



## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: John Hinchcliff  
Age: 57  
Location: New House Farm, Canterbury  
Size: 300 acres  
Type: Fruit

Interviewed by: Louise Rasmussen  
Filmed by: Joe Spence  
Date: 14 July 2015

\*\*\*\*\*

Louise: *Could you just start by telling us a little bit about your farm here?*

John: The farm is about 300 acres, I don't know whether you want it in hectares or acres.

Louise: *Acres is fine.*

John: So 300 acres, it's predominantly fruit. And I'm a third generation farmer, but the first to introduce strawberries and blackcurrants. So we grow strawberries, blackcurrants and top fruit. But in the last two years, we've just moved into cherries. And there is a bit of arable that someone else does. So that's the rough make up of the farm. It's a fruit farm. Well, I don't know whether Alan told you that but yeah, I'm a fruit grower. So I'm not arable, I'm strawberries, blackcurrants, and apples and pears. Do you wanna know about me, or?

Louise: *Yeah.*

John: I'm 56, 57 next week. I've got two children, and as I say, I'm third generation. So...

Louise: *How has the farm been passed on over the years?*

J: My grandfather died before I was born, so I never actually met him. He was the one who bought it, and it was predominantly a sheep farm then, and then straight after the war, they started planting cherries, and apples, and pears. And the cherries were, I'll show you some pictures later, absolutely huge. You know, cherry trees



planted years and years ago were the size of this house. Now they're tiny. So... and then my father and his brother in law ran it, then my father on his own and now me. And what happens after that I don't know. Both of my children have been to University and done something totally different. So we'll have to see.

*L: Are they not interested in farming at the moment?*

J: I don't know... I certainly wouldn't want to say on camera what the feelings of my children are. But I don't know, who knows? Watch this space! One's an occupation therapist, the other is a project manager for a company involved with the Ministry of Defence, so... It's a nice way of life, but it's getting harder. So yeah, it's not easy. So every year you make enough money to say let's do it all again next year. But no, it's not easy, don't let anyone kid you that it's not easy. It's very risky, it's very dependent on the weather. But it's a very nice way of life.

*L: Do you think it has been getting harder over the years?*

J: It's getting harder with the costs of production going up, and the power of the UK supermarkets. And we live in a, I won't be the first to tell you this, a global market. So whereas, you know, 50 years ago if there was no apples, then the price of apples went up and apples were short in the shops. Now, it doesn't really matter, we can buy apples from anywhere in the world, and we have one of the lousiest climates to grow fruit. If you go to Scotland, there's not an awful lot of top fruit in Scotland. You come to Kent, which is 'The Garden of England', you go down to the Loire Valley, begins to get quite good, go down to the Dordogne, very good, South of France and continually into Spain, the weather's getting better, so we are on one of the Northernmost limits of production for a lot of crops. Hence, why we cover them in tunnels to keep the rain off. You know, today is not exactly a summer's day. Yet, we compete in a global market where the supermarkets will search the world for strawberries, apples, whatever you like. So if you haven't got it, there's no longer a shortage of anything, cause they will source it from somewhere in the world. Which makes it very hard to compete, cause our costs are quite high, our yields can be historically low because of the climate, and yet we compete with, let's say Spanish strawberries, where the climate is generally speaking much, much better.

*L: When do you think that started to change? Or...I imagine that's something that has happened gradually...?*

J: It's just been happening gradually for the last 25 years. When we joined the EU, we suddenly woke up to the fact that we went from being small, domestic suppliers to suddenly waking up and finding that the shops were full of Golden Delicious and Granny Smith apples. And we were not used to the competition. So, right way through the 30s, the 40s, and the 50s and the 60s, there was no competition for our



horticultural production. Then all of a sudden, in the late 70s, we joined the EU, and we were suddenly faced with all this competition that we'd never had before. So we had to get our act together very, very quickly. If you contrast us to New Zealand, New Zealand's a country, which grows an awful lot of top fruit, but it's a country with only 3 or 4 million people. So it's always exported all of it's production, so it's always had the systems in place to export. We were used to orchard, shop, consumer there; it was all very, very close, nothing had to be very good, because everybody was on our doorstep. If we were the New Zealanders, the New Zealanders quickly realised that if you're gonna take an apple and ship it halfway across the world, you make sure that everything is good, whereas we weren't faced with that sort of competition. So we were faced with very stiff opposition. And then, since then our supermarkets have got more and more powerful, to the point where, you know, the top four, I don't know, 75% of the UK grocery market is in the hands of four companies. And I guess it's happening right way across Europe, and probably the world. You know, in France you got Carrefour and Ahold, no Arhold's the Dutch one...Auchan, you know, Tesco's is in parts of Europe. Walmart now own ASDA, so they're all getting bigger, which makes them more and more powerful. And we're quite small, we're quite tiny, as an industry, so that 'if you don't like it John, don't worry, we can get it from somewhere else in the world'. And they do. So if you look at, you know, if you look at operation stack, and what goes on at Dover, the moment they shut the ferries, the lorries are literally parked...it's just continually movement of lorries going to and across the continent. And you know, we import an awful lot of fruit and vegetables in our own season from Spain and Germany and France and that. So yeah, we are in a global market. So we're fortunate in as much that we have at least got 60 million people on the island of the UK. That is an advantage. If you go to Holland, they got massive horticulture production, but they've only got a population of, I don't know, 8 million or something like that, I don't know what the population is. But we do at least have 60 million people all around here. So even though they want to buy food from the rest of the world, we have an advantage in as much that we are, we have everybody locally.

*L: How would you say that you as a farmer have had to respond to this competition over the years?*

J: I think, ultimately we just have to become more and more efficient. So that I think if you look at something like top fruit, when I first came into this industry in 1981, there was something like 2500 growers of apples and pears, I think there's now something like 350, and those 350 are now serious, a lot of them are very, very much bigger, they're no longer moaning about it, they just...they know the score, they're just trying to make their businesses more and more efficient. They're trying to grow varieties, which are yielding higher. You know, we were, in terms of apples, we backed a variety as the UK called Cox, which is a shocking apple, it's a great apple to eat, but it's a very difficult apple to grow. It doesn't yield very highly, it's a



coloured apple, which doesn't go very coloured on the tree sometimes, so you throw an awful lot away. Yet, when we were faced with competition, we were faced with competition on price. So that if you've got a very, very low yielding product, and you're competing on price with a very, very high yielding product, you're never gonna win. So over the last 20 years, you've seen the entire top fruit industry go from Cox to more continental type varieties. You know, Braeburn is a New Zealand apple, but there are farms that no longer grow Cox, and the volume of Cox growing in this country is going down and down and down. And we are competing on price with parts of Europe, to a certain extent on a level playing field, because we're now growing Gala and Braeburn, which are very, very high yielding. So they yield, you know, sometimes twice, three times what Cox will. So if you get the same price, then you've gotta have a high yielding. So we're growing more high-yielding varieties, we try to be as efficient as we can, we try to – in terms of strawberries – protect ourselves from the weather, by means of polythene tunnels, so when it rains, we just keep going. And I would say, and we're now sourcing more efficient labour from the former Eastern Europe. So the whole pattern of having local labour, predominantly female, coming out at half past 8, quarter to 9, harvesting through until approximately three o'clock when they will go and pick up their children, that's all gone. It's become 7 days a week, long hours, labour living on site. So the whole thing has changed and become much, much more efficient...in order to compete.

*L: Could you maybe explain a bit about how your fruit growing techniques have changed over the years as well?*

J: I think everything is now done to make things much quicker in terms of the timescale. So that if you go back to the 50s when you planted a cherry tree, you planted one tree here, another one over here, and you waited 15 years for them to grow and then you had a crop of cherries. Now - and similar with apples – now you plant one tree here, one tree there, one tree there, one tree there, one tree there, so that they hardly have to grow before you fill the whole area with wood, in order to grow fruit. Because you haven't got time to grow the tree and then start having the apples, you need to get into production, so everything has become much more intensive. And exactly the same with strawberries, you know, we're growing them in, we're no longer growing them in the soil, we're growing them in bags, we're putting them in, cropping, taking them out, putting them in, it's much more..., in order to make the whole thing more efficient. Time is, I suppose time is money, but you can't afford to plant something and wait 10, 15 years for it to say, oh right, I'm gonna have some cherries this year, or I'm gonna have some apples this year. We are cropping apples in the second year of planting it. So you plant a tree in let's say March, well, this year, and we're having apples on it the following year. Because the trees only got to grow let's say that amount before it's filled up. You're only giving each tree, only a little bit of space to fill. So the tree you're planting is exactly the same as we might have planted 50 years ago, but it's on a more dwarfing rootstock.



But you're only asking the tree to grow a little bit, instead of saying grow from...and fill the size of this room, we're saying, just grow enough to fill the size of the fridge. And then we'll have another one, then another one. And then on top of that, everybody is trying to mechanize as much as they can. And if you take, probably the best crop I can think of as an example, we grow blackcurrants for Ribena, and probably as late as 1976, 77, they were still predominantly hand picked. And then from the mid 70s onwards, we had the advent of machines and now all blackcurrants growing for process are harvested by machine. So 4 people can pick 25 tonnes in a day, and if it wasn't for...So what's happened is we're all growing more blackcurrants, because in the past...So in order to supply the brand Ribena, instead of having 200 growers, there's now only 35 growers. And those 35 growers are growing as many as the 200. But when there was 200, you only grew as much as you could pick by hand. And I would have needed, in order to grow the tonnage I grow now, I would need, I don't know, 2, 3000 people, and I couldn't do it, I couldn't find the labour, I wouldn't be able to afford to pay them the price. So...it's just a fact that mechanisation has enabled us to compete, and one day I reckon the world will wake up to tea and coffee, all of which are grown in countries with very, very low labour costs. And one day those sorts of products will start to go up in price because they're all grown in countries, which have got cheap labour. Where we go after China when it comes to making a pair of jeans I don't know. When a Chinese person wants 60 pounds a day minimum instead of one pound fifty, you won't get cheap jeans anymore. So yeah, by mechanization we've been able to keep supplying blackcurrants, which we would not otherwise be able to do. A, from a financial point of view, and B, physically, I could not find 2000 people, for 3 weeks work, it just would never happen. Cause my next door neighbour would need 3000 as well, and the guy down the road, who grows blackcurrants would need 3000. It's never gonna happen. So machines have altered that. And people are trying now with machines for pruning apple trees for the fresh market and things like that. Anything to cut the cost of labour. Labour is the one that keeps going up, and so we need to keep the productivity up. It's happened in many factories, you know, we've got robots building cars, we're no different: the cost of labour keeps going up and in terms of soft fruit, there is a lot of labour involved in producing soft fruit. You know, you plant the strawberry, you have to put the tunnel up, and then when it's hot you have to push it up, when it rains you pull it down, then you have to pick them and pack them, there's a lot of labour involved. And we need to find ways of reducing the amount of labour, because the cost of labour is, does keep going up. And the price of the product keeps going down or is static. So the price I'm getting for strawberries is the same price that I got 15 years ago. And my costs in that time have gone up considerably. So we're doing all we can to get more strawberries out of the plant quicker, and everything like that. If that makes sense.

*L: How many people have you employed on the farm then?*



On a typical day in the summer, there's about 35 to 36 people. My wife works here, she does all the bookwork and the wages, everything like that. Then we have about 30 people from Romania, Lithuania, Poland, and most of those keep coming back each year. And they live on site. And then there's two or three guys who live locally, who work here. Yeah, about 35, 36 people, something like that. So...but if you go back 50 years, there would have been a much bigger permanent labour force, and then we would have just had local people coming in for the harvest, we wouldn't have had anybody from Poland, or Lithuania, or Romania, you know. I know the farms in Kent, which are virtually run, everybody is from either Romania or Bulgaria. It's just the way it is. The people who we used to employ, predominantly people, mothers with children, are no longer looking for that sort of work. They've gone to work for Tesco's, or, they need a 12 month regular employment, whereas farming always used to be a good employer for people for the summer. But what's happened is that the season for strawberries, let's say has gone from 5 weeks to 9 months. So whereas you could sort of gather all these people for a few weeks of the year to help with the harvest, nowadays we pick strawberries in May to October, so you need people on site for a long period of time. And I need them on a Sunday, cause you have to pick 7 days a week sometimes. So it no longer, the work no longer really fits the wishes of people with young children. And those days are gone, it's now young people, single, looking for a long summer job, sometimes from March to October, and predominantly employed from Poland, Romania, Lithuania. And each year we're getting some of the same people coming back year after year. We've had people from Eastern Europe for about 30 years. For many years we had special visas. So we had what they called the SAW scheme, which is the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme. So long before Poland joined the EU, we'd been having Polish people here. And now the Polish people can, and the Romanian people for that matter, can go work anywhere. They could be sitting here with you, interviewing me, operating a camera, driving a taxi, we've had them, and they had special visas for many years, now they no longer have to work just for me, they can become doctors and they can do anything, can't they. We're all in the EU together, just. May not get on very well but, you know, we never had any Greek people, but it's...yeah...So the labour force has changed predominantly from local, living in Canterbury, to people living on site for the whole of the spring, summer.

*L: You have mentioned the EU a couple of times, could you maybe explain a bit about how the European Union has impacted your work, or you as a farmer?*

J: It's enabled us to expand our workforce. Because now even without SAWS, we can call upon so many millions of people from Bulgaria, Romania, but obviously, I think there is an element that some of the less developed countries need a market for their produce in order to help their economies to the point where, we've never been an exporter of horticultural produce. I don't know what the percentage of horticultural produce export in this country is. 1% I would say. We're a high cost



producer, so very often, we open up our markets to other parts of the world, in return for being able to trade with finance or technology and stuff like that, so we're always at the end of it where we've always ended up facing very stiff competition. And nowhere was that more so than when we joined the, what was the EEC I guess, and we were faced with competition literally overnight. Now it's, whether we're in or out of the EU, I guess, from a fruit growing point of view, it's less relevant, some of the farmers you will talk to will say that they need to be in the EU in order to have a level playing field, because of the EU subsidies. But EU subsidies in fruit growing are not as significant as what's going on in the market place. Whereas every arable farmer will get an EU subsidy. I will get a subsidy for an acre of apples, but, whereas the EU subsidy on the wheat will be quite a proportion of the overall income, on the apples it's very, very less significant. So, I think the EU has benefitted UK agriculture because we tend to be quite big and efficient, and a lot of the policies were designed for farms within Europe, which were less efficient. And if we were to leave the EU, and I guess we could say that as we sit here today in 2015, *that* is a possibility – we might not have said that two years ago, but if we have a referendum in 2016, or 2017 and the UK public vote to leave the EU, then I would imagine that any government in this country would not be as sympathetic to its farmers as what the EU has been. Because whenever there's something wrong with EU farming policy, if the French don't like it, we all know what the French do. They'll blockade Calais, they'll blockade the motorways, and they'll get their way. UK farmers tend not to dump cow manure on the stairs of embassies, they tend not to blockade the tunnel or the ports or the motorways, but we all know what French farmers are like: they're very, very militant. And to a certain extent we benefitted from the policies of the EU, which were designed for less efficient parts of the EU, and because it all has to be one, we probably benefitted. And a new government, whether it'd be Labour, Conservative or whatever, would probably not want to spend the billions of pounds that are spent on EU subsidies if we were outside. So I guess most farmers would probably want to stay in the EU, in the short term, because it's, they won't get what they get out of it if we leave. It'll be a great opportunity for any government to say right, we no longer got to subsidize our farmers, they can stand on their own, and I've got some sympathy with that. You know, my strawberries, my apples, the price goes up, the price goes down, ... you know, I live on that. Whereas for arable farmers, it's... the subsidies have been a lot more critical, certainly when prices were very low, then the fact that they got the subsidy was whoopee! Sometimes when the price had gone up, they still got the subsidy and it's whoa, this is really good! But for me, it's quite a small proportion of the overall income, because we get the same per area. So if you grow a crop of strawberries on it worth, let's say 30,000 pounds for one acre and I get a 100 euro for that acre, you could grow a crop of wheat worth 800 pounds and still get a hundred pounds, so it's less critical.



*L: Knowing that Britain is becoming less and less self-sufficient, and then on top of that we might leave the EU, what do you think of that, or how do you see that develop in the future?*

I think if we were to leave the EU, we wouldn't...for a start I don't think it will happen, I think the debate will be, it's a lovely thought, and I would liken it to Scotland. You know, for many Scots, what a lovely, romantic thought of being independent, let's face it, it would have been a complete and utter nightmare scenario if they voted last September to go independent. You know, no one could see the price of oil doing quite what it did, that would have been a disaster. Okay, they've got some whiskey, but just extracting everything that's involved in the whole of the UK out, and starting up a whole new system, I think would have been very, very difficult, and I think going from...I don't think we're suddenly going to leave the EU and become some independent state, where we put up a big wall, which is how, to a certain extent we were many, many years ago. I think, if we were to leave, we would still trade, Tesco's would still be looking the world for fruit and vegetables. I don't think an awful lot would change, except we might not get the sums of money that the EU wants to give its farmers. So I would imagine it would only get worse, because no one is gonna stop our Walmart and Tesco's and Morrisons looking around the world for food. We will still want to import. No one is ever gonna suddenly, no government is ever gonna say you can't import that from South Africa, New Zealand or whatever. So I don't think...whether if Mister Farage got in whether he would want to send all the Polish and all the Lithuanians home, because if he did that we would all just pack up. I don't think it will ever happen, but if Nigel Farage got in and you know, pulled us out of the EU and then try to send everybody home, I just can't see that ever...I just...I have been a big supporter of a free labour market. And I think the problem comes with, we do have too many other benefits that are freely available in this country to new migrants, which is why they're all at Calais wanting to get over here. *That* is, that is wrong, that needs to be looked at. Why are all these people, you know, landing in Italy, going up through Italy, into France, into Switzerland, and getting to Calais, because they wanna get to the UK where they're welcomed with open arms and given a house, and given this and given money and everything like that. I believe that the free movement of labour has helped our economy. It's, people no longer...UK people no longer want to pick strawberries. Period. That is just...They no longer want the hard work. I don't get hordes of UKC students on the phone in June saying we need a job, we have to... You know, years ago people would say, Oh I remember I used to go and pick strawberries when I was at University. They don't do that anymore, which is why we've all gone down the road of having Polish, Romanian and people like that. There are no English students picking fruit. I bet the number you could count on your hand. It's hard work. You earn a lot of money...But it's...I don't know, I don't know what students do for summer jobs now. You tell me. Yeah, years ago when...we would have a few people from Christ Church, a few people from UKC, that'd trundle up. It doesn't happen





anymore. Young people, when they first leave school, if someone said well, go and get a job, yeah, where do I get a job? Well, go out fruit picking, go and pick John's apples or his strawberries. Ehh..yeah, I gotta get up early...It doesn't happen anymore. Whether English people are lazy...I don't know, but...

*L: You also mentioned the power of the UK supermarkets a couple of times, could you maybe expand a bit on how that has changed over the years? Or how it has come to be the way it is today?*

J: I think 30 years ago people had more time, and people would go shopping, and the high street of most towns would look very different. You had a butcher, the baker, the chemist and the fruit and veg shop, and people would probably go shopping 2 or 3 days a week, because they had a lot of time. And they would buy fresh bread and have milkmen, they'd buy meat... And then there's...we had the advent of the supermarkets, people realised that, people had less time because they wanted more leisure time. And as the supermarkets got bigger, they started bolting on the baker, didn't they, the fruit and veg, the chemist, and now, people can just go with their trolley, and get one massive trolley load once a week or even once every two weeks. To the point where all the little shops have now gone. So everybody goes to Tesco's and Sainsbury's and ASDA, which has made them more and more powerful with the supply base, because whereas in the past we were supplying the wholesalers who were then supplying all the little green grocers and things like that, everything was fragmented. Now, you get somebody here, and he's buying for 15, 18 million people, and that is *such* a big proportion of the market. You know, I think something like 18 million people shop in Tesco's...everyone thinks Tesco's have problems, which they have, but still, they still got, I don't know, 20...29 or 30% of the grocery market. And as all those other little shops have gone, we're faced with a situation whereby either you supply these big retailers of which there are already 4, with a few more add-ons, or you have no market. You can't turn around and say well, I'm gonna supply the little green grocers in Canterbury...because there aren't any. You know, I don't know how long you've been in Canterbury, but I think actually within the city wall I can't name you a green grocer, within the city wall. You know what I mean by the city wall?

*L: Yeah.*

J: I don't think there's a green grocer within the city wall. So even if I wanted to grow something and say right, no supermarkets, I don't like supermarkets, I'll supply the little shops, they're not there! Because people haven't got time to go to the green grocer's and then to the baker's and then to the butcher's. They just go to Tesco's or Sainsbury's and do the whole lot, which has made them very, very powerful. And of course the other thing is, they want everything done...they want everything very simple, so whereas in the past you might have different varieties of apple, but they



might only be around for a couple of weeks, they don't want that. They want Gala for 52 weeks of the year. When it's English, it's English, when it's French it's French, when it's New Zealand, it's New Zealand or South Africa. But that bit of the shop there, is Gala. And whereas in the past, if you said I got this super apple, I've only got a little bit, it'll only last 2 weeks, oh no don't want that, oh, you know, we need something we can get into and pump it out 52 weeks of the year. And they're so big now, it's made them very cumbersome. Whereas you could go to one shop in Canterbury, say look I've got 5 boxes of this, would you like some? Yeah, they look good, put them in the shop. Now, one guy buys all the strawberries for Tesco's...So...you can't really knock it because that's what everybody does, that's what everybody...you know, I know people who'd say oh, it's not right this power of Tesco's and supermarkets, yeah, but everybody goes there. So...you can't really argue against it because all the other guys have packed up. There's no bakers, I don't know of a bakery in Canterbury anymore. A few sandwich shops, a few sandwich shops, a lot of coffee shops, a lot of coffee shops. But now, you know, the dry cleaning, I can remember when I was young there used to be a dry cleaning base in Canterbury. Don't do that anymore. Chemists, chemists are gradually going because you go to Morrisons, or Tesco's. They got big bakery, post office, you can sort everything out. Soon, you'll be able to die, and buy your coffee from Tesco's I'll imagine. So they have got very, very powerful. ... But you have to deal with them, because, and of course, as they've got bigger, we've in a sense got smaller. I know how some of the big supermarkets treat some of their big suppliers, let alone little us. So yeah, it's made it very difficult. But you've got to go along with it, or stop. Don't moan about it anymore, just keep your head down, adapt and get on with it. If you keep moaning about it, you'll just end up digging yourself a big hole, you might just as well pack up...which is what so many have done, which is why you got bigger and bigger farms. I guess the saddest one is probably milk, I don't think there's...I don't know many milk producers in this area. I know one. But yeah, you know, they're producing milk for less than people are paying for a bottle of water. They're being paid, you know, 26 or 27, 28 pence a litre or something, and people are going in and buying... I think the thing that's happened over the last 30 years is that people have lost all understanding of the seasons...and the value of ... produced items. When people are happy to pay whatever – I don't know how much a bottle of water is, but let's say £1.50 – for a bottle of water! Yet, somehow, the bottle of milk has suddenly, you know, the guy who produces and looks after the cow every week of the year is getting something like 29 pence. And people no longer understand that we have a season, so that if someone said to me, so do you grow strawberries all year round? No, we have a spring, we have a summer, we have an autumn and we have a winter. And we can't...Oh, right, ok. And children are growing up without any perceptions of the seasons and that we have a harvest in the summer, we have a spring, and, you know, everything keeps going round like that. And I don't think they have any appreciation of the value of produce or anything like that. When they can go and, I got a guy who works for me and he went to buy a mobile phone the other



day, he only wanted a cheap one, he paid 99 p for a pay-as-you-go phone. 99 p. So he's thinking 99 p for a phone, why are strawberries so expensive? It's because the phone is being produced in China by people on 50 pence a day and it's being subsidized by all the phone calls I expect... But yeah, people are losing touch of value, and growing produce in this country is very high risk. You know, if you have a hail storm tonight, all my apples go from, you know, 90 pence a kilo to 8 pence a kilo, in 5 minutes. So if you had all your life savings, would you put them on the end of the garden wall on a windy night so if they would blow off, or you do what you can to sort of...yet, we've actually got our... out there at the whim of the weather, and if we had a hail storm, yeah, believe me, they would all, they would all...be worthless. I'll show you some pictures in a minute that will show you the changing in the farm. Do you wanna see them now? Do you want a quick break, cause I'm probably talking non-stop.

... (Showing us pictures in another room) (Description of the pictures filmed)

J: (Still looking at the pictures, describing them) I think the main difference is the size of...If you look at the size of the trees here, and then, you know, modern trees are just no bigger than you or I. We got some in tunnels in the drive, and you know, the whole idea of the modern tree is that here you need a huge, great ladder to pick them. You know, we are talking big trees. And from a health and safety point of view you wouldn't be allowed to do that now, but also all the time people are going up ladders they're not picking, if they're not picking, they're not earning any money, so that you get low productivity, which means it's...you know...the cost of production go up. So everything's got smaller to the point where you don't really want anything bigger than you can do at ground level. People are going higher a little bit, and they got platforms, but ultimately, if you can do everything from the ground, whereas, you know, these would be, you know, you can see that is...that's only a single storey coach, but even so, some of these trees are just massive. ... (Pointing to another part of the picture) And then obviously we got the start of what has become quite a big caravan site. And all the big trees are gone.

...

*L: When did you stop having pigs?*

J: oh golly! Before my time, they'd gone before my time, before I got...I came here in 1981, they'd long gone by then. When...about the same time as the big cherries went.

... (Going back into the kitchen)



J: All the big cherries trees are out here, you know, you were looking at the house that way, and this is where all the big cherry trees were, and it's now long rows of tiny trees.

*L: It's really changed a lot.*

J: Yeah, and of course everything's longer rows and straight, and now all of this is now plastic, you know...

...

J: (Sitting down again at the table) So yeah, it's changed a lot, even in my lifetime. And I'm not old.

*L: You mentioned in the very beginning that there was a particular crop you'd introduced when you came?*

J: I grew... I ended up introducing blackcurrants, and strawberries.

*L: And for what reason did you introduce those?*

J: The apple...we joined the EU, and top fruit was getting very, very difficult, faced with all the competition from French *Golden Delicious* and things like that. And we...So I felt we reduced the apple acreage considerably. And we started growing strawberries. And then I introduced blackcurrants because I wanted a crop that, from a farming point of view, if I did everything I possibly could, if I had a contract, then I wasn't at the whim of the supermarkets. So you can grow fantastic strawberries, fantastic apples, but ultimately, you're at the control of the supermarkets. Whereas with blackcurrants, I have a contract. I have to negotiate the contract, but there's the contract, so I come along and if we have a good summer, running our produce, that amount of blackcurrants, with that quality, I get...

(Someone comes in) ...

J: Yeah, so I wanted a crop that was fixed. If I came up with what I said I would, you would honour that cause we got a relationship of...a contract. If I come up with a ton of blackcurrants, you'll pay me that. Whereas with strawberries, or with apples, you can plant an apple tree today, spend five or six years building it up, and then once you've got all the apples and everything you then gotta fight for the price and everything like that. I prefer the relationship whereby we agree, I'll go off, and I'll plant some blackcurrants, and you've told me what you're going to pay me. Fair deal. Whereas it doesn't happen like that with supermarkets; they encourage you to plant things and then... you know, it all changes, so...



*L: What do you think about the changes that have taken place now over all these years?*

J: The changes that have taken place...I guess...I'd like to think that we've progressed. I would like to think that we've kept up with the pace of change. It's relentless, you know it just keeps going on and...A week ago in the budget, the chancellor announced that the minimum wage was going to go up to £7.50 or something, which is going to put our labour costs *way, way* higher, which is going to be a challenge. And it might force me to pack up strawberries. But for those people that have chosen to make horticulture or agriculture their occupation, then I think it's been absolutely vital that we adapt, change and get on with it. There are people who fruit grow, who farm, and it's not really their occupation. They're doing it more of a lifestyle, they might have a large house and they might have 20 acres of orchards...They might not have adapted quite so quick. But you have to, otherwise I would not be sitting here talking to you. You know, when I said half an hour ago that when I first came in there was something like 2500 growers of apples and pears, there's now 350, and it's probably still falling. All those 350 are probably bigger than what they used to be; we've got fewer pack houses packing, but they're all massive pack houses. I think, for those people that didn't want to adapt, they wouldn't be sitting here now, talking to you. So the ones that have kept abreast of change, they're the ones that you're still talking to. And anybody that didn't want to change has probably long gone, just like any other industry. And I think the only thing that...we have to remember about farming is that farms don't actually go anywhere. And if you look at the high street of any town, the shops are still there, whereas the butcher and the baker has gone, they're now charity shops. All that's happened is it's changed, but they are still there. The thing that characterizes farming is that someone will always farm the land, they too have to, you know, you're not seeing large areas of land derelict, are you?

(John's wife comes in...)

...

J: So yeah, that's, you know, the high street's changed, and it's now full of charity shops, full of coffee shops, that used to be the green grocers, the butchers, the bakers, whereas the farms are always being farmed by somebody, and some of them are much bigger. If you go to people like Goldens or Mansfields, they're huge. But someone is still farming it. But it's those people that have adopted the change, cause no one could carry on growing apples or anything where the cost of production is higher than the value of the product they're getting. So they've been squeezed out. So those that didn't adapt, yeah, they're not here. You just gotta hope we can continue to adapt to what's going on out there, one of which is wage inflation, we



# 50 Farmers' Tales



*An Archive of Interviews with Kent Farmers*

are very, very labour intensive. Blackcurrants is ok, we can harvest all those with machines, but all the strawberries get picked by hand. But we're being squeezed at that end, and we got cost of production going up at that end. So yeah, it's challenging, it's challenging. Yeah, great fun.