

Farming Futures Video Transcript

Music plays in.

Woman's voice – Jo Bath:

Farms have been part of our landscapes for centuries but the way they have supported us has adapted as the world around us has changed. Sometimes farming families are reacting to national trends, sometimes to factors very special to our area. Now we can find out more from farmers whose memories are close to the land. Their words help us understand more about how farms have developed from feeding medieval monasteries to supporting the mines and protecting wildlife. Farmers we are about to meet have their roots here in a triangle which moves inland from the coast between the Tyne and the Tees. It's an area with a remarkable geological heritage which shapes all our lives here including the lives of our farmers.

The shallow soils of this Limestone escarpment lend themselves to agriculture; large fields often with low hawthorn hedgerows and few trees are a familiar sight. But the arrival of the mines in the 19th century, impact on farming, some became known as colliery farms, adapting their crops to supply what was needed by the pits. David Kelton tells us what they grew and sold.

Voice of David Kelton:

Essentially the farmer was here to provide the feed for the pit ponies and the straw for the wagons, holding the wagons to stop the coal from falling out instead of repairing the wagon properly they would just shove a slice of straw in there. Because obviously you can go through the whole process and it didn't matter if it was still in the coal as it would burn.

Voice of woman:

David married into farming. His new wife was the 4th generation to farm that area. His Father-in-Law Richard lived at the same farm for more than 60 years. The family wanted to save the memories of the colliery farming and recorded this interview with Richard in 1980s in his final years. Here he describes threshing, beating cereal crops to release the edible grain.

Voice of Richard:

I used to get up about half 5 / 6 o'clock, start up the engine, get on the cockpit, stoke the fire up and it sounded like a kettle. Then by 7 o'clock the driver would arrive and get a head of steam and I would get it ready for him. He would get up beside the stack and go in to thresh, put the belt on and at 8 o'clock we were ready to starting time. We had extra hands, 2 Or 3 extra men to carry straw, extra men to fork coming off the stack, others to bag the corn up, lead it away into the granary and a gang of 4/10/12 extra people involved in all that.

Voice of woman:

Ron works at a nearby farm. He might be a more recent generation of farm worker but he too has strong memories of the annual threshing.

Voice of Ron:

We used to work on the harvest time, we would go up to the farm when the mobile thresher would come along. We would be there helping when they were threshing the arable, the wheat and barley such like with the mobile threshers. We used to kill the rats if they ran out of the stacks of straw with a lump of wood, that's what the young kids did and you were on your school holidays at the time.

Voice of woman:

The number of people working on farms now is far lower than when Ron began work, despite the fact that the land used for farming has remained pretty constant throughout the last century. Machines have replaced people. Richard remembers how different it was 60 years ago. Whatever the weather all year round there was always a backlog of jobs which needed men, women and even children available to tackle.

Voice of Richard:

Other Winter jobs – trimming hedges, cleaning drains out, you would find some place where water was coming to the surface, jobs like that and there would be repair work, repair fences. The women used to be out in the fields picking stones off the fields that had to be cut with the grass cutter. Wet days they would be upstairs in the granary, mending sacks to hold corn, all the sacks had to be rainproof. That kept them coming almost all the time.

Voice of woman:

Railways were a vital transport route in those days. This area saw the birth of the railways, thanks to coal and there were various lines including the Durham Coast railway. The railways were originally constructed to transport the coal from the mines, but were valuable for local farmers to were always ready to seize opportunities when goods arrived. Often with little or no warning.

Voice of farmer:

A lot of stuff came in on railway wagons. Haswell had a depot and it was a junction, I understand between 2 different railway companies so they could come from anywhere and they would get a message to say that cattle cake was in and we have records that there was 5 tonnes of cattle cake delivered so that they would have to go with the horse and cart, pick it up from the railway goods yard and bring it back home. And also sheep, I remember a time when we had, he bought sheep up at Scots Gap in Northumberland and arrived the next day on a wagon.

Voice of woman:

Life on the farm required many skills from the workers, you had to be able to cope with whatever was needed. Everything from managing big teams, to mucking in and doing all the tasks yourself. If a cow needs milking or a crop needs harvesting, it won't wait.

Voice of Richard:

My Father would be on the morning with a cow to and then have the workers over to have our orders, who would be doing the horses who would be ploughing or some carting to do or turnips to get into the shed or potatoes something like that. Jobbing about the farm most days after that. Deal

with any callers, travellers used to come, stuff arriving and so forth and harvest time we were out in the field.

Voice of woman:

Every member of the family was expected to lend a hand.

Voice of man:

As a child we always had what we called potato picking week when we used to go with our parents, our Mothers in the main as our Father was working down the coal mine. And we would go on the land and the farmer would see the farm right out the window as we were next to it.

Voice of woman:

Those views for the farm workers have changed dramatically in their lifetime. The horse was a crucial ally shouldering the heavy work and offering the chance for youngsters to [perch precariously on the equipment being dragged over the fields. But mechanisation, everything from the tractor to the milking machine gradually replaced labourers. Now the farmer had to borrow to make the financial investment needed in largescale highly productive machinery needed.

Voice of man:

I went from horse and cart with no or very little machinery needed and it was all hand work. There was only the grass cutter and that you could ride on. And everything else you walked behind it, the whole lot you used to do by hand. Then we got the tractor and you got to buy a tractor plough and a set of discs and harrow.

Voice of woman:

The harrow which broke up the earth was one of the things which increased productivity, making more food for us all, but often at the cost of damaging wildlife. Intensification and change in practices in particular the move from arable to pasture crops has resulted in larger fields, the loss of hedges and trees and damage top grassland and wetlands. But farmers are now increasingly involved in helping restore suitable habitats for wildlife, living and working so close to nature they are especially able to make a difference, as Ron describes.

Voice of Ron:

On the other side of the railway line on the north of here up towards Hawthorn Dene we have one of the most beautiful meadows in East Durham. What I do about August / September as late as possible, weather permitting, when the flowers are going into seed, I go over there with a brush sweeper on the back of a quad and I sweep through the grasses collecting wildflower seed as best as I can. Then bring it back off that meadow and bring it on to other land and spread it on them fields there and hopefully where the cattle have grazed there on disturbed grassland, hopefully that will germinate on there.

Voice of woman:

There is much more still to be done. Field boundaries, particularly older hedgerows, conservation work and more planting of copses and hedges is needed. Broader uncultivated edges of fields would benefit both the landscape and wildlife. Pesticides can still be harmful, but nevertheless there is a lot to thank the farmers for. David has seen real progress in what is summarised by the phrase biodiversity.

Voice of David:

We now have partridges back on the farm that were missing for quite a few years. A wide variety of wildlife which is now come back we now got a lesser spotted Woodpecker which has just turned up last year. We have bats and a good population of mammals, voles, field mice, this sort of thing.

Voice of woman:

The modern farmer can seem separated from the countryside cocooned in a noisy tractor cab, close links are still there.

Voice of man:

When I'm cutting grass I'm watching all the time, the least movement, you see it and I'll stop cos 9 times out of 10 its either a family of pheasant or a family of partridge. I'll get out of the tractor and I'll shoo them off where they are across to the swaths of grass that are already cut and I'll carry on. Or if there might be a possibility that there might be a pheasant or a partridge still nesting and it's got ages and young in the nest, you know where it is as you are watching, you just drive around them ,you don't cu that grass, leave it there for them and then carry on.

Voice of woman:

So now the farmers are a vital part of restoration of our region. The former mining areas are being redeveloped and that includes improvements in habitats to create wildlife corridors between areas which were previously isolated. The Limestone Landscape is home to some rare species which love these conditions and now they are being helped to increase in numbers thanks to their allies the farmers.