



## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Teresa O'Brien

Age: 55

Location: Split Lane Farm, Stelling Minnis, Canterbury

Size: 46 acres

Type: Grass

Interviewed by: Louise Rasmussen

Date: 24<sup>th</sup> April 2015

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*Louise: Could you tell me a bit about your farm to begin with?*

Theresa: Yes, its... We, we've got about 35 acres here, and we've got another 11 acres about 3 miles away.

*Louise: Ok*

Theresa: And they're all in Stelling Minnis.

*Louise: How long have you been farming here? Or since when has the farm been here?*

Theresa: My parents bought the farm in about 1960, and they didn't live here at the time, we actually had a farm in Canterbury, near the University of Kent, at St. Stephens, and, they ran that farm in conjunction with this farm at the time. Then in about 1970 they moved here, I was 10 at the time. And it's never been the sort of farm where you could actually make a living from it, it's always been too small for that, so we've always had other jobs besides; both my parents did, I have now. Having said that, we did used to keep a lot of sheep here, and we also had cows, quite a few cows. We did make profit at one time, but now I, I work, as a manager for a charity, and, I can earn so much more in that job than I ever could here. So, we keep the farm, mainly to grow hay, it's all grass. We grow hay and we sell that to other people. We've just got three cows of our own.

*L: Ok, so you said you did have sheep and more cows?*

T: Yes, we did.



*L: How come that has changed then?*

T: Well, so basically, it's a direct result from the foot and mouth disease crisis, because up until that point we had a hundred sheep and about 30 cows, but life was so very difficult after that, we didn't have foot and mouth here, but it did come quite close, it came within 2-3 miles of us, and we were just so frightened that our animals were going to get it. During that period, even though we weren't personally affected by the disease, we had movement restrictions placed on us, we couldn't move anything beyond a three mile radius, which meant we couldn't sell anything. So we didn't have enough food for them, life became very difficult. I was working as a teacher at the time, and thank goodness we had that money coming in because I had to draw, we had to draw on all our savings just to keep the farm going. After that, once all the restrictions were lifted, we didn't feel that there were enough safeguards in place, put in place by the government, to stop it ever happening again. So we decided at that point that I, I was working part-time at the time, but I would then work full-time. My husband is retired, so he gets his pension. And we just wouldn't have so many animals, so we gradually reduced and released.

*L: The farm in Canterbury...?*

T: The farm in Canterbury, I can't remember an awful lot about it as I was ten when we left, but, that was mainly grass. But I think my father kept pigs. Well, he did keep pigs. And, they started hiring a lot of land around Canterbury, and they kept a lot of cattle.

*L: And what happened to the farm after that?*

T: It was sold.

*L: Ok.*

T: In fact most of it went for compulsory purchase. Because, they built a housing estate, up... In fact, Beaconsfield road, yeah,... so that was our land, and they built a housing estate on it basically and put a road through. So it was no longer viable as a farm. But anyway, they were intending to move here, so that's what happened. Of course my parents are both dead now. When my mother died, I took on the farm. And I've lived here ever since with my husband.

*L: So, today, it's mainly a grassland farm. To you have any other type of crops or activities that go on at the farm that provide you with an income?*

T: No, no we don't have anything else. This is why I didn't think that we would be that useful to you. Having said that, maybe it will be useful.



*L: So, what do you do here then, on the farm still?*

T: Well, we have the cows, and we grow hay. Just grass.

*L: What does a typical working day then look like?*

T: Well, for me, it's... I get up and go to work, and it's unusual that I'm up here actually, cause I have been working this morning, and I work in Ashford. I've been working this morning, and in fact, I got through my work quicker, so I came home. Otherwise you wouldn't have found me here. But my husband he goes out and feeds the cows, looks after everything, tidies it up, that sort of thing, keeps it in good shape. (?) and yeah.

*L: And, how would you sell the hay to others?*

T: It's our neighbours, or, what I mean it's a long-standing agreement now, that they do that, yeah, basically, we want to keep the farm cause we love the environment and we love not having neighbours. And we also know it's appreciating in value all the time. So, by just sitting here and doing practically nothing, we cannot waste money, or lose money. But just through natural appreciation of property, it's earning us money every year. So we keep it for that reason, and we love living here. And then of course we can walk out in it, we don't have to listen to somebody have a fight in the next house or anything like that, so you can see that we're very isolated.

*L: So you don't mind that the farm has become smaller? And that you have less animals?*

T: I do, I do mind, but what we found was that we were losing money. It never made much money, then it just about broke even and then we started to lose money, and we were putting a lot of work, cause it's still a lot of work whether you've got 10 cows or 30 cows or 50 cows. Really, it came to the point where you can't do that, you can't spend your life working hard and not getting any financial reward, whereas by going out to work, doing what I do, I can earn a lot of money, cause I'm very well qualified, and, not worry about losing it. So I don't earn enough to have, run it as a hobby, just as an interest. You know, I can't sort of say alright, I'm going to do this, if it loses us money, that's not a problem. It would be a problem, but as it is, life's so much easier than we were running it as a farm. And we used to have to do lambing, and, when we were lambing a hundred sheep just the two of us, it was really quite tough because you're up all night, the weather always seemed to be against us, and every year when lambing turn comes round we say 'thank goodness we're not lambing'. Yeah, we're just so glad that we're not doing it anymore, because it was just tough. And life's a lot easier. But we still love the place and the position.



*L: Did you ever hire any extra labour during those times of the year where you perhaps could have used it?*

T: We used to., only family labour. My uncle who was a shepherd in his youth used to come and help, we would also hire contractors for various things. But otherwise no, we've never employed anybody as such.

*L: So it's been more seasonal?*

T: Yes, I mean on this sort of size of farm that's common, but you wouldn't because there's just not enough... in it to warrant paying a wage, when we were struggling to pay ourselves anything.

*L: Have you had any experience with EU regulations and all the big changes that the EU have introduced to farmers over the past 50 years?*

T: Yes, we have obviously been involved with that, there's subsidies and things, first they put subsidies on cows, and then subsidies on sheep, and if you sold them over a certain wage, and it was really complicated, and that all went, just as you got used to something, they'd just clear it and then you were not doing it anymore. Then they put the subsidies on the acreage that you had, so, per acre, or rather per hectare you'd get x amount of money. Provided you complied with certain rules that they laid down, and that's fine, but you are subject to inspections, they come round and want to inspect your property to make sure that you're not doing things that you shouldn't such as cutting hedges at the wrong time, and that you are doing what you say you'll do, and they also inspect the cows. And in fact last year we had a TB test on the cows, and that's done every four years, and that's all part of the EU decrees that come down from there. So we are, even though we're on a very small scale we are subject to all of that.

*L: Would you say it is something that has helped or benefited you in any way? Or has it, perhaps, rather impeded your work?*

T: I think initially it was an impediment because you had to do, to comply, it was really hard, you know to hit the criteria exactly as they wanted, but now as it is at the moment, they, well up until very recently, I'll come on to how it is sort of right now in a moment, but up until very recently they, we work, we are paid an amount per hectare that we have, provided we keep it in this state, so obviously that's of benefit to us because we get money, just for keeping it as it is.

*L: What are the major changes that you've seen happening around your farm and also your parents' farm over the past 50 years?*



T: As far...Let's go back to my parents' farm. Buildings, the city of Canterbury encroaching on their farm, so that the land had to go for compulsory purchase. And that really became I mean I think by the time we left there was only three acres left and the rest had been taken. Literally we didn't have any choice. So that's one thing, you know the encroachment of urbanization. (That's a good one to put in your essay!) And, as far as here is concerned, I think it has to be the rules and regulations that are put on us by the EU. For me, personally, the biggest impact that I experienced was the foot and mouth disease epidemic, because I think that just completely turned everything on its head and I no longer trusted the government to deal with it in a sensible or even sane way. Cause they just went at it hammer and tongs, and I no longer trust them to deal with it any better should it happen again, I don't feel there's any more safeguards to prevent it, and I don't feel that there's any more contingency plans should it occur. So, for me that was a real biggie, because up until that point I don't think there'd been any big epidemics in this country, I think the last one, I think that was in 2000 and in 2000, 1999, 2000 that that one hit. But prior to that I don't think there'd been anything since 1967 and I think that was in a completely different part of the country. So it really didn't impact on farmers in this area but that one really did. And, it made me feel that I didn't really want to get into it in any big way again. Just in case such a thing happened again. It was very very difficult.

*L: So did you sell of many of the sheep and cows after that?*

T: Yes, yes we did. We immediately started, once we could, we cut right back and didn't replace and we didn't breed anymore. So that was that really.

*L: Ok. Have you tried selling some of your produce to supermarkets over the years or to others, who then sold it on?*

T: Not to supermarkets, no, not that I know of. We sell through livestock markets, so where it went from there I don't know.

*L: And during your parents' time was it the same?*

T: Yes, as far as I know, but as I say, I've got distant memories of that, so...

*L: Now, we talked a lot about changes but are there a few things that you think have stayed quite the same over the years?*

T: Yes, I mean more or less, the speaking from my own experience I can't say that the... prior to this, but I suppose we're talking the last 30 years... Our farm is practically untouched as far as cropping is concerned, it's grass, it was grass then it's



grass now, the size of it has remained practically unchanged, apart from the fact that we bought the extra eleven acres, so that has remained unchanged. I suppose the biggest change has been the introduction of technology, because things are all done online now, but that's everywhere, it's not unique to farming or to us.

*L: Do you feel that in terms of machinery as well perhaps? That you use for your work...*

T: As far as machinery is concerned we still use stuff that we used thirty years ago. But that's because it's the sort of farm we are. I'm sure if you went and visited one of our bigger neighbours you'd find...

*L: So, how would you see the future then of your farm?*

T: I don't see it changing much, until possibly we retire, or are forced to move through ill health or something. To be honest I can't see anything changing. Possibly if I were to give up work, maybe if I did retire, I might have more cows and more sheep cause I'd have more time to deal with them, but when you work full time it's very difficult to run that along side.

*L: Would you expect anyone to take it over, perhaps, later?*

T: Possibly, I don't know. That's very much in the lap of the gods. But I suppose I do tend to see it as our retirement safeguard, because it obviously has a very high value, and, we,... yeah, if we sold it, we'd be able to buy a nice retirement property. But I don't see that happening, only something like ill health would force that, I can see.

*L: Ok. Yeah, maybe just if I can go back to asking again, how do you feel more generally about the changes that have happened? Also, say, that the farm has decreased, you say it's become easier and you obviously had to do it because it didn't really provide much income, but how do you feel about the fact that it has changed so drastically?*

T: I do feel a little bit sad that it isn't still well stocked. But to be honest, it wouldn't matter... I... speaking with other smaller people who are running small farms they're all in the same boat. And the ones that do still... A lot of people with small farms have gone over to keeping horses for example for other people. I don't want to do that because people, if you have horses on your land, and they're not your own, if people neglect them, you can be charged with cruelty or whatever, anyway I couldn't stand back and see that happen, so I'd have to look after them, so that's not gonna happen here. But there aren't that many small farms like ours around. Most small farms like





this do have people with other income like myself and my husband running them, and aren't really intending to make a profit from them.

*L: Sorry, may I ask whether you have any siblings?*

T: Yes, I have. I have two sisters. One's in Australia, and one lives in another part of the country.

*L: Ok. And they didn't think about taking over your parents' farm back then?*

T: No, my, they both got, they're much older than me, they both got married and moved away, I stayed and looked after the farm, in fact my mother made me a partner in the farm when I was 21. And, it was always going to be me that took it one because I was the only one that had any interest.

*L: Ok. So is it... do you know where this interest comes from?*

T: My interest...?

*L: Yeah.*

T: Oh, I've always been interested. You know, and that's all I ever wanted to do, and I suppose if it had been a larger farm and we'd had more money to stock it well, and we hadn't had various things happen along the way that's what I'd continue to do. But having said that, it is a lot easier to do other things, and if you can work with your brain rather than your hands, it's... a lot easier.

*L: Alright, well I won't take more of your time today. Thank you...*

T: Oh! That's it! Okay...