



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Les Fordham, Barbara Fordham
Age: 60s
Location: Coulden's Farm, Edenbridge, Tenterden
Size: 650 acres
Type: Mixed: Arable-Dairy-Beef-Sheep

Interviewed by: Anna Durdant-Hollamby
Date: 20 July, 2015

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Anna: *I was wondering if you could tell me some of the main ways that you've seen farming and your experience of farming change in the time that you have been doing it? And feel free to go wherever with that that you want because there are no specifics.*

Les: Right, well, from a dairy point of view, back in the 60s, when we started... early 60s, we had Guernsey cows and I think when we started, we had 28 and there were three people working on the farm. Well over the next, I dunno, ten-fifteen years, we changed to black and white Friesians...and we went up to about a 160-170, I guess. And all the followers and everything else and the great difference, I guess was the huge amount of difference in milk yield, you know. That was the main difference I suppose, and then during that time we upgraded parlours twice I think. We went from an old cowshed to an abreast parlour and then we went to a herringbone and we're still in that one, which we've had for thirty something years. But we're now down to about fifty cows and shortly to be packing up, unfortunately!

A: *Oh, wow really? Everything or the dairy side?*

L: Yeah, I mean I've been milking cows for forty five years now, and I've nearly had enough of getting up at quarter past four in the morning [*laughing*].

A: [*laughing*] *I'm sure!*

L: Every day of the year, yeah.

A: *Just one of the most relentless things and if you're doing other things as well, like beef.*



L: Yeah, the beef side of things sort of started when we started slowing down and cutting down on the cows, we started rearing our own Simmental crosses out of the dairy herd, and we have been doing that for probably ten or fifteen, maybe fifteen years I suppose. And we've brought in some store cows and some beef calves and reared them. Now we've got about 180-200 beef animals, I suppose. We sell them straight to ABP at Guildford, rather than go through the market. We used to go through the market, but we actually found that we were getting a better price without any complications going straight through to ABP. Listen to those geese!

[cries of early morning geese getting louder and louder]

A: *Yeah I was gonna say, is that geese? Wow! Are they in your fields?*

L: Coming over here, amazing!

[Pause while Barbara Fordham brings in coffee]

A: *Oh there they go [reference to geese], wow! A big old flock! [laughs]*

L: So that's really the difference, the huge increase in milk yields, and the huge difference in the speed of milking cows. When we used to, when you're doing twenty eight cows by two blokes and it takes forever to walk around and do churns and take churns to the bottom of the drive. It's all a bit different now. ...And on the machinery side of things, I mean, sorry about the dog.

A: *No, it's fine, don't worry about it - he's lovely! [talking to the dog] you're very soppy aren't you?*

L: It's just an amazing difference in tractors.

A: *And machinery - yeah I'm sure*

L: And machinery and the size of everything. We used to do a lot of hay for horse people and we still make quite a bit of hay and we used to throw the whole lot into the barn by hand and do our own bales and everything else. Now we don't get off a tractor really! Just big bales, put them on a trailer, come back, take them off the trailer with a big grabber, stick 'em straight into the barn. So that makes life a load easier.

A: *I was gonna say, it must cut hours down! Considering how relentless a farm day is anyway, even with machinery, to have done it all by hand, as you say!*



L: Yeah, we were fitter and younger then! *[laughing]* and that did help!

A: *But it makes a difference in terms of size of labour force and stuff as well, doesn't it?*

L: Well now it's really me and one chap, I guess. My brother's older than me and he's not very well, so he does a bit, a bit of tractor driving, but that's about it. And now we grow, over the last fifteen years I s'pose, we've grown maize for the cows. That's sown by contractors and harvested by contractors, we do the pit and that sort of thing.

Barbara Fordham: Your wife, she gets involved?

L: Pardon?

Barbara Fordham: What about your wife? She gets involved?

L: Ah yes, sorry, my wife gets involved *[chuckling]* she looks after me

A: *Keeps it all running, I'm sure! [laughing too]*

L: Yeah, yeah. We make a lot of silage, we do it all ourselves, for the cows and the bullocks. We contract farm most of our acreage, which is 650, which is the main farm adjoining. Which we make hay on, some silage, maize, we grow some wheat and we rear a lot of beef animals. And we've got a huge yard up there where we can keep 150 animals in the winter. So that's basically what goes on now. I mean and we're not one of these modern-tech, high-flying things and that's probably where you want to go to.

A: *Ah well, no this is interesting too, I like getting all experiences. I've actually had practical work experience on some organic farms, which gave me a little bit more of an understanding of just the intensity it takes to farm. Obviously, again, organic is different so, yeah, no I like getting a flavour of all types.*

L: Well we're fairly organic now, we have hardly got any animals and so we use very little fertiliser that we put a bit on the silage ground. And we obviously put a bit on the wheat and the maize. Other than that, nothing!

A: *Yeah nothing, ah that's really impressive. Then you are, it's just the whole certification process always seems a bit ridiculous!*

L: Oh certification, you've got to jump through a million hoops.

A: *Exactly and have land that's been sort of untouched for years and I just think ...*



L: Yeah and the other thing, onto that, the single farm payment thing is the biggest load of garbage ever, really, when you think about it.

A: *Is that the EU payment?*

L: Yeah, yeah. Farmers should never really be paid for not growing crops in my view. Insecticides and stuff like that and next year with this greening rubbish about leaving fields just to grow, we've left one field.

A: *Ah it's just...rewilding or whatever?*

L: Yeah, yeah. And it's full of weeds and they're all growing up and they're going to spread all over everywhere, which it's absolutely absurd!

A: *It is so...to put those kinds of sanctions in place does make me really angry!*

L: And the fact that you can't start hedge-cutting now until...

A: *Oh God yeah, I heard about the hedge-cutting thing - that must be a nightmare!*

L: It's to do with birds nesting, no birds nest in August, I'm sorry but they don't! Maybe the odd pigeon, but I don't think we'll worry about them too much.

A: *Yeah exactly! No it's that kind of thing, the EU is a big thing that we want to find out about. Because that's happened in the time and we're very curious about people's experiences and usually it's pretty negative.*

L: Well, it's quite nice to get a cheque obviously, but whoever's running it at DEFRA, or whoever's in charge, has made such complete balls of the whole thing, excuse my language.

A: *Yeah, I totally get it!*

L: This year. And if they're going to be computerised, be organised and then they're not ready! Why say you are when you're not, you know.

A: *And have some more understanding of what's happening on the ground. As you say, the hedgerow rule? Do you actually know what happens in hedgerows at certain times?*

L: I mean I put my hedgecutter on the other day because a chap wanted some stuff cut under his electric fences, and we had to cut underneath there. Anyway, I thought about it



and along there [*points outside*], there's a lot of thistles growing up and I thought about it a lot, 'should I go and cut them down?' Well probably I shouldn't, so I'm just going to let thistles go to seed and blow their seeds all over the place.

A: Exactly and then you have six foot thistles that are impossible to cut down. God what a nightmare!

L: It's just ridiculous!

A: Very frustrating!

L: But anyway, some do-gooder somewhere thinks it's a great idea...

A: Yeah exactly, if they're pulling all the strings, it's very tricky, definitely. Talking of challenges, what's been your major experience of things like disease and either animals?

L: Disease, well we had some BSE cases, which were really very sad! Mastitis cases in the old days, we used to get a thing called coliform mastitis in cows, which was horrible.... We don't seem to get as much as we used to, mind you I haven't got so many cows so probably the pressure isn't a problem anymore. So I s'pose when we were fairly full up with cows, in fact we were very full up, we used to get probably more of it in fact, and feet problems in cows. On concrete and stuff in the winters. But now we've scaled down, you don't seem to think about it quite so much, but we used to get quite a lot of trouble. On the cow side of things, we had, obviously BSE was the big one. And the worry about foot and mouth when it was really near.

A: Yeah that's what I was gonna say, those are the two big ones.

L: Yeah.

A: But you were okay through the foot and mouth thing? It didn't affect you?

L: Touch wood, yes, I mean yeah. Other than that, I don't think we've had much, I mean you get your normal stupid things with cows trying to kill themselves.

A: Oh really? Do they do that?

L: Oh yes, with calves and calving and calves coming the wrong way. We've had deformed calves and silly things you don't think about. We seem to have been a farm that's had loads of twins.



A: Oh really?

L: Yeah, yeah, we don't seem to get so many now, but we used to get lots of sets of twins and sometimes that's not a good thing, sometimes you're lucky and they both just pop out and everything's fine. Otherwise you can have two coming at the same time, one backwards, one forwards, one all over the place. The other problem is now that we've got less cows, they're under less stress, cows when they're dry before they calve, are probably putting too much on in condition and the calves are getting too big, so I'm having a bit of a problem trying to stop them from calving too big calves, which upsets the cows.

A: Yeah sure, yeah that's not great for them, I see, that's interesting yeah!

L: We keep sheep in the winter as well.

A: Oh do you? How many, roughly?

L: Oh probably, over the whole lot, probably 400/500.

A: Wow, yeah, that's an impressive amount!

L: And dairy cow fencing is not built for sheep. And as soon as they start giving out, I tell the bloke he can have them back *[laughing]*

A: [laughing too] okay yeah exactly I've had enough of the sheep now!

L: They always seem to get out on Christmas morning, I don't know why!

A: Oh really? Yep that would be typical, just as you're trying to have the one day off a year [laughing]

L: No I don't actually, I've milked every Christmas day for the last forty five years!

A: Have you? Wow. Well here's to that. If I had a drink I would raise my glass, because that's full on.

[Arnie, the dog appears]

A: Lovely boy, how long have you had him?



L: Well, since a puppy and there's been a bit of a problem with his coat. But he's a lovely chap, we've had trouble with his skin but he's a great boy. He's about five I think, yeah. Right?

A: *Excellent, thank you so much, so far, this is really cool. So it's you and your brother that started?*

L: Well my dad was, he was a chemist and an optician but a frustrated farmer and we used to live about two, three miles away. And we had eighty acres there and unfortunately he bought this place in 1960 and within probably four years, he died. It was very sad, so he never got to do his real passion. When he bought it, it was forty or fifty acres, and twenty eight cows and three blokes working. So it was a bit of a different scenario.

A: *So it was quite a different picture to what's there right now?*

L: Yeah with a couple of tractors, and anyway that's how it used to be but it's not quite like that now. Now we've got big John Deeres and things....

A: *And contractors and it's amazing how much it's changed!*

L: We do quite a bit of contracting ourselves because we've got the gear.

A: *That's cool, what else shall I ask you? What kind of other things, hmm? So would you say your interest came from your dad's passion in it?*

L: My interest, my own personal interest, when I left school, back in those days you could get a job just like that, getting a job wasn't actually a problem. I left school when I was sixteen and went to work for a bank. I did that for about three years and then I went to work in the City in London at Lloyd's, underwriting. I used to ski every year and I was halfway up a ski-lift in Italy one day and the ski-lift stopped and it was floating about on the most gorgeous sunny morning and I thought 'what am I doing? Getting on a train every day, wearing a suit and tie with hundreds of thousands of other people walking across London Bridge' and I thought 'well I'll give it up!' So I left then and went back, did a year working on another farm, then I went to Plumpton Agricultural College. Did an NCA or whatever they call it, I think it was National Certificate in Agriculture or something like that, which was alright. Didn't learn a lot but had quite a good time *[laughing]*. Then I started working with my brother and that was probably '64/65, something like that, I dunno.

A: *Wow, brilliant, that's really interesting.*

L: Come on Arnie, get out of it! Sorry about this.



A: No, no, he's sweet.

Barbara Fordham: You used to work in Forest Row at the bank didn't you my love?

A: Oh did you? One of the banks there?

L: Yeah, yeah, used to work in the bank in Forest Row.

A: Ah wow! There you go, you know it well then?

L: Yeah, great little place.

A: Also changed a bit since that time [chuckling]

L: Yes it has changed, God, you're not changing!

A: Well I've only been there, seventeen, well no actually nearly twenty years, most of my life! [laughing] it's a cool little place for a little village. Oh, that was really interesting! What else can I ask you? So you were saying about selling the beef earlier, was it?

L: And the hay as well.

A: Sorry the hay was it?

L: To start off, we sell milk.

A: Yes, yes of course, how do you sell that?

L: We used to sell it to the Milk Marketing Board, which you've heard about. And when that all stopped, it all got - you could do what you like, you know. The Milk Marketing Board was dissolved, then we went with a company called MilkMart which was basically the offshoot of the Milk Marketing Board. Then a few years later, we set up a sort of, what do they call it? A cooperative, no, I dunno what it's called really. That was called Southern Milk Farmers or something.

A: Okay, so a kind of collective?

L: Yeah, with guys all round this area and a bit further south into Sussex and that was all going very well and we were being paid decent money for our milk but the problem was



that in fact, it turned out, I didn't realise at the time, but we were all supplying, 90% of our milk was going to one of the supermarkets, I can't remember which one!

A: Oh okay, yeah!

L: And one day the supermarket said 'we don't want your milk anymore, we're going to get it from somewhere else. So that was the end of Southern Farmers, bang gone! So then we joined a company called Freshways, which is in South London. They supply lots little garages and little corner shops around South London and places like that. And they do cheese, eggs and all sorts of stuff and they provide milk. They've been okay. My neighbour is with Marks and Spencer and has to jump through a million hoops!

A: I was gonna say, God yeah! Especially with milk, I'd imagine!

L: Yeah, has to do everything! I mean we, obviously, we're accredited or whatever you call it with dairy, the little red tractor thing, with beef and dairy and everything. But to have a contract with Marks and Spencer or one of these top supermarkets you do need to..., you do earn good money from it, but...

A: Yeah but it's all the stuff that comes with it though, I guess a bit like with the EU isn't it? Restrictions etc? And so apart from with Southern Milk, have you dealt with supermarkets much, with beef or?

L: Well no, because my beef goes to this ABP.

A: ABP in Guildford!

L: And most of their stuff goes to Sainsburys.

A: Okay, yeah!

L: So Sainsburys come back to us every year, I think, it has been, all about this garbage with greenhouse gases and how much CO2, and frankly, I can't be dealing with it but there you go.

A: Yeah, I'm sure, but they're cows aren't they? They're always going to produce a lot [laughing]

L: Yeah I know. And you drive into Europe and those bloomin' factories and stuff belching out black smoke everywhere and they're worried about a few cows having a poo somewhere.



A: Yeah exactly, that's just what they're going to do. It's just how their stomachs process or whatever, messed up priorities in my opinion. Okay so it goes to Sainsburys and ABP are good to deal with?

L: Touch wood, they've been fine! They pay you quickly, so yeah they seem fine. I sort of semi-regret not dealing with the local market, but I mean at the moment I know what I'm gonna get. I like the local market and I feel like I'm letting them down, but you know at the end of the day, you have to think about what's good for you...

A: Yeah, the bottom line and all that. It's hard with markets, it's lovely, I've noticed this sort of renaissance in them and I wonder how... because a lot of it's quite kind of Yuppie 'I've got a smallholding and I'm selling my handmade stuff' and I wonder how much of the real farmers getting a look-in here? And even if they are getting a look-in, is it profitable for them?

L: Yeah, it is different! I do feel like I wish I was supporting the market more and I'm sorry it and our nearest market now is Hailsham. All the other local markets have closed, Sevenoaks, Haywards Heath.

A: Yeah I was going to say!

L: We used to take all our calves down to Haywards Heath Market and to Sevenoaks market, when that was going on.

A: Yeah because they had that huge market didn't they?

L: Yeah and that's all closed and gone and we're not very near anywhere to be honest, the nearest one's Ashford and or Hailsham.

A: Yeah those are really far away really!

L: When you've got a horsebox full of beef or little calves, and they're not coming out the other end looking that great.

A: So do you mind if I ask about the future, you said about the dairy not being able to continue?

L: Well the dairy is able to continue, there are two or three reasons, the main reason is personal because I've had enough of milking....and seriously having old buildings that need a lot of money spending on them and nowadays it seems like you need 200+ cows to survive. Well I've got 48 or 46 or something, I don't know what it is now. So, I'm not probably actually making any money, mind you my costs are really low, so actually probably



am making a few bob, but the returns from milk are rubbish. But that's not the main reason I'm packing up the milk. The main reason is one, personal, because I've had enough of it but the other thing is that my parlour's thirty something years old, my cubicle sheds are all on the verge of needing something done. One of them's completely had it and the other one, which houses 72 cows is still alright. Generally, to stay in it, I need to spend...

A: A lot?

L: A £1000,000 - 1,500,000, £2,000,000! A lot of money! And to restock and to put new buildings up and everything else! Past retirement age, I'm afraid I am, and with no one to come into the farm to follow us, no successors, which is really sad unfortunately, but there you are, that's the way it is.

A: No it's tricky now isn't it because people just aren't so interested.

L: Well yeah and we haven't got any family and my brother's family aren't interested either. So that's the end of that. And beef seems to be the easier option, or arable, either, which you can do in a rush patently compared to dairy farming, and so that's where we're going really.... And the plan is, whether it ever comes to fruition is to knock over some of the old buildings and maybe build a bungalow for my wife and I, who has got back problems and such. Whether it takes off or not is anyone's guess.

A: Sure, see how it all goes, definitely! With the dairy cows, do you then sell them on or what actually happens?

L: As I haven't had any young replacements coming in, they're all sort of going naturally. Yeah, naturally, I mean there will be a point when I get down to thirty or something and I'll say 'right, that's it, they've got to go,' and I've now got rid of my bull recently, so there won't be anymore calves coming along.

A: No more babies, sure, yeah so wrapping things up in a gentle way. I think it's important though isn't it when your farm means so much to you and that aspect I'm sure, even though you're ready for a break.

L: Yeah it'll be a sad day when I stop milking, I know, yeah, yeah, you know.

A: It's been your life hasn't it for 45 years, it's not a small thing to just suddenly [sucks in air and exhales]

L: Yeah quite, I won't know what to do the first morning without going out there and starting the machine up at four o'clock, but there you go.



A: Yep exactly, life happens doesn't it? Can I ask you sort of overall, it's quite a difficult question to ask in a way but kind of overall, highlights or your most enjoyed parts of farming life for you? Are there parts or is it kind of, is it too big a life experience to condense like that?

L: I guess it might sound ridiculous but getting the cows in, in the summer, I do it on a quadbike, there's nothing better than, I know it might sound ridiculous, having sworn about getting up early, but actually once you're out there and no one else around, in the dewy morning, the smell of honeysuckle in the hedgerow and things like that, very little to beat it to be fair. That's one of the most endearing factors and I mean, we live in an absolutely ideal spot.

A: It is beautiful! The drive down was magical!

L: This is it, this is as rural as it gets here. You can't hear anything. You just see the odd plane going towards Gatwick and that's about it really. And if the wind's blowing from the north, we might hear the motorway.

A: But very faintly I would imagine.

L: So we live in a really lovely spot, so that I'm very thankful for. And I suppose the other really good feelings are when you've come out of a big field and you've made a load of hay and you've finished taking the last bales out. Probably the actual highlight, I remember when oo, a long time ago, I don't know how long we've been doing big bales for, probably fifteen - twenty years, I don't know how long ago it was. But when we used to have loads of trailers lined up here to throw off by hand in the morning and it used to be me and another chap. And by the time you got to the last trailer, you were completely and utterly worn out and when you slung that last bale off, you felt 'wow!'

A: [laughing] I have worked hard!

L: [laughing too] Then you'd go out to the field and load them all up for the following day. But that was quite a nice feeling! And I mean we're very fortunate, we have lovely wildlife round here and I love watching birds and that sort of thing. Saw a red kite yesterday afternoon.

A: Wow, yeah, they're coming in aren't they? We've seen a few over in Forest Row and it's like oh wow, red kites and buzzards.

L: And we've got buzzards, so just beautiful and I love watching that, and that sort of things. I think are wonderful, just that I'm lucky to be alive in such a beautiful area.



Barbara Fordham: And the fox that keeps coming in and pinching plums off the tree!

A: Oh cheeky! The plums - really?

L: Yeah, yeah.

A: Really, does he stand up on his hind legs then?

L: And jumps to get them, because the boughs are so heavy with plums.

A: And jumps, wow!

Barbara Fordham: The other year, he would eat some himself, we were sitting here watching him having supper, and he would eat them, spit the pips out and then would take some more in his mouth, so he must have babies, take them for his babies.

A: Babies, aw bless, because you don't think of foxes eating plums do you?

Barbara Fordham: And green ones at that!

A: Chickens and rabbits yes. But plums!?

Barbara Fordham: Gets stomachache I should think.

A: Yeah I was going to say! Not very ripe are they?

L: They were green, so he left a load on the floor....

A: Realised that 'oh these might give me bellyache!' [laughing]. Bless him, aww, that's really cute. Wildlife, you must see all sorts of things round here, that's awesome. That's brilliant, thank you so much for your time today.

L: No problem!