



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: David Cornforth
Age: late 50s
Location: Lomas Farm, Cranbrook, Tenterden
Size: 160 acres
Type: Beef

Interviewed by: Anna Durdant-Hollamby
Date: August 13, 2015

Anna: *So could we start by talking about how you got into farming and how it all originated for you?*

David: How did I get into farming? Well, family, really. Both my grandfathers were farmers and my mum and dad were obviously farmers; just a small farm up in Yorkshire, on the moors. I had an elder brother, 5 or 6 years older than me and when he left school, he started milking the cows. And I'd do the same, used to work with my dad, but when I got to 14 or 15, my brother was taking on half the workload and dad said 'there's not going to be enough room for you.' And I remember in the early 70s, mid 60s, sending the milk in churns to bulk deliveries, watching the engineer wire up the tank and thinking 'oh that's interesting,' - I was fascinated. and then I trained as an electrician, so got that life skill but I still lived at home during my apprenticeship and kept helping out at night and on weekends and in my holidays. Then I went offshore and earned a bit of money and bought into the family partnership when mum and dad retired. I farmed with my brother for 10 years, built the farm up, mum and dad's old farm, then we bought a bigger one. Expanding, you couldn't produce milk unless you had a quota for it and I'd earned some money working on the oil rigs earning cash, and I'd saved it and just bought milk quotas. And on my time off from the rigs, I just helped my brother build the farm up. And after about 7 or 8 years, I gave it up and came back to farming full-time and that's when I bought the bigger farm.

Anna: *Yep, down here?*

David: No, no, that was up in Yorkshire. And as what normally happens with farming families, we wanted to go different ways. So, sold part of the farm and I was



paid out, and I came down and bought this place, and everything went pear-shaped, absolutely everything went pear-shaped.

Anna: *Cause this was a dairy farm, your wife was just saying, before you took it on?*

David: This was a dairy farm, yeah, yeah. Month before we completed here, BSE broke.

Anna: *Oh God yeah, of course.*

David: Came down here with animals that we couldn't sell, had an original herd of core cows, but because we'd split the herd, had to bring them down here and then couldn't get rid of them.

Anna: *Yeah, sure.*

David: Managed to get the place up and running, then by the time it was up and running, milk prices then started to be screwed down low by the supermarkets. Because when I came down here and I bought the place, farming was good if you could produce plenty of milk and had a big enough quota. And first all the livestock sales went west, then the milk price went west, and I was at the size of milking about 90-100 cows, couldn't afford to employ anyone, so I was doing all the work myself.

Anna: *Doing all the work, wow and that's just relentless.*

David: It is relentless and just led to a nervous breakdown really, struggled on for a couple of years, took advice from so-called professionals, you know who said 'ah you're doing too much work,' I was profitable, my profits were as high as anyone's in the country at the time. But it took its toll. Anyway I did what the professionals told me, farmed things out and got help in and I found out I was losing money then.

Anna: *Oh God, so hard isn't it to get that right*

David: I just struggled. We increased the milk yield per year, the milk prices go down, so in effect my turnover remained the same, but taking more and more work. And the farm needed investment and there just wasn't any investment and I said 'you know I've got to get out of this', sold the cows, cleared the working overdraft and I just went to visit my friend in New Zealand for a year. When I came back...

Anna: *Did you do any farming out there?*



David: Yeah, I was farming New Zealand style and had the shock of my life! It's unbelievably hard out there. Well I was 40 when I went out there....

Anna: *Is it, because of the climate or the isolation factor? Or just different things?*

David: You are isolated, it's just hard work, it's bloody hard work! Trouble is, my friend's a bit of a workaholic as well.

Anna: *Ah, okay [laughing]*

David: We took on this crazy farm that was just completely derelict, virtually. We started milking cows and calving them. We were rounding up cows on motorbikes as they calved. In the same manner as people would herd sheep, you know and doing electric fencing to keep them in, and...yeah, so that was, I was 40 then, realised I'm too old for this!

Anna: *Not sure if anyone would be, sounds exhausting! [laughing]*

David: It's somebody's job your age.

Anna: *[still laughing] yeah! Not sure.*

David: They keep telling me, it changes after calving, because it was seasonal calving. The workload is horrendous when you're calving, and then when your breeding....but when they're safely back in calf, on a well-maintained farm it's a bit of a doddle, you know.

Anna: *Okay, sure, so it was going out to attend to cows calving?*

David: Yeah, well I mean, they're quite self-sufficient out there cows; we've gone wrong in this country, we really have... Anyway, I went out there with the intention of buying a farm out there, and I got out there and farm prices are actually comparable to what they are in this country!

Anna: *Really? That is surprising isn't it, just because I always thought it would be cheaper out there actually.*

David: It is cheaper 'cause you don't have the residential value, you know, but it's more expensive because land is valued on its profitability.

Anna: *I see.*



David: There you are, I came back to this country and I didn't make the break. I should've sold this place, then I would have had enough to buy somewhere out there, and I came back after a year, When I came back I had 5 animals, had to pick up my tools and go back to work as an electrician, which I did, which I still do.

Anna: *Yeah, making it all work, it's so tricky these days isn't it?*

David: It is!

Anna: *You've got to have so much land to make a profit and then with that amount of land, you've got so much more work and people to pay, I just can't see how all the maths check out, it must be really tough.*

David: Yeah, scaling up, I mean this is a small farm really, when dairy was profitable you could make a living, but when you're not doing dairy on this place, it's just not big enough to do it full-time.

Anna: *So is it just beef now?*

David: It's just beef, yeah. What I learned out in New Zealand, I'm employing on this farm now. We do rotational grazing, which I've since got a bit addicted to and I changed my whole concept to holistic management now, where we graze animals, move them on and you don't actually tightly down, make the animals graze all the pasture. You make them trample some of it so you feed the soil.

Anna: *Brilliant, yeah because that's what's suffering so much at the moment isn't it? The soil.*

David: The soil with these modern farming techniques has been destroyed.

Anna: *Yeah exactly, it's got nothing left, I keep hearing.*

David: There's nothing left, there's no humus left. We've discovered through lots of YouTube videos about people in the Mid-West in America. They're just reclaiming land, and they're stopping the desert coming back. Because in these extreme climes, we're in a lovely climate here, these extreme climates, land has been turned to desert. People don't realise it, for 1 person in the world, he needs half a tonne of food a year, but modern agriculture is destroying 10 tonnes of soil a year per person to produce that half a tonne.

Anna: *Yeah? Oh God!!!*

David: It's not sustainable!



Anna: *No, no exactly.*

David: And the supermarkets are driving it in this country, because they're forcing dairy cows to be kept in huge units and kept inside, and the way they farm, they put more carbon in the atmosphere, and I don't believe it's any good...

Anna: *It's such a short-term model isn't it?*

David: It's a short-term model and it's not sustainable!

Anna: *Yeah exactly!*

David: But no one listens to me! Farmers, they don't understand what we're doing, they think we're crazy really.

Anna: *I think that's really exciting, to hear about someone doing it slightly differently because as you say, most farmers, well I'm a bit biased, I shouldn't be but I'm a bit biased because I've grown up in Forest Row where they have 2 organic farms, where they do the same kind of rotations with the beef farm and have a very humane dairy farm, as humane as you can get with dairy. So when I hear about all these industrialised farmers, I'm sitting there going 'okay but can we talk about the sustainability factor or non-sustainability factor?' I mean I hope people wake up but they don't seem to be.*

David: I mean, my family, we lived 25 miles away from a nitrogen plant and back in the 60s and 70s, if we could have had a pipe from that factory with nitrogen coming, we would've been happy, because we used incredible amounts of nitrogen. My brother is organic now. I don't know if he does it the same way as I do, I think he still puts nitrogen in but I do it now from a different perspective.

Anna: *Different perspectives, definitely, and something like that where the cows get better treated...*

David: Well what I find is that my system of farming now is that I don't use any nitrogen, just a bit in the spring and I'm not buying fertiliser, I'm not buying lorry-loads of food. Alright I'm not producing milk but my animals are virtually up to where I was at the peak of my dairy farming. And I'm just not as stressed! Back then, I was buying fertiliser like it was going out of fashion, I was renting land to grow maize on, feeding them conserved forage virtually 360 days a year. Whereas now, the beef animal I've just sold, he was inside 87 days last winter. Rest of time, he was just on grass.



Anna: *Just on grass, that's amazing, that's so great that they've got all that pasture, really cool. So did the Foot and Mouth hit you after the BSE?*

David: Well it did and it didn't, you know obviously we couldn't move stock, but I mean when I was in dairying, calves are worthless anyway, so we were shooting them. ... And I think back then I wasn't putting anything to beef animals, so I didn't have beef animals to sell because I was just trying to build up number, build up numbers, keep more and more more cows. And I just realised it was unsustainable really. It didn't really affect me.

Anna: *That's good!*

David: Although I almost wished I'd got it. I know that's a terrible thing to say, but some of these farmers, they got ridiculous amounts of compensation.

Anna: *So do you sell all the beef to? How do you sell the beef?*

David: Word of mouth, because I work off-farm in a non-farming environment, I'm working with people, who don't know I've got a farm down the road. I get talking to them and get them to realise that grass-fed beef is quite good. One of my contractors did the same thing, but because he was an agricultural contractor, all he knew was farmers. So that's how it works.

Anna: *So it's all privately sold, you don't have to deal with supermarkets?*

David: Well, I mean obviously a lot of the animals have got to go to Ashford Market to be sold. But I'm trying to build this up, we're doing about 3 or 4 animals a year, I'll do 5 next year, it's pretty small scale.

Anna: *Yeah pretty small scale, there's a lot to be said for that!*

David: There's a lot more profit in it, a lot more profit.

Anna: *Presumably because you're not having to fight all the time for a, I'm just trying to think how to phrase that properly, well you're not fighting against the supermarkets. Do you have to deal with anything related to the EU? We're quite interested in how EU legislation has affected farmers.*

David: aah EU, well, you've got to deal with these bloomin' subsidy payments, you know. They keep altering it, I've got to get my head round the next environmental regulations.



Anna: *Yeah I've been talking about this with various farmers, things like the 3 crop rule and the hedgerow rule and stuff like that and all those kinds of things that don't actually apply to farmers on the ground necessarily at all, it must be really challenging. Are there any particular things that you've come up against or just generally related to the EU?*

David: I find the way I'm farming now is much better for the environment, but I'm finding it increasingly against the odds to get the maximum subsidies out of the government.

Anna: *Is it? Wow! Even though it's for the environment.*

David: They haven't made the link between the way I'm farming to the way they want me to farm. For instance, under the Stewardship Scheme, one of the conditions of the scheme if you get into it, you've got to have a field of grass and sward that is less than 7cm.

Anna: *God, that's so arbitrary!*

David: Yeah! And I had an advisor on the farm a couple of years and I said 'look that's no problem for me, because I rotationally graze and that bit there is less than 7cm and the rest of the farm is above. It's great for wildlife, crickets, insects, the whole lot!' And he said 'It doesn't work like that, the whole thing, you've got to have a clump of grass there that's less than 7cm and a clump of grass here that's less, you can't have all the grass.'

Anna: *Unbelievable isn't it?*

David: Because some bureaucrat has decided...

Anna: *That that seems like a good idea! It makes me think of Kafka novels, people having to fit into these ridiculous boxes that no one is going to fit into.*

David: Yeah, no one looks at the whole system!

Anna: *Yeah exactly, no one's thinking about farmers actually on the ground.*

David: I mean, what do you think Jane? *[speaking to his wife]* do you think there's more wildlife on this farm? You complain when I cut the hedges...

Jane: No, I think it's being less intensively farmed isn't it...?

David: It is and it isn't. I'm not piling chemicals on, I'm not going out with a sprayer.



Anna: *Well that'll have a huge impact in itself won't it, because that's what the land is used to having and the soil, like most importantly! Someone did say to me the other day that the lack of nutrients in the soil is the biggest crisis we're facing and no one's really talking about it.*

David: Oh it is! The problem is that there's nothing to hold the nutrients in the soil.

Anna: *Yeah, yeah. It's all about the soil chemistry isn't it?*

David: Well, it's all about the fungi in the soil and the roots. I've just been at Aylesham Market today and we saw one farmer who was offloading some Friesian bullocks, and its quite obvious why he's selling them, he's got no grass. And you can see from the animals he's got no grass; they've haven't had enough to eat all summer. And he's selling 2 year old animals for £450, well, it's not profitable, he's losing money on those animals, it's only those EU payments that are keeping him going. But I mean my animals, I'll show you.

Anna: *They look like very happy, shiny, healthy things.*

...

Anna: *What kind of breeds are they?*

David: Anything that's cheap in Ashford market! Anythings' that cheap...

Anna: *I've heard good things about Ashford market, I 've never been there but sounds like its one of the only proper markets left in Kent.*

David: It is really, even that's not so vibrant really, its only cause the channel tunnel is doing so well, they got all these big permits to put up newer facilities. You go to Aylesham market, its like going back to the middle ages, its right in the middle of the town, they still rings tin sheets...

Anna: *Amazing it still going...so a mixture of breeds...I don't even know what cheap breeds are, do you mind naming a few?*

David: Well, when I say cheap, what I mean is they've basically been abused, and not been fed so they're thin. I get them here and rescue them. But I am going towards continental..we've got now the Frisian, put a line in it to get the milk, so that animal leaves lots of milk to make the calf grow. Lot of southern farmers make the mistake of buying a big fancy fat Limousine or Charolais cow, which is all well and good, it looks the part, but it doesn't produce the milk. But then in this part of the world they don't manage the grass so the poor cow can produce the milk! So, the



animals I buy they won't touch, because they go to skin and bones quickly, because they don't grow the grass to feed them.

Jane: ...don't forget to mention the EU, cause its had a massive effect on us because of the milk quota, hasn't it? How it's all separated out, and the quota was how much you could produce, and you were kind of limited by that. It became a currency, that was bought or sold as well. I don't think it really mattered now when the quota went....

David: No, it does matter. If someone borrowed money with the AMC to buy milk quotas ten years ago, that milk quota is worthless and they're probably still paying the loan off.

Jane: I mean we could have a bit.

David: When I came down and bought this farm, it was £390,000. The milk quota was worth the same as the farm.

Jane: shocking really, and people have rich on trading it, by selling it, it was never intended to be like that.

David: I mean that was good for us in the 80s. When I was working on the rigs I was earning lots of money, I bought milk quota 25 pence a litre, 18-15 pence a litre. And then we bought this bigger farm, we didn't have the cows to produce the milk, so we then leased out the quota, what we owned, for 15-16 pence a litre a year! You know, it was crazy, when you look back. We actually probably made more money doing that than we did physically milking the cows we had. You listen to people down here it was the same with the hop quotas.

...

David: The way I farm now is a complete turnaround to the way we thought it was the way to farm when I was growing up.

Anna: So was it quite traditional sort of muddle that you grew up with?

David: We were really intensive, as much feed, fertilizer as we could put on. I remember some of the old boys used to say, you Cornforth boys are poisoning the grass, you're making it sour. And we thought, what does he know? Silly old fart, he belongs in the last century! But looking in hindsight now, he was right!

...

David: I honestly think, I look back and think that all the subsidy that has been put into sustaining British agriculture since the war, its been captured..., been snatched



off us by these big companies like ICI, BOCM, big seed companies, grass seed companies, corn seed companies, they've just honed in and they've taken that off the poor simple humble farmer, they've taken it off him by telling him that that's the thing to do to make his business more profitable.

...

Anna: So they only go in barn for as short a time as possible, is it, presumably its weather dependent, is it?

David: No, well, no, what I'm looking at now, it's food dependent, I'm looking at ways to keep them outside, but to keep them outside you've got to keep them in a small area and move them every day. But the problem is you've got to have enough food in that small area... cause you must move them everyday or else they just make a mess. So, I'm looking at, starting to investigate, things like red clover and various fescues that we can grow now, and they will look terrible, but they will go down and the cows will be able pick..., there's got be a thick enough mat there for the cows to walk on, without them ruining the soil in 12 hours, 18 hours, but feed them as well. But this is really new to me...

Anna: How long have you been thinking about this and doing this?

David: This method of farming? Its started off 6, 7 years ago, when I got a reasonable number of animals. Its really kicked on, intensified in the last 18 months, haven't I Sarah? I've really intensified my thoughts about... they think I'm crazy!

But, in New Zealand, animals are not housed! The only shed we had on the farm was a tiny little shed for the baby calves, and a three sided shed, one side...a roof with...well nothin', and open on three sides...you don't need to keep them inside, but they must be fed, they got to be fed; the rumen's got to be full to capacity at all times. We used to feed the dry cows out there in three foot of snow...

David: to me electric fencing is the most important thing you can have, what you're doing is mimicking all these herds, these bison and buffalo in America, and the wildebeest in Africa, they stayed as a herd, they have to stay as a heard because if they didn't they'd get eaten by lions, and the herd have to keep movin'. Before man got involved, there was horrendous amounts of animals out there, they're al gone, we've killed them all. And the land has suffered, its gone back...because, you need the density of animals there, on the ground eating the grass, but not only eating it, padding it, pushing it down and exposing soil, and getting the bugs working from the poo and the urine, increased the fertility of the soil. And what do we do, we try to mimic it with tractors, moving a tractor just needs fossil fuel all the time, but animals recycle the vegetation. I always...was bothering me, must clean the field out,



I couldn't bear to see the fields wasted and grass pushed down...but that is the best thing you can do for a field of grass...

David: so yea, I mean, I've turned around and doing the complete opposite from what I used to think was the best, growing up in the 60s and 70s...

David: ...yea, there's a government scientist, she comes down here, partly ... government department, trying to get people to understand how grass grows, and I feel sorry for her, cause she's banging her head against a brick wall...

David: Farmers are very traditional, they don't like change...

Anna: Exactly, they've been doing it for a couple of generations and....

David: yea, the problem is they're wealthy enough to vary on doing it...I'm not, if I had kept on farming the way I was doing, this place wouldn't be in my ownership now, I'm quite sure of that...

David:...well, like I say, it's a very wet farm, and 90 days last winter they were inside.

...

Anna: Weather and climate, are these particular issues...when it comes to, I guess obviously, with the grass...what are your favourite conditions?

David: To be honest, now I know, dry conditions, you know, dry. Terrible for grasslands really, but if you grow the grass and then keep it and you don't overgraze the ground, the grass keeps growing. Other farmers haven't grasped that in this part of the world. You see, when I first came down here, I'd be praying for rain, as soon as there was a rain cloud, I'd be out there with nitrogen, spraying nitrogen...

Anna: In terms of cultivating the grass you don't need to that much...

David: No, well let the worms do that....give the grass time to grow so the roots go down and can reach the moisture and various plants can recycle, bring up the minerals...you don't need to lime, I just found this out. If you do this properly you don't need to lime...I never worm my animals now, don't use chemicals and have not had an animal that's suffered. ...the problem is, you inject them with wormer and it travels through in the dung and kills the worms, and then it kills the soil.

....

David: The thing is, if farmers adopted the way I farm, all this climate change could be stopped within ten years! We get carbon dioxide levels down to pre-industrial revolution levels.....it makes the land suit...you can store horrendous amounts of

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carbon in the soil. I was watching a YouTube video of a guy in the Midwest, two brothers right, the Dad dies, well I don't know whether he died,...but, you can have that half and you can have that half. One guy kept on farming like his daddy, pop farming the traditional way, phosphate, potash, liming. The other guy took this approach that I got. After five years, the boundary fence, they took a soil sample, and the top of the conventional farm soil was a bit of soil like that, black on top; this other one here, the soil colour was black for ten inches! And all that is carbon, which stores water, 8 times its own volume. This guy was forever spraying putting fertilizer on, this guy was doing nothing, just managing, rotational grazing....