ...so, we got my son, my brother, me and my wife, who does more than part time really, but she does book work and term jobs on the farm. At one time when we were contractors-advisers we were employing eight people. But they shut down, that's...this is big business, you don't get no warnings, they just walked in and they shut the research farm next door and that's it! Bang! It was gone.

*I: So, why did they close it?*

BOB: We did that for about ten years, sometime ago we had... they had the research farm and I've put the farm workers in there as a contract.

*I: Aha.*

BOB: We had sheep and we had a shepherd and all sort of things...but then when the shepherd decided he wanted to do something else, Avril and I looked at one another and said: "Do we really want to chase sheep round the field at our age? No! It's a young man sport" *[laughing]*.

*I: Is your farm increasing in size or...*

BOB: it has, but I can't see it increasing anymore because of the price of land.

*I: Right.*

BOB: We've gone up... I've just worked out a few figures here. At the moment, because I share the farm with other people as well, but at the moment we are farming 200 acres plus 100 acres - 300 acres, of which we own 131 acres.



*I: 131.*

BOB: Yeah. We rent 68 acres off other people on a business tenancy type thing. And as I said, the rest of it is on a shared farming basis with Bridge Farm, down...a neighboring farm that was bought off Pfizer, but the owner is not a farmer... it's a... and that's all come from the 10 acres we started with in 1955. That's 60 years this year, this month.

*I: So how about the people that you're working with. Have they changed through time? Are they the same farmers around?*

BOB: Yes and no. There is a certain core I suppose of old time farmers, like the Goddards, but we've got... one or two people are now farming for people from big business, who've bought the land for death duty reasons - and that's why the price is going up. A lot of people are buying land - it's up to £15,000 an acre in this area - solely to get the relief if they all keel over. For the families, you know, and it's put an unrealistic price on the land values.

*I: Mhm. Do you see any way in which this could be counteracted?*

BOB: Well, I think somebodies gonna' have to do something in the end. Either they will cap the death duties, which won't worry me...to say...say 1000 acres. But I don't know what they would think about, but when you got somebody owning thousands of acres solely to save the death duties, the biggest worry I've got is when they bought these farms, they've normally sold the farm houses and the farm assets off. So where the average size of farm, when we moved here, up this road, was ten acres—because originally these farms were for the First World War officers from the army...they had, the old house over there which was in a hut and I'll show you later, and 10 acres as a pension and they gave them that. So, this road was all 10 acre farms. Well, we bought the next one out, and added to it. So we started the block...and will probably end up as bad as the rest of them!— but when you buy a 500 acre farm and sold the yard off...or 200 acres even, like Bridge Farm, it was sold apart, it worries me 'cause you got to rebuild the farmstead. If the size has gone down to a manageable size, say 500 or 1000 acres so that the units were smaller, you got to find houses and farm yards for these things again. Because they have been developed into, you know...even in this road, we've got big iron gates with electronic controls going up which we've never had in the past.

*I: So basically, they're monopolizing farming.*

BOB: Yes, it is...it came to my notice... I was machinery chairman in 1985, when first health and safety really took hold, and other things, and we had the man from the housing HSE, and I mentioned it being draconian because we're farming business and we wouldn't put our family in danger. And he says, you're not a farming business you're an industry... And that's when things changed. It changed from being individual farmers to being on an industrial scale.

*I: So you mentioned that a possible measure would be to put a cap on...*

BOB: Well, I don't know what the politicians are thinking about, probably not, probably never happen because politicians are like everybody else: they're feathering their nests...that was just my thinking, you know.

*I: How about Farmers Union? Because it's like a bridge between politicians and...*

BOB: I don't think that the Farmers Union will, because this is the bit where we can't get going is... we all rely on our subsidies whether it be from the EU or...in the old days it was the Government itself



did it, which was actually a better scheme because when the British Government run the subsidy system--I can remember it now—if they wanted more wheat or barley to balance the food chain here in the country, they would increase the subsidy on the product. You'd know in autumn that year what they were gonna pay for barley, so, you adjusted your farm to get the crop that they wanted, and that all stems from the war when we were producing food for ourselves in the war time. But then the EEC come along and took over and, I don't know if you can remember, they had food mountains 'cause it all went wrong. They had butter mountains and wine mountains, and the fact they try to correct that by making us set-aside and putting land into other activities....but without the subsidies and the food prices as they are in the shop, agriculture wouldn't survive.

*I: Do you see any way out of this situation?*

BOB: The New-Zealanders have done it...it could be done. I would say our inputs are quite expensive: sprays and fuel. Fuel has come down a bit, but sprays and other things are quite... are very expensive. So, if you could get a control on them, which I can't see how 'cause they're private enterprise, and a slight rise in food prices, which if you average out what the average person spends these days compared with the '50s or '60s 'cause somebody was quite happy to pay 5 shillings, remember this which is a quarter of a pound for a dozen eggs in those days because they valued food....Nowadays, they're probably the same price in the shops...well they're probably lower if you work out the inflation of money, they're probably half price of what they were.

*I: Yeah, so it's becoming ...*

BOB: And you know, I remember my mum doing a sort of budget and she would say ... she didn't have rent because we owned the propriety, and she would say: I need this for that, only this much money, I need that for groceries and I need ... bla-bla... and she worked her budget out. But nowadays they say: Well I want 200 for me holiday fund, I need 50 quid to go down the pub on a Friday night at the Duke of Cumberland; *[he laughs]*, oh we got a tenner left for food, what we gonna do with that? *[he laughs]*

*I: Right...*

BOB: Sadly that's the way it's gone. But now it's... it will... people have a way of sorting their selves out I suppose. I have to... I am a bit optimistic.

*I: That's good!*

BOB: If you weren't optimistic you wouldn't do it, would you?

*I: You mentioned that the machineries that you're using have changed through time. Are they constantly changing? How quickly is that happening?*

BOB: It's too quickly really, they're always bringing out new models 'cause it's a very competitive market at the moment, because go back to the old system when we had a lot of small farms: our local dealer around here would have 20 or 30 small tractors and he's just waiting to be bought, and the fruit people in this area would buy half a dozen a year, they would just swap the tractors over. So the units were smaller and they were selling more – more diverse. Now, you buy one big tractor or perhaps two and they've got so many options on it – whether you have shower in it - I'm joking there *[he laughs]* – you know, air conditioning and cab comforts and the bits stuck on the outside that basically you order them and get them to order. So everybody is fighting for the orders. So, the machines are bigger, they're more expensive to operate but they do a lot more work, and nowadays you can't work on them yourself like the old tractors; we did all our own engineering and



maintenance. But you need a laptop stuck in them now to do a lot of work on them, to diagnose them and sort things out.

*I: Right. So in other words... do you feel in a way compelled to purchase these new models...*

BOB: No. No. Not. I always buy second hand or recent second hand - should we put it like that? - because all new models tend to have faults and if you buy a machine that's two or three years old, that not been abused, most of those faults have been.... There's a lot of depreciation -it's like a new car, the day you take it out the showroom it loses 2 or 3 thousand pounds, well that's the same, it happens to tractors - and you get a tractor at a reasonable price that's operating properly. So I normally, I don't think I bought a new piece of kit apart from my generator over the last 20 years. Small tools it's different -chainsaws and things like that - then no you don't... you can buy new.

*I: So now, we are going to talk about how you see your farm developing in the future and what kinds of challenges do you see coming?*

BOB: Oh, challenges. I suppose the biggest challenge is working with the volatility of the world market on cereal prices. The weather always has been a challenge, and always will be. It's not as easy to predict these days what... things move so fast...things can happen in the world that alter agriculture in a split second, and in the old days if there was....say there was a war going on, you wouldn't know about what happened on the telly for about a week, 'till they got the film back, but now they're actually videoing it in real time. So, this is what I'm trying to emphasize: that things... the world is a small place. When my daughter went to Australia, we got there in a day to see her in an airplane, which few years ago would have been six weeks on a boat.

*I: Yeah.*

BOB: And she goes, she tends to like traveling with her boyfriend so I just Skype her anywhere in the world to see her so this is all different from very short time ago. So, it has... We do use technology quite a bit here actually, we've got a website, we've got an automatic weather station which I record all the weather (a) because of the airplanes and (b) because I am not a great believer in global warming aaaa.... *[he laughs]*

*I: Right, so you're doing a bit of science here...*

BOB: Well, it's unofficial, it's for my benefit but the first year that I put that weather station up, the sensors on there, over there *[points out the device]* that's got a temperature sensors who record every half hour.

*I: Hmmm!*

BOB: Right, and onto my computer in the office, and in the first two years, the overall temperature went down by half a degree a year and I'm thinking - what global warming? This is...it's either wrong or they're wrong *[laughing]*... That's my son and daughter behind there *[pointing out to a picture on his tablet]*.

*I: Lovely!*

BOB: Could you see it?

*I: Yeah! So they're not, are they here now?*



BOB: Well, Kim actually worked in London - she works for Goldman Sachs in the bank - but Alan works for me, but he is... do you go into the Duke of Cumberland at all?

*I: Well, I've been a few times.*

BOB: Yeah, you've probably seen him. He goes in there Friday nights.

*I: Right.*

BOB: His friends and him sort of have a Friday night and then sometime I have to pick him up on the... on the... from where they've been having fun. But we've got a website...

*I: Yeah, I've seen the website.*

BOB: Did you had a look 'round it?

*I: It's very informative, yeah.*

BOB: Yes.

*I: Yes.*

BOB: I built it as an information block rather than constant news, 'cause I can't keep updating it. I do... erm...

*I: I think it's very useful to have a website and ...*

BOB: Yeah, for instance like... there's a map on there [unclear 36:10] because we have a lot of caravans and lorries

*I: Mhm*

BOB: You could just say to somebody: If you look at our website and click on the, where is it? That one there, you get... that map comes up that brings you up to the farm.

*I: I saw that there are two webcams as well, are they still operating?*

BOB: Oh yes, we've got more than that, we've got 8 'cause I've had a lot of burglaries. We had 8 visits by the 'as you like-ies' [laughing] so if I go [swiping sound]

*I: So you're mentioning burglars. Do you think this is changing through time?*

BOB: Yes!

*I: A lot?*

BOB: in the last few years it's got worse and that's because of the cuts to the police.

*I: Right.*

BOB: That one there in the airfield with the caravan scans like that.



*I: Hm... that's..that... did you manage to catch any burglars since...*

BOB: Yes, they haven't been back since I set this lot up. But I'll... just briefly run down what going on during the year. We've had 6 visits here. Actually, we've had some caravans; these caravans parked down the side were broken into. Then they stole 14 000 pounds worth of my nephew's tree climbing and chainsaws 'cause he can't run his business from his own farm so they don't live there. Then they broke into my chemical store thinking that I've got diesel in it and they pinched a four wheel drive off the field while the men were building my new hangar down there, and I've had two lots of aircraft fuel stolen about 50 liters a time.

*I: How about dogs, do you have dogs on the propriety?*

BOB: I've got a dog yeah, it's ...they're very good. The modern thieves we've got around here are in and out the farm you don't realize it, and they would take anything from a tractor to your grandmother if you leave her standing there in the yard.

*I: Do you think this is going to get worse in the future?*

BOB: Yes 'cause they're cutting the police all the time! When... I've got policemen applying, retired policemen, and when they were training back in the '70s or '60s there was 19 officers in the rural. There was a police-house in Barham - just on the edge, you're going to Barham on the left-hand side that was a police house - there was two policemen in Bridge. Aylesham police station was open - it had a full complement of officers. Now we've really got one, that comes up from Dover.... Well, a one man army, he's got to have time off. You know, we all moan about them, but I think, what's left of the police force's doing a marvelous job against all odds. I've been 30 years in Neighbourhood Watch. I'm chairman of Dover, and I have been county chair for a ten year stint at Maidstone, solely because I am a believer, you can't criticize unless you've had a go yourself.

*I: Yes.*

BOB: People that are standing on the sideline that say: this is not right, this is not wrong. If they never had an attempt to help these people, and the police need our help and they need information and they need support, if you haven't done that you've got no right to criticize them.

*I: Community collaboration...*

BOB: Yeah. We're getting on very well now; our local policeman has got 90 texts. When you post a text on missing vehicles or suspect vehicles, it sends it to 90 people now; which is a lot of eyes to watch for it.

*I: Yeah.*

BOB: Anyhow, we're off farming again *[laughing]*. It's all a rough shoot because you know, it's a problem.

*I: It's... it's quite relevant. I also saw on your website that you have a pond that you've build...*

BOB: Yes.

*I: In what year?*

BOB: Yeah, and we just reconstituted it.



*I: Mhm...*

BOB: Alan did that last year 'cause it did get overgrown. I made the mistake of putting bulrushes in it and they went down to its clay, and it drained. So yeah, we're on for reviving that.

*I: Right.*

BOB: We've got a very positive attitude to... I used to breed and release barn owls.

*I: Hm!*

BOB: Until English Nature and the RSPB decided we shouldn't do it, because the survival rate is 25%, and that's exactly what it is in the wild.

*I: Right...*

BOB: Did you know that wild barn owls if they run short of food will take the smallest chick and feed it to the others?

*I: No! [laughing]*

BOB: *[laughing]* Sorry mate, your for dinner!

*I: Well, that's nature and surviving I guess [laughing].*

BOB: So, I spent a lot of time doing that. I used to go to fairly way up country to get the chicks from the hatchery where they'd... they'd got surplus birds with the cock birds they didn't want and I used to raise them up and feed them, and release the offspring. But, we were suddenly stopped by licensing which was unfeasible to get... if I would've got a license I would have carried on, but I had a license all the sites where I released them. And, it included telling all the local bird watchers which means they'd all turn up watching for the birds and ruining the job completely 'cause barn owls do like to be discrete. If you put them on a site and people don't get around it too much they will stay and work. But, wildlife is changing... if we're talking about wildlife, do you want to talk about that here?

*I: Yes, yes!*

BOB: It has changed, in my lifetime. Now, there's two or three reasons why the major changes are. Small bird populations, like hedge sparrows and things like that, were very very prevalent out here. We had flocks of them, but with the new food regulations we had to shut our feed stalls down...

*I: Right...*

BOB: ...so the birds couldn't get in and feed. For instance, at the end of my shed we had a food stall for the pigs, and you'd get knocked over by flocks of starling and sparrows coming out the door when you walked up to it 'cause they've been in there pinching pig grub. You're not allowed to let them in anymore, because of salmonella and so forth. Also, there's more predators about now. We've got buzzards here, I've never seen in my lifetime. There's up to four circling in the sky sometimes in this area.

*I: I do... I do see them on Railway Hill as well.*



BOB: Yeah. They weren't here but they've taken...also we've got new legislation which protects certain species like magpies which are not supposed to take but magpies are the worst for small birds. They are vicious; they go along the hedge and take all the little birds out but you are not supposed to... We had a larsen trap before the law came in on the back lawn 'cause I was fed up with loosing blue tits 'cause I've got a box out there, I think we still got blue tits in it and we've caught 11 magpies in one afternoon in it. Well they do...11 birds do a lot of damage to small birds. If they are taking two or three a day, every day, it adds up. Of course, you've got the debate about badgers but they're another thing. I'm just looking at that bumble bee flying around over my lawn. Out there, look. See?

*I: Yep.*

BOB: They're crucifying them, they're crucifying the ground nesting birds, they eat all the starlings, all the skylarks, eggs and the plovers eggs that we used to have in the fields and it's mainly because they are overprotected. There's badgers everywhere in this area, you see them dead on the road. We never saw them before because they were elusive but now I think they're getting short of food because it's... the population's grown.

*I: So, from what I understand, you feel that everything is a bit overregulated...*

BOB: Yes, when things go overregulated the people put in charge of overregulation – and now I'm gonna be careful, you're doing a *[he laughs]* wildlife degree...

*I: I'm trying to be as objective as possible.*

BOB: Yeah. When you do look at problems in your career, keep an open mind on both sides of the incident.

*I: I'll try.*

BOB: Because, if you go blinkered to saving solely the wildlife now, right... nightingales...every year they used to sit and sing. Our woodlands, every year a section of it was cut for paper pulp, pit props for the coal mine when they were done, and skylarks love freshly cut wood, they go in among the stumps and nest. They don't like fully grown wood, so we had pressure on them. They not only shut the coal mines, but some bright spark thought about recycling paper. So they started recycling paper which meant that there was no trade for the pulp wood and they shut the factories in Sittingbourne down; they use to make paper. Now, if I cut wood down to recycle it like it should be because the trees will die if they're left too long 'cause they just get too big and just fall over, like coal was produced like that in the middle... you know, in time gone by....I cut wood. I got to send it either to Wales or Yorkshire to have it processed, which the transport cost takes any profit of the money that we would make, so therefore I don't cut it. So the wood is deteriorating because of (a) the mine shut, and they don't want pit props, but also because people are saving paper and recycling it.

*I: This is quite interesting because you mentioned earlier EU regulations and subsidies and set-asides. Do you think the agri-environment schemes that are run under CAP now help you with all these issues in a way or...*

BOB: No, they don't. They got it completely wrong.

*I: Right.*



BOB: You're not allowed to cut your hedges every year. Right. Now, when we had all the small birds, think back, the farmers... well, granted they were doing it by hand but every year they trimmed the hedges and made them nice and neat, and a nice thick hedge although it's smaller, it's thick. Little birds go in there and the predator can't get them. When you leave a hedge for two or three years it gets a lot of frondy branches which the predators can sit on and they can walk in and they can grab what's in the nest. It's...not thinking. Well, a lot of people—we can say this, we noticed it when they brought all these schemes in—we got a lot of people who've done degrees like yours, and I'm not gonna be unkind here, but they came straight into... they got jobs with DEFRA on this side of it. And they got a one-way view with an inability to listen what farmers talk to them at in the meetings, and I was there, and this is what's gonna be done, this is the new scheme. And farmers were saying: well that ain't quite right. Cause, believe it or not, farmers are not vandals, we live in the country side, I like... I've got blue tits and I like... you know... Sometimes I've sat in the garden with Avril, and we heard a bird singing and I'd say: I'm a failure, that one's still singing *[laughter]*. But, you know, there are... you've got people that have got really solid ideas and you can't budge'em, and they are doing a lot of damage, but not willfully 'cause they think they're right...

*I: Right...*

BOB: But if you... if one thing comes out of this interview, if you keep an open mind all the time in your career and think both sides of what ifs, rather than just, oh this looks good on paper...

*I: So do you think that it's still a one-sided...*

BOB: Yes!

*I: Nothing changed?*

BOB: No... I've never taken on the environment schemes – a) because I've got a pond and they would regulate it so much that I probably couldn't cope with it but I'm quite happy to do what I can do and get it going – and b) with the diversification I've got if I need an odd tree out I'm not adverse to take it down. I need to cut the edge at the end of the runway at least once a year so the airplanes don't hit it, whereas if I was in agri-scheme I'd have to leave it for two years and it would probably be a safety issue...

*I: Mhm.*

BOB: ...growing up. So... they believe... it showed up when we had our hurricane. We've... in this area like Charlton Park, do you know Charlton Park as you go towards Canterbury? If you go up the hill from Kingston...

*I: Mhm.*

BOB: ...you've got Charlton Park on the left hand side, who's got lots of big trees in it. Well, they were planted for furniture making.

*I: Right.*

BOB: So when they got to say 200 years old, they go at it and suddenly cut the old boy down and they make their furniture, but they plant another tree.

*I: Mhm.*



BOB: Now, with the tree preservation order, you can't touch them until they've fallen over and they're useless.

I: Hm...

BOB: Can you see where I'm coming from?

I: Yeah, yeah!

BOB: You got to refresh things. Things don't live forever in the rural. That goes for farmers as well [he laughs].

I: Do you think that this is gonna change in any way in the future?

BOB: What? These laws?

I: Yeah, these laws and... or how could they be [interrupted]

BOB: I don't know how, because everything is so one sided at the moment. I'm gonna have a chat to your boss 'cause he's interested in this quite seriously. He calls them the 'floppy hat brigade' I think. And when you got people like Chris Packham – I don't know what you think of him – but when he says that all research into cancer should be stopped, and the money put into wildlife, that's not a very pleasant man, is it, whatever you think of wildlife. And he did say that in a newspaper article.

I: That's a very one-sided approach...

BOB: It is, yes. Erm...and he's completely... says that the badgers don't take ground nesting birds but every farmer in the area sees the evidence. We've seen them disappear, we've seen holes in the fence lines 'cause bumble bees normally nest along the fence line like that, they all make an underground... 'cause they know you're not gonna dig that bit up... but you go along and you'll see all these little holes like that where the badgers have dug them out and eaten their nests, and disturbed them. And you can tell them 'till you're blue in the face and they say 'oh no, they're vegetarian'! But on his own Spring Watch last year, they swam here to an island and ate all the little baby avocets and they said, 'oh, that must be a rogue one'. Well, the man's blinding itself to what's going on.

I: How about... I don't know, hard evidence – taking pictures and... Do you think they'll maybe take that into consideration?

BOB: I don't know. It's a hard job to do. 'Cause I've been sort of preaching moderation ever since it all started, but you get people that are fanatical and they can be very persuasive and when you get numbers against you, what can you do? You can only... and then you're looked on...actually if you say too much you're looked on as a heretic, really, or anti-nature, anti-environment, but we're not! We're not really. It's just we live with it, and we know actually what goes on. We don't have rose tinted glasses, we might have a few smudges but [he laughs] that's life.

I: Right... erm...

BOB: I'm not putting you off your degree [he laughs].

I: Not at all! I am quite aware of these problems. I hope, I don't know, in the future...

BOB: So what do you ought to do in the future with your degree? Work in agriculture or...



*I: I think I'll do a Masters degree and study further. Yeah, I want it to be food related.*

BOB: Yeah, good. Well, if I've had any influence on you, that's....

*I: I'm sure, everything!*

BOB: You'll meet a lot of interesting people. I don't know how many interviews you're doing. Are you doing more than one or...

*I: Yeah, more than one. We need to interview 50 farmers in total. I'm looking to see if there are any other issues that we haven't discussed. Do you have anything else that you would like to add?*

BOB: I hope that common sense comes back to everything *[laughing]*, but I can't see that. That's a long hope that is. But you know, it would be nice if we could get stability back. This is what we lack these days, it's stability. We've got an election coming up now and whoever wins will have their own ideas and we'll have to swing with it, but if you could... long termism it's what's wanted in both the country and for agriculture. Everything is so short-term at the moment. We've just got this old system of subsidy going with the paperwork, and they've decided to change it all and it's all gone wrong. I've got sheets and sheets... oh, I've brought my form out for my subsidies, I brought it in to show you, its 40 pages long.

*I: Wow...*

BOB: I had to print that off 'cause I couldn't do it online.

*I: So you're doing it yourself?*

BOB: Yeah.

*I: Can you contract someone to do it for you?*

BOB: Well, you could do but...

*I: It's probably expensive.*

BOB: I got to find the figures for them, so shall have to try and sit down and do it.

*I: So do you think this could be simplified?*

BOB: Yeah. Of course it could. You don't need 40 sheets of paper *[laughing]* it's because they've brought the environmental side in it: we now have grain in, which means we've had to change... well I'm alright 'cause my rotation was spot on with the beans in it, but other people who've been growing wheat and rape they've had to bring other crops in which will probably suppress the price of my beans 'cause people are growing beans now to put green in. You get 0.7 of a hectare for green in for beans, so you got to have enough of them to bring it out at the amount that you want onto that point.

*I: So they impose in a way what you're allowed to grow?*

BOB: What we're allowed to grow, yeah.

*I: So that didn't happen in the past. When did this start?*



BOB: Well this, it started to creep in and it started with environmental side on the last system, but this has really kicked in now 'cause... I don't know why but...

*I: So why...what are they trying to do. Are they trying to avoid monocultures or...*

BOB: You ask me? *[laughing]* They're politicians. They just get a fancy idea: this is where we're gonna get the votes from 'cause everybody's turned green...and then it doesn't matter whether it works or not, that's what you got to try and do. Makes me sound a bit caustic doesn't it? but...

*I: Well, I hope that... yeah, we've covered pretty much everything, if we could yeah, maybe take a look at these documents.*

## PART II

BOB: This is young farmers in the early days, that... we formed a group in the young farmers because two or three of the farm lads played and we did pantomime and things.

*I: So do you think that young farmers have similar meetings now?*

BOB: Yes, they do. My nephews and nephew sons and my son was in it, my daughter didn't go, I don't know... 'cause she go up to uni quite quick to do a sports degree, but it's an ideal meeting place for youngsters from the rural area and they do a lot of good things, they have a lot of fun, they probably drive too...

*I: Similar interests.*

BOB: ...they probably drive too fast but...

*I: Oh.*

BOB: ...yes *[laughing]* and they do charity work and it gives em a chance, 'cause a lot of the girls, you don't have to be a farmer, so young ladies from town join up 'cause we have... She was a beautician in a department store for instance. She wasn't connected with farming but she just came along because she liked the things that we were doing – we'd go... visiting farms and parties and... great party goes in the winter *[laughing]*. So... and it is an international organization. My nephew went – Derick – to New Zealand on an exchange with them. I don't think this is...that's a zoo isn't it?...

*I: That looks like the '70s.*

BOB: Pardon?

*I: That looks like the '70s. Yes.*

BOB: Yes, yes...

....

BOB: Oh that's down near the pond.



*I: What year is this?*

BOB: That could well be back when I built it in the '80s.... Yeah, there it is there, see? That's looking the other way, that's looking from over here, when it was... it's basically...

*I: Yeah, it's quite...quite big.*

BOB: Yeah, it's a ...it's... we got it down a bit at 2.5 meters 'cause I did some research on it. Oh! That's another thing. We had the farm inspected 2 or 3 times while they were farming the wildlife group. Quag it used to be called but... and I took advice on the pond 'cause you need a certain depth to keep the temperature right. If it's too shallow it warms up too quickly and...but if you... you want it at least two meters deep.

....

BOB: Because I can't hear that ringing when I'm driving the spray or the tractors my children bought me that.

*I: Oh wow.*

BOB: [laughing] that for Christmas. It shakes my wrist

*I: When the...*

BOB: When the phone goes...

*I: That is... that is brilliant.*

BOB: It's a pebble. It's not... well... it's not the iPhone one, 'cause they're a lot of money, but it's... it's a watch and...

*I: Oh wow.*

BOB: You can get your messages up and all sort of things.

*I: That's interesting.*

BOB: You never know what you'll find on a farm. So I'm not as Stone age as I look.

*I: I am sure that you're not... yeah, with all these changes... you've probably learned to adapt really quickly and...*

BOB: Well, two pieces of advice my father gave when I took over from him, running the place for us: If you start selling bits and pieces off to pay your bills, sell the lot; because you wind up with nothing in the end if you have to start selling assets... if you're not making enough money to cover your expenses. The other bit was: don't specialize, e.g., when we had the chickens we never put a special shed for chickens. And the new hanger I've put up is taller than it needs to because we put grain all around here. If we get an emergency we can tip the trails in there and put grain in here. So should something happen to aviation and the aircraft go away, its still utilized as a farm building. So, it's just common sense really.



*I: Yeah, yeah. So how do you see your farm evolving? I don't know maybe after... in 10 years – 20 years?*

BOB: I don't know if I can answer this because it all depends what happens to the world. But, where ever it runs, I'll go with it. And I think Alan will 'cause he's—that's my son—'cause he's like me. He's fairly switched on I think and I hope...hopefully... He's doing a wonderful job with the lorry... it's got its drawbacks, because it hasn't helped his social life. It will leave here at 4 o'clock Monday morning, we don't normally see him until about 6 o'clock Friday night, 'cause he's got a sleeper cab in it...

*I: Right.*

BOB: And he goes off and he keeps picking up loads until Friday comes, when he's got to have time off and comes back. So, it's not always running back empty to get back here at night so things like that. So he just stays with it and keeps going, and it's making good money 'cause it's not having wasted journeys.

*I: It takes a lot of dedication I suppose.*

BOB: It takes a lot of dedication and, as I say, it is affecting his social life a bit 'cause he can't get out in the evenings to meet people or there...you know, partners, but there's plenty of time, he's 30 odd. So, somebody will come along and like driving the lorry with him *[laughing]*; but... but no... he decided to go that route. He started working here when he was... left school at 18. He didn't go to uni, but he's done just as well. Kim went to uni and did a sports degree. She then got a job in a... she had two years operating Greenwich University sports team abroad - she's very good at organizing. She then went to a job in a... where they find people for other firms... or something, and then a friend of hers got her into Goldman Sacks in Fleet Street, the banker. And she was administration in their crèche, and the first thing she did was to put all their figures onto a spread-sheet 'cause they were doing it in long hand, and the bosses were quite well impressed with that so that they promoted her upstairs to being a PA to a group of buyers, and she's worked her way up. She's done extremely well: a) because she puts herself out and she's... 's pretty switched on. When they were talking austerity they all used to fly first class, which they still do to America, but when they go to the continent it's only an hour's flight and they say they want to save money, so what she did...she booked them all on the Easy Jet. They go: "But there's no first class!" She said "No, then you can't work on there, it's only an hour's flight, you talk to somebody normal". *[laughing]* Come back, they said: "Oh, it's quite reasonable, we enjoyed it. We was talking to people" and you know. Well, you don't need food for an hour's flight, you know, it saves the company a lot of money, and they realize that there's normal people out there. But... she's just off to Venezuel... not Vene.... Her and the boyfriend they're going for a fortnight to South America somewhere. I can't think where it is, it's... but she does all the travel so...

*I: It looks like you are really proud of her*

BOB: Oh I am, yes, they've done well. Then, you know Alan, as I was sayin', he started here when he left school 18 or... yeah, 18. He was working with us for 2-3 years until Pfizer shut the farm and things quieted down. And he said: "Look, I'm surplus requirement here, I've... could... I've been offered a job on, with Valcor, which is a big farming enterprise. I was very upset at the time, I thought ah... but I said: "You take it mate, see what you can do".

*I: Yeah.*

BOB: Well, he went there and got all his certificates for all... loadings... loading machines and other bits and pieces, spraying tickets and he got on very well and then he was offered a job somewhere else, with more money, and he went there; and it's all put him in good stead, because he's got all the paper work he needs, and then he worked for somebody driving a lorry and he said to me... he said: "



I'd like to come back on the farm". I said: "Yeah, I would like you back here as well". Especially harvest and drilling time. He as time off, when he's parked the lorry up for two or three weeks, and he said: "I'm thinking of buying a lorry". I said "Well, the first thing you've got to do is go and chat to your boss, and tell him what you want to do, because we don't want a lot of aggravation 'cause if people get upset 'cause you've started up in opposition.

*I: Yeah.*

BOB: I'm a great believer in being straight with people. There's so much under handed these days, but in politics and in business in my day, if you shook hands across the table on a deal that was it. Nowadays it's only one or two people I can do that to and I know that deal'll stick. Most people are very sharp, they will stab you in the back as soon as look at you. Anyway, he went, saw him and he said "I thought you would've done it two years ago". So he said: "You think I can help with anything?" You know, so we bought the lorry, didn't know if he'll make it or not, but you have to take a chance. He's done excellent, it really has.

*I: So what do you think that made him come back to the farm?*

BOB: Basically he's a farm boy. A... 'cause when it... when I broke my ankle we were hay making and he had a day off school. We actually phoned up the school what was going to happen, to do the baling, 'cause he was good at it. We went and saw the teacher and said look, I've got a broken ankle we need to bale the hay is it alright to ask for a day off. No she...he said, 'cause that's what he's gonna do off work that day, he said and it's all good, as good as being in school if he wants to do it, and he can do it, so. That' the trouble with the education system – the practical side of it is not what it used to be. A lot of people would be very happy going into apprenticeships, learning skills as engineers on the ground in full work where people actually know what they're on. Then what they're doing at the moment. They're trying to force everybody down the academic route. Not everybody is built to do it.

*I: That's true.*

BOB: Ai?

*I: That's true.*

BOB: I'm not talking silly am I?

*I: Yeah, not at all. That... that's very true.*

BOB: You know, I didn't go to university, I did City and Guilds day release when I left school at 15. I went to the Canterbury Technical College and I did the day release City and Guilds, which was... is a sort of diploma you get in agriculture. I did the crop production, machinery and animal husbandry, and then some bits and pieces. But the biggest thing that I was really chuffed with, and that was quite later in life, it was about 20 years ago I did my pilot's license.

*I: Right.*

BOB: And I thought as I hadn't had a higher education, rather went to secondary school at Brockhill, that it might be a struggle. And basically I walked in at the minimum hours, 38 hours and I thought well that's not bad for an old chap that hasn't been to uni and... 'cause it's quite a bit of paperwork involved in doing it then exams but... navigation and everything else, and I found it very satisfying.

....



*I: So are you still growing cattle?*

BOB: No. We used to up until two years ago we used this shed. We put this building up for Pfizer actually, to store their cattle. We used to have 150 in there. They would come from Wales as calves, go in there, and they kept them here as a quarantine, and then after they've been here 3 weeks or for 2 months they would take them down to their farm...

*I: Right.*

BOB: ...to use 'em as control groups, and whatever, they just tested wormers on em. But that was our own cattle we had in the early days, but we used to use part of this barn and rent it out in the winter. But Avril has had a knee replacement, I've had two hip joints done.

*I: Mmm...*

BOB: And cattle, it doesn't matter how small they are now by the end of the winter they're quite big and they get quite boisterous and we decided for safety reasons we wouldn't do it anymore.

*I: Yeah.*

BOB: You got to know when to...

*I: When to change... [laughing]*

BOB: Yeah, when to give over.

*I: Yeah.*

....

BOB: [discussing about photos] It shows you how time flies. In our kitchen we've got an oak table we have built for the millennium, 2000. Do you realize that's 15 years ago?

*I: Yeah.*

BOB: And it seems like yesterday. All of this has gone by in a flash. You don't realize it just happened and...

*I: Yeah...it's life. Yeah...*

BOB: It is. So my advice to you is make the most of it 'cause it goes by extremely quickly.

*I: I know... I am aware of all of this... [laughing].*

BOB: You are aware.

*I: Already, yes.*

BOB: You know, there's not much I would change in my life but you think, where's it all gone? I would spend more time with the kids I suppose, but that's the only... but you don't realize it.

# 50 Farmers' Tales

*An Archive of Interviews with Kent Farmers*



*I: Well, I'm sure...*

BOB: You think you're doing the right thing by working and trying to keep things going and... but you can never get it back.