50 Farmers' Tales

An Archive of Interviews with Kent Farmers

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Alistair Lyon
Age: 64 (1951)
Location: East Valley Farm, Dover
Size: 700 acres
Type: Arable

Interviewed by: Joe Spence and Baely Saunders
Filmed by: Joe Spence
Date: 9th December 2015

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Baely: *So if you can just start by introducing yourself*

Alistair: Right my name's Alistair Lyon, I've farmed here in partnership with my son. As a family we've been here since 1951. This is East Valley Farm. Yes, so we moved here in 1951, that was the year I was born, so you'll just have to work out my age from that! No, I official retire… officially of retirement age next year. As I say, we moved here in 1951, my father and uncle were farming in Scotland prior to that, in the Isle of Bute - a small farm, a rented property. They preferred a…they really wanted their own farm, they didn't like renting. A number of farmers from South West Scotland had moved to this area, and my Dad's sister was already in East Kent – she actually found this place and, so as I say, they bought it and moved here in 1951. Just 200 acres then…few years later we managed to buy a neighbouring farm which doubled the size to 400. It stayed at that size for a long time. Then as father and uncle were retiring out of the business I was coming into it and we've picked up extra bits of land over the years and were now farming 700 acres.

Baely: *Ok*

Alistair: What do we do on the farm? Well originally it was… probably the main enterprise was a dairy herd, had about 30 or 40 dairy cows, besides some sheep. I think it got to about 200 ewes at one point. And grew some crops, wheat and barley in those days. Gradually it was getting easier to specialise in some things and not do so many different things so the sheep went, grew some more crop, started keeping cattle for beef and then, back in about the mid 70's, we gave up the dairy herd, kept more animals for beef but doing more arable cropping. Crops are now wheat, barley, oil seed rape, linseed and beans. This part of the country, it suits arable cropping more than livestock. Livestock are really, they need plenty of grass to eat, obviously,

and it just gets too dry here in the summer. Grass stops growing, it's as simple as that. So the West part of the country where it rains more is more suited to that, so the arable is more suited for here. So that the way we've gone. We farm 700 acres now with probably as fewer people as we've ever done –just 3 of us and well, through the Winter, 2 would be enough, to be quite honest. But, so that's been a big change. And quite honestly, on the arable side if we doubled our acreage we probably wouldn't need any more people, we'd just buy bigger tractors. And certainly, there's farms not too far away that have got, they do farm a couple of thousand acres of crop and still only do it with 2 or 3 people, so that's been a big change. Yeah, farms certainly got bigger over the years, I mean we've expanded from 200 to 700, some others have grown even more up to 2 or 3 thousand acres, and obviously the smaller ones have disappeared. Initially the farms tended to be bought, more often than not by neighbouring farmers - nowadays it tends to be the original owners hang onto the ownership, but another, another farmer farms the land, under some arrangement or other… 'renting it in' in inverted commas. As I said, arable cropping, we could farm twice a year and just buy bigger machinery, and if take on extra land that's just what they do. It almost endless, but you can go that way. We still keep some beef cattle, got a few fields that are, are too steep for sensible arable cropping so they stay as grass and the cattle graze them. We've also built up quite a useful trade making hay that we sell to local people with horses, riding stables and what not – that's certainly been a growing industry in the last 20 or 30 years. We haven't gone down the road of any energy production in the form of solar panels or wind turbines. We've been tempted by it, it's quite lucrative I know but we haven't done anything that way. A lot have. Some comment sometimes that using land for energy production, it's taking it out of food production, which is true but, at the end of the day it comes down to economics, what's going to pay you the best – I'd make no apology for that. In other ways it's nothing new, 50, 60, 70 years ago I think about third of the farm was for growing energy crops – it was to feed the horses!

[interview interrupted by phone call]

Alistair: Sorry about that.

Baely: *so you were saying 40 years ago some of the fields were for energy crops?*

Alistair: Yes, perhaps 50, 60, 70 years ago more so. But as I say it was for feeding the horses! The horses did the work on the farm, not the tractors. Go back a bit further, and horses were used for road transport and everything. And they all had to be fed, so the crops were grown for energy that way. Its just completely different to what energy crops are now, but a, it's an interesting thought. Of course the populations grown a lot in that time as well. You might know better than I but, I think since before the 2nd World War we've probably doubled haven't we? I think. So a lot more

people to feed. Production on farms has certainly increased dramatically. After the 2nd World War, well during the 2nd World War, up until then we were relying on imported food a lot, cheap food coming from the commonwealth and what not. And when we were at war with Germany they tried to blockade all the imports and the country nearly starved. But after the war we said we must never let that happen again, and support farming and increase production. They introduced subsidies to give us some more guaranteed income, had advisory farms to look into new methods and employed advisors to go round the farms telling us to improve it, artificial fertilizers started being used more and more, chemical weed control disease control…all these things came in, and it all increased, allowed us to increase production dramatically. Better breeding with new varieties of all crops. And I think, probably 60 or 70 years ago, the average yield for wheat was probably only 1 tonne an acre, and now we're...well the average is not quite as high… but we're commonly getting 4 tonnes an acre. So it's… we've certainly increased production a lot and that applies to all crops, and grass. As I say, though the use of better varieties, better understanding and feeding of them, controlling weeds and diseases. And so it goes on. Few years ago, for a while we kept being told 'oh the world population is growing, we're going to have to keep producing more and more'… suddenly this year we're producing too much, and prices have collapsed. But that's the joys of farming I'm afraid, you have good years and you have bad years, but you just cross your fingers that it'll get better eventually and it always does. As I said before, labour wise, certainly less. Yeah I think we had… initially when we had 200 acres… dairy herd… that's always quite labour intensive. We probably had 3 or 4, 3 or 4 people on the farm I think in those days and just 200 acres, but now there's just 3 of us and 700 acres. We don't have the dairy - but in even livestock production - you can mechanise a lot of it and do more with less people. A machine to reduce the labour is cheaper than employing another person. Even if somebody's lost their job that's the sad economic truth of the world we live in. What else? Yeah I suppose crops have changed. We used to be pretty well all 'spring cropping', by that I mean sowing the crops in the spring to harvest that summer. Now probably about three quarters of the crops are sowed in the autumn, that's come about with the benefit of chemical weed control. If you sow the crops in the autumn potentially there's a lot more weeds growing, but we now have the ability to control those weeds and that's contributed a lot to getting a higher yields at the end of the day, the crops just in the ground longer to grow. How has the weather changed? Topical at the moment! I seem to remember colder winters, more snow, frozen water pipes and all that, which we don't seem to have had for a long time now. Hotter drier summers, wetter milder winters…that's my impression of it, I'm sure there's official figures to justify that or disprove it, but that's my impression of it. Is that going to affect us? Hotter drier summers certainly – the grass stops growing in the summer when it gets hot and dry. Has that got worse? Seems to have done in my thinking, which is why we've tended to go more down the road of cropping rather than of livestock. Crops sown in the autumn, we still sow some in the spring, then it comes to the summer, once it's

hot and dry, well they've virtually finished growing then and it just ripens them and we want it hot and dry for harvest. It doesn't work exactly, but that's generally. I could do with some questions now to prompt me…

Joe: *that was lovely, a very concise overview. I think there's lot to expand on. I was quite interested…you were talking about mechanisation…so we met a number of famers, especially farmers that have smaller farms…when that demand to really produce so much more than had ever been known in the past…a lot of small farms found it difficult to mechanise quickly enough. What was your experience of it? Having to cope with that exponential increase?*

Alistair: Yes. Yes a new machine becomes available, you think 'golly that's expensive – can I really justify that?' Once you take the plunge and buy it, usually after a year or two you think 'how did I survive without it?' Perhaps we've been fortunate, we've been big enough to justify it. Certainly if you're much smaller it's harder to justify yes. I'm just thinking of other farms in East Kent's areas. Richer soils, grow vegetables with a much higher output per acre, but more labour intensive so they can go down that route. We're on relatively shallow soil here, over chalk, so we can't really grow vegetables. We tried to grow potatoes for a few years but the soil is just not deep enough for that, so we're restricted really to what we can grow. Farming you tend to grow what suits the…what does best on your farm. That's mainly the soil, climate, also what you enjoy doing most. I think there's three farms within five miles of here that are, contrary to what I've been saying about going arable, they're very keen on dairy herds, they've got very big dairy herds. I can remember, yeah certainly, 40 years ago even there was a… there were five dairy herds in our village, all with 30 or 40 cows each, now there's none. But no end of people have given up, but those that have got them, they've got 3, 4, 500 cows each and through better breeding and feeding those cows are producing more milk than ever, so there's plenty of milk being produced even though its from fewer herds. For those farmers that was their choice to go down that route. Yeah, I said earlier about grass not growing, they still have that problem – I think a lot of them, all of them in fact, they're now growing maize which grows well as an arable crop. They harvest that and then feed it to the cows indoors. So that's the way they got round it here. On the West side of the country, especially the West Coast of Scotland, 'cos I've got relatives up there, it rains so much that grass does grow and yes there's grass to feed the cows. So that's different to here. Yeah, we gave up sheep, sheep…we weren't doing it very well. Didn't seem to be very profitable, the cereal crops seem more profitable, so seemed to be the obvious way to go. Yes this is possibly what you call a typical 'family farm' but most farms around are family farms, albeit that many have taken on more land and other families have gone out of business. Probably tend to rely more on other firms supplying us with stuff now, machinery is the obvious one, fertilizers, sprays to control the weeds and diseases, repair firms – yeah we certainly rely on others a lot more than we used to.

Joe: so we were just talking about mechanization again, a lot farmers we've spoken to have said they borrow equipment from other farms. I don't know if that's something you've experienced?

Alistair: A little. Well specifically, as I said we make our own hay, we don't have our own bailer, a neighbour comes and bails ours. Some of ours we wrap in plastic, we call it silage or haylage… haylage … wrap it when it's a bit drier. So a neighbour comes and bails ours but we've got a bail wrapper. We wrap ours and wrap theirs as well, and one or two other people as well. So that's one way of sharing, of spreading the cost. But we use contractors a bit more than we used to. We have them in for dung spreading and sometimes bailing. Yeah I think contractors are probably busier now than ever they were

Joe: would it be like Velcourt – would that be an example of a…

Alistair: yeah that's a very different set up. Do you know anything at all about Velcourt?

Joe: I know a little. I was just wondering if that's an example of a contractor that you were talking about

Alistair: Not really. Velcourt started 30 or 40 years ago. There were 3 or 4 farmers over Westmere somewhere, they got together and realised that …they were probably mixed farms like ourselves in those days …and realised that it was it was very expensive to have all the machinery to do all the different jobs. So they pooled their resources and bought one good big range of machinery to do the work for them all. And it was all costed out obviously. That was successful, so they thought 'crikey if we can do this we've still got spare capacity, we could do another, do some more land'. And they kept expanding from that. So they take over, they come to agreement with a farmer, either pay a rent or a profit share…different arrangement, whatever suits. And they come in, farm the land, do all the work…so yeah they can justify the big machinery farming thousands of acres. And, yeah it's not a family business anymore, but they do farm the land very well.

Baely: Being so close to them have they approached you?

Alistair: Not directly. No, if I was in the position of not having anybody, not having any family to carry to farm on I would certainly consider going down that route, either with them or with another firm. But no, nobody's ever approached us directly. Its … economically it might make sense, even in our area – we've got 550 acres of crop, our machinery costs and labour costs are probably quite high compared to those farming 2 or 3 thousand acres - so economically it would probably make sense

just to employ nobody here and just let them do the work and take a share of the profit…but it's more fun to do it yourself! I know that might sound silly, but I make no apology for using that word. I think like all farmers, we love our work…yes it's a way of life, but it's also a business, we've got to earn a living out of it. But as I say, the rewards of farming aren't all financial. Keeping animals, especially if you're breeding them, you see calves born, feed them, grow up, and you eventually sell them. Sowing crops – seeing a crop grow, look after it and harvest it… and they're very satisfying. Sometimes things go wrong but…sometimes you can blame the weather and sometimes you can only blame yourself, but you just have to take it on the chin and get on with it.

Baely: Earlier on you said that when you started the farm you had a mixture, you had dairy, you had sheep you had some crop, some grass and that eventually it became easier to specialise. Why is that? And do you miss the variation?

Alistair: Yeah. We had dairy, that's always a lot of work going out milking the cows twice a day. As I say we only had 30 or 40, if we'd have improved the facilities we could have been milking a hundred a day. It wouldn't have involved any more people, there would have been a lot more output. Had some sheep… that involved a lot of time as well. Once again if we had had… I think we had about 200… but if we'd had 1000 it probably wouldn't take that much more time than 200. But 'cos you've got the different enterprises you're trying to go in different directions, different jobs…so to concentrate on the one it definitely does make it easier, less time consuming.

Baely: *What made it easier to specialise?*

Alistair: That's the main thing. I suppose which way do you specialise? I'll come back to what suits your farm best…

Baely: *What I mean is…maybe I misunderstood… but it sounded like some kind of change, you know maybe it's with machinery or…that suddenly meant that farms were able to go in one direction rather having than five or six. I'm wondering about the change that kind of made you decide that 'Ok – now we're able to just do that'*

Alistair: I suppose arable cropping certainly got easier as tractors got bigger and all the machinery got better for doing the job so that was obviously becoming easier in many ways. Livestock, it had more and more demands …more rules and regulations…there's an awful lot of paperwork tied up with keeping animals nowadays, that's certainly been a change in the last, specially the last 20 years. All out cattle, every ones got its own individual passport nowadays, you've probably come across that before. So if you move an animal onto the farm or off the farm we have to record its ear number. We have to keep a written record of it all, but also it's

recorded on a central government database so its a…'go through all that, record any treatments the animals'…the cropping side we have to record all the the…when we sow the crops, any treatments they get, fertilisers they get, it all has to be recorded. And then when we sell the grain, a lorry load goes out we can trace it back to where it's come from. So if any problem arises, trace it back and we're…'oh you did that wrong', or trace it back and 'you did everything right and that's not where the problem has come from'. 'Traceability' – that's a big thing nowadays. With cattle I think a lot of it took off when we had the BSE crisis back in the 90's – 'Bovine spongiform encephalopathy'…almost before your time!

Joe: Did you have cattle at that time? When BSE…

Alistair: Yes we did actually have some…after we stopped the dairy herd we kept some beef suckler cows and, yeah we got it in a few of those.

Joe: And how did the BSE crisis affect you?

Alistair: I suppose there was movement restrictions. Yeah, we lost a few animals, we were compensated for them. I suppose the biggest effect was financially. Obviously it didn't give the public much confidence in buying beef so the demand dropped off dramatically. The prices are purely supply and demand, the prices dropped rather dramatically so that was probably the biggest financial effect. It was certainly a worry for everybody, we didn't know if it was going to berserk and wipe out our whole…every animal, or erm…thank goodness it didn't. It's now a thing of the past. So, that's when a lot of extra record keeping came in, so animals could be traced back to their parents, and also feeding. It was virtually proved that it was spread by feeding meat and bone meal, so feeding the remains of other animals to those animals, it hadn't been properly sterilised. So we think that's where it came to ours, we were buying in some food at the time and that undoubtedly had meat and bone meal in it. We're fairly sure that's where it hit us. And then we had the foot and mouth outbreak a few years later than that. That closed down cattle, animal movements for a while. Caused a few problems, which eventually it got sorted out. Fortunately we've never had foot and mouth here. Two neighbouring farms had it, a bad outbreak way back in the 50's. I can't really remember it myself but as I say, neighbours had it and we didn't. We were jolly lucky in that respect and I can't put it down to any more than luck. When there is an outbreak of such things you all rush about with disinfectant and make sure that anybody that comes in disinfects their feet, you spray disinfectant on lorries' wheels and all the rest of it. But I'm not sure it does a lot of good, I think that disease in particular was spread by wild animals. Nobody has ever proved it one way or the other but…certainly in the Winter when you get snow, you go out in the morning and, if anybody's been walking or there's tire tracks in the snow it's always surprising how many wild animals that have been around…foxes, badgers…well you can recognise the prints on the ground and it's a

bit of an eye opener to see how many have been around every night so I think they've got a lot to answer for when it comes to spreading some things. Birds as well – we can't keep them out of farms. That's always a bit of a worry with animals but if you worried about everything all the time you would worry yourself to an early grave! Things go wrong on farms - sometimes you get health problems in animals, crops go wrong sometimes, machinery breaks down. After a while you get enough practise at it, enough experience of things go wrong that you learn to cope with them, sort them out and you know life carries on, so you don't have to get too worked up about it.

[Joe discusses turning the light on to improve the image quality on the camera]

Baely: *I was just going to ask, over the years that you've been farming here… who does your product go to? And has that changed from when you had the sheep and the beef and the dairy? Now that you're just arable, where are the crops going?*

Alistair: If we go back to when we started here with the dairy herd, for quite a long time the milk as just being picked up in churns, ten gallon churns, and going to a dairy in Dover. So, it tended to supply local people.

Joe: What years was that roughly?

Alistair: Certainly in the 50's and part of the 60's I think. The dairies, for the same reason as any other industry, they were getting bigger and smaller ones were disappearing. So for the latter years that we were producing milk it was going to Headcorn, not much further away. As I say, our milk was going away in churns. We were going to have to go…the whole system it was going to bulk. So you milk the cows, milk goes into a big tank. Then a tanker lorry would come along. So it was…when that…that was the final straw really…why we gave up. And now I think the milk the local people produce goes…I'm not sure where it goes to nowadays. I know the Headcorn dairy packed up. Meat and sheep and cattle that we had…we sell ours now at Ashford market, bought by butchers and wholesalers. There used to be abattoirs…in Canterbury there was a small one, at Sandwich, Ashford…they've all gone. I think Guildford is our closest one now, or up into Essex…actually I think our closest one is Dunkirk but that's across the water so that doesn't count! Yeah so the overriding thing is things are being transported a lot further. Obviously roads are better and lorries are better, the transport gets cheaper in real terms. So instead of supplying locally, local people, we don't know really who it's really supplying! Grain…same thing really. We're on the chalky soil here, we can grow quite good malting barley, barley that's converted into malt and used for beer production or whisky or different malt products. I remember my father saying they used to take the grain to a small brewery at Walmer, just 2 or 3 miles down the road. I don't remember that myself but it must have been back in the 50's. Now it goes up to East

Anglia or even the Midlands. We sell it to grain merchants 'cos…they changed over the years - there used to be a lot more local firms, but they tend to be national firms now, even international firms. And…so the malting barley goes…some of that's exported…but it certainly goes a lot further. Wheat…we can't produce, we can't grow…our grounds not suited to growing what we call 'milling wheat' which is used for bread and biscuit making. Most of ours goes for animal feed. There used to be a feed mill at Canterbury, a lot used to go there. One at Robertsbridge, a little bit further. They've all gone. Oh there's still one at Wingham – they take some. But more and more of our wheat now is exported. A lot goes up to Tilbury… it sometimes goes up on smaller boats either at Ridham or even some goes out from Dover. But we just sell it to the grain merchant, it's up to them. So yeah, as a country we're definitely exporting far more than we ever used to. I think we've got … now last year's harvest approximately sixteen million tonnes in the country of which I think 4 or 5 million are surplus to requirements and we've got to rely on exports to sell them. This year they seem to be struggling to be export as the whole world has produced too much grain and the price keeps dropping. The pound is strong in value, especially against the Euro and that in effect reduces our price. So that's not so good at the moment. We had a few…3 or 4 years, good years price wise and everybody throughout the world has planted more crops and last year was a … sorry, this year, I suppose was a particularly good harvest, everything grew well this year and it seems everything throughout the world had good harvests so there's a … quite a surplus at the moment. Far more international trade than ever there used to be. As I say, we export. Once again, transports just got easier, cheaper. I think it probably costs more to take our grain on the lorry from here to, well as I say Tilbury - once it's on a ship there it can go almost anywhere in the world for the same price as it costs for those first few miles. Shipping is very cheap. So yeah there's lots of grain exported, some beef, a lot of lambs are exported...dead, I hasten to add, a few live but that's another matter but no, a great bulk of them go dead. So they really rely heavily on the export trade. Oil seed rape, which is … how long have we been growing that? 20 years now? That goes up to Erith, South-East London. You know what I mean by oil seed rape? The yellow crop. You crush the seed. You get … about 40 to 45% of it is oil. You take the oil out, use that for …. sold to everybody as cooking oils or used for cooking oils … numerous other things I suppose. And the crushed seed afterwards is quite a valuable cattle feed, well animal feed full stop. Linseed … that's nearly always exported to France … at least ours is. France, Belgium, Germany, it's gone to … yeah it is an oil crop again … crush it to get the oil out. I think a lot of that is used for animal feed but going abroad like that we lose track of it rather.

Joe: Can I just ask you a question about imports and exports? It's connected with this increased globalisation and interconnectedness of markets. I'm quite interested in the futures market. Farmers have said that's been quite a big impact. Futures contracts … which obviously feeds into the question of our relationship with traders effectively.

Alistair: We've never got involved ourselves in the futures market. I don't fully understand it. I don't feel big enough to get involved. But what we can do, we can sell our grain in advance to the grain merchants. Which it comes to the same really.

Joe: And is that a fairly new phenomenon? When did that come about?

Alistair: Probably … probably we do more of that … don't really remember doing it 10 or 15 years ago. So we're certainly doing more of that. I mean we can speak to grain merchants hopefully when they phone us up looking for grain … that would be the best time to sell rather than us phoning them … but that's a minor point. But yeah we can sell it … make a contract with them to supply 50 or 100 tonne or whatever … either for immediate delivery or next month or six months down the line or even next year's crop. Not sure if we can go much further than that. They probably, with all the thousands of tonnes that their dealing with, they probably use the futures system for that. So yeah, there's certainly a lot more trading goes on that way. At the moment prices are low … below the cost of production for a lot of people … and if you could see that you could sell some of your grain next year at a better price it's tempting to book some. We've done a little bit. Yeah, so it's certainly a feature in the system.

Joe: And has your experience been positive? Trading that way?

Alistair: Some and some. Yes sometimes it's a … I've seen grain go out at a £150 a tonne that was booked 6 or 9 months earlier and on the day it was perhaps only worth £100 a tonne! But I've also seen it go the other way. I remember one particular year …. 5 or 6 years ago I think it was … we had two lorries here once … we loaded them up with wheat … identical wheat. And each one … one we sold forward for £80 a tonne and the other one had sold just the week before for £160 a tonne! One load was worth double the other!

Joe: of exactly the same stuff?

Alistair: Yeah! It was probably going to the same place! So that year we got it wrong but you have to … I always wonder … a grain merchant put it to me … he said 'if you get it wrong you just say "sod it" -you were satisfied on the day!' So again, you agree a price and everybody has to stick to it. So there is a written contract. There's no way out of it. Some will wriggle but no, you're word is worth … if you honour things then generally you get a better reputation. Yeah, one thing I would say about the farming industry is how much trust there is in the whole industry. We sell stuff and we buy stuff … there could be numerous thousand pounds worth involved but … obviously the farms were around a long time … firms know that we're good for our money, good for our word. And that's pretty general throughout farming I think. Well I know it is. But I know that's not the case in other industries! When we sell our

grain most contracts were paid a month after it's moved, but touch wood we've never had … never had a problem with that. It's always nice when the cheque arrives, well when it arrives in your bank. But no, we trust the firms that we're dealing with and they trust us. So I think we're quite a lucky industry that way. Similarly we're always pleased and happy to help neighbouring farmers if they have a particular hiccup… a broken down machine or if they know we've got a particular machine they can borrow… or sometimes you work out a financial – you do charge for it. If it usually covers the cost, you're happy. So yeah, we're lucky.

Joe: *A lot of farmers actually have spoken almost of this sort of traditional … almost a legacy of cooperation and mutual support. So that's something you think has remained?*

Alistair: Yes … perhaps not as much in this immediate area as some areas. I think pretty well all farms in this immediate era are big enough to have their own … like have their own stuff and don't need to do that I suppose is the main thing … but yes certainly do occasionally. We had one incidence 3 weeks ago - we we're moving some horse muck out for people with a few horses just a couple of miles way and driving out the loaded trailer managed to tip the trailer over in the road! And I was able to phone a neighbour up who came with two men, a loader and chains and got us pulled upright and got us out of trouble in no time! So that sort of thing, it is valuable. Yeah, and you're pleased to do it. You know when I hear some of the goings on in other industries and people having to chase for money and not getting paid and all the rest of it, I think 'thank goodness I'm in this industry!' And as I say, a load of grain goes away and I know a month later the money will arrive. So … sell our cattle at Ashford market and a week later the cheque comes through. That's worth a lot. Sometimes I don't think we appreciate how good that is compared to other places. As I say there's not as much cooperation in this area as some places I know.

Joe: In this region?

Alistair: Yes. Possibly … perhaps we're fortunate that farms are big enough that we can afford to have our own machinery generally. Yeah, that's certainly been the biggest change, farms getting bigger. We've gone right back to the start now. Some farms have diversified into other things. We mentioned energy production earlier. Other people have converted redundant farm buildings into offices and housing. I suppose the only thing we've done that way is making the hay and the haylage for horse people, and we've 2 or 3 smallish fields which we let out to be grazed by horses. That's the only real non-farming thing we do. I know others have gone a long way down that way. We've over the years extended from 200 to 700 acres … oh and we took on a neighbouring farm … that had its own range of buildings but they were all oldish buildings … you couldn't get into them with a modern tractor in those days. So basically we let those building fall down and actually that old farmyard has

since sold. So we've always just had to increase the buildings here. Other farms when they've taken on a neighbouring farm, they might have increased their buildings at home but had a farmstead with redundant buildings that they could let out. And so that's certainly been a … quite a thing over the last 30 or 40 years. What else can I say? I could do with some questions if you've got any more time…

Joe: How are we doing for time? Oh we're nearly at an hour!

Alistair: Oh crickey!

Joe: We've been here quite a long time. Maybe we could spend 10 or 15 minutes or so … I mean … firstly is there anything you … is there a question that you would like to be asked?

Alistair: What's the future going to bring?

Joe: That was going to be my final question! But could I get a brief idea just about the succession of the farm. How has this farm changed hands? I don't know if you've got a knowledge historically about it?

Alistair: Well as I say, my father and Uncle … well the Lyon family was farming in Scotland. One particular farm was on the Isle of Bute. There's a book just there about them actually! The Lyon families traced back for 300 years on that farm so the Lyons have been farming ever since my Grandfather started on that farm. He ended up on a smaller farm. My father got married and left the home farm. It wasn't big enough to support another family but he really wanted his own place. Eventually he found this one, and his brother and grandfather all sold up what they had in Scotland and all moved down. Uncle never married. I didn't have any brothers or sisters so I've been fortunate in … inherited all they had really, and … but hopefully … well definitely increased the farm and hopefully improved it. Yeah, Michael my son – he's going to carry it on. He's certainly doing more of the practical work now and I'm gradually doing less … I'm becoming the office boy! Ten years ago I had a serious illness and it made us all just sit down and decide what … say what we were going to do. And yes … he and his wife definitely wanted to carry the place on. So that was one good thing that came out of the illness, it made us all just talk about it. That's a problem on a lot of farms I know. It's assumed … a lot of this time it's assumed that the next generation is going to carry it on, but if they don't want to there's no point in forcing them. So yes it's quite pleasing that they're going to carry it on. They've got a son that is currently at college. I suppose that's been of growing importance … training for people coming into the industry nowadays … it's more and more technical, much more of a business than ever it was before. So it's important that they're trained well for it.

Joe: *So people coming in with degrees and doctorates in quite specialised areas as I understand?*

Alistair: Yes. Yes. I mean I went to Hadlow College, but that was up near Tonbridge. That was skilled farm workers that was aiming to train, it certainly wasn't a degree course, but that was about the normal at the time. Now it tends to be degree courses their going for and it's becoming more and more important. Yeah, there are rules and regulations for everything. You've got to pass an exam and get a certificate to go crop spraying, to use the loader outside, tractor driving is covered by an ordinary car driver license. But yeah you've got to be … You're responsible, as an employer you're responsible for all your staff to be … you've got to be confident that they're knowledgeable in what they're doing and safe in what they're doing. Yeah that's of course being responsible for what you do, and if we sell anything that goes on to cause a problem down the line, that's quite a big problem nowadays. Hence, we have to have good record keeping so those things can be traced back through the system.

Joe: This brings us quite neatly to the future. If we were to look into a crystal ball and see where we might be, say in another fifty years…

Alistair: Well as I say at the moment we're producing too much, but overall the world population it seems it's going to keep growing so the farming industry is going to have to produce more. How much more we can produce in this country? There's still scope for some. As I say we're growing … yeah we can quite regularly achieve 4 ton an acre of wheat. The scientists tell us the potential of a wheat crop is 8 ton an acre. Whether we can ever reach that or not I'm not sure, we seem to have plateaued at 4 tonnes for a long time, so I'm not sure about that. But there is still potential throughout the world to produce more food, I don't believe the world's going to go hungry, or at least the people that can afford it, but that's another issue completely! Genetically modified crops might be an answer. Bit controversial but if they can produce crops that will grow with less water, that's certainly a … would certainly be a more acceptable thing. We rely a lot on imported inputs, diesel for tractors obviously, artificial fertilisers, chemicals to control the weeds and diseases … well if through … and some are … especially vegetable crops they irrigate a lot … but if they could produce crops that will grow with less water, better resistance to diseases … that would all help. They occasionally say that they could produce crops that are healthier, I'm not quite sure what they have got in mind, but there must be all sorts of possibilities that way, so I could see that coming gradually. Farms getting bigger and increased mechanisation - well that doesn't seem to stop … I wonder where it will lead us to eventually. Any other changes? I think they're all going to be the main ones … farms getting bigger and improving yields always. Trying to do things, produce more for less money, which is what any business has to do. Any other specific things you've got in mind?

Joe: I think we've got a lovely overview. Thank you ever so much. Is there anything?

Baely: No that was very very concise. We didn't have to chip in very much at all!

Alistair: I know I shall remember numerous other things after you've gone that I should have or could have said.

Joe: Always the challenge with this project is that the interviews tend to be an hour each and there's only so much, you know, so much of a story, cos we're trying to condense, like, a generation of knowledge, and a lifetime of experience into an hour, and we can never successfully do that. Hopefully, as we speak to more and more farmers, a very good picture will emerge of what's happened in Kent, and wider.

Alistair: I suppose one thing I've glossed over – extra mechanisation. I mean I can remember when all our grain was stored and sold in sacks. I say '1 and a half' and '200' weight sacks. 50 and anything up to 100 kilos per sack, but that was an awful lot of hand labour. The combine used to put it into sacks and the bag was dropped off on the ground, then you had a gang of people going round picking the sacks of grain off the floor, onto trailer, back home, unload it, load them up again onto the lorry. Well now of course it's all bulk. Combines are far bigger than ever they were, it's grain goes into a tank, its unloaded into a trailer, comes home, tipped and gone. Grain stored in bulk and goes away in a bulk lorry. There's a lot less physical work involved in farming nowadays. Still out in the fresh air which is good in the summer, not so good in the winter. But, no, certainly far less physical work than ever there was before.

Joe: In your opinion, is there anything important that you think is being lost, as a result of these changes. Could be, you know, anything…

Alistair: I think the, most of the western world is probably suffering from lack of physical work. In some ways we've become lazy. Certainly farms that do need a lot of physical workers, basically fruit and vegetable people I'm thinking of mainly, they're having to bring in workers from Eastern Europe, who are still more used to physical work, and the money they can earn here is vastly superior to what they can get at home, and so they… I know most farms that employ such people here, they advertise within the country for people but, sometimes you get some come along but never seem to last. So, I think we're becoming a bit lazy, which can have health problems. If everybody had to go out picking potatoes off the ground, or cutting vegetables there wouldn't be so many overweight people about would there? So yea, and health problems.

Fewer people on the farms can get lonely at times, especially for, more so for some people, smaller farms, perhaps hill farms where they've only got themselves, I can

see that could produce problems. A lot of people say 'oh in the good old days, we did this and this'. Well, I can remember things about the so called 'good old days' and I think 'thank god we don't do it that way anymore' Always got to keep your mind open to change. Sometimes I've suggested different ideas of doing things and, 'we've always done it that way' – Well perhaps it's damn well time we changed! None of us can stand still. Yeah, keep an open mind for change, whatever walk of life you end up in, that's my advice to you two. And, often hear people say, 'I was lucky, lucky to be able to get the chance to do this, or lucky to be able to get the chance to do that' but you've got to be prepared to take your chances when they come along. You'll know afterwards if it was right or not, but if you don't take them, you'll never know. And you'll never get them all right. Person who says he does is lying. That's nothing to do with farming, but just life as a whole.

Baely: That's lovely

Joe: Lovely way to end, thank you ever so much.

Alistair: No, pleasure, I quite enjoyed that.