



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Edward Spanton

Age: 63

Location: Edward Spanton Farms, Ramsgate

Size: 250 hectares

Type: Arable/Veg

Interviewed by: Anca Mamashe

Date: 13 August 2015

Anca: So now I'll start by asking you for a few basic descriptive data, for example what type of farm do you have?

Edward: Yeah, we're, we're arable and vegetables. We're about 250 ha, 40 ha at the moment of asparagus, and we're increasing, going to increase the asparagus acreage up to about 100 ha over the next 3 or 4 years.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: We, the Island of Thanet, I don't know if you know this area at all? Have you done any interviews here yet?

Anca: No, not in this area.

Edward: No, well this is still an Island, this corner, the Island of Thanet and it used to, you know, the river Stour and the river Wantsum which goes up to Herne Bay, this side of Herne Bay, Reculver, made it an island and it used to be a navigable channel hundreds of years ago but it's now just a small, a small dyke probably about as this, about half the width of this room...

Anca: Right.

Edward: About 6 meters or so.

Anca: So did you say a few hundred years ago?

Edward: Yeah a few hundred years ago the Isle of Thanet, it was an island...Because of the proximity of Thanet we have sea all around us from three sides...so we're



quite frost-free, we're a bit of a micro-climate, we're a little bit warmer than other parts of the UK and so we can grow early crops.

Anca: So asparagus is one of the crops that is advantaged by...

Edward: Well, it's one that is a, is a crop... I'll come onto that in a minute...but the, most of the crops historically in Thanet 50 years ago were cauliflower and early potatoes and other brassicas, cabbage. But a lot of cauliflower were grown in Thanet because it suited the climate of the sea, the sea climate, the sea air and kept the frost off, and we could grow early potatoes so a lot of the farming here could grow two crops a year, early potatoes planted in February, and they would come out in June, and then cauliflower would go in, and they would be harvested in the autumn.

Anca: Right, so that was in the past.

Edward: Yeah, yeah. There are, nearly every farm in Thanet was growing a lot of vegetables and now there are only 4 growers of cauliflower and very few potatoes. Potatoes, lots of potatoes were grown in Thanet early as a main crop. The quantities of consumption have fallen dramatically, throughout the UK I believe.

Anca: Of cauliflower or potatoes?

Edward: Of, no, potatoes mainly, potatoes mainly. I heard the other day from a marketing friend of mine said that consumption had fallen 15% in the last two years, which is quite dramatic - overtaken by pasta, rice - but the interesting thing is, frozen potato products, chips, ready prepared mash, is increasing.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: There's a bit of growth in that, but then you, we're not near any processors so we're not involved in that really. Cauliflower and cabbage consumption is falling there, it's not, a lot of people don't want the preparation, unless it's ready prepared stuff, they'll buy it.

Anca: Ready meals basically.

Edward: Yeah ready meals or ready prepared greens and you know, sliced up in a bag, put it in the microwave.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: That's growth on that but, buying a cabbage, buying a cauliflower is falling away a bit. The asparagus is something we picked up on, it's a short season crop, it's



only about 8 or 9 weeks, from April, middle of April to the end of June, we supply supermarkets for that. It's a high-value crop, it's a short season, people enjoy it for the short season and then it's finished and gone till another year. So it's a niche crop.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: We used to eh.. we used to grow a lot of potatoes, we grew 300 acres, 300 acres of potatoes, which is about 120 hectares of potatoes.

Anca: About how long ago?

Edward: We used to rent a lot of ground in the area, about 10 years ago, and I employed a lot of people. But we were being taken advantage of by the supermarkets and it was unsustainable. It was unsustainable and unfortunately we had to make staff redundant and cut down on our inputs. So for a while. So we grow the asparagus and the rest of the farm is wheat, oil seed rape and peas for combining, for processing. Hard.. hard peas, you know?

Anca: Right. So that's about, you mentioned a few very interesting issues here. So we'll come back to these, but first, I'd like to know...

Edward: All of my asparagus is harvested by Romanian labour, because we can't get anybody to work here.

Anca: I'm Romanian.

Edward: Are you?

Anca: Yeah.

Edward: Well I love the Romanians. They're, if we didn't have, if we didn't have our Romanians, we would have a, we wouldn't have a business here. They come, they come to me, the same gang. Virtually we're, we are increasing year on year. We provide accommodation here for them and then they, they come to us in April, and then they go up to the fruit farms, fruit farms in Faversham.

Anca: Ok. So how about, how many employees do you have at the moment?

Edward: This year we had, we had about 35.

Anca: 35. So they're all Romanians?

Edward: All Romanian, yeah. We used to get them through a company called HOPS, you heard of it? Harvest, something, I can't remember. It's an a, it's an a...



Anca: It's an acronym.

Edward: Yeah, it's an acronym. It used to be before Romania joined the EU, but now we just have one of our Romanian guys. He just organizes, we tell him how many we want and he sorts it out.

Anca: So I suppose you also have regular, people that come on a regular basis.

Edward: We have our yeah, we, we've got a, we have one, one full time employee and, and my, and then my son, so there's two. My son runs the farm and then one full time tractor driver. 50 years ago when I took this, 40 years ago this farm had 15 employees, 15 full time men.

Anca: Just 15?

Edward: 15 full time men and then we had, we had cattle, we had pigs, sheep and chickens, and plus all the arable crops and vegetables, and now it is just two people here.

Anca: So major, major changes.

Edward: Yeah, huge changes over the years. Yeah.

Anca: Could you tell me why you think that these changes, all these changes took place? For example why don't you grow cattle anymore?

Edward: Oh, cattle. This area is a lower rainfall, so we don't grow the grass. We don't grow as good a grass as they do in the west country.. uhm.. economics..

Anca: Could you...

Edward: Ehm.. [laughs].. we gave the cattle up 40.. 40 years ago.. it's just purely economics, there's not enough in it.

Anca: Ok. Were you growing for, for the meat or for dairy?

Edward: For meat, yeah, yeah meat, yeah, yeah.

Anca: So you said that you gave up on it 40 years ago?

Edward: We gave up the cattle, the livestock, all the livestock 40 years ago, yeah.



Anca: Right. So you said that you're happy with migrant labour and if...

Edward: Yeah.

Anca: ...you couldn't be, well farming without migrant labour.

Edward: No, no.

Anca: Could you tell me why is that?

Edward: We would like to employ local labour, but we just can't get consistency. We need people to be at work at 7 o'clock in the morning. They're unreliable and they haven't got the work ethic of my Romanians.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: Sometimes I have to tell my Romanians to stop working, 'cause they go too late. I'll say go home, go to bed [laughs].

Anca: Well I'm really happy to hear that because you know, in the media you don't always hear good things.

Edward: No.

Anca: Which I think maybe it's fair enough.

Edward: No. That's... that's where I went to school.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: St Edmund's at the top of the hill. When I was at school they were building the University.

Anca: Right.

Edward: It was just fields and woodland.

Anca: Right. Now that you mention the University, I would like to ask you whether the University of Kent had any impact on your farm throughout the time?

Edward: Has the University had impact on my...?

Anca: Yeah.



Edward: No, no I don't think so.

Anca: Ok. So you said that you're working with supermarkets for the asparagus.

Edward: Yeah.

Anca: And do you work with supermarkets for all the other crops as well?

Edward: No, no. Some, all the other crops are grains, commodities that go, they go through millers or bread-makers, biscuits-makers.

Anca: The local market or...?

Edward: No, go to mills up at London and Southampton, some export. The wheat goes to export or, or goes to milling. Yeah.

Anca: So. we're going to talk about the price war between supermarkets and eh.. you know there's a huge issue now and farmers generally complain about it, producers, some of them don't really dare to talk freely about it because they're afraid of the consequences, or at least that's ...

Edward: Really.

Anca: ...what I've been told so far and that's what the media says.

Edward: Mmm.

Anca: What's your view on this?

Edward: Well you're probably picking up on the milk crisis.

Anca: Yeah, the milk crisis but also the issues with the supply code, Groceries Code of Practice, the scandal with Tesco, the fact that they don't pay...

Edward: Well it's cartel you know, it does, they do, I'm pretty, they, they will work with each other or against each other. There's a lot of spying, inter-store spying so everybody you know, if one store's knocked 5p off a kilo of potatoes then the other one will do 8; and all the promotions. They used to, but they don't have these eh.. BOGOF. Have you heard that word?

Anca: No.



Edward: It used to be Buy One Get One Free.

Anca: *Ok.*

Edward: But they're not allowed to do that now, so they're just a promotional two packs for one, but the, and the, you might think that, the supermarket's being very generous, but the person who pays for that is the, is the producer - so the grower.

Anca: *Right. So as a producer do you have a say in all this, the, would the supermarket come at you and ask you, are you ok with this promotion?*

Edward: Eh, No.

Anca: *So they just impose it?*

Edward: It's the same with the asparagus where they do promotions on that and the promotions, which is very annoying, they decide at meetings in their supermarkets around Christmas time, when they're gonna do a promotion on asparagus. So they might do a promotion from the first week of May, if it's very cold, if it's cold April, May, early May, we won't have any asparagus. Asparagus only grows on temperature, you've gotta have 14 degrees in the soil before it go up, and so there'll be, we'll have very few, very little asparagus and they'll be promoting it. If we sell it on the open market in London, like Spitalfields, Covent Garden, if we throw it there we get a lot of money, but if we're committed to the supermarket and it's on promotion then we're, it's on a pretty low price.

Anca: *Right.*

Edward: So they, they don't consult us on when they're gonna do the promotion which is annoying.

Anca: *There are loads of issues to discuss here. First of all, I'd like to ask you really quickly: what's the difference between buy one get one free and two for one...I mean...?*

Edward: Eh they, they stopped doing this, BOGOF, did you write that down, B O G O F. That's how it used to be, and they used to advertise it. BOGOF - buy one get one free.

Anca: *Was that a long time ago? I've been here for 4 years I've never seen it.*

Edward: No, never heard that?

Anca: *No.*



Edward: Yeah. No it's only last couple of years, so it's, so now they're just they not allowed to promote it as buy, so it's not forcing people to hoard or buy too much, because they're saying there's too much wastage people buying too much filling up a fridge not using it getting chucked out. So it's just, now, now it's promotional, now it's promotional, so it'll be a value, value pack, you know, buy...It's still the same sort of thing, but promotion, promoting like...

Anca: So there's a way to go around it.

Edward: Like, instead of that thing, 20p you get that and that for 20p, it's just...it's just you know...it's marketing.

Anca: It is, it is, but it's a...

Edward: At the moment the..the agricultural business is in crisis. There's low milk, the lamb, lamb, lamb is, that's very very cheap, they reckon that's not in production costs. Wheat, wheat prices which is, that's nothing to do with supermarkets, that's a world market, but we're selling wheat at under production costs at the moment. It's not very exciting the market at the minute. Usually, usually farmers if the grain prices are low, then milk prices or beef prices are high and so one balances out the other, but at the moment everything is on the floor.

Anca: So why is this?

Edward: Why?

Anca: Yeah.

Edward: There's a world over-production at the minute of grains. We, we haven't had a, there's no crisis in the big growing areas of Australia, Northern America and Canada. Generally somewhere in the world there's tornadoes, floods or droughts, but everywhere's had quite good crops. France - huge crops of wheat this year, very high quality wheat. Huge crops of maize in the US and it reflects on, reflects on the, all the grains throughout the world.

Anca: Right.

Edward: The milk prices, we're importing. There's an over-overproduction of milk, over production of milk. It's a supply and demand, I feel very sorry for the British dairy farmers but, you've either got to, if we...if they don't produce it it'll come from France.

Anca: Yeah.



Edward: But then, in the Sunday paper the other day they were saying 10% of French farmers are facing bankruptcy.

Anca: Oh so the French farmers are having a hard time.

Edward: The French farmers are having a very hard time and France is a very... huge agricultural country, you know this vast country and it.. and eh.. many more people than the UK are employed in agriculture so that it's a very big important vote. The farmers have a strong vote and that's why they burn tires and parade their tractors up and down and stop all the traffic.

Anca: Yeah.

Edward: And they get away with it because they're a powerful lobby.

Anca: Yeah. So you mentioned about the fact that there's a, globally we're overproducing food.

Edward: It's, it's a distribution matter isn't it.

Anca: Yeah.

Edward: A lot of it is distribution, there are still hungry people in the world. The western world is producing lots of, lots of food, we've got, you know... and then there are... Africa's still got a problem.

Anca: Do you think that this is, the way in which the global market of food is run now, is it good for the economy, is it, is it good?

Edward: You don't get a lot of support from our government.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: Farmers get some support, but agriculture in the UK is not as important as we'd like to think it is [laughs].

Anca: So if you would have a choice. If you could make a choice between having local small economies versus, you know, international free trade and the global economies with all its problems, which one would you choose? Would you prefer to stay local and produce just as much as, as Great Britain needs and consume it locally and not having to compete with, you know the French?

Edward: Oh yeah, in an ideal world yeah it'd be lovely yeah, yeah.



Anca: So, I'm not sure if you mentioned this already, have you always worked with supermarkets for your vegetables or?

Edward: Not, not always, not, probably in the last 25-30 years, 25 years probably. Before we, before we, we just used to supply the wholesale markets. You, do you know the ones I mean like the Spittalfields, have you heard of Spittalfields?

Anca: Yeah, vaguely yeah.

Edward: Big big fruit and veg markets and we just...they have stands in the markets, we'd send up our cauliflower to these guys and they'd sell it to greengrocers and shops and restaurants and it'd go out. We still do, we still do that but a smaller part of our business cause we couldn't, on the asparagus we couldn't move the volume through them.

Anca: Ok. How has the Russian embargo affected you?

Edward: It's had effects on yeah, grain prices. It's affected... you know, I have neighbours who grow, that grow a lot of onions, because onions, Russia are big big big, big users of German.. German onions. Germany supplies into Russia eh so they're not supplying so Germany, Poland, what they're producing has been flooded onto Europe and has a knock-on effect here.

Anca: Could you tell me what's your general view on Organic? You know the debate between organic versus conventional?

Edward: Conventional. Yes. A neighbour of mine grows baby salad, you know the little salad. He has some organic, some conventional. It's a niche market you know, it wouldn't... I wouldn't say we would never do it. My son, we'd, we would look into it if we thought it was lucrative but at the moment we haven't been asked to produce it.

Anca: You know there are people that write a lot about organic and that it could be good for you know, for the planet and for us and so on. Do you think that's plausible, their claims are plausible? Do you think we could feed the world on organic? Do you think it could be done with...

Edward: I'm not very advocate of organic. If... people will pay through the nose, they're very expensive the stuff to buy. The produce we grow is, what we're allowed to use, chemical fertilizer, is strictly monitored. We have a very small armory. Do you understand that word? Like our defense system for weeds, fungal, bugs is getting smaller and smaller, the chemicals we're allowed to use are not, we get,



we're not allowed to use each year, it gets reduced to what we can use each year. So everything we use, we know is very, very safe for everybody to consume.

Anca: So I supposed the use of certain chemicals has been restricted through the time.

Edward: Yeah.

Anca: Could you, maybe...

Edward: In the, in the 70s and 80s, you know spraying was, everything, anything, loads of different chemicals and, and yes, toxicity was building up in the soil and building up in crops. Now we have, what we can use is very, very safe. When we send off, our asparagus gets analyzed regularly by Sainsbury's and if they find anything, anything chemical in in the what we're producing that we're not allowed to use then we'd be off their list of suppliers.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: We'd be finished.

Anca: So not just a small fine and things carry on.

Edward: Oh, no, no, no. We'd be off and then Marks and Spencer's and Tesco's would know that we use products we weren't allowed to use and they wouldn't touch us so we, we'd, we couldn't afford to, All our chemicals that we use are on very reduced rates.

Anca: So what do you think that caused this change. Do you think it was the public, the government, the...

Edward: People's health, people got more government. It couldn't go on spraying just carte blanche, pumping chemicals onto, onto crops and into the food chain.

Anca: Mhm.

Edward: So you know, it, it was, it was a good thing, it makes our job more difficult but then world health isn't it, my family and children and your health, it's vital.

Anca: Do you think that it could go too far for you, I mean, do you think it could bring you to the point where you're having troubles producing viable amounts of food because well, I need to reformulate that.

Edward: Because of pest control.



Anca: Yeah, because they impose you.

Edward: It, it gets harder, yeah. It gets harder, but we don't want, remember CGD - mad cow disease?

Anca: Yes.

Edward: Well, you know we don't want, and that was through contaminated foods going into the food chain, we don't want that to happen in the vegetable business 'cause you know, it'd ruin the business.

Anca: I'm very quickly going to go through the notes because there are a lot of interesting issues here.

Edward: [Looking at map] That's where we are here and this is the Isle of Thanet, Ramsgate, Margate, Broadstairs, Margate here and Canterbury's down here. This is, this is the island you see and this is called the river Wantsum and that...

Anca: It's such a beautiful area and Stodmarsh..

Edward: Yeah, you know the river that goes through Canterbury, well that's the Stour, which is this one.

Anca: Yeah.

Edward: River Stour and this is the, so that.. it still makes, and this is Sandwich down here, so it's still an island.

Anca: Yeah. If my colleague comes and he wants to film, is it ok if he takes a photo of this? I'll take a note of that.

Edward: Yeah, well yeah, there are probably better, better pictures, better maps of that, but there are some, if he goes, just Google it and you'd see some. Google the isle of Thanet and you'll see, it was this, this was a wide channel and then Sandwich down here used to be the Roman's fort and then they used to grow grapes. This, this is, along here it's all south facing, faces that way and it gets very warm. They used to grow the grapes to feed the troops, the soldiers. So the soldiers had wine, the roman soldiers. So it's always been a growing area.

Anca: So would you, are there any relics in the area?



Edward: Oh yeah, loads. Iron age, Saxon, Roman, everything down here.

Anca: Amazing.

Edward: Lots, lots of stuff [laughing]

Anca: Are there any changes that, or are there any ways in which your farm has changes during the past 50 years and we haven't talked about?

Edward: Uhm. Change, changes, major changes are...agro-chemicals, technology, which has reduced, which has reduced the amount of labour. 50 years ago labour was cheap, inputs were dear – but now labour is expensive and inputs are cheaper! The farming, farming is guided by what people want to eat, and that's probably the biggest change. All the farms, nearly every farm used to have livestock, used to have pigs or cows or sheep, but now round here there is, I think just about one cattle herd in the whole, the whole of this area and that's only a small, few sheep, not many.

Anca: So you mentioned technology, are you referring to, I don't know, tractors and basically?

Edward: Tractors, phones, communications, bigger machinery, more efficient machinery, storage, you know. We, our grain storage and we have a pack house and just...automation.

Anca: Ok. I think we're done with this section. So now, I'd like to know about your own background in farming. If I may ask, what's your current age and when did you start to farm?

Edward: I'm 63, and I started here when I was 20.

Anca: Ok.

Edward: I was told to come here by my parents [laughs].

Anca: So it was your parents?

Edward: Well my brother, my brother was running the farm and then he left, he went to be a nurse and I ran the farm.

Anca: Did you, were you happy with this or did you have other plans?

Edward: I had other plans, but I didn't have any choice [laughs].

Anca: Ok.



Edward: I would have liked to have gone around the world a bit, and worked elsewhere but I didn't have a choice.

Anca: So you said that your brother was on the farm, for how many generations...?

Edward: My father, my father set, built the farm up in the 1930s. In the 1930s it was very, what you call it, there was no money about in the 1930. It was depressed, years of depression, 1930s and so the farming was really on its knees. He, he managed to get, rent the land, rent the land round here and then 1939, when war broke out the country needed feeding, embargoes and shipping. So that's where English farmers made a lot of their money, in the war years, feeding the nation. Then he managed to buy the farm and get set up here. And, I'm the youngest child of five and my son farms here with me.

Anca: Right.

Edward: Are you a farmer?

Anca: No, my grandparents were farmers, but subsistence farmers basically. They had two horses, a few cattle and some arable and that was it.

Edward: Mm...they still got the farm?

Anca: My grandmother is still alive and she reduced considerably the amount of work that is going on the farm...but as I said really, really, small farm maybe 10 acres, maybe smaller.

Edward: Tough, hard work.

Anca: Yeah, really hard work.

Edward: And your parents. Do they, they're not...?

Anca: No, they were the first generation that moved into town and I'm the first generation that goes to university, so...

Edward: Well done, that's good.

Anca: Yeah...you mentioned that in the 30s farmers were basically encouraged to produce because of the war and, and this touches on the issues of subsidies and yeah, I'd like to know how the subsidies have changed through time and how do you perceive it. Do you take subsidies? Are you happy with the amount that you're taking?



Edward: Yeah well we get from, the subsidy we get now is reducing year on year. You are aware of that, are you? At the moment yeah it's been, we, we, we would find it harder without the subsidies but not impossible. I think, you know the, the sheep farmers on the hills, you know grazing sheep on mountain sides, they would not manage without the subsidies. If we were told in 5 years time subsidies were gonna be withdrawn, then we would change our farming and we would, we would go more intensive on the veg and change it like that.

Anca: Right so that would be your approach, but there are set-asides as well so, some of the farmers I have talked with have told me that because the subsidies have gone down, they accept. They get into all sorts of agri-environment schemes because.. and they decrease production..

Edward: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Anca: Are you in any sort of agri-environment scheme?

Edward: No, we've, we've gone the other way. No.

Anca: Do you plan at any point in the future..?

Edward: I have, we were involved in an environment scheme...H.. HNS.

Anca: Yeah I think that's it.

Edward: Yeah it was HNS and something else wasn't it? Well but we're not involved in that now and we probably wouldn't go back into it.

Anca: Can I ask you why?

Edward: Our land's too valuable, we... we can get good yields on it. If it, most of our land is grade 1, grade 1, grade 2 so we, we have irrigation so we can intensively crop it with the asparagus and the non-asparagus - the non veg land - we get good yields of wheat and rape.

Anca: So now, now the last section and we are, we're pretty much done. Yeah. First I'd like to ask you what does farming generally mean to you? Is it just a means for you to make a living or is it more than that? And what does your farm, your farm particularly mean to you?

Edward: Yes, it's very... it's very important, you know... to retain for the next generation.



Anca: Mhm.

Edward: Yes. Farmers are... fairly philosophical, to be a farmer I think, and not to get too depressed if it... if it... lots of... there's a high suicide rate in farming.

Anca: Yes.

Edward: You know, there's a lot of depression, I wouldn't say it's around here so much but it's in the areas where they have, where they're struggling with they're land and they're farming on mountain sides. But it's a good way of life, we're very lucky, you know, we're lucky to live here. You don't have to do it, you know, if it gets too much into a worry, you pack up.

Anca: Would you... would you be able to do that or would you try to hold on and...

Edward: Yeah, I had to, when my mother died, I had to, the estate, the farm was left to myself, my brother and sister, for their families so I had a huge mortgage to buy them out so got to keep working.

Anca: Right, so how do you see your farm developing in the future? You already said that you're gonna produce more asparagus. And how about acreage? Would you like to extend?

Edward: We'll...we'll extend. Yeah we'll rent more... well, I don't think we'll buy it, we'll buy more because it's very expensive now. We might buy small pieces if they came up near us, but we're quite happy to rent... rent land for cropping. My son hw's 37 is very keen to expand the business.

Anca: Right. So this is pretty much the last question, what kind of challenges or threats are there to your farm in the future? What...

Edward: Mainly governmental, European and, and at home. British governmental and European governmental.

Anca: So policies really.

Edward: Yeah. Policies and now that we're, the rest is farm problems, weather problems, things like that.

Anca: Weather problems?

Edward: Yeah. The world has got to be fed, is a very strange job at the minute. You just think, you know, the world... the world population is getting bigger, we're producing food – there seems to be too much about...distribution, isn't it?



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50 Farmers' Tales

An Archive of Interviews with Kent Farmers

