



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: John Harper (Manager for 45 years; land rented by Lockharts, owned by Muir and Lumley)

Age: 62

Location: Court Lodge Farm, Ashford

Size: 101 acres (41 hectares)

Type: Fruit ('top fruit')

Interviewed by: Katy Sharpe

Date: July 21, 2015.

Name: John Harper

Age: Very close to 62 (1953)

Length of time working at farm: Worked there since he was 17 (1970), first as apprentice then as worker (for Mr Muir), then in 1988 as Manager for Lockharts, who rented the land from Muir in 1988.

Size of the farm: Total = he manages 41 hectares of topfruit. Little bit of grassland that belongs to the Lockharts which is rented out

Age of farm: Here when he was born, Lockharts have had it since 1988.

Mid Kent Growers is a Producers Organisation (PO) of 23 growers who rent this office space, they share the office space with MKG.

Total number of staff on the farm: John – permanent, 1 man who works for 10 months of the year, lady that does approximately 20-30 hours a week average

Seasonal staff – up to 24 seasonal workers.

John: I, and then, we, I had about 20 odd years up there, as a, a shepherd, part, and we had a small bit of fruit. And then those two enterprises, the owner up there retired. He goes to the fruit, and my present family who I work for took over the fruit up there, and then about three years later, we took over this fruit as well.

Katy: So that farm where you used to work doesn't....is it not...exist as a farm anymore?

John: Sorry?

Katy: Does the farm exist, yeah the one up...

J: The one up, the other one?



K: The one in Pluckley or wherever it was

J: All the buildings has been converted or used for rental. We've got a yard up there that we rent, that we work out of and we have about 25 acres of, hectares of...top fruit up there.

K: Oh ok, so some of it's up there, some of it's down here

J: Yeah, we have a third small three a-, hectare, down that way as well, not far away, but they.... Going onto what you said about changing, we were a lot bigger, we used to run our own packing shed here as well, and we had a fourth farm that was at Grafty Green. Economically it started to come unviable, so we've actually gone smaller and more compact now, we were running a lot of staff. But the supermarkets and that weren't very happy with small little pack house sheds so you get closed down. They like the super duper sheds. So that's how it's changed on the land, so that's how we've ended up with just a small unit now. I say it's got me nervous, work this sort of thing, have to say. I used to, when we went right down to this 30 acres, I used to do it mostly myself, over the years, but age has slowed me up. We, with our students, they're all east Europeans, and we had one come in that's quite interested. So we've actually, this is his 4th year he's come back to us, so we've put him through courses and trained him up; he has got longer each year now that he works. He has a family at home, so

K: So he goes back and sees them

J: He does now, we send him, he goes back twice. I say he goes back over the Christmas period for about 2 months, maybe three months. He then goes back for a week. This year we've flown the family over, they're here, they're here for three weeks with him, and then they'll go back in October again for another week. But, you know, bluntly, there's not very many young people in this country that want farming. So, we've found someone who's quite keen, he's learning so we're trying to invest a bit in him, maybe he can bring the family over. So, that's how you go. There's a very potted history of the farm.

(Move outside, near the orchards)

J: We got three sites as I say, so for this one we walk but for the others, if you want to go to any of the others, it's driveable, they're only about 4 minutes away

K: It's up to you really

J: As I say, I've got two hours, I'm quite happy



K: So this is, does that path go somewhere?

J: That goes up towards one of the houses that I said had been converted...

K: Oh yeah

J: ...just see the tops of them down in there, and it's a back entrance to the farm...so...as I say, that building was the packing shed, but it's rented out, by the land owner who's not us. as I say we rent this site, so he rents this out for storage, so we more or less, or that office is ours...what I look after starts here.

K: So you rent, you rent it off Lockhart?

J: No, no, no. Lockhart is my boss, Lumleys own the whole land here.

K: Right ok

J: Mark Bruce Lockhart is actually the farmer who owns the [wind cuts out audio], farm, for us, and I used to work for his father, start...probably...Lord Bruce Lockhart used to be a county councilor.

K: I think I've heard of him

J: Yeah you probably have he's always on the news but he unfortunately died of cancer, so his son took over so I had to, I actually now work for, but as I say it's the lady who lives in the big oast houses over there who actually, from the gate, owns all the land, but he has nothing to do with it, we rent from the... [inaudible, wind].

...

J: Well all that was burnt, I think obviously the biggest change is environmentally and how we treat the environment is probably one of the biggest things with all our spraying and things, when I first started we used to have an adviser come out at the beginning of the season and say this week you spray this, this week you spray that, you spray this. Now it's all done by what, counts and what we're finding rather than just a regular programme we're only spraying as needs, as needs things like that. Er, labour, labour used to be all locals, but couldn't get a local now if I had to

K: (jokingly) you could get me!

J: Yeah!



K: Don't know how good I'd be (laughs)...So is this one of the footpaths you were telling me about?

J: It's not, it's not actually, although a lot of people do, this is not actually one of the main footpaths.

K: Oh it's not

J: It's... saying that, it does, cause it comes down here, it cuts through down

K: Oh to the church

J: Down to the church but the real main one is Greensand Way one which is a very old one, as you see this bit of land, that we've grubbed, you can just see the green strip through the middle of it,

K: Yeah my parents like that walk, well they keep insisting that they'll do it...

J: Yeah well that's part of it, it goes right through the middle of our orchards there

K: Oh ok. Do you grow apples, what fruits do you grow on this farm?

J: We grow Discovery, Bramley, Coxes, Russets, Gala, and we've just planted something called Red Winter.

K: So it's apples and, is it soft fruit you said the other...

J: No, no soft fruit no, I just deal totally in

K: Topfruit.

J: Topfruit, all topfruit.

(Continue walking)

K: And has it always been topfruit?

J:...since we've had it, as I say this...originally, and I'm going back more than 40 years now, it used to be a dairy farm, a big dairy-arable farm. It was then taken over and slowly changed to fruit. All this used to be blackcurrants through here, but since we took over, it was topfruit. This, if you look at this...here, this bit here between the stakes and here, is the only bit in 25-30 years since we've [wind]...the original



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planting bit...we've planted everything, replanted everything bar this bit. And this is it's...this bit is its last year, that will go this winter.

K: So they have a limited sort of...time

J: Well, more so the younger stuff that we're lasting won't last nothing like this will, but as you'll see the difference in a minute as we get there, cause if you notice these, these are very...lot of room between the trees, lot of room down the rows as well

K: So it's more sort of a traditional orchard compared to what...?

J: Yeah, this will be, the real traditional has the real big trees, but then this sort of planting and this sort of tree would probably have come next. And it, if you wanna go... a big difference is that when I first started doing these, we would pick everything off the tree at the harvest time you can see now that we probably chuck down 1/3 of our crop at this time of the year.

K: And why do you do that?

J: We are looking for quality and size. No more can we just pick everything. The supermarkets want a certain size, and a certain quality so we have to thin off the fruits, to try and leave the right number on the tree, to gain in size...if you look.

K: Would we be able to have a close look there?

J: Go in there and watch what they're doing, but basically, these apples like this will never, never grow.

K: No? How do you know...? I know you're a farmer, but I mean... [laughs]

J: Yes, experience tells me

K: Can you tell me?

J: It's just something, it's crop load, there's too many branches on. I can't give you an instance, but it would say, they would have to, to make these get to 65-70 mm, they will have to do that. They will take those (demonstrates), because of the blemish on them and they will leave that, something like...that. (demonstrates). And if you see the apples I took off, and then look at how many, where there's only three apples on their own, they will grow bigger they won't touch those because there's no other apples around competing. So you're trying to...

K: Lessen the competition



J: Well yea, you're trying to space it out over the tree. And with the whole farm is done like that to different degrees. Obviously each orchard is different, you know... We're doing that roughly...these are run. I've got 8 people here now and they came to me the 5th of June, and we have roughly...June to the end. We need to be finished this, really, the end of next week, because that gives us 5 or 6 weeks before we start picking. If you get too further on, you don't get no, the rest of the apples don't respond.

K: So do you only pick in...August, or September then?

J: Yep, each variety has a optimum pick date, and it's usually two or three, five days which is at, it's at, the fruit's at its optimum to go into store and to be stored. You can pick it a bit later but it won't store...First if you take Coxes the first Coxes we pick will go into the store and they will come out in February or March, the last Coxes we pick will go straight into a packing shed be packed then, because every day they ripen they don't store so long. So we pick them before they're mature and they mature much more because they go into controlled atmosphere stores, so they go, they, that slows their breathing down and then makes them last longer, but of course, as they get mature they won't last and then we go, so we have this sort of running thing when you do it. But with Discovery will be picked, Discovery's an early eating apple that does not store, that is picked off the trees and sold and we will start that bit the middle of August. Bramleys you can some, Bramleys grow very big, so sometimes we do the opposite there, we're taking off the thin ones, the small ones, we take off big ones to help the rest come up, in early August, and then we pick the rest in September.

*K: So this orchard that we've just walked through, is that all the same variety?
And yeah, sorry what variety?*

J: Cox. So that's our oldest orchard, this is our newest orchard. This was only planted at Christmas. And you can see the difference in number of trees.

K: Yeah they're much closer together, aren't they?

J: Yeah, much closer, closer that way, we, we, lots of people, probably everyone has their own ideas and number, but we run a lot of 2 row beds, which is the tractors only go in every 2, second row. So if you take the grass there, we've got two rows in between it, where there we were going up and down every other row.

K: Ah, ok. Will the wooden poles always remain or is that just to help them grow?



J: No they will, they actually, they hold the trees up. If you...these, these, these stakes are only just in the ground, so they're only in the ground about that much (demonstrates), it's the wire what is holding them and the big trees which are in over half a meter, and that is the difference now. I'll show you two row bed that hasn't got these on, and so no these are holding it up. If we go up and look at our Gala orchard you'll see that we use very thin canes, but we've just gone strengthened by using the...these stakes but these are, more or less to grow the tree up, what holds it in is the big stakes and the wire.

K: The wire, so that is...rather than growing them as little trees, is the plan to grow them along the wire then?

J: No, you can only grow them, you can grow them higher without them falling over.

K: I see. And the benefit of that, is obviously more fruit...

J: you're using more space. Now if you go to an ultra-modern farm, they've gone up, we have three meters, they've gone up to three, three and a half meters, but they use big machinery to stand on to pick the tops. But because we're only just changing over, it's, those machines are something like 25-35,000 pounds, and as we've only got three little bits like this, is its not...

K: Yeah, use a ladder [laughing]

J: [laughs], yeah we hop up on a ladder. Same thing again though, health and safety, we have trouble with ladders, cause if I don't give them courses on ladders and everything,

K: You have courses on ladders nowadays?

J: Yeah, and you're meant to take, half a day to train someone how to go up on a three step ladder.

K: Right [laughs] no comment

J: [laughs], No, no comment. I have comments, not while that machine's going. [both laugh] So yeah, as I say, these trees come to us, most trees come from abroad, there are a few English nurseries but most of them either from, actually Holland, and Italy are probably the two main. So they're planted in December, they are then, when they start, when they start to shoot and that, when they come to us they were like that, and when they start to bud, we cut them back in, and that is to...we're trying to get all these feathers to break out all the way down these, cause these will be our fruit buds and so we're trying to go in there, so then we cut them, and April



May, depending on weather conditions, they're mulched. And it's a God-send this year, as we would have been really struggling. Some farms irrigate, we haven't got irrigation. If we go under you'll probably notice how damp the soil is, compare to what it was yeah? And it's purely the mulch that's pulling it up and holding it. So yeah, that's potted history on a little young tree.

J: In, in there it's got a few apples on. In year 1 you really shouldn't have many apples at all.

K: And this is, this is obviously year one...

J: This is obviously year one, they are...

K: They're quite small

J: They will be, they can grow a few up the stem, but if you have too many on these it just stops them growing. We, my lady's got to come through, and we have to see... we have two fruits, they have to snap them out, and as she's doing it she will probably just take...

K: Would you have to take the apple of that because it's sticking...?

J: No, if you've got one, that does that for us (demonstrates branch, bending down)

K: And that's a good thing?

J: And that's a good thing, but if there was more than one on each bough, they will take them off. But we're not too bad. If you saw them in blossom time, they were absolutely....although they were first year, they were covered in blossom, but they actually do it naturally themselves in the first year. So there's not really too many in there but if someone, like that tree's probably too many so she will probably take two of these off.

K: So is it just one lady that goes round the orchard?

J: It could be, I could use them, I call them students, but they're not students anymore, I could use them students to do that job, but you probably d... There's a lady out there, there's a second lady comes to me in June and goes in October, she's a supervisor. So, she's in my 24 that I told you about, but she's actually been with me for years so she's very experienced, so she looks after those, those lanes. Caroline our other lady who does some of the pruning through the winter that I told you about, she joins her when we're picking, but unfortunately Caroline's had operations and things this year, we're struggling, I've got to find another supervisor for picking.



J: So, if you drop back now. We went, we went from the very old stuff and we started planting two row beds like, like this, but if you see the, so, and these when these get a lot of weight of fruit on they fall over, so this is why we've gone now so we're hold, hold the tops to stop this movement.

K: Yeah ok

J: And that's, that's how its changed.

K: So once, once you've picked these, will you be taking that out?

J: No, no no no. We won't do that until we...the bit we come past first will go to this system. So as it goes to the end of it's life we'll go onto a more modern system.

K: So when this comes to the end of it's life, then you'll go...

J: They, they, they will go. Right, these are now Gala,

Continue walking

J: And, they've yet to thin these, you can just see, see again the branches here and there's getting some quite small ones which tells me they're starting to stop growing, so they will have to come here and take out some of this underneath stuff. See here, these apples now I know will never make size, so you can see the difference between these

K: So is it just, cause you mentioned, you mentioned Waitrose earlier, is it just Waitrose who you...?

J: No

K: Who else do you give your fruit to?

J: Tescos, Waitrose, Aldi, all of them apart form Marks and Spencers and Sainsbury's. They specialise in individual growers most of the time. But our marketing organisation, we, the best way to describe...Mid Kent Growers is a marketing group, no, it's a farmer group and their job is too look round and find marketing desks that will do the best job for us, and at the moment, MKG use two marketing desks and I use one of those. And they, that should be, they watch the price and see that our bin price is good and then they make sale, or we move somewhere else.

K: Oh so they keep an eye on it for you.



J: Yes, at the moment we sell through a company called Univeg. So basically all our fruit goes to Univeg packhouse, and they distribute it where they see fit, or where the best price, and they supply Tesco- and they actually do supply nearly every supermarket. But some grow, as I say, definitely Sainsbury's has this thing that certain... they will only go for certain growers, they get...

K: I suppose, yeah that's quite a big change then as well, having to become so picky in what you have to, well, in what you have to pick has become.

J: Yeah, yeah, quality is paramount now, moreso...another way, because we do not have our own packing shed, and believe it or not our biggest charges for ongoing thing, we look at... The costs are about two thirds once it leaves the farm. So, packing, storage, and transport are our biggest costs and they take nearly 2/3 of the bin

K: Do you have to transport far to the pack to Univeg? Is that far?

J: It can be, there is...one of the...they have now got bigger and have now got two packhouses in Kent, we used to send them up to Wisbech. But it, it's as broad as it is long, because Wisbech is more central so when the, ongoing, once it's packed and going on, costs you not so much. Kent, if they pack them here it doesn't cost me so much to send it a bin of fruit, but it costs a lot more to send them up north from Kent once they're packed, so it's broad as it is long, and they do... a lot of bench marking, in that, then, and that's that what MKG is all about, is to look at the costs and things and tell me whether it's better to send my fruit in a bin to Wisbech and have it packed, or send it to Kent and have it packed.

K: What are we looking at there?

J: See that, just, you stand back – see the leaf on that tree? Now look at this one

K: It's dying isn't it...

J: Yep that has got either... I can't see it now, just there, [shows me leaf], it's got red spider or rust mite, and I need a glass to see which is which. But you wouldn't do anything.

K: Oh you wouldn't?

J: No, because it's an odd, same again...what I was saying, the change in spraying, and in farming techniques. If someone 20, 30 years ago, if we saw a red spider tree we'd go "ooh red spider!" and zoom, the whole farm. Now, we, we, if it's just odd



trees you rely on the tiff that are obviously working the good trees to move over and try and eat the red spider. You have to wait until the balance is not economical and they start affecting too many trees, and then we have to go in and spray.

K: So they have natural predators?

J: Yeah there's tiffs and everything. And if you use the right chemicals these tiffs are now, thing is I can't remember the name...but they, they build up, but if you go in with a vicious, not a vicious sprays, but the sprays that will take red spider out, they obviously take out the good tiffs as well, so it's nowadays it's inter-crop management and trying to balance the two as they adapt. That is like the changes in farming, everything used to be done willy-nilly and spray, and now you're so careful, you've got to justify everything and make sure. And, and of course, it's expensive, it used to be nothing to spray, now it has, it is...our, for our 40 odd, for our 40 hectares it can, it can be up to 80,000 a year on my spray deal.

K: Expensive

J: Yeah, very, so you can....everyone got the farmers spraying, but we don't unless we really have to.

K: No, that's... yeah...

J: And that's something that needs I think to be got over more,

K: Yeah

J: Everyone think "oh farmers are killing by chucking all this spray about" but we don't chuck it about.

K: No, but maybe in other countries, but definitely not here...

J: Here's another Cox orchard, that we planted. This is a big one, this is just a diff...this is more....a different....all the Coxes are cloned, yep, which have changed over the years, so we use, we used to have Cox orange pippin which we got nothing, anymore. Then we went onto some colour clones which is the one we've just come past, and then we had, we had they moved onto something they call Queen Cox which is more colour, and now this, the last one we do is called Cox Lavera which is a much more redder Cox because people will only pick up....

K: Red...



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J: Well, if the apple's meant to be red they will only pick it up if its' very red, they don't seem to like blushes of fruit on anything. They'll pick up a green apple if it's meant to be green, but they either want it green or...

K: Really?!

J: Yeah, or so the supermarkets tell us and I tend to believe them.

K: No.. every apple I've had has been half red, half green...

J: Yeah... Well we, when we pick Coxes, if you, cause this is going on, we never used to bother about colour, we'd pick everything. Then we changed to, it slowly went to up to 10% red so we had to push the colour together so it had to be 10%, we now can't put anything under 25% colour of the coxes.

K: Of red?

J: Of red, into them

K: Gosh. It's got quite scientific then

J: Oh yes, it's all changed to much more, you know

K: So when you said it's cloned and stuff, where is that, is that, is that like....do you - not you, but does Lockhart grow them, is that in Holland?

J: What the clones? No, the clones come from...East Malling research station do lots of research and they are forever breeding apples and finding better apples and things and that's where they've all come from, and the nursery men abroad play about with clones and we don't. Our advisors will just tell us, you know, there's this clone, or try this variety, and we have to take a chance and see if it does or not.

K: Have you had, I dunno, some varieties that haven't worked?

J: No, because being small, you don't take much chance, you wait two or three years, to pick...the supermarkets have picked them up, and are selling them well. If you was a big thing, then you take a chance and you maybe put them in. Cause there, there are some farms that some of the bigger, hundred acres, thousands acres fruit farms have plonked a bit in, 3 or 4 year hasn't taken off they just go whoosh and take it out. But we are, we're talking, those little plots that we've put now, like that last one, is probably 60,000 to put that bit in, it's a lot of money to get wrong if you...so we, we just wait until....



J: This is a whole Gala orchard, Gala, Gala now, for where....Coxes is a lot more harder apple to grow and we don't get such a good grade out, we have to chuck more of it away. Gala is the modern apple, because you can grade, you can pick, although we have to thin this a bit for size, we won't think it as much as the Coxes, and this colour we can get 90% grade out, on this, so and it much more prolific apple on the tree.

K: So do you, will you thin them as well?

J: Yes, depending on the year, each...thinning, we thin, the farm every year now which is something that, as I said, we would never have done, even when I come onto this farm, but thinning does lots of things, a) it does the size, but if you put an average crop on the tree you will crop it every year. If you take a big crop off one year, like everything, it will have a rest the next year, and just will not perform so well, so it, it is part of the growing of the fruit is balancing the crop each year to get a return. Same again now, you can just see now, there could be a problem there, I would like apples like that to go on, that bunch is not...so when they come through they say, right, these apples are gonna grow...tells me they're probably going to get to the right size. There's something wrong here, so they'll have to take these ones out to thin them off a bit, just to give these ones a chance,

K: And what do you do with? Do you just leave them?

J: Yes, they just rot down. Yeah, Its wasteful now, when we pick, we will drop anything that marks, and that...well that's not quite true, some years depending on how much is about, we ...drop back now, we use, I don't know about picking but we now use something called bin trains, so our pickers have 5 trays and they have 4 good bins and one juice bin, so they actually grade as they pick now.

K: So the waste goes to juice?

J: Yea, but that is...after you've thinned. You have to be careful with that because if it's a glut year that juice it's price is worth less, so it's more economical just to chuck it on the ground at that stage, than to try.

K: Do you think this year will be a glut year?

J: It won't be a good year, cause it, it's quite a good crop about. So we will get...an inkling of prices before we start to make a decision, usually. A juice company I've dealt with, probably 20 years now, ever since we had a packing shed, and he will say, right John, we'll start and we'll pay you 100 pound a ton, and I know that. But if he starts, and says John we're paying 50 a ton, I know it's not worth even doing.



(Continue walking)

K: Do you enjoy what you do, working here?

J: Hmm, up and down, it, it can be very frustrating, at times, and I suppose I enjoy it...how many ever years... and I still do it, and I'm not likely to do anything else. You have good days, and enjoy it...It's very hard to describe, cause it's quite stressful at times, but in another way you do enjoy. Getting to this time of year it's good, cause you can see what you've got, you're just trying to fine tune it to make it dead right, and when we start picking, that day we start picking is lovely, because you're doing, you're starting to gather it in, and you really are getting back to it. I find it very interesting. I have to say, when I was on my own, and at the end it was quite stress...cause I was working.

K: When you owned that farm in Pluckley, was that?

J: Well, we've still got that one, but I was working...I don't know, or used to spray 2 days a week and there would be nothing to work...18 hours a day, I... now I'm more, I manage more I don't have to work because I've got Yannis as I told you about, he does a lot off that, so we do it between us. I actually enjoy it more now because I get...I...5, 6 years ago, I wouldn't have time for this. I just, didn't see anybody cause I had to do, get so much done during the, during the week, and I enjoy more this now, it's actually quite interesting to do that, we have advisers walk round the farm, they used to have to walk on their own, but now I can... I said, half past 10, we're walking round looking for all them pests and diseases, well I've got time because I'm not thinking, oh must get back to the spraying, so I enjoy much more. So in fact...if you say a little while ago...personally a little while ago, I was thinking, or glad when retirement comes, and but now, I'm hoping that, like Yannis, that I can go on beyond retirement doing this because it's much more comfortable and I do enjoy it. Seeing these changes, putting in new orchards, you know, I get more chance to go off and listen to talks about new varieties and things, which is, makes it more enjoyable, anyway.

(Continue walking)

J: Then again, as I say with our new Galas, and if you've got time we can pop up and have a look at, have gone up onto wire work...

J: So our critical time, as I say, the critical time is picking and that's when we got to be very, and that does take long hours. If you're picking apples on a day like today, with a load of people out here, it's gorgeous, but if it's blowing a gale, cold or wet then it's not quite as idyllic as this. But it's still, I have to say, with the East Europeans the only, the beauty with them is, they won't go home until I tell them.



[laughs] So there's lots of different talks about them, but to be honest we couldn't farm without them now, and that, that's a fact. With you know... And I, I get political, but I don't quite understand all this, because all these lads here, some have been coming 4 or, more than that, 6 or 7 years, they come over, they work, and they go home. And I just can't see anything wrong with that, cause we can't get people to do it, they're not here, they're not taking anything out of the country, they're helping us and I can't see anything wrong with that.

J: Heard of Russetts? These are Russetts. We use them as pollinators, but these, these are getting very difficult to sell, we don't, we wouldn't plant them again, now. One or two people like them...

K: My Mum likes them

J: And that'll be our, these'll be our first apples, these are Discovery. These are, these will be

K: So they'll be coming soon, picking...

J: Yeah, they've probably got three weeks on them yet.

K: Do they grow quite quickly? I'm just trying to think of the size and how...

J: ... Same again, you're talking lots of things that will alter that. I could des-, probably no one else could do, but I could desperately do with a day's rain, then these will go. If they don't, we might struggle on size on these. Good growing conditions will grow. They will...they're getting it in their height like this time, if there was moisture down there, these could probably do about 3mm a week and our Bramley's would do about 5mm a week. Size will be an issue this year if we don't get rain. But then every year we have an issue with something.

K: [jokingly] it wouldn't be a year without an issue

J: That... that is actually farming...you'll never, never get a year where it just all, goes swimmingly and everything, but then that's probably some of the beauty of it...

K: So you know earlier how you said this was an open farm, can people walk around here?

J: Yeah, they're not encouraged to walk down here (between the rows)

K: Oh



J: [laughs] But they're encouraged to go round the outside. Down here is more dangerous, cause, you can imagine, if the lad was coming up there spraying, he couldn't see you.

K: Yeah might get an eyeful of spray

J: Yeah, that was... I'm surprised we haven't seen anybody.

(John's phone rings, he doesn't answer.)

J: Coxes again, this was in between, there was a little spell where people done three row beds. You can see one two three rows instead of...

K: Does it work?

J: Didn't really work you, can you can see

K: Can't really get to the one in the middle can you?

J: The beds, makes you get round...we only done two orchards like it and they're packed up and dropped back down to two, so missed out then...so, you get more apples from your hectare, but the quality and that is not really there. Now we need quality, quantity again was good, but quality, so no, we haven't sort of done it more

K: When did it change from being quantity to quality?

J: Oh, I suspect it was...slowly. It, it...it sort of gone on, as I say I think I run a packing shed for 8 years and within that time you could see it change, everybody was getting more....fussier...every supermarket was getting more....more fussier...

K: Why?

J: Well, because we are told...unless it's a perfect apple, their customers will not pick it up, so basically they will get apples left in the box that no one will pick up, yeah it's interesting.

K: Then... that could surely be because people have got used to supermarkets selling perfect fruit?

J: That's right

K: Not used to seeing what "normal" fruit looks like.



J: The good instance is, probably, I...well I can remember it. But if you used to buy fruit and veg you used to a greengrocer something, he will pick 5, 6 apples up, put it in a bag to you, there you go. You didn't know any different, you got those apples, and you would eat them. Now you have the choice of picking up those apples yourself, and people don't know anything about taste, they go by eye, and any of us....I'm the same, if we go into a shop to buy something we think, we look round and see which we think is the best, and so what they're saying is that what...everything's getting left to the end, and then, so when in the end, we'll say, well the first 10 are all taking what they think is the best the last 2 will think, well these are rubbish we won't pick it up at all, so then the supermarkets will take it away and put the best again. And that's how it's gone on...

...

J: Have you ever seen apple picking? No?

K: No, I don't think so.

J: Right, a very, very old...[gets windy] we used to have bushel boxes and they used to pick in them and we used to go and pick up the bushel boxes. We then moved on to, the bins..so, originally, more or less on the last 20 years or so, we've had bins, we used to put the bins up the row, so we used the tractor pick up three bins go up the row, put three bins. So if you come just in August you will see bins all up the rows, evenly spaced, guessed that the spacing is right, pickers will come along and 2 pickers will pick it into a bin. When the bin's full tractor driver pick it up, trundle back here with a bin, one or maybe stack them up, 2, here and load them up.

K: How do they make sure not to bruise the fruit?

J: Well, if they're put in gently they won't, hence the supervisors. The two critical jobs are my two supervisors. They have to be really on the ball, and firm but...with the pickers and that, and If you imagine 24 pickers, or even have 12, they would be spaced right up over there in the orchard, you never saw them very much, cause time you got back to them, they could have put them in the bin. In the old days didn't matter so much because most of them...now it, now it's, more critical, so we have moved on to...see the little tractor - we join 5 of them together, they've 5 bins on them, a team of 6 picks to that, all in them 5 bins. So the 6 pickers are here, you've got 5 bins here, you've got the supervisor constantly....and normally they do two teams each. So they're there, there, there, there, there and so it's much more than...and that's how we do it now, so, the bins are put on the trailer here, one tractor journey out, one tractor journey in. a) the bins don't get as damaged as much b) we've got much more control over it.



K: So how many journeys does it take to do a field?

J: Ooh, don't, don't know. That orchard there, there will be 200 bins of Cox come out of there, and we put 5 on there, divide that by ...

K: 40?

J: Yeah...

K: Is it quicker with the tractor and the bins? The little train, sorry? Or whatever it's called

J: No...probably, if you , if you leave.....yeah, ok, if you have 5 people picking into bins on the ground with no...they would actually fill them 5 bins quicker than what they will fill them on the train....because....they are working...they've only got there selves [sp], but if you got a group on bins, quite often find they work to the slowest one, even though they're paid by bonus, they have this thing that I'm not earning someone else's bonus, so...it's, it's tricky to get it right, but you can by tweaking little things, you can make...encourage them and do that. But the quality is, is infinitely better to doing it that way round. I could never go back to doing it the other way round, even quicker, if I'm slower I just have to get more people. ... Because of the quality issue...

J: And as I say, it's down to the two supervisors who are both experienced ladies, as I say, they look after the...with, with me....I do very little...driving, most of my...other and all the lorries, sometimes loading lorries, most of my time spent now is just spend with my head in bins as well, just making sure of quality, unfortunately. Used to do a lot of tractor driving, loading the lorries...quality again, it is a shame...Caroline who's just turned up, she's just had a hip operation she's only come back yesterday, and now she's got a 1st of September she's got to go for a knee operation replacement, so that's...picking...giving me a bit of a headache, as I say I've got to find...

J: Would you like to go and look at the other farm?

K: Yeah ok, yeah...lovely

(Gets in the car. General chat about the area, the farm opposite used to be owned by Lockhart, but they spray and pick it and do the work for, but they do the work and don't have to worry about what it makes. Stop recording when it gets quiet, start recording when conversation starts up again.)

J: Now from this hedge here, this is where I started life on the farm



K: Ahh. Is it cereal down there?

J: Cereal- yeah it's all...believe it or not, the person who owns it is 99

K: Ahh, wow

J: ...ahh 98, 99 in mid-December

K: So, he ...

J: That's, he's obviously retired but he still owns all the land and that. This is the yards, and these are our bins, and I think the rest of it's all rented out to different people and everything. And then the farm is all round here. Some of the big fields now are all rented for cereals, we, our fruit starts here and runs down this side.

K: What was the name of the, the 99 year old?

J: Mr. Muer, his name is, and he's who I started working for, my apprenticeship.

K: Oh, really?

J: I, I started on that, that farm over there.

K: Was it cereal when you started on it?

J: It was mixed farming we had a bit of...them days, mixed farming, still small farms were fine where we had bit of cereal, bit of sheep, bit of pigs, and a bit, a little bit of fruit.

(Get to field where they have orchards)

J: We won't walk much of this, cause it's all very similar but, from here back to the road is all Bramleys. So they all look like...these are Bramleys.

K: much bigger...

J: So these are bigger, these are your cooking apples, yeah. We grow...a certain...a very good Bramley, now these are Lockley's. These have all been thinned as well even with Bramley's even though they grow bigger, we still have to thin them and that. But this was done a long time ago and you can see what happens to the apples, they just shrivel more or less disappear in the end.



K: Yeah,

(Worker passes on a machine in the next field, gets noisy)

K: What's that machine...what does he do?

J: Spraying

K: Oh it's not one of your tractors... (seeing it disappear)

J: Yeah

K: Oh it is?

J: We've got orchards down on that side of the hedge, and down there. As I say, these are mega old these ones...started 30, 35 years ago so they've sort of been pruned trying to keep them young. Bramley's don't seem to run out of steam or anything much as the other apples, and again they're [inaudible]..sprays [against?]...everything, so we er, they are old. This was all Bramleys, getting uneconomical to keep them to be honest, we grow nice Bramleys and we run quite a few problems with this orchard, but whether we've got to take another one out I don't know. People just don't cook with Bramley's anymore, here. Yeah so, buy a Bramley pie, processed and that, but the Bramley sales have gone down. Really, really.

J: And then the Gala orchard that we walked through, the big Gala orchard, which we came, we sort of we turned down at the Coxes didn't we and came down where the Gala orchard

K: Mmhmm

J: Yep, well that is the same, but just gone onto the more modern system now

K: Oh and they've grown up, now

J: Yeah, where the height we would go to.

K: Do they spread out along the wire as well?

J: A little bit but you'll, you are trying...with a tree, the ideal tree on most systems, there are one or two different ones, is an A shape. So you're trying to grow this bit out, this bit there, right in there and then you can imagine if you've got like that,



you've got good sunlight all the way around. If I grow that out there, and that's in there

K: That will not have the sun

J: Less sun. And sun is not only to do with colour, sun puts...light will put fruit bud on a tree next year. So light is, light is a very important part of growing, so we're trying to keep light in to them, so we, grow them up high but try and keep the A shape a bit.

K: And is that why they've got the young...newer branches

J: Oh the red winter?

K: Is that why you encourage them to bud at the bottom?

J: That's right, yes these were all cut back here, and you're trying to get these bits coming back from here which will, these will...always be fruit up....not just growing. Trees would like to get bare wood there and grow out there and that's what we try to stop, so we push them back to start with. This, this is quite nice, cause it's at a nice shape, you've got fruit all the way up – look at that one, that's probably nearly my ideal tree, coming back into a top, and that's what you're trying to achieve with your pruning and everything.

K: So do they spray if it...?

J: I'll take you down and show you in a minute, go down in the car and just show you

K: Is it against pesticides or...?

J: Right, as I said, it could, it could be anything. Probably quite complicated.... When we start spraying, we're, there are two main wounds...there's scab, scab is, is really bad cause if scab comes in it spoils from the ground, goes up into the tree, it drips down and you get – exactly what it sounds, big, big scabs. We have to spray through the beginning of the season protect and spray on, so we're spraying every 7-10 days, and it's, it's not....generally not to kill it, it's generally to stop it coming in. Then once the tree starts to grow, starts to get the new growth, - I won't show you that one as that's not very nice – right, the new growth, these new leaves, this is all grown this year, it gets mildew which most people...and we have to put another spray on for mildew, so the....for the only part of anything we're spraying... to protect them from scab and mildew. Right, if you get scab, you have to put something more stronger on to kill it, mildew if you get more mildew we move up to stuff that will actually kill it. So we're not..and that, that is the protectant spray that we're putting on, and then,



on top of that you have, qualified, not..advisors walking round who's looking for all the pests and diseases. As I say, the pests and diseases will only be sprayed if we find them and they're above a certain threshold level.

K: And you only spray the ones that have it?

J: No, you can't you have to, once you've got it – you'll see in a minute, but you have to, you couldn't spray. And because you're going through putting this protectant spray on, you just add it to the mixture. So, if we walk round here, and he says, we've got lots of green aphid in block 4. On our sheets we will put something into green aphids to do block 4 on our reg, within our regular....cause we're growing through with us, once every 7 days we will add it to, to that. Now, we've gone past scab season, these are lovely, can't find a scab here, really pleased this year, cause it, it's good, there's not much mildew about, so we've now stopped. These now are having purely only feeds.

K: Oh good

J: And that's what he's putting on at the moment, he's just he's just feeding them. We will have to feed these up until August. And specially more now because of the dry weather I'm trying to put more feed in through the leaf cause I can't get moisture out the ground, so...but as I say, it....we wouldn't put any now spray on that we don't have to. We're very, very careful of that, and the sprays we use, I suppose that's the biggest thing....is, is, the strength of them is gone like this (Demonstrates down), you've got a...you've, some of the stuff they, we used to put on.... I...god knows what goes on. Wonder its still alive. [Joking].

[laughs] But nowadays, they're much more savvy to things and that. This is just a year younger to that, so that's another one I'm pleased with. We like these Gala, this system we're quite pleased with it.

K: Have they planted them to be at an angle?

J: Only the outside ones.

K: Yeah... I was thinking..have they fallen over...

J: No, because when they put these trees in, this stake will be at more of an angle, but course to put a tension on, they just pull them up, so they don't come right up, everything else is straight. It's only the end one that's on an angle and that's keeping the tension on the wire to hold everything up. But rather than waste the space we just grow them up, and then grow at an angle like that. And then, the one, this orchard we... think it's actually really not....I've got about just the right number on



it...I showed you them small ones, but if you notice, most of these...occasional one, but are love- coming along nicely, so fingers crossed with this.

...

K: So is this the only other...well are they the only other fields...you've got this one and then where the other, cause you've got this...

J: No there's a third one which is a small bit of cox that we rent off somebody else, he was a fruit grower, he gave up, we've rented his land, as it's got older and not economic we've grubbed and we're left with just a small bit of cox. It's about the same age as my very old bit and his trees are just like that. And he doesn't want it replanted or anything like that so as it runs out of steam he just puts it down to grass and we're getting smaller and smaller, and in the end we'll say it's not worth us going down there and doing that. Hopefully by then we'll have changed most of our old stuff round to this modern stuff, so our tonnage and that won't go down as we obviously pick a lot more tonnage of this younger stuff. That's only a small orchard.

(We get back to the car, to wait until the sprayer comes back to watch him spray.)

...

J: This is just Cox and russet again, fairly old orchard, you can tell they're old when they're just single rows and things

K: So is old, sort of what, 30 years or something like that?

J:oooh, don't have it all on a bit of paper

K: [laughs] don't worry

J: They're old, old.....yeah, I think I was still working for Mr. Muer, so yeah, 30ish.

K: So did you start with him when you were, was it him you started with when you were 17?

J: Yep. I done a apprenticeship, I done two years on this farm 4 days a week and one day at college in Ashford. And then my 3rd year apprentice I done a year at Hadlow, at Hadlow College. And then, rightly or wrongly, I came back here and got offered a job, permanent job back here after those three years. So, the rest is history.

K: So...was your apprenticeship under Mr. Muer and then you came back after those three years and came under Lockhart is that how...?



J: No, no no. Worked for Mr. Muer until he decided to retire which happened to be 1980...the year of the hurricane, whenever the hurricane was.

K: Oh yeah that hurricane

J: 1987 I think it was, so I started working for the Lockharts in '88

K: Right, ok..so was that..right ok.

J: So I think I done about 20 odd years for the Muers, and then the rest I've done for the two, I say the two, the Lockhart family, as I say...Up until the Lockharts took over, I just worked on the farm, as I say, as just a workman, one or 4 or 5 of us then, but we did on this farm as I say we did have pigs. Time we ended, we didn't have corn because like, like everything, the corn, over years the corns have changed quicker, they went to bigger fields and bigger combines and that. So the corn enterprise, I'm gonna say on the Lockhart farm, went first, and Mr. Muer rented that out to bigger corn growers, so for most of my time on here was sheep and pigs, we had a really big pig complex up in all them buildings. I run, I run a 100 breeding ewe herd for Mr. Muer and then we sort of, between two of us, fiddled off the fruit.

K: So, did, so did you and Mr Muer sorry did you both work for Mr Lockhart

J: No

K: So you just.....ok, right

J: Yep. Yeah, Mr. Muer owns all this, and as I say the farm up there, I done my apprenticeship up there for Mr. Muer, came back, he offered me a full time job after my apprenticeship, and then I worked, 21, 25 years for him. He then decides to retire. On retirement, Mr. Bruce Lockhart decided to rent all the fruit off of him, and he offered me a job of looking after fruit, managing the fruit. Which I did, so we more or less just had the fruit farm here, and he had a farm in Headcorn and I looked after the sheep on that farm. 2 years after we took over, we were offered share farming in the Court Lodge Farm. So, Sandy who his name was, Mr. Lockhart, I knew him as Sandy, and he decided, that was a big farm then, quite big, he decided fruit was doing quite well, we'd go solely into fruit. So we stopped all the sheep, and I came, then I came manager of the two fruit farms which took us up to about, we've grubbed a bit since then, so nearly 50 hectares, which we carried on for...and that went...from a couple of years from growing fruit, we built a packing shed, which was, in it's time quite a modern packing shed, and so the farm we packed all our own fruit and everything. We had 10 local ladies, all working for us, all the year round. When we weren't packing they would come out to the orchards, do the pruning and



things like that. We took on a third farm because we were trying to put more fruit through the packing shed, and as I say that was farm at Grafty Green, which we run for three years and then it got uneconomical, and the accountants advised us to close the packing shed and concentrate on growing. So, basically we then closed the packing shed, made all the staff redundant as we couldn't keep them all year round without a packing shed, and we went, gave up one farm as well because it was a long way to travel, and we only really, we only really took that on to service the packing shed. Came a bit smaller and decided to concentrate on trying to grow quality fruit, and everything, went through a few lean years and struggled a bit and then, then started, we started to build up again, and sadly Sandy Bruce Lockhart got cancer and died quite quickly in the end. And then 4 years ago that was now, his son decided to take his business off his mother. And now Mark Bruce Lockhart who I work for now, rents these two sites off Mr. Lumley and Mr. Lockhart, no Mr. Lumley and Mr. Muer, so that's how it comes, but he owns the farm what I showed you when we come down here. So we're in this thing, but we don't actually own them, we rent these two blocks of fruit and that's where it comes from. As I say, Sandy Bruce Lockhart, was a politician, county councilor ended up being made a Lord and a Sir, so never saw him, he was in London, and Mark owns his own business in London anyway, so I, I only see them once a week, so I, I'm in a way very fortunate because I have got a farm that I more or less run and look after without being too interfered with so it's quite nice for me. So we've got that done. So that's potted history of how it all works.

J: Any questions on that? I'm just sitting here waiting, cause I'm hoping this is the next orchard to spray, and he's about, he's usually, if he hasn't broken down which I can't think he had because he usually, he usually phones me, my guess is that he run out down there and had to pop back with a little bit and I'm hoping he's coming back to spray these Bramley's in a minute.

K: Yeah, let me just check...I've got a list of things I need to cover. Right so you've told me about your farm, you've told me about the ways it's changed, you've told me why it's happened and your background in farming, haven't you, really?

J: Really, yeah

K: Yeah, I suppose the last thing, yeah, how do you see your farm – do you see it developing in the future at all to anything different, or how do you see it changing, that kind of thing?

J: I see it develop...I think developing, but changing in varieties

K: Like you said about the Russet



J: Yeah, that's gone, so yeah I think.... I hope there's a future in it. This year that's just gone, is awfully tough. It was picking up, I have to say, we were...the '14 season which we've just finished was...awful...for lots of reasons. Before that we were quite optimistic, changing to this, newer varieties, getting more modern and that, it looked, it looked hopeful, Mark, Mark was very enthusiastic. We have had a very bad season, through a big glut of apples...last year was a big glut of apples on top of the Russian business, which affected us an awful lot

K: How did...how did it affect...

J: Yeah, because Russia imports a lot of fruit, nothing from us. But Poland and countries round there put an awful lot of fruit into them, it all had to come this way. The easiest instance thing...the Discovery, because it was last August when it kicked off. We were selling Discovery, we were selling some, although some were going into the supermarket some were going into the ordinary markets, one day they were selling at 6 pound a box, the next day they were selling at 3 pound a box. That's how quickly it...supermarkets, lovely supermarkets.

K: Is that all because Russia weren't importing it

J: Yeah, all lovely supermarkets suddenly decided, "oh there's going to be a lot of fruit about", they didn't offer us half as much, prices just fell down, and that's where it all went wrong, and it was just hard to shift it, and the prices were terrible. Hopefully, it's a blip, but with fruit growing it doesn't come back that quick. Although it was a bad blip, my guess is if we can move it up a little bit this year, we'll be lucky. And I'm sure it's going to take a few years to build up to where we were.

K: Really?

J: Yeah, we had, two years ago, people were starting to pick up English and really support it, paying a fraction little bit more, not a lot, and it was noticeable. Last year because of everything, it's gone right down, and it's gonna take a bit of time. But hopefully it will, and hopefully the future'll go on.

K: Yeah..cause I wouldn't think people's mentality's changed, if you know their mentality was "oh yeah English apples", I don't really think that would have changed, so I think they should still be wanting to get English apples.

J: Yeah, but the supermarkets...the supermarkets don't put them on the shelf if they can get...so there's not so many English apples on the shelf if they can go and buy them...

K: From Spain or somewhere



J: Yeah. Which is the problem with it. We are so governed by supermarket's it's unbelievable, and they rule the roost and we can't do...but no one will say a lot against them because if it wasn't for them there wouldn't be any sales, or hardly any sales. It's very difficult but, yeah, but I think, as I say if we sat here before picking last year, I'd have told you I was very optimistic, you know, we've got, we've got plans for planting three years on, so we're thinking of changing it, we've not stopped doing anything at the moment, I say we're putting 2 years in now, we are and I think that's more because of people, we are thinking whether to take the next step, maybe take one more of these plots of Bramleys out, but that is an ongoing thing, that is just people's tastes and that changing which is a different thing to prices and that changing, if people don't want Bramley's then you've just gotta just react and put something else in, and that's part of the growing, that's not a problem as such, you've just, like any business you need to be aware of what's going on and doing that and you've got more control over that than you have of this price thing, cause that you can't do anything. So, we, yeah, but hopefully, yeah, as I say Mark's done 4 years and it's really nice, especially when he took over, when he took the business off of his mother, he said I'll try it for a year John and see [both laugh] so it was...but no, it's good.

(Recording stops. We watch the man spray the trees, then head back up to the farm. On the way back, John shows me the old farm he used to work at, and his houses.)