In at the Deep End. Impressions of farming in a year gaining experience: 1952-3; 1978-85

Book

Published Version

privately published book

Harris, P. (2013) In at the Deep End. Impressions of farming in a year gaining experience: 1952-3; 1978-85. J Harris (privately published), pp240. ISBN 9780957519619 (includes essays of 41 students) Available at http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/35835/

In at the Deep End

Impressions of a year gaining farming experience: 1952-3; 1978-85

Paul Harris and 41 Students

In at the Deep End

Impressions of farming in a year gaining experience: 1952-3; 1978-85

Paul Harris and 41 Students

Despite every effort made by the then Development and External Affairs Office at Reading University, it was only possible to locate five of the essay writers. All were happy to have their essays published although the original intention to give an account of their subsequent careers was regrettably abandoned. Help from the Farmer's Weekly also failed to produce any contacts.

I have therefore assumed that those students whom I could not contact would be happy for their contributions to be included.

I am greatly indebted to Ruth Urben for reading the manuscript scrupulously and for many helpful suggestions.

It is anticipated that any profit made from the publication would be donated to Reading University to support a student following a course related to agriculture.

Contents

Introduction

Soon after the teaching of agriculture had been established at the University of Oxford Extension College in Reading in 1892, the award of the Diploma was withheld 'until after a period of residence on a farm, during which period the student would remain under the supervision of the College Authorities.' (*The Silent Fields*, 1993[1]). Following this tradition until the end of the last decade or so of the twentieth century, all students undertaking a degree course in agriculture at Reading were expected to have had at least one year's practical farming experience.

Even farmers' sons or daughters after leaving school were encouraged to work on a farm, preferably not at home - since many may have done little work on their own farm and even if they had, it was considered valuable for them to work as an employee, with all that this status implies.

We took our obligation to the students on their practical year seriously, and when I was responsible for the year, a system was put in place where the students were appointed a supervisor who would visit them at least once on their farm. However it proved difficult to provide a list of farmers willing to commit themselves to employing a student for a year, and so it was left for students to find a farmer willing to take them on. That they managed to do so was a tribute to ingenuity, perseverance and/or luck.

There could be little doubt that, as these essays illustrate, agricultural students were well motivated towards their chosen career and more mature than students who start a degree course straight from school. In this respect the degree course was, I believe, unique among degree courses at that time in

having an obligatory practical year related to the course they were to follow.

Towards the end of the last century, it became apparent that many universities offering a degree course in agriculture were omitting the requirement for a year's practical farming experience, and so it became impracticable to make it obligatory. However, between 1978 and 1985, when the stipulation of a practical year was still in force, an essay competition was held with the following brief put up on the notice board in the Department:

Pre-University Farming Experience

The subject can be dealt with from the angle which most appeals to the writer, but should include an assessment of the value derived from such experience. The essay should be between 1500 and 2000 words and should endeavour to arouse and maintain the interest of the reader. It might be found helpful to read 'Brian Newton, *To be a Farmer's Boy* pp. 112-115 in Akenfield by Ronald Blythe. A £10 book token will be awarded for what is considered to be the best essay.

A number of essays written over that period have survived and are reproduced here. They illustrate the tenacity often required to find a farm on which to work, titanic struggles with livestock and machinery, and sometimes with employers and employees. The year was in every sense 'character forming' as Kerry Jonnson pointed out in her essay:

'The expression 'character building' has been used often. Brief research reveals that it is usually used to describe activities that are a form of self-inflicted torture, involving a fair degree of physical discomfort and mental anguish.'

These stories represent a rare opportunity to appreciate agriculture as seen through the eyes of young men and women obliged to undertake a practical year before embarking on their degree course.

The majority of the essays (sections 1 and 2) are from girls and boys who were not brought up on farms. Section 3 has three contributions from farmers' sons and daughters. Students from abroad were also obliged to obtain what could be a bewildering experience of British farming (section 4). Some students opted to gain part of their experience in England and part overseas (Section 5) while a number of students – often brought up on farms, opted to farm abroad for a year (section 6). One essay (Section 7) summed up the whole experience commenting that:

'You can't put a price on the enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from working and being associated with the best industry in the world, farming.'

In most cases, but not all, the names of the farms, farmers and employees have been changed.

Before starting my degree course in Agriculture at Leeds University in 1952, I too was obliged to work for a year on a farm and my account gives a snapshot of farming as experienced more than half a century ago.

These essays are a constant reminder to me of the privilege and enjoyment it has been to be involved with students of agriculture over my working life. I hope the accounts will prove equally enjoyable to those who have or may not have any direct acquaintance with the industry.

[1]*The Silent Fields: One hundred years of agriculture at Reading*. Paul Harris (1993) Department of Agriculture, Reading University.

Practical Farming in 1952-3

I was obliged to keep a diary through the year, and thanks to it and a tracing of the farm with the acreages of the fields marked, I can say with reasonable certainty that the farm consisted of about 230 acres, a respectable size for that era. The largest field was 42 acres and the smallest 1 acre.

Paul Harris

I was eight years old when the Second World War began and when with my older brother we embarked on increasing the countries food supply by removing a crazy paving – at our grandfather's suggestion – and sowing lettuce seeds. We had not involved our father with our plan, since we thought he might object, but on being discovered he commented 'Nothing will grow there, that soil will be as sour as gall' which puzzled us, since we were not aware of the properties of that substance.

We lived on the edge of a small town and adjacent to the local allotments, and it was not long before we rented two plots and set about growing vegetables, breeding rabbits and keeping chickens. We received much encouragement from the older generation of allotment holders who provided us with the initial livestock – including a ferret – and helpful advice. We also supplemented our pocket money by working on a small farm nearby – where we picked and planted potatoes and helped with the barley harvest. The barley was 'opened up' by cutting round the outside of the field with a scythe and twisting handfuls of straw to make straw ropes with which to bind the loose stems into sheaves. The crop was then cut with a horse drawn binder, the sheaves 'stooked' and allowed to stand before carting them off with a horse and wagon and pitching the sheaves off it with 'pitch' forks to make a stack. There were breaks for tea – brought out in a pail, and

homemade cake. The horses munched away at oats in their nose bags and life was perfect.

After taking the Higher School Certificate, the equivalent of 'A' levels in those days, what career to follow loomed large. Our old chemistry master – masters tended to be old during the war – lower down in the school had questioned the class about what careers they had in mind – and without hesitation I replied 'Farming'. However, Bill Rowel (the master in question) queried my ability to buy a farm – which was a good point and one which I had not considered in any depth.

Having been involved with rabbits, chickens, ferrets and a cat – I thought that it would be a good idea to become a vet – so I made the necessary enquiries about courses that would assist the process and was informed that priority was being given to ex-service men. So on getting the summons to do National Service, I spent two valuable years of prime time giving potential enemies little to worry about. I observed an epoch coming to an end with the death of King George V1, when the signal went round to his majesty's ships to splice the mainbrace, and I have a distinct recollection of mainbraces being spliced, but whether this was in recognition of the King's departure or more likely the accession of Queen Elizabeth II to the throne I am not at all sure.

By this time I had given up the thought of being a vet since this would involve at least five years study and that I thought would be buckling on my armour for far too long before entering the lists. Europe was on the verge of starvation, food rationing was still in force and even potatoes became rationed. Agriculture involved animals and growing things, activities that had formed a prominent part of our youth, and so logic suggested a degree in agriculture would be a good way of helping me to a career and incidentally solve the world's food problems.

To think is to act, and before leaving the navy I applied to Reading University to read for a pass degree in agriculture. An honours degree would take four years and add to this a year's

practical would have meant five years of ‘armour buckling’, also I had not actually progressed academically over the last two years, regressed would be more appropriate. And so I applied for a three year pass degree course which left the problem of finding a farmer willing to take me on for a year’s obligatory practical farming experience.

A subsidiary priority, however, on being discharged without a blemish on my character, was to play rugby and I was soon playing for Kesteven (a subdivision of Lincolnshire) which also resolved the problem of employment since the president of the club was Mr John Nightingale, a local farmer, so I asked him if he would be willing to take me on for a year as this would be nice and handy and would facilitate playing rugby for his club. He recognized the value of this proposition and took me on. This entailed living at the Nightingales during the week and receiving a wage of two pounds over the same period. So we shook hands on it.

I started work at Manor Farm, and lived on the farm in a typical rambling L-shaped farmhouse built of locally mined limestone in the tiny hamlet of Lenton about ten miles south of Grantham, which I was to access by motor bike.

The household consisted of Mr Nightingale, his wife Barbara and two small daughters, Janet, the elder of the two and Stella. Mrs Nightingale’s father, Mr Burgess a retired London tailor lived with them. My room was approached through Mr and Mrs Nightingales bedroom, which made things a bit tricky on occasions when I came in after the normal bed-time. Mrs Nightingale was a buxom good natured lady, and a good cook. I remember applauding one dinner time when she arrived in the dining room with a steamed pudding, which slipped off its plate as she came through the door; with a movement that would be the envy of the most adroit footballer, she trapped the pudding against the door with her foot and saved it from reaching the ground.

John was a lean, spare character. In his former life I think he worked in a bank, but a spell in the RAF during the war, part

of which was spent in Rhodesia, gave him the idea that farming would be a good thing; he did some work on the farm, mainly at harvest time but not very much at other times. He and his wife were however very kind to me.

Janet and Stella were OK, with Stella being the extrovert. There were lots of cats – who lay in heaps in front of the fire in the kitchen that kept going all the winter; there was a dog, but it was not much in evidence. We were surprised on one occasion to see through the window a cat hurtling by, appearing to drop from the sky: it turned out that Stella had dropped it from a bedroom window to see if it would land on its feet, which it did without apparent harm. I also threw back the sheets of my bed one night to discover a kitten had been deposited under them by Stella, no doubt testing its aptitude for a life as a living warming pan.

I was obliged to keep a diary through the year, and thanks to it and a tracing of the farm with the acreages of the fields marked, I can say with reasonable certainty that the farm consisted of about 230 acres, a respectable size for that era. The largest field was 42 acres and the smallest about 1 acre.

I found myself one bleak November morning with the rain stair-rodding down, standing in an open fronted Dutch barn where I was riddling potatoes through a round sieve and putting the tubers that qualified for entry into sacks each destined to contain one hundred weight of tubers. Outside, stretched seemingly into infinity, a clamp of potatoes awaiting my attention in the coming days, or weeks or even months? I pondered on the relative merits of this life as compared with other options and at that particular moment the odds were leaning ominously on the side of the latter. However the timely arrival of fate in the form of *Phytophora infestans*, favoured by the wet weather, was working to my advantage, and was wreaking silent havoc on the defenceless tubers in the clamp. The riddle was made redundant and the rotting Gladstones dumped in a remote corner of the farm. The crisis passed.

My fellow workers consisted of Les Glossup – the foreman, kind, patient and competent who lived in one of the new council houses in the village. Mr Nightingale was on the Parish Council and had persuaded the Council to buy part of his land on which the houses were built. Les Glossup said that his wages were four pounds a week and it was the richest he had ever been.

George was a general farm worker – who wasn't excessively keen on work. He was pleasant and had a weather eye open for the meteorological conditions and glancing a critical eye to the sky, he would announce that 'It's a bit gleamy – reckon it be goin' te raian.' The cowman was a Ukrainian ex-prisoner of war. He was married and competent and the only one brave enough to enter the bull's pen when it was decided that it was too dangerous to keep. Peter, a tractor driver, made up the full force.

My objective with my obligatory student diary was to build up a picture of the costs and returns of the enterprises on the farm; on days when there was little work to do I was allowed to extract relevant information available in the farm office. Mr Nightingale hinted that the exercise was laudable but too ambitious, and he was right! The first entry was on Tuesday 2nd December, the diary having missed the November crisis.

Tues 3rd

a.m. 1 load of kale, tractor and 2 men, removed part of hedge, approx 6 tons of beet loaded for factory, 3 men.
p.m. Commenced threshing oats.

Wed 3rd

a.m. Continued threshing oats, 10-12 breakdown, 6 tons of beet loaded for factory, 3 men.
p.m. Threshing oats.

Thurs 4th

a.m. Commenced threshing barley, 9.30 – 11 one man to load beet lorry.
p.m. Threshing continued.

Tues 9th

a.m. p.m. Remainder of the potatoes cleared from field 189. These were all frosted and a total loss. They were unable to be lifted earlier, owing to labour not being supplied as promised, followed by heavy rain and hard frost. Labour 3 women.

Wed 10th

Cowman ill. Assisted the foreman with the milking. Two men did odd jobs and carted kale and dumped bad potatoes.

Thurs 11th

Assisted with milking. Some beet carted to the roadside.

Mon. 15th

Rain all day. Odd jobs i.e. sacks sorted, seed potatoes strawed down.

Wed 17th

a.m. Load of kale to crew yard for stock. Crew yards bedded. Beet topping.

p.m. Snow. Barn cleaned. Engine of the combine tested.

Thus. 18th

a.m. and p.m. Crew yards bedded, beet topping completed.

Fri. 19th

Field – under winter wheat flooded at the lower end, where the pond has overflowed around where a blocked drain is forcing a considerable quantity of water to the surface. The field has no proper drainage system. 2 acres of potatoes still remain in the top corner of the field, being abandoned owing to the impossibility of working the field with tractors.

Mon. 22nd

Soil too wet to cart beet. Rabbit catching (13).

Tues. 23rd

Rabbit catching (cont) (10).

24-28 Holidays

Mon 29th

a.m. and p.m. Beet carted to roadside. 1 tractor 2 men.

Tues. 30th

a.m. p.m. Remainder of the beet carted.

1st Jan -25th Feb. – Injured.

The circumstances were as follows.

I had been given, appropriately, new Wellington boots for Christmas. On New Year's Day, I donned the same boots and since there was little real farm work to be done, I went with Les to chop down an ash tree – although what offence the poor tree had given was not at all clear. Les selected an axe of alarming size, and we spent some time honing the blade to a sharp edge. The tree was entrenched on one side of a ditch, which made it a little difficult to get a firm footing, however the ditch was small enough to straddle and as my legs were longer than Les's, I was afforded the prime use of the axe. I was also beginning to fancy myself as a lumberjack and pitting my strength against the ash, so I raised the axe high above and to the rear of my head, as if to fell the tree with the first stroke. Unfortunately the aim was not true and instead of biting into the tree, the axe was deflected from it and into my foot. I could not feel anything, but on looking down I noticed a cut across my right Wellington boot and thought, 'O hell, look what I've done to my Christmas present,' until I noticed some blood oozing out of the cut.

Les offered to take my boot off, but on reflection I thought I would rather he didn't, as I had visions of part of my foot coming off with it. Instead, Les went for transport and I was taken to Grantham hospital, where the boot was removed, an X-ray taken and it was noted that the axe had cut into the

bone, my leg was plastered, crutches supplied and my farming career temporarily suspended.

I had at the end of the previous year fallen in love at first sight and had taken the opportunity to suggest we became engaged – which was readily agreed.

I discovered that Judy, my girl, who was in the sixth form of the Kesteven and Grantham Girls School, was destined to go to Leeds College of Education to qualify as a teacher, and here was I destined to go miles south to the town of Reading to read Agriculture. Up to this point I had only been aware of one university that offered Agriculture as a degree, but I had bought a copy of *Agricultural Chemistry*, by Comber, Townsend and Wilcox in the wildly optimistic assumption that I would be able to swot up on this subject during the year. But as Cobbett pointed out many years ago, give a ploughboy a book to read and at the end of the day he will be asleep in ten minutes, or words to that effect. However, I noted that the authors were staff in the Department of Agriculture at Leeds University. So, as numerous chairmen remark when introducing a speaker 'Without further ado,' I sent off a note applying for a place in the Department of Agriculture at Leeds University. Such was the speed of this action, that having popped the letter into a letter box, I remembered that I had failed to stick a stamp on it. I posted a second letter complete with an apology and a stamp. However, one or both letters reached their destination and I went up to Leeds for an interview with Professor Comber.

The signs were not propitious. The train approached Leeds Central Station through Hunslet, which in a thick, yellow swirling fog, presented a scene which could have come from one of Charles Dickens more depressing descriptions of London's East End.

Professor Comber was pleasant, but obviously a sick man as he had to seek recourse to a spittoon at intervals. However, I was offered a place, and, despite the omens, the thought of being in the same city as my new found love overcame all

misgivings. I enrolled at Leeds and wrote to Reading explaining that they had lost out to my girl and a rival institution.

So, the episode with the axe spared me the depth of winter on the farm and, as indicated, the time had not been wasted. I limped back to resume work on 25th February, and noted in my diary that the headlands were ploughed in field 187 and the ground where a hedge in the same field had been removed. In field 121B nitro chalk was applied using one man and a horse.

Despite the layoff, my farming activities must have done something for my fitness. Days had been spent lifting and 'knocking' sugar beet – in which the loosened roots were picked up one in each hand, knocked together to remove the soil and placed in a neat row with the roots pointing in one direction. After this operation, the tops were removed with a smart chop administered with a beet knife and the roots thrown into little heaps as one progressed down the row. The heaps were then forked into a cart which when full was driven to the edge of the field and the beet dumped by the side of the road. When this heap was judged to be large enough, the beet were forked into a lorry, again by hand, and taken to the sugar beet factory at Southwell near Newark. This exercise was very strengthening, a process augmented by manhandling hundred weight sacks of potatoes – say 50 kg in current parlance.

Early March saw potato planting in full swing. This operation required the soil to be drawn up into ridges, fertilizer applied over them, the 'seed' potatoes to be hand planted by a gang of women, and the ridges then to be split so that the potatoes were covered by soil. One of my jobs was to apply the fertilizer over the ridges. For this operation a horse, borrowed from a neighbour, was required to pull the fertilizer drill. The drill consisted of a hopper to hold the fertilizer, an adjustable slit below it governed the flow of fertilizer to a brush which revolved as the machine moved forward by means of a connection to the axle and thus distributed the fertilizer evenly over the pre-drawn ridges.

Rather than having reins with which to ‘steer’ the horse, the steering mechanism was a line attached to the bit in the horse’s mouth, a steady pull on the line steered the horse to the left, while a series of jerks steered it to the right, this arrangement left one hand free to do whatever needed to be done, such as put it in your pocket.

I was gaily tootling along, at ease with the world, when the horse, followed of course by the drill, began to veer to the left, I was momentarily nonplussed, but then noticed that the free end of the rope guiding the horse and its assemblage had become wound round the brush on the fertilizer distributor, as the horse moved forward, so this continued to wind the rope round the brush thus transmitting a steady pull and the horse, obediently, continued to veer to the left. Long experience indicates that no immediate action will be taken, such as shouting ‘Woa’ to the nag and hoping that it will stop and allow the problem to be sorted out. As a consequence the horse and following drill device continued to progress in an ever decreasing circle. The women planting potatoes had by this time noted that there were some unusual goings on which could temporarily stop proceedings, ease their aching backs and give them the opportunity to vent loud shrieks, cheers and hand clapping. Eventually, the circle in which the horse was pinioned got tighter and tighter until there was no further room to turn. Being a sensible animal, which is more than can be attributed to its temporary boss, it gave up the attempt and sat down on its haunches, which unfortunately placed undue stress on the shafts of the machine and snapped one of them off. This act brought considerable applause from the attentive audience.

Thus ended in ignominy one of the best jobs I had been given to date, and left me with a firm resolve never to let a rope dangle freely. Later a farmer who took on students to ‘train’ re-coined Churchill’s wartime plea to the Americans to ‘Give us the tools and we will finish the job,’ to ‘Give us the tools and we will finish them off.’

Whilst of a modest size, the farm was perhaps typical of its time in that it consisted of a multiplicity of enterprises. For a start all the following crops made an appearance: potatoes, sugar beet, mangolds, wheat, barley, oats, peas, beans, kale, mustard, lupins and clover (for seed). These accounted for four fifths of the acreage, the remaining 45 acres were down to grass which was grazed or made into hay. There were thirty cattle, of which in January 1953 there were 8 cows in milk, 6 cows or heifers in calf and 11 young stock. There was 1 sow with a litter of 11 piglets and 130 pullets.

The most important crop was potatoes both early and maincrop varieties. Work on them occupied practically every month of the year, in my case starting somewhat unenthusiastically in November. My diary noted planting taking place in March and April and cultivations for weed control in April, May, and June. Les was of the opinion that each tuber had to be twizzled round three times in the process of cultivating for weed control, but I noted that we stopped this drastic treatment when it became obvious that the tubers were becoming unduly disturbed to the point where they pleaded for less harsh treatment. Harvesting the early crop of Home Guards started in June and carried on into July, King Edwards were lifted in August and Gladstones, Arran Pilots and Majestics in September. The tubers were harvested by means of a tractor drawing a ‘spinner’, which crudely flung the tubers from the ridges, after which they were picked by hand into wire baskets; this involved gangs of up to a dozen pickers, usually women. The baskets were emptied into sacks and the sacks dumped into a cart and the carts then trundled off the field to a convenient place where the tubers could be tipped out and covered in straw and soil to await removal and grading. The saleable tubers, known as ware, were put into sacks until each weighed 1 cwt. The labour involved will not have gone unnoticed!

Sugar beet was drilled in April at a rate which required the plants to be subsequently thinned out to about one every 10

inches. This was done in two operations, the second one to remove any excess plants and weeds. All this work was done manually with hoes. Weeds were removed between the rows by tractor or horse drawn hoes and took place in May and June. The manual work required to harvest the crop was as described earlier.

The cereal crops were on the cusp of a radical change. Herbicides were being sprayed to remove weeds;
while the oats were still cut with a binder, since the crop was cut before it was ripe so that the straw would still retain some feed value for the cattle, and some of the other cereals were also still cut with a binder, stooked, stacked and ultimately threshed, for in December I was involved with the threshing of all three cereals with a hired machine, it would be almost certainly for the last time, since that summer a newly purchased combine machine was brought in to harvest part of the cereal acreage. I was given the job of relieving Les at lunchtime and had sole charge of the machine, having the barest instruction on how to operate the device. On my first solo operation, the height of the cutter bar needed adjusting, and I thought I could see how it could be done. The first move led to the opposite affect to the one intended, which called for a further adjustment to be made, which in turn led to another unintended consequence, which called for further action, which resulted with a degree of inevitability in the whole of the cutting device becoming detached from the machine. Dear old Les by dent of skill at which I could only marvel, managed to rectify the problem without Mr Nightingale being aware.

However, I had managed to learn to drive a tractor and was pleased with that amount of progress. Les and I reverted to medieval practices when under-sowing a field of oats with grass by the expediency of broadcasting the seed by hand from metal hoppers hung from our necks.

Most mornings before the cows were turned out to grass, involved cutting kale and carting it to the crew yard where the cows were housed. The milking herd was tiny by modern

standards, but I was instructed in the art of milking them in the small milking shed where they could be tied up and given their ration of concentrates. Contrary to best practice, I used to give the poorest milker, who I quite liked, extra food since I thought that would stimulate the flow, it failed to do so and she was eventually disposed of for not pulling her weight. In a letter to my fiancé (telephones were rare) I wrote:

> *I did the milking on my own for the first time tonight, and was an hour late in finishing. I gave the cows twice as much food as they should have had (I was later informed) so I hope they didn't mind the extra time involved, at least they were not out in the rain for so long.*
> *….. I have shut the chickens up, had supper and let the black cat in to see its kittens.*

Having become reasonably proficient at the operation, I was occasionally called in to do the milking at the weekend, and one such occasion I thought that it would be useful for my intended to get some insight into the operation and to marvel at my expertise. The cows were milked by machine, which was operated by a petrol driven motor, which had never been known to give trouble, until the Saturday afternoon I was about to show off. The animals had been rounded up, tied to their stalls, fed and the teat cups attached to the appropriate places, when my guest posed the fatal question: 'Does the machine ever break down?' The engine must have heard and responded to the challenge, for almost instantaneously, it shuddered to a halt, the teat cups dropped off and my reputation was put to the sword. After some futile fiddling with the recalcitrant machine, the only thing I could think of was to apply oil in liberal quantities to the engine and eventually, the machine relented and spluttered into life. The milking was completed some time after the operation was scheduled to finish, but it had introduced my fiancé to the

trials incident to the business of farming, which should have served as a warning but I am pleased to say, did not.

While on the subject of oil, I knew that my motor bike would not function without petrol, but I had forgotten that, like the milking machine engine, it also needed regular topping up with oil. Eventually it became aware of this neglect, the engine seized and the machine refused to take any interest in resuming its role as a means of transport and my Raleigh racing bike was reinstated. This was not too bad going from the farm to Grantham, a journey of about ten miles, since at the end of the journey there was a very steep descent as the road fell over the Lincoln Edge, which permitted a free wheeling swoop into town. Due to the fact that physical features tend to be set in stone, the return journey was not gravity assisted. However it had its compensations, since on the road between Boothby Pagnell and Ingoldsby at about two o'clock one morning progress was eased by the song of a nightingale in full throttle. It somehow seemed appropriate that I was returning to my own temporary nest at Nightingale's farm.

In the next village, there was a garage and a competent owner/mechanic, who did a few repair jobs on various injured items of farm machinery. He had found an old motorbike and asked if I would be interested in it? It was of ancient vintage and boasted acetylene lamps and an idiosyncratic oil feed mechanism. The oil was administered through a cap on top of the engine, where, eventually under the influence of gravity it collected in the sump beneath the piston which prevented the latter from moving up and down and hence propelling the bike. When the bike began to slow down, then the tap beneath the sump was unscrewed, the oil released and collected in a jam jar, and returned to the top of the engine through the appropriate aperture. Progress could thus be resumed. It was slow, but quicker and less tiring than the push bike. The acetylene lights proved quite inadequate, but it was never too dark to prevent progress at the sort of pace that was dictated

by the venerable age and condition of the machine and I would normally switch the lights off to preserve what juice was available. On getting into town one evening I noted a policeman about to flag me down, and quickly flicked on the feeble lights. This was sufficient to prove that I was not driving without lights, and I was told to push my machine to its destination, which he probably guessed would be just around the corner and out of sight.

Thus one valuable lesson drawn from my practical farm experience was that oil should be used liberally and often.

Between 'dragging' potatoes on 1st June and hoeing thistles on 3rd June, I noted in the diary that Wednesday 2nd June was a holiday, which was to mark the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Judy came to the farm to watch it on the Nightingale's TV and in the afternoon we toured the Grantham streets on the motorbike to see the decorations.

On July 21st hay making was in full swing, involving cutting the grass, turning it, putting it into heaps and carting it to a growing stack in the farmyard.

The farm diary for Friday 25th September, the last day of my practical year, read as follows:

> a.m. until 8 p.m. Field 121B. Loading wheat, 3 men.
> a.m. p.m. Field 181. Lifting Majestics 9 women, 1 man.
> p.m. Field 37. Loading 90 sacks peas, 2 men. Field 181 loading Majestics, 2 men.

There is no indication which of these jobs fell to my lot. And so ended my 'year' on Manor Farm, Lenton, care of Mr and Mrs Nightingale and my fellow workers. The year embraced an enforced rest due to an encounter with an axe, swapping universities, playing rugby, getting engaged, and having interesting encounters with various machines and I had become fit after two relatively inactive years in the navy.

The farm was probably quite typical of its era and appeared to be profitable. Prices were good, food was in short supply and rationing still operating. The farm gate price of potatoes

for example was not much less than prices almost half a century later. I noted that barley was being sold for £5 10s a quarter, or in current units £55 per ton, which was almost half the price current at the end of the century. There were many enterprises, all small in scale and all of them very labour intensive. Chemical weed control was in its infancy and I cannot recall any pesticides being used. There was no concern about the effect of farming on wildlife and there were practical benefits from removing hedges since many of the fields were very small. The size of the animal enterprises would not register on any scale relevant at the end of the century when a milking herd of two hundred cows is scarcely a viable proposition and poultry are kept in their thousands on a few specialized farms. Eight cows in milk, a hundred or so poultry and a sow would now be regarded as pets. In retrospect, the farming I had taken part in and enjoyed this year was to the twenty first century what farming in manorial times was to that in 1953.

I was left with an enduring love of the land and the countryside. Judy had left the town before I finished my farming year and writing letters was the usual means of communication. The following are extracts from two of them written just before completing my farming year:

Tuesday

> *Today we have spent most of our time moving sacks of potatoes and corn from one place to another. By the end of the day I heartily wished that I had not filled the sacks as full when combining, as some of them seemed to weigh at least a ton. The wet weather has also caused some of the corn to sprout – giving the sacks a very whiskery appearance – an exclusive farm this – having sacks with beards. After tea Mr N and me pulled a tractor out of a ditch, the tractor driver*

had been ploughing and had somehow or other slid into the ditch.

It is a lovely night- cold – but the stars are sparkling and the owls hooting. I'm afraid I shall miss this peaceful country up in Leeds, I love this countryside – and one only begins to realize how beautiful it is when one has been out here for some time.

Monday night

I wish however that you could be with me, and peep out of the window at the night; the wind is still rocking the trees and the clouds are skipping across the sky in front of a most dazzling harvest moon.

When Mr N came in tonight after shutting up the chickens, he said "it's a pity we have to grow old and die and leave all these beautiful things." It was quite an unexpected thing for him to say, but it does make you think, doesn't it?

1

Farm Girls

A dairy farm in Surrey

'The milking equipment in the bail provided hours of unrivalled fun as it kept falling apart.

Kathleen Webb

I started my year's practical experience on September 1st 1978, a morning my fellow student Jane and I will never forget. We both wandered down to the milking bail at 7.30 am, not a minute earlier, or later, looking clean and tidy, only to return at 6.45 pm, much the worse for wear, and very much dirtier, with a completely new outlook on the way things are done, not in general but on this farm in particular.

Finsbury Farm, was situated by Coldharbour village, about three miles from Dorking in Surrey. The main farm consisted of about 80 acres of semi-permanent grassland on which the farm house was situated (which contained the boss/owner, her husband and an odd collection of cats, a dog and the two students). This had attached to it a collection of fields (about 70-80 acres) scattered in the valley below the farm.

The farm was on the side of Leith Hill, overlooking the valley and on a clear day, planes could be seen taking off from Gatwick airport, affording a very nice view. But the other side of the coin was not so pleasant. On cold wet days (there were more of these than any other type) the view was a little limited (to about three feet) and the position was very exposed, so much so that even when one was hiding in the barn it was still freezing cold.

The farm supported a herd of about 72 pedigree Jerseys and 5000 battery hens, kept in two deep pit houses. As well as all the heifer calves below about six months of age.

The farm had been purchased about 15 years ago and originally supported about ten Jersey cows, which were milked by hand. The herd was gradually increased to the present day numbers, with the milking facilities changing from hand

milking to a mobile milking bail and churn system to the 6 by 6 abreast parlour which is now in use. This bail, which has seen many a happier year, had one of the most original ventilation systems I have ever seen. It worked wonderfully on cold windy days, affording a draft from all angles, with an especially efficient one from the large gaps under the exit doors, which faced down hill and tunnelled all the draft up the back of any unfortunate person attempting to put a cluster on a cow. This all round ventilation was provided mainly by the sides of the bail being made of galvanized iron which was rusting away from its supports, thus allowing plenty of gaps for air movement.

The main problem was that the system did not work on hot still days, when the bail acted as a collector of hot, smelly air, which, without the presence of a window, was very hard to get rid of, as one could not leave the door open. There was a lot of thought given to knocking a hole in the roof, but this was decided against for a variety of reasons.

The milking equipment in the bail provided hours of unrivalled fun, for the first couple of months, as it kept falling apart and generally working the overflow system at random, and refusing to work on most occasions when it was needed. But a lot of tail number tapes, a few months of practice and some carefully placed kicks and we had it working with some degree of success. This being much appreciated by the cows who were getting a little fed up with having to wait to be milked (especially Jemima who just couldn't bear waiting for her food).

The main problem with the bail (other than its dislike of working) was trying to keep it clean as there was no water in the bail except for one tap which only produced water at a slow rate. Any hot water had to be brought from the farmhouse so cleaning was difficult. The difficulty was increased by the holey walls, a very uneven floor and bad drainage. This gave rise to quite a high proportion of the cows contracting mastitis which proved difficult to control.

The cows lived out all year round. In summer they were grazed on a paddock system. The farm being divided into four fields, which were divided by permanent electric fences into a total of nine paddocks, one of which was down to a mixture of swede and kale for winter feed. The other eight were down to semi-permanent pasture. The kale field was rotated around the farm, thus each year one paddock was ploughed and put down to kale and swede after the year's collection of slurry was spread. Each paddock was grazed from 2-6 days depending on the amount of grass present. Grazing was supplemented by feeding according to milk yield.

From the beginning of November until spring, the cows were fed on a mixture of kale, swedes and hay supplemented by sugar beet nuts, dairy nuts and brewer's grains.

The cows spent the days in an open feeding yard, along with six feeding troughs and each were moved to the milking yards while food was placed in the troughs. This was achieved by means of barrow-power, that is a wheelbarrow, a shovel and one or two students. In this way 1 cwt of sugar beet nuts, 3 cwt dairy nuts and about 1 cwt of brewer's grains were convoyed at lunch time to the troughs. 25 bales of hay were also moved in this way and placed in the appropriate places, 6 in the morning, 12 at lunch and 7 in the evening. Many a time a student was to be seen clutching desperately to the handles of a well laden barrow (7 bales) while it tipped itself up, accompanied by an assortment of truly unrivalled vocal noises.

The free for all which resulted when the 'table was laid' and the cows released into the yard had to be seen to be believed, it was enough to make the bravest heart stop in fright and more than enough to get the students moving faster than they had ever moved before.

The cows were kept in the kale field during the night (electric fence moved every evening). This field proved the nemesis of many a student and cow. During wet weather – a large proportion of the time – the field did a good impersonation of a mud bath, in fact in places it came over the

top of the wellies. A sight which often occurred was a student standing on one leg, waving the other welly-less foot in the air before falling gracelessly on her face in the mud, while the other student rolled around in the mud having a mild attack of hysterics.

In cold weather, this mud froze into an expanse of very hard mountain like creations, which were impossible to walk on for man and beast and there was many a night when the cows refused to go into the field – despite frantic attempts – and had to be put into one of the grass paddocks, much to the boss's disgust.

The cows, not surprisingly, disliked their winter living conditions and tended to look rather unhappy and the milk yield suffered because of it. As the cows calved all year round, we had some cows calving in the winter; of about ten cows who calved during this time, we had three who after they calved refused to eat and all three eventually collapsed and died. The fourth cow to give up eating after she calved we brought in (without the boss's permission) and kept her inside and from there on managed to keep her eating. But even apart from these cows, the others in the herd looked generally dejected, even on the warmer winter days.

When the cows calved in the summer, the calves were left with their mothers for ten days if they were heifers, but if they were bull calves they were taken away at the first convenient market day. During the winter the cows were brought in to calve. The calving box resembled an overgrown potting shed and had obviously been used for some other purpose during its life. The calves were removed at the first milking and fed by hand while the mother was returned to the herd. The calves were kept in an odd assortment of old looseboxes and old buildings whose original purpose had been lost.

The main problem with the calves was discovered when one scoured. At the time we had 15-20 calves due to all the heifers calving in a short space of time, and we had no means of separating infected from healthy calves – as we had nowhere

to put them. Thus we just had to wait for the calves to get scour and then treat them. All we could do was to keep them as clean as possible. But with a lot of luck and effort we only lost one calf.

The heifers, 11 Friesians and 12 Jerseys joined the main herd in February and calved during March. The Friesians caused havoc with the free for all feeding system as, with an extra 20 or so cows, there was not enough room around the feeding troughs. This resulted in a lot of pushing and shoving and a couple of very bent feeding troughs, which the Friesians kept sitting on. The Friesians were part of a general conversion of the herd to Friesians and all the calves born to the Jersey herd were Friesian crosses. This caused a lot of problems at calving and after, with a high incidence of twins, five pairs in all of which only four calves survived.

The Friesians proved a little too large for the milking bail. They could fit into the cubicles – only just – but had difficulty in removing themselves via the exit doors as they were too tall. So we had to develop a system of backing the Friesians out of their cubicles after they had been milked and letting them into the finishing yard via the side doors, and even this was a bit of a tight squeeze.

Our boss by this time had decided that students could take charge of the general running on a day to day basis, which, as we both had little experience, gave rise to a few odd means of doing things. Like calf feeding was done on a system of ‘if it looks thin it needs more, if it’s fat it needs less, but do read the instruction on the pack first’. The same went for the cows so goodness knows if the place made a profit or not. Things like calving indexes were unknown, our boss kept very inaccurate records of when the cows were served and it was anybody’s guess when they would calve. But by the time we had made our own system out it was a bit late to see if it worked.

There was also a second farm of about 120 acres, which supported replacement heifers and about 72 ewes along with a selection of tenants in the farm buildings, or rather the

farmhouse and a couple of cottages. This farm was rented from the Forestry Commission and was very poor grassland which was either flat and boggy or dry and on the side of a steep hill. Thus we did little work there, but could sometimes be seen running around barking due to the lack of a sheep dog.

Battery hens, at Finsbury, provided little excitement – well you wouldn't if you were shut up in one of those things; only hours of collecting, grading and packing eggs, which leaves little space for enjoyment, even to the most dedicated fun loving person.

But still somebody has to do it and if you are a big enough fool you will do it by choice. You may not learn how things should be done, but you learn how not to do them. You also know that what a farmer wants to do is not what he does and that even when you are dog tired and flat on your back in the cow yard, looking up at the ewe you have just tried to catch, there is a funny side to it somewhere.

Dairy and potatoes in the South West

I am sure now that it is impossible to appreciate the whole 'farming system' without having worked on a small part of it; without having felt a part of the system, a cog in the machinery, perhaps sometimes a spanner in the works!

Elizabeth White

If anything could have dampened my enthusiasm for my 'chosen path' it would have been the long and increasingly depressing search for a farm on which to carry out the year's

work. It became clear that I was not an economically attractive proposition – a girl, with no previous farming experiences, unable to drive and wanting to 'live-in'. Just as I began to think "Surely I will not be stopped here", a school friend found a farmer, Mr Martin Peters, willing to take me on. The novelty of my situation impressed him and was, he told me, largely instrumental in his decision to employ me.

Mr Peters farm, partly his own land and partly leased by Cornwall County Council, covers two areas totalling about 70 hectares. The larger area, about 50 hectares, includes the nucleus of farm buildings and the modern farmhouse. Most of this land has a southerly or south westerly aspect, lying at about 120 m above sea level on the north side of the river Lynher valley, on the outskirts of Landrake village, 6 miles west of Plymouth.

The smaller 20 hectare area is situated three miles north of the other, with two good access roads. It lies about 80 m above sea level, with a predominantly north and north eastern aspect. This area comprises approximately three quarters of the farm's potato hectarage (total about 8 hectares) the rest being pasture land for the 34 three and four year old bullocks and heifers.

The farm buildings form two blocks on either side of the concrete yard. The smaller block consists of a large dilapidated calf house, once divided into cubicles (which Mr Peters always seemed to be on the verge of renewing) and an extremely chaotic workshop, into which I was periodically sent 'to organize'. Once inside, Houdini himself would have found it an exacting task returning to the light of day.

On the other side of the yard is the new potato store/machinery shed, completed by a local group of craftsmen during my first month there. Here also is the collecting yard, milking parlour and milk room, and the covered yard divided into 72 cubicles, one large calving pen, four old stables converted into calf houses, the grinding and mixing room and two silage pits/bale storage barns (with a floor space of some 1500 ft^2 each).

Mindful of the infamous early-rising of the farming fraternity, I was careful to include a hefty alarm-clock in my case, along with such novel items as overalls, stout 'wellies', numerous men's shirts from Oxfam and a heap of garish jumpers donated by various relations – strange, it was still only July!

I was, however, 'broken-in' gently, and the herd of 63 Friesians had already been milked before I appeared on the scene – rising at ungodly hours came later. I met the only son Jonathan, aged nineteen, a bulky lad with obvious punk-rock affiliations.

Mr Peter's father, universally known as Old Man Peters, appeared on the scene, along with his constant companion, Spot, an old and flea-ridden Jack Russell terrier whose fleas were only outnumbered by its dirty habits. Old Man Peters had passed ownership of the farm to Michael, his younger son, after the Second World War, when his elder son was determined to stay on in the Royal Navy. Malcolm Peters, a competent, new owner, built up the present farm on a new site in the middle 1950's. His father works on the farm even at the age of 78; it became clear , however, that he was only 'trusted', and sensibly so, to do the more straight forward tasks, yet there was a tacit conspiracy among the rest of us to 'consult' and 'be advised' by him. In the evenings in the local pub, he spun incredible yarns about the feats he had accomplished that day; we never let on.

Until he left for agricultural college early in October, Joe helped Mr Peters with the milking, both morning and evening, so my only contact with the cows until I took his place, was bringing them in to be milked.

Once I had got the hang of this job (early attempts having created great consternation for the cows and great amusement for everybody else), I loved it, and insisted on doing it until the herd was housed for winter, and again the following spring and summer. I deeply appreciated the break in a hard day's work, the slow amble up the unspoilt lane which twisted and

climbed from the valley side fields up to the farm. Over the year I saw the changes in its beauty – masses of bluebells, snowdrops, campions, violets, primroses and buttercups, and watched out for the two resident pairs of pheasants, the pair of buzzards with single offspring, the half-white blackbird and the jerking white behinds of disappearing rabbits. It is a very lovely lane.

My involvement and interest in the whole dairy enterprise increased when the herd increased when the herd was housed for winter, and with the onset of calving in late September. One of my most treasured memories from the whole year is the first time I delivered a calf at two o'clock one September morning. The calving season brought us much misfortune and sorrow; out of 45 pregnancies we had 8 still births, 5 calves died before living a week, 2 were born deformed and were shot, and 4 were very poor and were sold, once weaned, at market. Neither Mr Peters nor the vet could offer any explanations for this tragic run of misfortune. Added to this, and the fact that most of the deaths were of heifer calves, there was a heart breaking accident on Christmas Eve night. While we were all out celebrating, five of the older calves broke out of their house. By 1 o'clock Christmas morning we had found four of them. We found the fifth in the light of Christmas Day, drowned in the slurry pit. It was the heifer I had first delivered, and the finest of all the calves.

I enjoyed being surrogate mother to the surviving 'family' of 26, as well as the 25 yearlings now housed in the large pen in the covered yard, and the whole lot became known as 'Bess's Babies', and I took over their complete care. Mr Peters expressed great pleasure in their development and quality, and in my work. I think however that the quality was not so much due to what I had done, but seemed better due to what had <u>not</u> been done in previous years.

The dairy herd became more than just walking udders to me. I got to know most of them by sight, their temperaments and interrelationships. This was one of the only things Joe and I

complemented each other on, as he, unlike his father, was interested in the carefully planned selective breeding of a really first class herd.

The other major enterprise on the farm is potatoes, with land totalling about 9 hectares planted with Pentland Dell and Pentland Crown. Bad weather held back the harvest until early October, frustration increasing with the frequent break-downs of the old harvester. Mr Peters therefore bought the first of the year's new machines, a new Faun harvester, which worked a treat.

The monotony of sorting on the harvester conveyer was lightened by the company I had. The men employed for the harvest seemed to have been picked from the cream of Landrake's 'characters' There was, for example, Tim, who considered himself the Casanova of the county and Di, who spread scandalous fabrications with considerable glee.

That winter was a true test of my enthusiasm, and although it occasionally thinned, it never died, helped a great deal by the incredible good humour of Mr and Mrs Peters. The care of all the livestock took up most of my day, and when potato riddling started, I really knew the meaning of hard work! The work was hard and often monotonous. That winter seemed to have no end.

However, spring arrived of course, and with it came some major changes to the farm.

Constant rows and hassles with the potato merchant who bought most of the stock came to a head when Mr Peters found out he had been almost consistently underpaid. The main result of this was Mr Peters' application to join a recently initiated local potato co-operative, and as if to reinforce the fresh start, the purchase of a new potato riddle.

The second major change was the result of Mr Peters' decision to bring his small beef enterprise to a close. He was keenly aware of the relatively small increase in the market price he got for a 3 or 4 year old bullock over a good quality

yearling, and the sight of the good quality yearlings he had catalysed the decision.

So he sold at Liskeard market all the bullocks on the farm: 17 three and four year olds, 12 yearlings and 13 of that year's calves. It was quite a day, albeit a sad one for me. The money received helped buy the new riddle, a new Faun potato planter and a much needed pressure hose. He also applied for a larger potato quota. The farm was the talk of the region's farmers, who 'popped in' to inspect the new hardware.

The new planter was a huge success, and Mr Peters celebrated in typical fashion by buying a new Massey Ferguson tractor. What economic crises?

The wet May brought temporary frustration and regret of his earlier extravagancies. The weather and the unreliability of the contractor seemed to spell ruin for the first silage cut. But a fine June raised everyone's spirits. The depression of the winter calving, the miserable monotony of the chilly and damp potato harvest and the hours of picking rotten potatoes from the riddle with freezing fingers, were forgotten. The 'spending bug' caught Mr Peters again and his wife got a parrot, his son a motorbike and his father a puppy. I got a selection of brushes and large containers of anti-rust paint, creosote, bituminous paint and whitewash, and spent a happy few weeks on a much needed face-lift.

I was sorry to leave at the end of my year. Now, it seems so far away. What did I gain from it?

Besides a good deal of knowledge of that one particular farm, I am sure now that it is impossible to appreciate the whole 'farming system' without having worked on a small part of it; without having felt a part of the system, a cog in the machinery, perhaps sometimes a spanner in the works! without having played a part in the planning and decision making. To read or to be taught is not really enough by itself – myths can then still prevail, false impressions form.

I received a better and sometimes surprising understanding, through being 'in the thick of things', of farmers' attitudes to

their work, how their own feelings can affect their farms, their feelings towards ‘outsiders’, or those indirectly connected like advisors or salesmen, and their attitudes to themselves.

Mr Peters knew he was a part of a vital sector of employment, yet strongly felt that he was taken for granted, exploited and somehow looked down upon. Yet he was guilty of these same ‘crimes’ against the salesmen or representatives who got past the three Alsatians.

I saw two opposing attitudes on the one farm – Joe’s deep, genuine interest and enjoyment, and Mr Peters’ colder more business like attitude, ‘it’s another job, just a way of making a living.’

I was always faintly surprised at the speed of change and the never-ending list of things to be done. There was never a second’s rest, one job was started, completed as quickly and as efficiently as possible, and another got on with. Alongside this was the impressive planning, thinking ahead, preparation, decision-making. It never stopped. To be frank I was surprised and not a little put out by the sheer unromantic and business like way in which the farm was managed.

The seasons dictated the tasks and the seasons sped by. The great importance and control exercised by the weather was underlined by both the stories told to me of hard winters, unexpected gales and ruination and by my own experience on the farm. I could see that the weather could really make or break.

I also learnt a fair bit about myself; I really was interested, I could cope with the responsibilities I was given, and I almost enjoyed appalling weather! I enjoyed that year so much.

A large pig enterprise in Lancashire

'The expression 'character building' has been used often. Brief research reveals that it is usually used to describe activities that are a form of self-inflicted torture, involving a fair degree of physical discomfort and mental anguish.'

Kerry Jonsson

The expression 'character building' has been used often. Brief research reveals that it is usually used to describe activities that are a form of self inflicted torture involving a fair degree of physical discomfort and mental anguish. Thus developing survival techniques in the North Pole with minimal equipment (a billy-can and a polythene sheet) or sailing across the Atlantic in a tin bath are character building experiences. In theory the rewards are supposed to be ample compensation for the deprivations.

I suspected that my year of pre-university farming experience was going to be character building when I was rejected by my fourth prospective employer. My suspicions were confirmed on my first day at work.

The job I found was the result of a conversation with a long lost friend whom I met by chance. Inevitably we talked about what we were doing and I told her I was looking for a farm job. She knew a farmer who might need somebody. Three months later I started work at Manor Farm.

The farm occupies about 80 hectares on the Fylde coast of Lancashire. The enterprises include producing big bale silage, and a small herd of Charolais, however, a large poultry unit (laying hens) and a 500 sow breeding herd are the major money earners. Although I helped in all parts of the farm I worked mostly with the pigs and this essay reflects that fact.

Mr Ramsden (Tom), my employer was not specific about what my job involved when I started. Vague references were made to my observing and recording farrowings to determine a 'normal farrowing procedure'. He hoped to improve the % born dead rate by better supervision of farrowing, also I might pay attention to those piglets born small and weak which usually die. Then there were the multitude of other jobs which can always accommodate an extra pair of hands; sows to be moved and washed, piglets castrated etc, the list is endless. Later on I was to realize that his sort of vagueness was characteristic of Tom. Something, an article read, the results of recent research would spark in him the idea of applying a version on his farm. He rarely considered the more generalized repercussions of his schemes, or the practical detail of how the scheme might be applied. I was just such a scheme, he wanted someone to improve the farrowings, how they did it was less clear.

So I began my first day with a growing feeling of trepidation. I knew absolutely nothing about pigs (unless you count what I learnt from my friend's pet gilt, Wilma!).

I latched on to the head stockman, Bill, he handed me to Pru the girl who managed the farrowing houses (I began to feel like the parcel at a children's party) and she proceeded to treat me to the icy blast of her disapproval. The atmosphere could not have been colder in a deep freeze. The problem was quickly revealed; the farrowing houses were her territory, my employment was a professional insult to her, she believed the farrowings could not be supervised better, in short, she considered me entirely (and preferably immediately) expendable. This posed quite a difficulty, my job depended to some extent on Pru's co-operation. I needed to learn from her. The next six months were dominated by her resentment. I agonised about how to cope; to complain would be counter-productive, it was my problem anyway, and a full out attack I believed would only worsen the situation, in the end I just sat it out. I started in June, she apologised at Christmas. The

whole thing was an exercise in diplomacy and endurance. I think she finally discovered I was more fun to complain to about everybody else on the farm than to tyrannize.

Pru's attitude was in part justifiable, especially when I first started. Talk about incompetent.

One of my first tasks to learn was castrating the piglets. Bill showed me the technique on about three piglets then left me to cut the other 97. First I tried to catch a piglet, sounds easy; a piglet I discovered can accelerate from 0-60 in ½ a second, it can change direction at speeds only to be surpassed by politicians performing U-turns. Nor are they stupid, there is always one which works out that if it sits quivering under Mummy's snout it is safe from nasty human hands. Within two minutes I was covered from head to foot in pig-muck, having tripped over bars and flying pork chops and in mortal fear of having my arm bitten off. Finally I got one in the crate and proceeded to make every mistake possible. I did not cut deep enough, I burst the testicle, I fiddled, the noise was terrible but worst was the silence. I thought it had died. It took five minutes to cut one piglet, four hours to do three pens. I think I suffered as much as they did. Eventually I was to match the farm record, 160 piglets cut in 240 minutes.

Injecting was another nightmare. First fill your syringe: it took me ten minutes to work out that unless you injected air into the bottle it was very unlikely that you would withdraw any fluid. I engaged in a losing battle wherein I heaved mightily on the plunger drew some fluid into the syringe, let go of the plunger to see it rocket back to its former position. Honestly, I was near to tears.

Second, get fluid into pig. Tom was very specific, the site of injection was a band of muscle on the very top of the sow's neck. Significantly, he never demonstrated this trick. In an old sow the muscle is so tough it bends the needle on entry, failing this, being a wily old thing, she waits until the needle has entered and then makes an upward leap accompanied by a heart stopping bark and then hurls herself forward whilst

lifting her head. The result is: 1) the tether slips back, breaks syringe or your fingers, 2) she crushes your hands and the syringe under conveniently placed bar in crate, 3) the bunching of the muscle ejects all the fluid back out.

Ultimately, I became reasonably adept at my tasks, but this involved my learning to cope with being a laughing stock and crossing the threshold from asking for help continually to using my own judgement. This required an ability to compromise.

Tom, as previously stated, is not very practical. I compromised and injected the sows to the side of the neck. I became more flexible about my role on the farm. It was simply impossible to observe all the farrowings from beginning to end and do all else that was required. If I had only one sow farrowing I got on with other things. Tom would then tell me off if he found out but he would certainly criticise Bill if the cutting was not up to schedule, but that is the boss's prerogative. In fact, the management of the farm was quite effective.

Tom provided the emphasis on excellent recording, full use of computer analysis and continual innovation. He was reasonably benevolent towards his staff if a little out of touch, mostly because he farmed from the office. Yet computers alone cannot make a successful farm. Bill provided the other essential ingredient, a truly traditional stockman with a tireless devotion to his animals. He would often stay all night if a sow had a difficult farrowing. It was Bill who put into practice all of Tom's schemes and coped with all the ensuing chaos. He was greatly respected by the staff and managed to maintain harmony amongst them (frequently very difficult).

In contrast, a previous manager (University graduate!) failed in these roles and left just after a year, suffering from a nervous breakdown. He made some fundamental errors. Primarily it seems he did not understand the stock. This he demonstrated by killing first a sow; unable to replace her prolapsed uterus he cut it off with a knife: second a gilt; he

injected her with oxytocin when a piglet was wedged, she ruptured and bled to death. He further sinned by treating the staff with contempt and arrogance, lost their respect and they refused to work with him.

No staff, no profits, Bill got his job back.

In summary, I gained a lot from my year. Personally I had a lot of fun, I learnt to work with people and from this and my practical achievements I derived confidence. The practical skills I perfected I may never use again but I will never forget how hard they were to learn and that a good stockman is a skilled worker worthy of recognition.

From the manner in which I got the job I realized that it is foolish to hesitate about using contacts. Doing things the hard way is not more 'worth'. It is a competitive world and if you fail to help yourself it is unlikely that other people will come unasked to your rescue.

A farm is in many ways like any other business, it is dependant on good organization based on accurate recording and analysis, allowing policy decisions to be made which can be adapted to changing circumstance. The staff must represent a team and this can only be achieved when the person in charge holds their esteem. This is vitally important, farming though greatly changed in today's mechanized world still involves the handling of living animals or crops. A cow will still calve at midnight and a crop can still be threatened with ruin by untimely rain. The job is not yet a nine-till-five occupation. Therefore, the people employed must be prepared to care a little bit more and work a little bit harder than others in many different industries. They will only do this if the person they work for is prepared to put in an equivalent degree of effort.

So I suppose my year was character building, there were times when I cursed the University from here to Timbuktu, but I would not have missed the experience for the world.

No substitute for practical experience

'Having worked with horses for nine years I approached milking with a positive attitude really feeling the part in my 'Nora' wellies and white milking cap.'

Joanna Lawton

Having worked with horses for nine years I approached milking with a positive attitude really feeling the part in my 'Nora' wellies and my white milking cap. I stomped into the shippon behind the initiator of my farming experience and very rapidly began to see the pros of an office job. The smell was asphyxiating! The shippon holds twenty seven cows and on a day such as this with the windows shut the air could be cut with a knife. The fact that I choked my way through the first ten minutes of what was to be the love of my life for the next five years caused a great deal of hilarity among my bosses.

This intensity of strong ammoniacal smell, which I thus experienced for the first time, later proved to be one of the things I missed most when away from home.

The progression from a kid who didn't even know what a cluster was to a farm worker who could mend, break, make or clean a cluster with her eyes shut, taught me not only a variety of stock handling and practical farming skills but equally, if not more importantly, it introduced me to the way in which a fairly small and close knit farming community works together.

The work I did at Meadowcroft [in my spare time from school]all centred around the hundred and sixty cows which I have learnt to love very much. Having been there five years, most of the cows we are milking now have come into the world, occasionally with my help, since I started working there. The fact that I have had my fingers bitten through almost to the bone by calves that wouldn't finger feed and I have washed out water baths for them with bare arms in sub-

Arctic conditions makes it all the more rewarding when she finally calves herself and comes in for milking.

During my first few months there, my friend Louise and I spent a good deal of our time looking after a set of twenty calves, since we got home from school just in time to feed them. To this day 102 [one of the twenty calves]is, to me, the best cow North of London. Professionally she is not a very special cow, since she is rather small and has bad feet, but she is a quiet milker and wherever she is, at whatever time of day or night she will always come to me and see what I'm doing.

Although I am closest to this cow, out of that first twenty each one had its own character and still many of them have not changed. 120 was infamous as a calf for escaping by breaking doors down, but now she has matured to undoing chains!

Knowing members of the herd so well makes this job so much more rewarding than if it was just 'another herd of cows'. Since farm work involves many physically strenuous jobs which have to be done in all weathers at all hours it is a necessity that you enjoy the job or the temptation to back out becomes too great.

Three years ago the farm bought a new pasture just across the road. Although it was not a bad piece of well sheltered land it was poorly drained, still depending on the old stone drains so the Boss decided to dig it up and lay a new drain system. Thus a couple of days were spent with a drain finder marking out where the new drains were to go. This done it was time to dig them up and lay the new tiles. At this point we realized that no way was a David Brown 121 and its adjoining back actor going to get out of Long Meadow if it ever got in. On pointing this out to the Boss we were met by a sadistic grin and a digging spade each. Now I'm not proud and I don't mind digging holes laying tiles and gravelling up, but I soon got relegated, along with Louise to 'hole-filling'. If I'm ever asked to fill another hole I swear I'll jump in it! Louise and I must have filled dozens of holes during those few weeks and no matter how well we cleaned off the sods we always had more

hole than soil. Long meadow, however is now not overly wet and the satisfaction felt when the field was something like flat again was indescribable. Many jobs in agriculture carry with them the satisfying feeling which cannot be replaced by money.

To go to bed at eleven at night, having spent seventeen hours making silage is one of the best feelings I know. Every muscle aches, your head is banging away, you are dying of starvation but you know that if it rains, hails, snows or world war III starts, every blade of your grass is safely in the clamp.

This is the sort of job which is far from envied by those who have never experienced it. On the other hand there are jobs, such as feeding calves or working with lambs that every Tom, Dick and Harry wants to do since the James Herriot books were televised. Admittedly, bottle feeding lambs is a wonderful job, but when those lambs become shearlings and need dipping, injecting and feet trimming, the average man off the street is far less willing to get involved. I personally, however, get far more exhilaration out of a physically strenuous job than one which may at first seem attractive. To walk round every wall, round every meadow picking up fallen stones before mowing, may seem like a gentle sunny job, but after about two miles of monotonous Lancastrian dry stone wall I was just about ready to scream. Anyone who may have ventured to ask what I was doing may well have found themselves showered with sandstone.

On the other hand to milk a newly calved heifer for the first time, which undoubtedly involves getting kicked, squashed, trodden on and generally maimed for weeks is brilliant fun and really gets the adrenalin flowing!

Working with animals which are always so unpredictable also taught me to keep a clear mind and react quickly in moments of crisis. In my first week at Meadowcroft I was bringing the cows in one morning and the bosses were still in bed. We had a Charolais cow in with the herd and since she wasn’t milking I sorted her out of the collecting yard and left

her on her own in the end yard. I went into the shippon to tie my cows up when I heard a resounding bellow and the rattle of metal. I ran out to find ‘Charlie’ and the gate fighting in the middle of the yard and the gate was most definitely winning. Not knowing what to do and being somewhat fearful of the large Charolais cow, I dashed off and got the Boss out of bed.

Five years later I was presented with a similarly critical but very different situation. Although the Boss was there he was out of action due to a gammy hip and I was left to cope with the situation on my own. One of our less intelligent heifers had started calving at the top of a ravine, fallen twenty feet and finished calving in the brook at the bottom of the ravine. The calf, obviously, did not live through this little escapade and the heifer was standing in the brook half immobilized having splayed her legs during calving, looking very miserable. It was half past nine, dark and cold and we had started at five that morning so we could make silage all day and all of a sudden I found myself with this crisis on my hands. I couldn’t run to the boss because he was out of action so I had to put the old ‘grey matter’ into gear. The next hour involved pulling fences up, crawling around on all fours in a brook and running to the nearest house to phone home for a cattle box. Despite all my efforts to get ‘Doris’ out of the brook and up the ravine, by the time the cattle box arrived she had gone down, but by the grace of God and a lot of gentle persuasion I had got her out of the brook just in time. Working with no light became futile and we left her till morning, but now she is on the road to recovery in a shippon back home. I felt very proud that I found her in the first place and that I had the self confidence to do what I thought was right. Heaven knows, 5 years previously I wouldn’t have had a clue what to do.

It is not just the knowledge of cows that helped in this situation, but the training I’ve had that whatever happens and whatever it takes, for that hour, that one heifer in front of you is the most important cow in the world and it is up to you, and you alone, to save her.

I have seen lives, marriages and machinery risked for either just one cow or a whole herd of cows and now I have total faith that however many times you get kicked and however many dark hours you spend looking to difficult calvings, dairy farming is as addictive as hard drugs.

Skills such as fencing, milking, baling, silaging, dehorning and the rest may all be useful but I know that the one thing I've got out of the last 5 years is a total and utter adoration for my job which is one thing that very few people indeed can say they have.

Not just cows on a Cornish farm

Being the only female around I felt I had to be able to do all that needed doing and do it just as well as anyone else could and only ask for help as a last resort.

Sara Brimacombe

Never having been on a farm before and also a female, seemingly a disadvantage even in these liberated days, I found it very difficult finding work on a farm. However after endless telephone calls and letters, through a friend I was given an interview by the foreman of an amalgamation of farms, comprising about two thousand acres in Cornwall. I could never understand why anyone ever wanted to do anything other than agriculture; it has always been something I've considered important to know all about: the bare essentials of life and so in spite of my friends and family thinking I was cracked, I went to the interview with enthusiasm in vast measures! This paid dividends: I was offered a place on the

government's youth opportunities scheme at first and then taken on full time.

At first I lived at home and travelled to and from the farm on a motorbike, later I moved into a caravan down there, finding myself in the ridiculous position of only going home for about three hours sleep – there was also irresistible cider in that area and the cows – a herd of a hundred Friesians - had to be milked at 5 a.m. the following mornings! The milk lorry came at 7 a.m. to collect the milk and even though it only took me 1 ½ hours to put the cows through the parlour, time had to be allowed to find them, or rather stumble over them and amid pitch darkness, mist and rain! Also they weren't necessarily in the field that they had been put into the previous evening – one cow fancied herself as a champion steeplechaser.

When I started, the 250 acre farm on which I was to spend most of my time had just been acquired by the estate. Previously it had been badly run by a few guys who were really into electric fencing wire – the farm was practically knee deep in the stuff. So many hours were spent cleaning up the farm, pulling miles of wire out of the ground, like flags out of a magicians hat, unblocking drains full of dead rats, shovelling muck like concrete out of calf pens waist deep in it (almost resorting to a chain saw, the pens not having been cleaned since the stone age), painting with bituminous paint and white washing the entire farm – jokes were made about when I was going to finish the cows! Thus were spent spare afternoons throughout the winter, after the routine muck scraping, fighting with hay bales in gale force winds, cleaning and bedding up the cubicles and hugging sacks of pulp nuts about amid hailstorms – all good stuff for muscle building.

However, the greatest moments of all were watching or helping a cow to calve – an incredible miraculous experience, so beautiful, especially if it was one of my favourite cows, but so sad if the calf was born dead. You couldn't help but become attached to the cows – each one had her own definite character - they could be really funny! Quite unlike sheep, which I

worked with for a while, helping with the lambing on the farm on the opposite side of the river. These animals have got to be the most silly, with a sub zero intelligence – I could never believe how stupid they were.

One of my responsibilities was to look after the calves, this has undoubtedly infinitely increased my patience, some took so long to 'twig' and drink milk by themselves, meanwhile sucking and chewing me to death.

The sheep were lambed in February in two enormous white marquees – a different idea the farm foreman had, which was quite good except in the end it was a bit of a joke because there were some particularly strong hurricane like storms then, so a lot of the time we were struggling to hammer the tent pegs more securely in the ground. At one point we really thought the tent was going to take off – the whole thing was like a circus. A really embarrassing moment happened later when I was out with a guy I quite liked, reached in my pocket for cigarettes and pulled out some orange castrating rings – I just died laughing

For a good deal of the time there was only myself and another bloke who was the herdsman/manager on our farm, and fortunately we got on very well, sharing the same sense of humour; warped. He was an amazingly patient guy and for the good part suffered me in silence, just letting me get on with it. One time however I was certain that he would really blow up and beat hell out of me.

It happened that we had an old open Fergie 35 which I was using with a trailer to pick up a fence at the top of a rather steep field, I was standing winding up the wire when suddenly I heard the tractor wheels in motion behind me – the worst moment in my life so far – the most awful feeling! I hadn't put the brake on enough notches and so it had held for a few minutes but then the tractor and trailer quickly gathered speed and all I could do was watch helplessly as it raced through a fence, a hedge, some small trees and then disappeared. Expecting to find it over the cliff and in the river, I was

relieved to find it in a thicket on the edge of the cliff, amazingly in one piece and the right way up! As it turned out we managed to winch it back up and were given £500 by the insurance company who declared it a write off. With a new battery it was back in working order so in fact we made £400. The foreman took it really well and told me about when he had done something similar, only his tractor ended up in a reservoir and needed a team of frogmen to get it out.

Summer found us making silage and to help, various people from the farms opposite came across – the best pub session ever was when we had just finished sheeting down the pit and it started pouring with rain.

Then followed a slightly lazy time with nothing in particular happening and so the herdsman, a real workaholic, was made to take a holiday – I had to bundle him in his car! I was left to keep the farm ticking over, milking and drying off some of the cows and keeping an eye on the calves, who were really tame. If I went out in the field they just ran up to me – marvellous for TB testing.

There were about two action packed weeks in the summer during which just about everything was done; the barley was harvested, straw made, fields burnt (plus one tractor on the other side of the river!). We made a second cut of silage and made hay and pea haulm bales at the neighbouring farm. Then the slurry pit was emptied, dung spread, fields were ploughed, harrowed, rolled and reseeded. Working from five in the morning until ten at night really killed you. We used to collapse in the local pub when we had finished at night and invariably be the last people to leave at about midnight! One day I was particularly hung over and shattered and I was sent out to chain harrow a field. Not really thinking what I was doing at all I started harrowing the field which it was in, which happened to be stubble turnip seedlings! I only did one strip and luckily they managed to get their roots back in the ground and in fact it was only noticeable afterwards by the absence of weeds in that area.

In ultra hot weather everyone wore shorts and a siesta was declared at midday, usually spent in the local beer garden with the market gardener down the road, his girlfriend and the local community policeman.

Beautiful summer evenings were whiled away canoeing and swimming in the river, just off our bottom field. I really got into photographing and took pictures of all things possible. The old friends I remained in contact with were amused to see reels of film I had just had developed … cows, calves, cows, a chicken, tractors, local pubs, cows, more cows, another cow, a Hereford bull… a horse for a change, "Sara!" they would say. The best photographs were a crowd of half naked people returned from a swimming expedition chasing the cows which had broken down a fence and got into the kale.

In fact it became very difficult to see friends not in the immediate vicinity or who had never been involved with a farm – they just didn't understand when I would turn up three hours late for a party completely shattered with excuses like the cows had got out.

At first I was also working some evenings as a waitress in a bistro in the back of a pub in Plymouth, but it got increasingly harder to make it on time, having abandoned the wellies and washed all traces of the farm from me – straw in the hair was a dead giveaway. In the end though the guy who ran it, left and set up a beach bar on the west coast of Florida.

Not only did I learn about cows and tractors, but also became very good at improvisation and do it yourself jobs. I also learnt the basics of plumbing, carpentry, concrete laying, stone walling, fencing and how not to be an electrician. I became excellent at driving all sorts of pick ups, usually without brakes. I also got into picking pheasants and gutting and skinning rabbits. In fact I became so practical that I amazed my family whenever I went home. Being the only female around I felt I had to be able to do all that needed doing and do it just as well as anyone else could, and only ask for help as a last resort. This led to many struggles but by the time

I left I had conquered everything and with incredibly few disaster areas.

If I ever went home for a weekend, when I returned I couldn't wait to see how a cow with summer mastitis had progressed, if a cow had calved or how a lame cow was.

Farming is never boring – things rarely go according to plan, something always happens to catch you on the unexpected. At the end of a day you really feel like you have done some work! It's really good though – I loved it – I always felt as if I had really achieved something.

As I became more involved with the farm and assumed more responsibility, even to the extent of nagging the herdsman the whole time about things, I realised that it was not a job at all but more a way of life. It was incredible how social, domestic and work spheres became totally integrated and how committed you become. It is a very good way of life though – totally rewarding and I learnt so much in the year. In fact I enjoyed it so much I didn't want to leave, but neither did I want to spend the rest of my life as a farm labourer, working for somebody else, when I really came down to it.

The only trouble is, I can hardly read and write any more, nearly eighteen months off leaves the brain very rusty as far as academic work is concerned. My academic achievement since I left school has been to complete the crossword in the Sun.

Innovations on a Surrey pig farm

‘The work was usually done by four thirty. I usually had the dinner to cook then. I lived with the farmer and his wife, but his wife was working at their restaurant most evenings, so it was my job, as a girl of course, to cook the evening meal.’

Julia Lambeth

My pre-university farming experience was gained on a one hundred sow breeding unit in a village in the south of Surrey.

The farm consisted of the farm owner, Reg, the farm manager, John, and a boy who worked weekends and later full time.

The sows were mainly Camborough hybrids, the seven boars were either Large White or Pietrain. The dry sows were kept in a fairly new sow house with eighty stalls opening at the back to a central dunging passage for the two rows of forty. The sows due to farrow were moved four days before they were injected with prostaglandin to induce birth. The sows farrowed in individual farrowing huts. They stayed in their pens until their litters were three weeks old. The sows were then moved to the service area where they were mixed between boars in individual pens.

The piglets were weaned into Seaford bungalows with an inside feeding area and an outside with slatted floors. After spending four to six weeks there the pigs were moved to Trowbridge fattening units. At pork weight the pigs were weighed and sent to Hasham abattoir.

My routine on the farm was to start at seven thirty in the morning by feeding the dry sows which was automatic and then to clean them out, collecting the dung into a wheelbarrow and dumping it in a trailer. The routine also included giving any medication to any of the pigs that were sick. The rest of

the stock, apart from the fatteners, was my job to clean out in the morning. If there were any sows farrowing it was generally my responsibility to supervise and separate the newly born pigs from their mother into a heated box in the hut. The rest of my day's routine would comprise pressure hosing huts out and general cleaning or moving pigs or weaning pigs. The work was usually all done by four thirty. I usually had the dinner to cook then. I lived with the farmer and his wife, but his wife was working at their restaurant most evenings so it was my job, as a girl of course, to cook the evening meal. Luckily I enjoy cooking most of the time.

Although I learnt a great deal about pig farming, that wasn't all that my farming experience taught me. I have also learnt to have a little more confidence in my ability. At the beginning of the year I was petrified of doing anything wrong, consequently I did far worse than if I hadn't worried.

One of the worst days I had was when everything went wrong and I was given a lecture by John on how disappointed he was with me because he knew I could do the job but that I just didn't think ("You are all the same you students, for all your 'O' levels and 'A' levels you haven't any common sense."). It was a particularly busy day with us finishing at 6.45 pm with some sows still farrowing. I had to come in very drained and start cooking the supper while Reg sat in front of the television. I didn't mind the work or cooking the dinner, but I don't like being thought of as useless, so that day made me feel bad.

John occasionally let me drive the tractor, but as the tractor was only used to pull the trailer for the dung scraped out of the Trowbridges by hand there was little opportunity to develop my skills. I must admit I wasn't a very good tractor driver. One of the reasons could be because of my experience of my first time driving a tractor at sixteen. I spent three weeks working on a farm and the first day I went with the cowman to do some fencing. The cowman very kindly taught me to drive the tractor, the first time I had been taught to drive anything!

He showed me the clutch the gears and the throttle, but he didn't tell me which were the brakes. I drove a little with the cowman by my side, helping me by putting his foot on the brakes where necessary, then he told me to try to drive while he was there but not helping. This I managed because the tractor was on the flat and I thought the clutch was the brake as the tractor stopped when I used the clutch. The cowman then told me to take the tractor round the corner to the farm. This I dutifully did, but unfortunately the road down to the farm was downhill, so when I put my foot on the clutch expecting it to stop, the tractor just carried on of course. I was heading for a post holding up a lean-to building, so in a terrible panic I quickly turned the steering wheel and drove up a bank and pulled on the hand brake. I failed to clear the post. Down came the lean-to, narrowly missing a very expensive motorbike parked underneath. Luckily nobody seemed at all bothered except me. I was shaking for the rest of the day.

One part of the job on the pig farm that I enjoyed was the administering of medication to the sick pigs. This is one area where I gained confidence because by the end of the year I was trusted to do all the medication without question. It was rather daunting to begin with, having to stick needles into animals that were obviously going to try their hardest to avoid it. I remember trying to inject a sow with a wormer, she knew what was coming and charged around the pen wildly. In her frenzy she trod on my foot, I stood holding the side of the pen gritting my teeth trying not to feel the pain. At this moment Reg walked past and shouted "What's the matter?" I told him. He said "Hurts doesn't it"? injected the sow, and walked off!

Another of my responsibilities was to pregnancy test all the dry sows each week. This job was left up to me, so when I left I had to teach everyone my method so that they could understand my records.

One of the jobs I acquired when the farm manager and owner realised I wasn't very squeamish, was the castration. We used to castrate at three days old, so I could do the cutting

on my own. Once Reg and John found out I could manage the job quite well they seemed quite pleased that they were relieved of it!

Very occasionally I was allowed to do the serving when there was only the boy and myself on the farm. This was alright if I could choose a boar, but very often one particular boar was needed for the job. All the boars were fairly good tempered, except for Peter, who was usually alright, but he seemed more interest in fighting the other boars than serving the sows. Unfortunately the boars all knew that I wasn't as strong as the men, so they took advantage of me trying to put them back in their pens. If I was guiding a boar with a board, they would push past me and pick fights at other boars' pens. The only time I was really frightened by the boars was when I tried to put Peter away one day. He lashed sideways with his head making a deep groove with his tusk in the board I was holding.

My favourite side of the year's work on the farm was looking after the farrowing sows and their litters. There was nothing more satisfying than seeing a sow giving birth to a litter of twelve or so nice strong piglets, especially if the mother was a first-time gilt. My least favourite jobs were teeth and tailing the new-born piglets and then castrating them.

I thoroughly enjoyed the second half of the year. I was too worried about work at first in order to enjoy it. The farm owner and manager were always reminding me how lucky I was to work on such a clean farm, with such short hours to work. I did appreciate that the farm was a good one, Reg was always trying out new ideas, and so the system was always changing. For instance when I started on the farm we used to feed the pigs twice a day, once at seven thirty in the morning and once again at three o'clock in the afternoon. Then a P.I.C. [Pig Improvement Company] representative came to the farm and asked us why we didn't feed just once a day. The following Saturday we tried it, just feeding in the morning and

the system is still like that now! The pigs didn't suffer and the labour was reduced, so there was more time for other tasks.

Another change that took place while I was working there was the introduction of creep boxes in the huts rather than just creep boards which merely cut down draft from the door. Reg designed the boxes himself and had them made from plastic stockboard. They worked very well, reducing the amount of heat needed in the hut to that provided by a light bulb.

Reg was one of the first farmers to try the new Bibby creep food 'Supernatural'. The food cost about £450 a tonne, but from looking at the piglets fed on the food they seemed to be putting on a lot more weight quickly and they didn't scour when they were weaned. This was still in the experimental stage when I left, but it looked a good proposition at that time.

I feel that I gained an enormous amount from my year on Sheepfold Farm, not only from the farming aspect, but from the business side too. My only regret is that I didn't get the chance to work on a dairy farm as well, but Reg and John couldn't understand this, they would say "You like cows? Nasty, messy creatures cows are!"

Social distinctions on a livestock farm

'He was … still active and helping at 88. He was exceedingly kind to me and although he expected everyone to work hard he would continually tell me to take things easy. I do not think he really approved of a girl working on the farm.'

Ann Johnson

I started to look for a job on a farm having spent about eight weeks on different holidays on farms in Wales, Denmark and Germany. I was therefore only aware of the pleasant side of farming and knew nothing of the dirt and hard work involved. I found a few farmers who were willing to take me on, but then a boy would come asking for a job, and then they would be very sorry, but they would rather employ a boy than a girl. As with most things, in finding a job it was a case of who you knew rather than what you knew, and in the end I was lucky enough to find I knew someone who knew a girl who was about to finish a job on a farm under the work experience scheme.

After two long interviews and talks with the other employees, Mr Baker agreed to take me on. As the farm was about twenty miles from home it was agreed that I should live in the farm house during the week and go home at the weekends. I think it was a great advantage being in the house and being treated like one of the family because the conversation is nearly always about farming and you can see the management side as well as the practical side. I sometimes did the wages and V.A.T. for Mrs Baker, this gave me a good insight into the amounts of money involved. Another advantage of living in was that if they had a farrowing or calving in the evening I would be there to see it, though this

turned to a disadvantage when they needed a hand with a calving in the early hours of the morning.

There was a lot of class distinction on the farm, I found that a lot of the delivery lorry drivers thought that it was strange that I worked for the Bakers but still lived and ate with them. When it came to silage making one of the men, who is the same age as me, was given his tea so that he could work on in the evenings without going home. I was horrified to find that he was expected to eat it outside with one of the dogs, but it seemed that he preferred it that way. Although everyone was on first name terms with Mr Baker, his father was always referred to as the Boss and called 'Sir' to his face. Everyone was a bit in awe of him, and I kept expecting to see someone touch the forelock to him. He was, and still is, a pretty remarkable man, still active and helping at 88. He knows everything there is to know about the district since before the turn of the century and would talk about it for hours. He was exceedingly kind to me and although he expected everyone to work hard he would continually tell me to take things easy. I do not think he really approved of a girl working on a farm.

They were slightly male chauvinistic and had a strange attitude to me getting my hands oily, they were quite willing for me to drive their car or the Land Rover, but when it came to driving a tractor I had to really beg to be allowed a chance. Sometimes I was glad of their chauvinism because they realised that I was not as strong as them and when unloading cake or fertiliser I had to take things a bit more slowly than them. Also I had the nicer jobs like looking after the calves and doing the milking, leaving cleaning the pigs out for the others, but sometimes they gave me the muckiest jobs possible, like going down into the slurry pit. In the winter, during the snow, I spent a lot of time in the cubicle yard, putting out hay, forking down silage and putting down straw bedding.

One thing which annoyed me very much was when I met someone new outside farming, they assumed that because I

worked on a farm I must be totally stupid. A lot of people do not seem to realise how farming has changed from the slow, quiet life into a mechanized industry and that a farm worker needs to be highly skilled. Only one of the workers appeared to be a traditional straw sucking type. At first I found it difficult to have a conversation with him because we did not understand each other, but I found that if I stuck to subjects like the farm, darts and football we got along fine, and in the end I learnt a lot from him. One chap, Fred, who worked there was at first completely unintelligible to me because of his broad accent. I used to have to keep saying 'Pardon' if it was not very important I would just say 'yes' and 'no' in what I hoped were the right places. He must have thought I was pretty stupid at times. After several weeks I began to understand him, but I was never quite sure of what he said.

The farm is very much a family affair, with Mrs Baker working hard to feed everyone, looking after her hens, geese and ducks and fattening turkeys for Christmas, she helps with the lambing and on top of all that and a big house and five dogs to look after. Three of the dogs were worked regularly, taking it in turns to fetch the cows and take them back. One is a family pet and works with the sheep, the fifth being too old and deaf to work any more. The dogs were quite a handful, two of them being extremely ferocious and would regularly bite some unsuspecting visitor who got too close.

Fred's son, Joe, also works on the farm, he does the milking and sees to the feeding of the cows. Mr Baker expects complete involvement and dedication to the job, this would be reasonable if Joe was officially classed as a herdsman and paid to be one, but he gets no more pay than the others but is given a lot more responsibility. I think that this is a false economy on Mr Baker's part because he cannot expect to get the best out of someone without some incentive. As it is he is very lucky with Joe because he is intelligent and very conscientious, He could easily get a better job but he married young and has a child who is ill, he lives in a tied-cottage and is rather trapped. He

has had the same job ever since leaving school about ten years ago. Even if he seriously thought of changing jobs the feudal cottage, which is his security, ties him to the job. To change he would have to find a job with a house attached which would again tie him, or try and get a council house, which would be miles from work. This is a great problem.

In some ways the farm was very old-fashioned, most things like the amount of fertilizer used or the amount of cake fed to the cows was done by guess work. This made it difficult for me because if I asked why they used a certain amount they would just say it seemed to work best like that, or that they had always used that amount. The only dairy records that were kept were the AI and service records and the calving book that I kept. All the cows are named, Joe being the only person who could be sure of getting the name right. I used to get in a terrible muddle when a cow had mastitis because I could never be sure of recognizing that one cow out of the hundred and forty others; sometimes they would put a piece of tape around her tail but you could never rely on it. I think the worst thing was when it came to drying off and a long discussion was needed to decide which was the right cow. What finally decided them to get some sort of system going, was when I washed a cow ready to milk without realising that she had been dried off the day before, luckily it was noticed. Now they have a proper calving chart and all the cows are tagged with large numbered tags.

Sometimes I found it difficult working with the men and living with the family, because if there were any disagreements I could normally see both sides of the argument, and my loyalties were divided. I found the best policy on these occasions was to keep my mouth firmly shut. Unfortunately I nearly always agreed with the workers, but I could say nothing to them, but I had a few heated discussions with Mr Baker's son, whose attitude was that if anyone would let you walk over them why not use them as a doormat, but

despite this and our different political views, we managed to stay good friends.

Talking to people at Young Farmers, a few farmers' sons would rather get out of farming, this is a shame, I know a lot of people who would like to get into farming, but it is almost impossible for them because of the lack of openings and the amount of money involved. Farms are gradually getting bigger which means that there are fewer farms. If some way could be found to make it easier for someone to start in farming, I am sure the competition would make farmers try to get their farms to be more profitable. At the moment it is financially suicidal to borrow money from the bank to buy a farm, because with the price of land and the interest rates as high as they are you can only make enough on that land to pay off the interest and can never make enough to pay off the capital.

Generally, I found that it was very useful to have a year off from academic studies, I am not really sure what I want to do in the future, and the year gave me a chance to get away from the rather narrow environment of schools, a chance to meet different people and to think. I really enjoyed my year on the farm, it was hard work at times and I wished I was inside in the dry and warm, but other times it was just like something out of a James Herriot book and everything seemed worthwhile. I think I shall be going back often and I have made some lifelong friends.

A dairy farm in Pembrokeshire

Footpath walkers were the bane of most farmers' lives as they were often leaving gates open or complaining about getting electric shocks off the fences. One lady even complained that it was illegal to keep a bull in a field with a footpath crossing it. She stalked off rather quickly when she was told that it was a red heifer with horns!

Linda Trehearn

My year's practical experience began in August 1978 when I arrived on a 150 acre farm in Pembrokeshire not having a clue what I'd let myself in for! I had been for an interview some months previously so I had seen the farm but I didn't know what the work would be like, or indeed, whether or not I would be able to cope, having had only limited previous experience on a farm.

The couple were very friendly and I was fortunate in that the last student was still there for a week's overlap to 'show me the ropes' so to speak. I was very grateful to her as she was able to give me advanced warnings of the "kicker" in the dairy herd and she was very patient in teaching me the workings of the milking parlour and the calf-rearing system. Looking at the herd of sixty cows I never thought I'd ever get to know one from another but it was surprising how quickly you get to recognize them, especially the ones with little patience for a comparative novice!

The farm was mainly a dairy farm but it also grew a few acres of barley and there was quite a bit of rough land on which ran some cattle and the young beef stock. These didn't involve much work in the summer except for drenching etc, but they came into sheds during the winter. The worst job when they were out was trying to count them everyday, as

gorse bushes were prominent and they were usually in the most inaccessible parts. Often it would take me over an hour to scramble around and find them all but luckily after a few weeks I learnt enough welsh to give me some control over the cattle-dog and he was, on occasions a great help, on other occasions he could be a hindrance and scatter them far and wide! He was the same when bringing in the cows, usually when it was my turn to fetch them, it was his day for feeling obstinate and he might only fetch ten of them!

After a while I became completely responsible for the calf-rearing which was done on a multiple suckling basis in groups of three or four calves to a pen. This was a job I really enjoyed and I took great pride in the condition of the calves. The Angus suckler cows could be a bit temperamental, especially when put with a group of new calves, but the system seemed to work quite well as we only reared about twelve calves at a time, either for beef or as dairy replacements. It was my job to treat them if they were sick, tag them, dehorn them and to bury them if one died.

In general I was mostly concerned with the animals, although I did do quite a bit of tractor driving when necessary, but to be honest I didn't get a lot of job satisfaction muck-spreading as I found it pretty boring not to mention deafening! Fertilizer spreading was also a job I did my best to get out of as I usually managed to get a pellet in my eye and then it would water so much that I couldn't see the patch I'd just done. Harrowing, rolling and ploughing were interesting but it would take me as long to plough two furrows as it would take my boss to do half the field. During hectic times like silage or harvest, I was involved in carting most of the time, although on the first day I remember it took me about thirty minutes to hitch up the silage trailer correctly.

Fortunately there was a boy living nearby who used to come at weekends and after school if we needed him and he was quite content to sit on a tractor all day, but you couldn't get

him to go anywhere near a cow so the arrangement suited us quite well.

I found that as well as farming skills I also learnt a lot in other directions, ranging from changing babies' nappies to building concrete walls for a new silage pit. My biceps also had to get use to swinging a sledge hammer (a small one, I hasten to add) as we re-fenced most of the farm whilst I was there. Another major improvement was to lay a new water system as the old one had been laid by prisoners of war during the early 1940's. This involved plenty of digging by hand although luckily we had a J.C.B. to do the majority of it. The day we laid the concrete for the new silage pit floor, eleven lorry loads of 'ready mix' arrived one after the other just as we had finished milking, so we didn't have time for a cup of tea, let alone breakfast. Fortunately on these strenuous occasions we usually had some help from some cousins who farmed nearby.

Compared with some other students I have spoken to, I consider that on the whole I was very well treated although I did have certain unpleasant jobs to do, like crawling inside the combine when it got bunged up, testing the electric fences, clearing the baler out and going up the cake heap ten feet to shovel the cake above the bins when the supply ran short. It was very dark and dusty up there and the rodents were pretty numerous. Due to my complaints this was remedied by putting poison in the walls, but when this killed one of my favourite cats I decided it was preferable to put up with the mice.

However, these tasks were more than compensated for as I really was treated as one of the family and I was often taken to see various farms in the area in order for me to see different enterprises. I also managed to see quite a few agricultural demonstrations, shows, open days and ploughing competitions etc. Another diversion I enjoyed was when we went to market, either to sell cattle or to buy heifers. I remember once going to market to buy a calved heifer and getting chatting to a chap who was selling a heifer. He told me that she was really quiet

and that he wouldn't dream of selling her, only his son had gone off to college and his wife was ill and he couldn't manage. I was very impressed and went in search of my boss. He had quite a lot of faith in my stock-judging ability and after looking at the alternatives he eventually bought her. As soon as she was out of the ring, she showed her true character and it took five men to load her into the box. The first time in the parlour she managed to smash a collecting jar and did her best to make contact with us and her feet. She really was a case of bovine dynamite. Fortunately she did improve her temper after weeks of patient handling and proved to be quite a good milker, but that escapade taught me that there's more to a heifer that meets the eye and to take all you hear in markets with a large pinch of salt!

During my time on the farm, I developed a growing interest in veterinary work and luckily we had a group of really nice vets who were never too busy to answer my questions or show me how to give injections or discuss problems of mastitis control for example. My employer, on the other hand, was genuinely more interested in machinery maintenance and didn't have a lot of patience with the chemical names for various drugs etc. and so he was quite happy for me to treat the animals as long as I consulted him first. Nevertheless he was always willing to get up in the night for a cow, whereas when it was my turn, I found myself cursing to eternal damnation a cow that got milk fever at 3 a.m.

I'm very glad that I decided to go to a different part of the country for my practical instead of staying in my home area, as it certainly gave me a wider range of farming experience and it was also good for me in other ways as I had to learn to live by my own means and sort out my own financial problems etc.

The farm was in a very picturesque part of the country, right on the coast which was lovely in the summer although most of the beaches and villages were packed with tourists. Footpath walkers were the bane of most farmers' lives at this time as

they were often leaving gates open or complaining about getting electric shocks off the fences. One lady even complained that it was illegal to keep a bull in a field with a footpath crossing it. She stalked off rather quickly when she was told that it was a red heifer with horns!

The winter, of course, was not so delightful and then living by the coast could be a bit of a problem with severe fog which often lasted all day. Like most other places we suffered from the lorry-drivers' strike and quite bad snow, some days the diesel would freeze in the tractors and then we couldn't clear the lane for the milk tanker. Fortunately the farm had a generator and a reserve tank so we were better off than some.

My worst experience during the year happened when we had contractors in spreading lime. I was taking some hay down to the cattle on a tractor and the dog was with me as always, following right by the wheel. As we passed through the field where the spreading was going on, a great cloud of lime rose up and I could not see where I was going. When I'd gone through this I looked to see where 'Spot' had got to and then I saw him lying in a crumpled heap about 100 yards back. I had run over him. When I went to him, he was unconscious and blood was pouring from his nose and ears. I drove back to the yard at break-neck pace to fetch help and when my boss saw him he said he would have to shoot him. I pleaded with him not to do it and eventually he agreed if I would stop crying! I took him into the vets in my car, a journey of about fifteen miles, and miraculously the vet said that he would be alright. After a week or two of rest he was up and about and after that whenever he saw me getting on a tractor he put his tail between his legs and ran off in the opposite direction!

Being the only employee, it was difficult to have time off, but we did manage to work it so that we all had a chance to get off for a few days. The family had a couple of days off to go to Smithfield and I went home for over a week at Christmas. They also took a week's holiday in the summer and I assured them that I could manage. This time things did not go quite so

well as two cows got milk fever, one of which managed to crush me against a wall as I was injecting her; the milk pump broke down and eight cattle got out, three of them ended up in the Chapel cemetery on a Sunday morning.

All in all, the year was quite eventful and certainly of benefit to me. I made a lot of friends in the area, local farmers and members of the Young Farmers Club, all were so hospitable that they made me feel as if I had lived there for years. I was very sad when the time came to leave and in fact I was offered a permanent job in the area and I was strongly tempted to take it. Time will tell if I made the right decision!!

Cows, sheep, tractors and corn

'Being of a diminutive stature, the cows' udders were not at a comfortable height.'

Penny Street

To begin with, since I am not a farmer's daughter, I had to find a farmer who was prepared (for better or worse) to take on a totally inexperienced person for a year. I was lucky and fairly quickly found a farm near home which employed one or two pre-college students per year – when I enquired about the possibility for a vacancy, the reply was positive.

I started work on 6 August 1984, but unsure of what to expect, and somewhat nervous. Milking the 140 head dairy herd was to be my main occupation, so the first task I had to learn was how to milk cows – not especially easy for someone who has never worked with animals before.

The parlour was a 12 x 12 herringbone built with an extra deep pit because it had been designed to fit the previous cowman who was very tall. Consequently I found (being of diminutive stature) that the cows udders were not at a comfortable height as intended i.e. shoulder level, but instead were swinging somewhere in the dim distance above my head. So on my first day in the parlour, under the supervision of my boss, I attempted the apparently simple task of applying the units to the cows. Clasping a cluster in one hand and one of its cups in the other, I turned my face away to avoid the wet tail that was swishing across my cheeks and felt around in the approximate region of the udder, hoping to find a teat. I was lucky and found one. So the search began for another – I don't know quite what I did at this point, but the cow obviously considered it most improper for, she aimed a swift kick which caught the centre of the cluster and knocked it into the muck. Red-faced I retrieved the now filthy equipment and tried again, acutely aware of my employer chuckling to himself at the other end of the parlour.

Although the first day in the parlour was somewhat traumatic, things did improve fairly rapidly and I found that I very much enjoyed milking; each cow had her own habits and foibles and I began to recognise them all individually as friends – well most of them anyway. Some were very definitely enemies! There was number 13 for instance who, for no reason that I could identify, took an instant dislike to me. Whenever I walked past her in the parlour she aimed a vicious kick, and more often than not she managed to hit some part of my anatomy. Also there was number 89 who seemed to enjoy getting me wet: each time I touched her she lifted her tail. Milking time for her was a competition between the two of us – I would walk up to her, wash her udder as quickly as possible, then run away before she had time to react. A few minutes later I would return to dry her and, after another pause to put on the units, sometimes I won, but all too frequently I lost.

I did not have to do all the milking, as a general rule I milked afternoons during the week and both morning and afternoon every alternate weekend. This meant that I was allotted a variety of other tasks during the morning which added to the interest of each day, milking is very repetitive and likely to become boring on its own. Especially during the winter months when the cold wet conditions make the job sheer drudgery.

The nature of my work in the mornings varied with the time of year. In the autumn and winter there were a lot of calves being born so although I was not responsible for their milk feeds, there were many associated tasks which I was expected to carry out: for example, disbudding, ear-tattooing and drawing pedigree registration cards for the heifer calves. Also during the winter months the yards had to be scraped every day and straw bedding put down in the cubicles for the dairy herd. At the same time I had to keep an eye on the dry cows who were approaching calving and deal with routine problems, for example New Forest eye, summer mastitis (fortunately not too common amongst our herd) and milk fever, which affected quite a large number of the older cows at calving time. If there were any serious problems my employer was usually available to help, so I did not have to tackle any calving difficulties on my own.

As the calves grew older and were weaned, we penned them into larger groups, about thirty five calves in a pen, with males and females separated. The farm produces bull beef so the males started to become rather boisterous as they grew older and tended to jump on each other rather a lot. Feeding time was the highlight of their day and the low point of mine. I dreaded it. One calf in particular seemed to have become rather confused about his species – whenever I went into the pen he jumped on me with his fore-legs over my shoulders – the rest of the farm employees found this spectacle rather amusing and used to gather round at feeding time to watch and

guffaw noisily. I found my fluency in four letter words increasing rapidly.

Last winter was long and cold and left many experiences indelibly printed on my mind. Memories of the dark mornings when I woke at 4 a.m. cursing the alarm clock and staggered out into the snow and biting wind to find the roads blocked by drifts; memories of those mornings (fortunately not too numerous) when I trudged through two miles of snow and darkness and arrived at the farm numbed by the cold, to face the apparently endless stream of black and white bottoms.

As spring arrived, such memories lost their sharpness. With the start of April came the first of the lambs, we had brought the 450 ewes off the hill into the barns about a fortnight earlier as lambing is considerably more pleasant under cover. I enjoyed lambing time, perhaps more than anything else; many of the births had to be assisted and we maintained almost a twenty four hour vigil in an attempt to reduce losses. Delivering lambs was a satisfying occupation particularly if it was triplets or quads, often in these cases the lambs were in quite complicated positions and it gave one a feeling of achievement to pull out all the lambs alive and well.

Lambing finished at the end of April, and about this time the cows were turned out to grass; it was a comical sight – one hundred and forty elderly matrons galloping into the field, tails uplifted like banners and bellies rolling from side to side like great barrels. The cows seemed much happier once they were out at grass, the same cannot be said for their guardian – yours faithfully. The fresh spring grass of course had a devastating effect on their digestive systems; within two days of turnout the parlour at milking time looked like a slurry lagoon and I was barely distinguishable from it. Everywhere, throughout milking, tails were lifted, some cows gave up hope altogether and ceased to bother even lifting their tails. The most lethal combination came from cows that coughed whilst lifting their tails, this had the effect of projecting a stream of slurry backwards for a range of some four or five metres. As it was

usually without warning I was inevitably caught out from time to time. This I think is perhaps the origin of the expressions: ‘a pat on the back’ and ‘one in the eye.’

In May the sheep were shorn, and whilst they were penned we also trimmed their feet. I had little to do with the shearing as it is apparently very hard work and quite a skilled job. Instead I spent some time trimming feet, a fairly revolting job if you come across any bad cases of foot-rot, but like everything else, it was an experience and another skill learnt.

At the end of May we started cutting silage. I had to haul a silage trailer which at first I thought rather a daunting task. Mainly because tractors, like everything else on the farm are designed for men. The seat in the tractor I was driving was on a spring and I found that when I sat on it I sank low enough to be able to just reach the pedals, but as soon as I used any of my weight to push down the rather stiff clutch the spring seat instantly shot me up into the air. I eventually developed a technique which involved using one hand to push against the side of the tractor and keep myself low enough to put the clutch down, whist using the other hand to change gear. It meant that I didn’t have any hands left for steering with but I seemed to manage alright and didn’t have any crashes.

Having mastered the art of driving the tractor I had to face the problem of keeping close enough to the forage harvester to catch the grass in my trailer, it looked difficult, but when I tried I found that in fact it was fairly easy and really quite fun, though corners posed a few problems the first time. We were hauling the grass from rented land back to the main farm which involved a journey of about three and a half miles which meant that since we were only running two trailers, we had to move very fast indeed in order to keep the forage harvester waiting for as short a time as possible. The journey, along narrow twisting lanes with a high, somewhat unstable trailer on the back was extremely exhilarating, not least because the braking distance with a full load is rather poor (especially down hills). I had several near misses with cars on

some of the corners, but the need to get there and back as quickly as possible prevented me from travelling at a more sensible speed. Between the two silage cuts and before we started harvest was a slack season, so everyone spent their time repairing worn machinery and mending broken water troughs, gates and fences etc. and generally improving the condition of the farm.

In mid-August we started a very late harvest. It was an awkward intermittent harvest and we cut grain at stupendously high moisture levels but there was no alternative. Often the combine worked late into the night and sometimes it worked for only an hour or two in mid-afternoon during the brief times when the moisture content of the grain was almost sensible. It was a depressing harvest, long, slow and exhausting. I spent most of my time stacking straw ricks, we made about 30,000 bales in all, as this has to supply the dairy herd in the winter and the beef unit all year round. Due to the incessantly inclement weather I spent two or three days stacking outside ricks in the pouring rain – this must be one of the most miserable jobs in existence, the bales seem, and probably are, extra heavy, and your soaked jeans, clinging clammily about your legs, weigh you down.

Harvest finally finished in mid-September and bale carting was completed a week later, it was at this point that I left the farm one week before starting university. It was an interesting year, in which I learnt a great deal – more about using my initiative than anything else. Often I was confronted with situations that were totally new to me and was expected to deal with them efficiently alone because there was no one else around to help. The fact that I coped has certainly improved my self-confidence considerably. I enjoyed working on the farm, so much so that it was with considerable regret that I had to leave. Perhaps I shall return there in three years time!

Foot-and-mouth scare on the Isle of Wight

'He was convinced that the cows would get foot and mouth …and accepted the fact that the whole herd might be destroyed along with thirty years of work by him and his father, with a remarkable amount of stoicism.'

Rosemary Cooper

Before last September I had never really worked on a farm before, so my practical year was a big eye opener for me. I spent the whole year working on a three hundred acre dairy farm on the Isle of Wight. The farmer that I worked for was very friendly and easy-going so living in with the family was no problem. It was lucky that I like children though, because there were four of them, all under the age of six. When all four were crying at once it could become very noisy and the house tended to be in a perpetual state of chaos.

Relief milking was to be one of my main duties, so the first thing that Stephen, the farmer, did was to give me a crash course on learning to milk. By the end of ten days I could milk forty cows by myself with reasonable efficiency. The rest of the one hundred and sixty-cow milking herd were dry at that time, and calving was due to start in a week's time. The other job that took up most of my time during the winter months was the calf rearing. Before the cows started calving I spent most of my time cleaning things. I scrubbed all the walls of the parlour, I washed out the dairy, cleaned up the calf pens, sterilized all the equipment for mixing the milk replacer and disinfected all the floors. I used up a whole gallon of Jeyes Fluid and a bucket full of dairy sanitant powder. Everyone could tell when I was in the house because the smell of disinfectant and bleach clung to my clothes and hair like a very strange sort of perfume. I was to smell of worse things than disinfectant though before the year was much older and a

hot bath with plenty of bath salts became a must before going out in the evenings.

Once the calves started arriving I had very little spare time during the day for other jobs. The calves were taken away from the cows at one or two days old, and were fed on colostrum for up to four days while I taught them to drink from a teat. Some calves learnt to do this immediately but usually it took a couple of days for them to realize what they had to do. A few seemed determined to starve themselves to death before they would consent to drink from a cold rubbery tasting teat. These calves required a lot of patience but it was a very rewarding feeling when they finally decided that they wanted to live after all and consented to suck from a teat. After the calves had learnt to drink they were put into larger pens in groups of between five and eight and were fed on cold acid milk available to them ad lib. They sucked this from a teat attached to a large plastic dustbin. These bins had to be kept filled with milk so morning and evening I would mix up the milk replacer in ten gallon milk churns, lift them on to a trolley and drag them over to the dustbins. At first I could hardly lift the full churns but I soon built up a few muscles and by the time that my sister came to visit me at Christmas I could impress her with my new found strength!

During the winter the cows were milked three times a day. The cowman did the morning and afternoon milking and the night milking was shared between Stephen and myself. This meant that every other night at half past nine I would finish my cup of coffee, pull on my Wellington boots again and trudge up to the parlour to milk the cows. It usually took about four hours to set things up, get the cows in and milk them, and then clean up afterwards, and so it was usually about half past one in the morning by the time that I could stagger back to the house and fall into bed. I was usually very tired by the time I finished and quite often I forgot to switch one of the lights out. The light switches in the dairy often got wet and several times I received little electric shocks from them, which used to wake

me up a bit. I had told Stephen about this but he never found time to mend them. One night when I was feeling particularly sleepy, I forgot to switch off the radio as well as one of the lights. I found out the next morning that Stephen had woken up at about three o'clock in the morning and on hearing the radio still on and seeing the light, had thought that I was lying electrocuted on the dairy floor. So he had jumped out of bed and rushed up to the dairy only to find that there was nobody there and that I was sound asleep in my room.

I was quite surprised to find how dark it could get at night in the countryside, having lived in a town with street lights everywhere for most of my life. Once I had finished milking and the cows were back in the cubicle sheds, it could become quite cold and lonely out in the milking parlour by myself at night. It was then that I was most thankful for having the radio to listen to. Except for one night, when the news reader announced that the Yorkshire Ripper had been sent to one of the prisons on the Isle of Wight.

I met quite a lot of the farming people on the island and found out that they were all quite friendly and helpful. It was a bit disconcerting at first though, to go out to a pub in the evening with a group of friends and spend the whole night talking about farming. I also quickly learnt that everybody knows everyone else and that the farmer I worked for seemed to be related to half the people on the island. After coming home a couple of times and voicing my low opinion of someone that I had just met, only to find that he or she was a distant cousin, I soon learnt to be careful about what I said.

Stephen owned an old mini pickup for running about the farm in, and I was allowed to drive it around the island in my free time. The bodywork was in an advanced state of disintegration, grass grew out from behind the bumper and the floor was full of holes, but the engine worked, most of the time anyway. Sometimes it went through phases of being grumpy about starting and then it was advisable to park it facing downhill. It did have one major drawback in that the

petrol tank had a leak and the fuel gauge did not work. This meant that we always carried a can of petrol in the back. I usually ran out of petrol at least once every few weeks, which was alright unless somebody had used the petrol from the can and had not refilled it. This could mean either a long walk to the nearest garage, or back to the farm. The brakes were not always very reliable either, one day they failed when the tractor driver was going down the steepest hill on the island. Luckily he managed to steer the car round the corner at the bottom of the hill and came to a halt on a garage forecourt. Both he and the car were unscathed but he was very shaken, and having a stammer at the best of times, when he telephoned to tell us what had happened we could hardly understand a word.

Then on one Saturday evening in the middle of March the day to day routine of the farm was shattered by a phone call from the local vet, warning us of a suspected case of foot and mouth. This was confirmed a couple of hours later by an announcement on the television news. That was the beginning of three very tense and nerve racking weeks. The first thing that Stephen did was to obtain a supply of disinfectant and by Sunday morning we had made a disinfectant straw mat across the lane up to the farm and had put up notices telling people to keep out.

We didn't leave the farm for three weeks and the only people that visited the farm were vets from the Ministry of Agriculture and the milk tanker lorry. During the first week a Ministry vet came to the farm five times and on each visit looked at every single animal. All the cows had to be walked past him while we stood by watching. Every so often he would point to a cow that looked a bit lame and ask to have a closer look at it. We would put the cow into the crush and then wait with our hearts in our mouths while the cow's feet and mouth were examined. Luckily none of the cows ever had any symptoms and we could heave huge sighs of relief.

Stephen was convinced that the cows would get foot and mouth because the infected farm was only three miles away and the veterinarians kept telling us that the virus could be spread by the wind. He accepted the fact that the whole herd might be destroyed along with thirty years of work by him and his father, with a remarkable amount of stoicism. He even started planning how he would spend the compensation money and where he would buy cows from to start a new herd with after the farm was safe again.

When at last the quarantine period was over and we could leave the farm again the sense of escape that I felt was incredible. Living so much on top of each other under such tense conditions for three weeks had meant that tempers had become rather frayed and it was wonderful for life to return to normal again.

That was the only experience on the farm that I really didn't enjoy at all, the rest of the year passed by very quickly. Although actual hours spent doing jobs such as such as mucking out and stacking straw bales seemed to pass by very slowly, the days and weeks seemed to flash by and the year was over almost sooner than it had begun. I gained a lot in knowledge and experience during my practical year and I learnt quite a lot of new skills including how to mend almost anything with baler twine and how not to shear a sheep! I made many new friends on the Isle of Wight and I learnt something of how farms and farmers work. I have so many memories of the little things that happened to me, it would be impossible to write them all down. By themselves they seem unimportant but together they make up what was for me a very enjoyable year.

The real world on a Surrey pig farm

'I worked the most hours on the farm. I started half an hour before everyone else and worked a six as opposed to a four day week. I had the responsibility of making breakfast and lunch everyday and preparing the evening meal on alternate days.'

Helen Cottam

Having placed the statutory advertisement in the 'Farmer's Weekly' for a job on a mixed farm, I hardly dared hope for any replies. It seemed from the endless printed columns that everyone about to go to college was after the same position. However, I did have several phone calls from all over the country offering vacancies. After visiting various farms I short listed two. Although the romantic side of my nature tended to favour a small sheep/dairy concern in the wilds of the Welsh hills, I knew the practical choice would have to be a profitable efficiently run, modern pig farm in Surrey. I was, after all, a student out to learn as much about the agricultural industry as I could. And that was where the dilemma began.

Was I to be treated as a student, or as a general farm worker? Was it necessary to make that distinction? I went as a student expecting to be taught, coached and tutored in the working ways of the farm (an expectation no doubt brought about by the over-protective supervision at school – the idea that everything would be spoon-fed). What I in fact met with was abruptness and exasperation over my inability to immediately master skills with the same dexterity my employer had acquired after many years experience. With everything so new it was impossible to commit all information to memory. Repeated questions were met with irate replies. I had been told beforehand that the farmer had taught nine previous students. At first I thought this an advantage, as at least I might get

some definite training. On reflection it was a disadvantage. The farmer was tired of annually having to retrain his workers at a basic level. If the student didn't fit the mould exactly, then there was to be very little room for adjustment in his teaching methods; altogether not a very good kick-off to a working relationship.

However once I had adjusted to his way of thinking, we got on fine! Arguably I should have stood my ground on certain points, but it seemed far more sensible to play the role of peacemaker. With the importance of gaining practical experience so emphatically stressed by the University, there was pressure on me to maintain the position. As it turned out, my silence and acceptance of the inevitable caused a greater rift. The farmer interpreted it as a lack of interest in the job, and communication between us was very strained.

One such incident started with the arrival of a custom-built piggery, designed to house litter runts, and rear them away from the sow, until at weaning weight they could be returned to their litter mates. If successful, the new unit had the potential for rearing at least one extra piglet per litter. From the moment it arrived there was a never ending flow of farmers, advisors, friends huddled round it, weighing up its merits, considering alterations and improvements. The discussion would then move indoors and continue over endless cups of coffee.

Meanwhile, the farm had to be run, the daily routine continued. I saw myself as the only one responsible enough to carry on. So I buckled down to the mundane chores like mucking out, strawing-up and serving, with what I thought was an impressive efficiency. The rest of the work forces thought differently. They had expected that being 'a keen university bod', I'd have been in on the experiment from the word go. When I explained that I'd thought the job had already got enough willing hands, I was told that no job was specifically one person's domain and that an efficiently run farm was one where everyone mucked in together (in a

manner of speaking!). From that moment on I added night feeds for the unit to my rapidly growing list of duties.

I worked the most hours on the farm. I started half and hour before everyone else and worked a six as opposed to a four day week. I had the responsibility of making breakfast and lunch every day and preparing the evening meal on alternate days. My job was not complete until I'd washed up the dishes at about 7.30 p.m. and often I would be left in charge of the late farrowings whilst the farmer went out for the evenings. It became increasingly apparent why they wanted a female employee.

Accommodation was poor. When I first went for an interview I was shown a large spacious garage which was supposedly being converted into a bed-sit for myself and a room mate. Until it was ready I had the use of an 8ft x 14ft room which I shared with Jenny. Fortunately we got on well together; under the cramped conditions we had very little other option. The garage was never converted and I learnt later that it had remained untouched for the last two years.

Payment for my efforts was minimal. I received £20 cash in hand for a week's work, with the assurance that tax and National Insurance contributions were being made on my behalf. Subsequent investigation at the tax offices proved otherwise. They had never heard of me. Requests for an official wage slip were repeatedly refused and the whole business seemed highly suspect. (In fact I went to the Agricultural Wages Board about it, but six months later there has been no satisfactory investigation. I am learning the wonders of a bureaucratic system.)

So far the whole episode sounds like a case to be brought up against the U.N. international relations board. I assure you things were not nearly as bad as I make out. People are prone to exaggeration. If something is good it is praised to excess, while the not so good becomes nothing short of disastrous. Memories of the good times tend to be forgotten.

And there were plenty of good times. Chasing sows round the farm, backing the tractor into the Trowbridges, overflowing the automatic feed system, pumping slurry over bystanders (myself included); more seriously, supervising farrowing, assisting at minor operations (prolapsed anus), injections, teething and tailing, castration and general husbandry tasks. Each job held a particular fascination for me, and getting it right gave me tremendous satisfaction.

Within every one of us there is a touch of the James Herriots: the longing for the outdoor life. Farming is an occupation that has a magnetic effect on all of those who try their hand. There is always the feeling of wanting to go back. For me, when I next try farming I will go in with my eyes wide open. Apart from learning many aspects of pig farming, this practical year I have had a glimpse of the 'real world' and found things are not always as simple as we would like. Exploitation has kindled the fighting spirit in me. Next time, and I have no doubt there will be a next time, I will make sure that I am not walked all over.

As it stands at the moment the system is very wrong. Student workers are being exploited and there is very little they can do to change it. Farmers must begin to realize that workers respond to encouragement, both verbal and financial. Students are after all, only human.

Experiences on large arable and dairy farms

Of particular interest to me was the increase in value of the vegetables from the field to the shop.

Isabel Pearce

The present economic situation has presented a number of obstacles to any prospective student seeking pre-university farming experience. The main one being that for many farmers it is no longer economically viable to employ a large labour force and consequently as farm workers resign or retire, they are not being replaced. Thus there are very few situations available to be filled. This was a particularly large problem for me since I had no previous experience at all, whilst many of the other students applying for the same job had fairly widespread experience. However I was finally offered work on a 290 hectare arable farm in Essex. Although I realized that it would not constitute the extensive experience that a mixed farm could have given me, I accepted the job with the aim of moving to another farm after a period of six months.

I started work on Glebe Farm during August, together with two other female students with whom I shared a cottage. This in itself had a major disadvantage, in that we were not in contact with any of the farm workers outside our working hours and therefore it was difficult to learn the reasons for many of the management decisions taken. We also could not participate in general farm talk that at times can be extremely informative and educational.

The farm was tenanted by R Simpson and Partners. Mr Simpson, being essentially a businessman, expected maximum profit constantly and rarely considered the other aspects of good management that produce an efficiently run system. The manager was similarly a hard man whose aim was to derive as much as he possibly could from our work. I used to occasionally stop to ask him a question, but I rarely received

an informative reply. The farm foreman however did try to help if he could.

The farm was mainly a vegetable farm although crops such as winter barley and spring barley were also grown. Since most of the vegetables could not be efficiently harvested by machine, there was a large labour force of eight permanent and four casual women from the local area. These pickers together with three students were organized by a foreman and an under foreman. In addition to the pickers there were also four tractor drivers, since tractor work continued throughout the year. A mechanic looked after all their machinery and two secretaries looked after all the office work.

The students used to work on a rota system which alternated between carting in vegetables with a tractor and trailer and generally helping the under foreman.

Most of the vegetables supplied wholesalers who in turn supplied supermarket storehouses. Orders from the wholesalers were placed with us on a daily basis, there being no commitment to buy any minimum quantity. The wholesalers used to buy spinach, spring greens, Primo and January King cabbage and curly kale, amounts of which depended wholly on consumer demand and the season. The wholesaler's management were always very helpful and discussed their business with us at great length. Within this system the wholesalers were well secured against financial loss in the event of consumer demand for a particular vegetable suddenly dropping, since they were under no obligation to buy any particular vegetable from the farm. The farm however, was vulnerable to fluctuations in consumer demand since vegetables cannot be preserved in the ground if demand drops. This was exemplified in January when the demand for spring greens fell. The wholesalers orders subsequently dropped also and the farm had no alternative but to harrow several hectares of greens into the soil, thus losing all of the investment that had been placed in them.

Of particular interest to me was the increase in value of the vegetables from the field to the shop. For example, spinach was bought from the farm at three pence per pound, and during the growing season approximately three thousand pounds each day were cut. For this particular vegetable there was very little wastage at the wholesalers where it was packed into plastic bags and sent to Sainsbury's. The retailers then sold it to the consumer for twenty two pence per pound. I tried to find out about the costs incurred at each stage of the process and for how much it was sold to Sainsbury's, so that I could see where the money was used and where it was profit. However the wholesaler being a different firm to the farm could not disclose this information to me. However I was able to build up a general picture of the money involved in getting vegetables from the ground to the urban home.

The farm also dealt with a farmer who hauled vegetables for farms when his own supply was short. He used to buy Primo and Langendyke cabbage. We also used to prepare some vegetables for London markets, which mainly involved washing and packaging spring onions, leeks and sweet corn. The journeys to market took place in the evening and so I was able to go occasionally and have a look around the market.

One of the major things that I learnt from this experience was that relations between management and workers and indeed between workers themselves, are of crucial importance to the efficient and successful running of a farm. On this farm the workers did not seem as happy in their work as they could have been and they were motivated by nothing but the thought of their wages at the end of the week. The women worked piece work so their productivity was often high, but the quality of their work was normally fairly low. They disliked their work and disliked their employer and so had no pride in their work and felt no obligation to work well. Whilst this is unavoidable to some extent, considering the monotony of this type of work, I feel that it could have been largely overcome with a little more consideration and co-operation from both

sides. There was very little contact between the manager or foreman and the workers, with instructions being carried from person to person until it reached them. Secondly instructions were always in the form of an order and were never politely phrased and whilst the end result would have necessarily been the same, a person's attitude towards their work is always better if they have been asked to do it rather than been told. They were never praised for work well done and never thanked after working all day in often appalling conditions. I am sure that the quality of work would have been improved if everyone was happier in their work, and this could quite easily have been achieved with a little thought and consideration.

In December I asked to drive some of the machinery and thus learn tractor work such as ploughing or harrowing, but I was disappointed, so all I could do was watch the tractor drivers working. I then had an accident and cut off the tip of my second finger, after which I could do no carting or tractor driving for three months. At this stage I felt that I had learnt as much as that farm enabled me to learn. I had learnt how much of the machinery worked. I had also learnt about how a farm of that nature was organized. I had learnt about the particular crops that were grown considering sowing, fertilizing, harvesting and irrigating. I therefore decided to try to find work on a livestock farm. Having completed six months experience I found that more farmers were willing to consider me for a job and I was very quickly offered a job on a dairy farm in Buckinghamshire, although I had no previous milking experience. I accepted this position and moved to this farm in February.

It was immediately obvious that this farm was run on a very different basis from that upon which the Essex farm was run. The entire aspect of organization was different and many factors contributed to this. The main factor seemed to be the farm's history. The farm was family owned and run principally by the two brothers. Their father had built up a dairy which processed milk from his own adjacent farm and

distributed it to the local area. Today the dairy is the largest private dairy in Bucks and the farm is run as a secondary interest. The dairy herd consisted of only eighty Guernsey milking cows and their good quality milk was added to Milk Marketing Board's milk each day, which raised the overall quality slightly. The herd was split into two groups, this happened when a new farm was purchased a little way away, about two years ago. One herdsman was employed for each herd and a boy worked at the dairy farm. I was used as a relief worker and I therefore worked where I was needed. This was advantageous since it meant that I learnt far more than I would have done if I had been restricted to one farm. The two farms together were about 130 hectares, most of which was under grass. Lucerne, peas, wheat and barley were also grown.

The farm was very old-fashioned in respect of its machinery and methods and the owners had no wish to improve its efficiency and profitability. However it did mean that I had to do most of the jobs by hand and by doing this I may well have learnt more than if all the processes had been fully mechanized.

One of the herds was milked in a small six standing three unit parlour. The small number of cows milked meant that a bulk milk tank was not needed so the milk was fed into a series of churns. These cows were in-wintered and were fed a diet of hay, silage, treacle and wheat straw. In the parlour they were given dairy nuts. This year the silage lasted well and the cows did not go out until mid-April, this together with the fact that there was very good grass this year meant that the milk yields were consistently high throughout the summer. The other herd was milked in an old portable milking bail, also with six standings and three units. The cows were fed on a mixed dairy ration and hay, silage and straw as was the other herd. However these cows were out-wintered and their winter milk yield was consequently much lower. The rest of the livestock consisted of fifty heifers and twenty five calves. The calves were brought up on suckler cows and they all did very well.

Initially I learnt the milking processes both in the parlour and at the bail which were very different from each other. After this I gradually built up my knowledge as I gained more experience. The farmer was very helpful, constantly lending me books and magazines that were of interest to me. I was also able to take part in any of the work that would be valuable experience for me. I therefore used to help when the cows were blood tested and whenever there were calves to be wormed, or given a husk vaccine. Whenever the vet came I was encouraged to watch him. The veterinary side of the work was especially valuable since by being allowed to give treatments to sick cows I learnt much about the illnesses themselves. For example I often gave cows calcium boroglucanate injections when we suspected that they might have milk fever. We had very little incidence of mastitis but we did have one cow with bad summer mastitis and I used to strip her quarters out constantly, but eventually one of her quarters fell away and she had to be slaughtered.

The rest of the experience that I gained was either factual or else general understanding of the farming system which increases with time.

By working for a year as an agricultural worker I learnt much about farming from the worker's point of view and for anyone hoping to go into any form of agricultural management this is of extreme importance. But most of all I learnt about the principles of dairy farming and those of vegetable farming, many of which can be applied to other forms of agriculture.

Overall, I think that I gained a lot more experience by working at two farms than I would have done at one, because both dealt with a completely different aspect of agriculture. I am sure that the experience I gained by working for a year prior to university will prove of immense value to me both now and in the future.

2

Farm Boys

A sheep and dairy farm in North Devon

'Between us we had discovered that two people working as a team can achieve much more than two individuals.'

Andrew Evans

'…. And don't forget to buy some steel toe capped Wellingtons – I had three toes broken by a cow last month' – so ended my final interview before embarking on twelve months of farming experience.

I arrived in early July 1984 – a raw recruit clutching boiler suit and Wellingtons - on a 150 acre sheep and dairy farm in North Devon as the first employee of my twenty five year old boss. Despite his age, he had built up his herd of fifty Friesians and Ayrshires over three years on very little capital, and had been awarded a prize for 'Young Businessman of the Year' by a local television company. I knew when I started that what he lacked in experience and knowledge he more than made up for in willingness to learn and sheer enthusiasm. Sadly this situation was to change……

When I arrived the bulk of the hay harvest had been completed and the single cut of silage was safely fermenting in the clamp so there was a temporary lull in activity. This was filled by routine maintenance, namely painting galvanised sheds – one took a week and fifteen gallons of Presomet, and repairing holes in the hedges that the sheep had made. This latter task turned out to be the curse of the farm and had to be done at least once a week in all weathers.

Routine maintenance kept us busy until late autumn when we started logging trees for the sale of firewood. In the meantime there was milking to get used to. As it turned out this proved to be one of the most dangerous activities I ever undertook on the farm.

Due to limited capital, my boss, Michael, had been unable to install a proper parlour and so had converted a twelve stall

shippon by the addition of a glass pipeline which regularly broke down due to its close proximity to the cows' heads.

Most cows hate strangers and especially inexperienced herdsmen and this herd proved to be no exception. Consequently the first month turned out to be a most painful experience.

Milking involved first dashing around chaining the cows to their stalls – this is where toes were trodden on and strong Wellingtons were tested. Next the cake bucket was passed around and the cows rationed according to yield. Putting the clusters on required kneeling down in between two cows and gently easing on each cup. During this operation all one's vital organs are within 30 cm of an extremely hard back foot. A cow's kick has to be experienced to be believed which made me think that strong Wellingtons aren't the only pieces of protection required by the inexperienced herdsman!

With the gradual shortening of the days came an increasing workload and an increasing number of new skills and experiences. The silage clamp was opened and samples sent away for analysis and a fortnight later the cows were brought inside for the winter. I assisted in a number of difficult calvings and lambing was looming large on the horizon. We started logging trees for firewood which provided extra income and activity in the few slack moments. I now realise that it is important to have a different occupation such as this to ease the monotony of winter stock tasks and to provide motivation.

There were times however when the scream of chain saws had to be stopped to allow us to return to the daily grind of feeding, milking and scraping out. The slurry was scraped from the yard and cubicles into an open lagoon, allowed to harden and then shovelled out with a rear mounted loader (painful on the neck muscles as one has to be looking over one's shoulder all day). As Michael hated machinery I got all the tractor jobs – which suited me – and I spread slurry by Rotospreader every day when the ground allowed. This proved

to be a most skilful task, especially on slopes and it paid to remember the wind direction and also not to brake too suddenly with five tons of slurry behind!

In addition to the cattle tasks, lambing started in early November and as the rams ran with the ewes all year, it didn't finish until May. This meant that lambs were born all over the place and it was impossible to arrange proper feeding or vaccination programmes. Consequently we had a difficult season with frayed tempers and more than our fair share of mortalities.

Winter brought with it its own problems in the shape of two very cold spells with ice, snow and temperatures as low as -10^0 C. The fifteen miles travel to and from home twice a day became impossible and so I became marooned at the farm, on one occasion for four days. One day even the milk froze in the pipelines and jammed everything and all the water pipes froze, it meant that we had to carry water for the cows from the house. For four days the roads were too bad for the milk tanker so milk had to be taken to the milk factory in the emergency tank.

The sheep and their lambs, however, managed to survive remarkably well, we had no mortalities, just a few frost bitten ears to show for it.

Life was not all problems and with spring came a relief from the monotony of the previous months, in the shape of ballast rolling and applying fertilizer.

It was about this time when other farmers were thinking of turning out and the start of the dairy farmer's year that Michael announced that due to family problems he was going to have to sell his cows. Whilst this was not entirely unexpected, it came as a shock to realize that the years of extremely hard work to build up the herd to a useful size and quality had been to no avail.

The followers having been sold to a neighbouring farmer, work now was to prepare the fifty cows for sale in four weeks time. Lactating cows were given an increased ration,

especially of concentrates to boost yield, and dry cows given increased rations to improve condition. Next all the dirt from six months of housing had to be scrubbed off with a hose and curry comb. This was an especially filthy job with the three cubicle refusers which had managed to accumulate a thick hard layer of matted dung covering most of their bodies.

In the beginning of May the herd was packed off in lorries to the local market for sale the following day. We followed with a load of hay and straw to last the herd until the morning. After their journey the cows had to be washed down again, a process which took until 12 p.m. We spent a restless night in the market cowshed until 5 a.m. when mucking out and feeding started.

The cows were auctioned that morning. The money raised together with a cheque from the 'Ministry of Agriculture Outgoer's Scheme' recovered the cost of establishing the herd, but not much more.

My final job on the farm was to assist with the shearing of the 150 ewes and their lambs, which we did between us in an oven of a corrugated iron shed.

I left the farm in July of 1985 a little under twelve months after I had started. During this period I had learned a large number of new skills and experiences and had begun to appreciate the full value of the Pre-University practical year. I had come to the farm expecting to learn about the technical side of farming and acquire such things as knowledge of fertilizer application rates. Such knowledge was acquired in plenty but of more importance was my new appreciation of the farm as a system – a complex interaction of plant, animal, machinery and man. Between us we had discovered that two people working as a team can achieve much more than two individuals and for myself I acquired a greater self-confidence and a new initiative to the challenge of a new task.

Finally I discovered that for a working relationship to succeed, two elements are essential, namely trust and reliability. For my part I believe that I provided my fair share

and I know that in return I received a wealth of experiences to draw on and a friendship normally so rare in employee and employer relationships.

Corn, cows and characters in Somerset

‘ “Toby wants you to go and collect the cockerels’ eggs after breakfast” he chirped.’

Alistair Kaye

“Work experience is designed to help the unemployed youth to obtain a healthy interest and obtain substantial training in the career he or she wants to go into,” croaked Mr Bullstern, looking over the bowl of his pipe.

Ten days later I had moved from the careers’ office in Taunton up the road five miles to the estate of Mr Toby Elston, local celebrity and master of the local hunt. The farm was one of the most picturesque in Somerset, situated on the side of an eight hundred foot hill with two hundred acres of corn and a thriving dairy unit. The buildings owned by Toby though were in a pretty terrible state being in the grip of woodworm, ivy and numerous tractor accidents.

I made my way along the concrete driveway, worming in and out of the fields of winter barley, on my Honda 72 cc. It was my fourth morning and already I had settled into the methods and routines of farm life. Pulling ‘superbike’ up beside the combine I was greeted by Duncan, the six foot seven herdsman’s son, who was just returning from breakfast.

“Toby wants you to go and collect the cockerels’ eggs after breakfast” he chirped. I nodded agreement and made my way

down to the dairy unit where Fred had been working since 5 a.m. I was terrified of Fred, he was about sixty five with a Hitler moustache and tinted glasses.

"Morning Fred"

"What's so bleeding good about it?"

Feeling very downcast I made my exit from the parlour and crossed the yard towards the cow shed where I was supposed to bed up. Number 57 looked up in surprise and seeing that I proved to be no immediate threat to her space in the shed, she snorted and concentrated on chewing the cud again. Up in the loft where the straw was kept, I switched on my pocket transistor and threw the load of twenty five bales through the hatch to the tune playing on Radio 1. If there was one thing a student could practise to his heart's content on Toby's farm it was bedding up, a pursuit which we were encouraged to do at every conceivable opportunity. One of the high spots of the day was the virtual throwing of bales on to No. 28, which lasted for the duration of the winter until one morning she decided to butt me into a cow pat so I kept well away from then on.

In each shed there were about 25 Friesians all of which were pedigree. The pride of the herd was 'Auntie Bess' or 'Wistful Master Bess' who was almost totally white except for a few black spots on her back. Fred had shown her all over the country and there were a dozen or so rosettes in his office to prove it. The best milker was a short black stocky beast called 'Sue' who could give about 2800 gallons a year, but as far as pecking order in the herd was concerned she was surprisingly well down the list.

As I was half way through spreading the straw the face of William poked around the door. He was a year younger than me, he was also on work experience but had quite a bit of tractor work to do as he had worked on farms before. Though he was later my best friend on the farm he did have two habits that mildly annoyed me. The first was his accent which was so broad Somerset that I think the cows understood him better

than I did. The second habit was his inability to tell the truth; his stories were well known on the farm and every time he told them he would double the quantities involved from the last time. His most famous story occurred one day when a calf was aborted and so they placed it in the dung spreader and it allegedly flew out and hit his friend in the face. What his friend was doing standing in the firing line, William failed to explain.

The process of scraping the yards began and it involved William leaning on the hand scraper picking his nails, Fred fuming with rage trying to bring life out of an old International 444 tractor and me forking excess soiled straw out of the shed into the path of the yard scraper. It was then that Toby made his first entrance of the day appearing round the corner of the yard dressed in a donkey jacket and baggy jeans. “Come on William, get on with it, Alistair pull your finger out, you should be on the cubicles by now.”

A few minutes later we were all washing in the parlour ready for breakfast. The parlour was a herringbone able to hold ten cows at a time and milking generally took about 3 ½ hours to get through the hundred or so cows. Breakfast was eaten sitting on the combine in the garage and most of the time was spent throwing bits of pork pie at Toby’s dog Rover. I told William about collecting the cockerels’ eggs and he smiled and nodded with a rather sly look in his eyes; still I hadn’t caught on. Finishing my sandwich, I climbed off the machine and walked up the gravel path to Toby’s farm house. I use the term farmhouse loosely as it would be more apt to describe it as Buckingham Palace with a couple of geese outside it. Timidly I tapped on the big white door and in about a minute the ruddy complexion of Toby’s nose stuck itself out of the door. “What do you want, don’t say the ****** pulsator’s gone again. “No Mr Elston, I’ve come up for the cockerels’ eggs.”

Toby’s face went through a set of colour changes and an evil grin appeared “Oh so you’ve come to collect the cockerels’

eggs have you? Well first could you go down to the parlour and ask Fred for a left handed screwdriver." I'd heard that one before, so I giggled nervously until my eyes met Toby's stony pools and I shuffled two steps back. "If you don't get down the farm yard and do some work, I'll kick you so hard in the backside that the echo will break your ankles." Feeling like the scum of the earth, I shuffled towards the parlour and continued to bed up.

The mist cleared off the hills and the October sun almost apologetically shone on my face, warming me up if not making me cease to feel like a prune.

At lunch I had to face the Micky taking of Dave, another farm hand, and William which put me in a bad mood for the afternoon. The first part of the afternoon was spent helping Dave put a wheel on a tractor, a Massey Ferguson 165. This was the most used tractor and had done about five thousand hours. Later on in the spring and early summer I was to spend much time rolling fields with it and cutting silage using a Parmiter cutter. We had another big tractor also, a Massey 590, and this seemed to be doomed to be driven through the sides of sheds by William in fits of enthusiasm.

Having put the wheel on the 165 it was then time to feed the calves in the bottom shed. At any one time there were about fifteen milk fed by a preparation of 'Super Cake' from Taunton market. There was a collection of twenty or so heifers which ate nuts and silage in the afternoon and who I had adopted on the second day as creatures for 'special care'. In the six months I was at the farm I gave them all names like Nelson, Jasmine and Lupin and I was sad when towards the end of my work experience, they were sold to a Welsh farmer.

The last forkful of silage was shovelled in front of Lupin, who timidly prodded at it with her nose. I looked at my watch, 4.30, time to go home; I walked up to the parlour for my donkey jacket and met Fred who was just starting the afternoon milking.

"Bye Fred, see you tomorrow."

"Depends if I'm here tomorrow" he grunted into the bowl of his pipe.
I backed towards the parlour door, tripping over the hose.
"Bah! Students" said Fred, "all smart ideas and no common sense."

Farm design and efficient labour use

'Being stretched in ways which I wasn't used to meant that I discovered myself and my capabilities and limits in areas that I did not know about.'

Tony Harwood

The idea of students gaining a year's experience before commencing a degree in agriculture is in principal a good idea. It should give students a much more realistic approach to the practical aspects covered by the course e.g. in farm design and labour management.

However in my job I learned very little practical skill. Most of the time was spent shovelling up muck around the farm and moving hay and other foodstuffs.

Nearly all the work I did was created by bad farm design and false economy by the farmer. Within a very few weeks I could see for myself improvements that could be made to the farm with little cost or effort.

The most obvious improvement would be to rearrange the yards and gates. For several months feeding required ten bales of hay being dropped off the side of a stack and then being thrown over two gates. Then another six were thrown off another stack. Four bales were then thrown over an unused

feeding trough and loaded on to a tractor. The other bales were then loaded on to a trolley and then fed, which required the opening of ten gates. All this was to feed five yards of cattle totalling about twenty five head altogether. However with little expense the whole operation could have been undertaken without opening any gates at all.

Two thirds of the dairy herd were kept in cowsheds about a hundred yards down the road. At some point on most days, five gates had to be negotiated with a hand trolley; three cows had to be turned out and kept off the hay loaded on it. The hay had to be stacked and the cows chained up again,

There was of course a lot of unnecessary time wasted and even the most useless farm designer could have revolutionized the work on the farm.

However to cap it all, Eric (the farmer) intended to build one of the new fangled cubical buildings with a milking parlour, but he was going to build it about 100 yards down the road from the Dutch barn where the hay was stored – though this was unnecessary!

The story about the straw was even worse; once some of the cattle were in the Dutch barn it all had to be carried by hand around the barn and then loaded on to the trolley and distributed in the same way as the hay.

The muck from the cattle was cleared up daily (my main job) and put into ten piles around the farm and then shovelled into a dumper and taken down the field daily. Each day Eric and/or I fought the dumper, winding it madly by hand and shoving various mixtures and chemicals down the air intake to start it. Then one day I graduated to dumper driver – however no instruction was given by Eric as to how the gear box was arranged, or how to un-jam the gear box which happened frequently. This resulted in yet more time wasting as I sat on the dumper with my foot on the clutch waiting for help (I could not stop it because Eric didn't tell what to push!)

When help came, it came with a torrent of cussing and no explanation (even when asked) how to do it myself the next

time. Finally I managed to drag the information out of Eric's son. To get it out of reverse (it either jumped out when you didn't want it to or jammed) one had to stand hard on the brakes and lift the clutch and go backwards until it jumped out. To get it out of first gear if it jammed it required wiggling the gear lever back into first while going along and then disengaging again using the clutch. Driving the dumper required quite a bit of thought and foresight especially when turning round in the yard or going through gateways.

Each day the muck was tipped on the fields where it was composted, there were several tips around the farm, some near and convenient but some required forty minutes a day for several weeks on end. This was of course another waste of time caused by the use of small, slow equipment. If the dumper had been exchanged for an old three ton trailer or something similar, then the dung need only have been tipped two or three times a week, and they would have been faster trips.

On the subject of false economy, I will not comment on the basic economic principle of the farm because I'm sure there are good farmers of both sorts. By that I mean, some farmers work on the principle of borrowing capital to improve the farm, to make it more profitable with the aim of paying off the debts and having a higher standard of living. This method requires much speculation of future profits, which fluctuate in agriculture and which could lead to more hardship and sleepless nights than if the debts had not been incurred. Hard times could of course lead to the bankruptcy courts too.

However other farmers, including Eric, worked on the principle of low inputs resulting in a steadier output and more sleep. But this method could also lead to debts if the profit margin is too small.

The economy which I am sure was false was the cutting of his labour force. During last summer he had five workers plus himself working and contractors to do the combining. Some workers were doing over 12 hours of work a day, with only

three of the workers being paid. So after the summer he kept the work force at just one, with occasional contractor help.

The result of this was to neglect the land still further and to drop the corn acreage still lower without increasing the stock. One man, well managed, could have more than paid his way by just planting more corn.

The management of the grass was poor. This was a more difficult task than on most farms since his farm was carved by two roads, a river and a railway line, with the result that some parts of his land were a bit of a fag to get to. This resulted in some fields being very poorly used and managed, whilst others were well used and managed. Of his twenty or so fields, five or six appeared to have good hay.

One of the more educating, relaxing and amusing days in my job was the day I went to market with Eric. It nearly went all wrong when I almost bought four lots of ewes and lambs. I knew I must not wave, nod, wink, scratch my head, pull my ear or pick my nose or it would end up with a bill and some live stock. I went to watch the sheep auction, being unable to see the sheep I watched the auctioneer. The next thing I was being asked if I was bidding to which I replied no. Then I was warned by the auctioneer that I would end up with some sheep if I kept looking at him.

I would also consider that there was much personal gain to be had from taking a year off from academic studies to work on a farm.

Firstly such a job instils discipline. Starting work at 7.30 a.m. twelve miles away required getting up at 6 a.m. sometimes working seven days a week. Most of the work I did had to be done every day, which meant that there was no room for an off day as there is in most jobs. I had to force myself to work hard however I felt.

Being stretched in ways which I wasn't used to meant that I discovered myself and my capabilities and limits in areas that I did not know about.

Such a job obviously took up far more time than school, resulting in the fact that though I had more money to do things with than at school, I had far less time to do it in, this I am sure resulted in better use of my time. This perhaps is one of the greatest personal gains that I have obtained before going to university.

I have learned too what it means to do a proper day's work. When I first started there was little work for me to do – but as winter approached the work increased until I could not get through it all. But as I got further, more work came my way thus making me work harder still. Though obviously I wouldn't like to spend a lifetime working in that situation, I valued it as good disciplinary training. Though Eric made me out to be worse than useless as a worker, when I worked in a bus maintenance company I was considered a very good worker. In the last year I have also met many people, most of them much older than me. It has been valuable to see business from the other side of the fence.

Not only have I met many people but I have had to work with some of them. Those I have had to do just one job with have been interesting and easy, but those I have worked with for longer have required a certain amount of effort to keep the work harmonious.

Having worked both on a small farm and in a small engineering company where money was scarce in both, I have thought through different aspects of running a small business, from effective financing of an operation to the pros and cons of partnerships and the effective use of labour. Probably the best training I had during the year which will help me in future work is effective labour management, though I have learned some of it by experience of how not to do it.

Making an impression in a silage pit

'[I] learnt some of the tricks used to make show sheep look fatter or thinner, older or younger and how to make them put on weight in ten minutes.'

Lloyd Gudgeon

It was only when I started looking for a job as a student on a farm that I realised why so many friends had been so cynical about my chances. My first-hand experience of farm life was restricted to five years of barely remembered self-sufficiency when, my father, strengthened by the Soil Association and ideals of organically produced plenty, left the Navy in order to put his ideas into practice. That I could milk cows by hand cut very little ice with prospective employers. Eventually, after using friends, neighbours and the Farmers Weekly, I got a job in Dorset on a mixed farm. Two or three weeks later that fell through and I started again.

After wading through those that would be prepared to employ me for sixteen hours a day, seven days a week for my keep, I got a job in Somerset with Mr Cullen, a farmer who goes out of his way to employ students each year, and was used to people as inexperienced as I was.

I took up lodgings in the village with Mrs Turnbull, a widow who traditionally looked after the student on Mr Cullen's farm. I learnt very little from her in the way of the agricultural history of the area, but I knew all the divorces, the forthcoming marriages and imminent births in the village.

Despite the quiet nature of Stansfield Lacey and the downright somnolent nature of life with Mrs Turnbull, work on the farm was both active and interesting especially to me as an outsider.

Apart from myself, Mr Cullen employed three other full time men, a tractor driver, a herdsman and a shepherd, as well as two regular part time employees – Old William, the previous

shepherd and young William, a student of Agriculture at the local Technical College. I did not join the local Young Farmers Club, and on reflection I think that might have been a mistake, but even so I was never made to feel lonely, possibly a major fear faced by those about to embark on pre-university experience. I got to know people in the area, many of whom knew who I was long before I knew who they were. This aspect of village life, which resulted in a sort of distanced friendliness was one which was new to me and a little disappointing in its shallowness. However, I found it relatively easy to settle into the village, the only drawback being moments of boredom brought about by the isolation – I had no car and so wasn't very mobile.

Due largely to the conglomerate nature of the farm, with each of the other full time employees having their own defined jobs, I tended to do little milking and had almost nothing to do with the sheep apart from hauling mangolds and helping with the dipping and lamb-weighing. This last activity was one subscribed to by Mr Cullen involving computer records of the ewes and their lambs' weight increase rates. Dick, the shepherd, I believe thought of this as something of an insult. He felt he was perfectly capable of deciding in his own mind which rams to use with which ewes to produce the required results. The nice thing about it was that he felt able to tell Mr Cullen this. Although, of course, everyone knew how best to run the farm, and never tired of talking about it, if any of the employees felt strongly enough about something they would talk it over with the boss.

My chief job was calf rearing, from when they were about forty eight hours old until they went out the following spring. Calving started in early August and went on past the rush of heifers' calves in August/September to December/January when those cows calved that had not been successfully inseminated when planned. This meant that through the winter I had calves of all ages, some still on the bucket, some on a

calf weaning mix of dry foods, other older ones on a mix of rolled barley and protein.

I started work on the farm knowing nothing about tractors or tractor driving and as Sid, the tractor driver, would tell you, left knowing little more! I don't believe this to be so, but certainly I wasn't given the chance to do much more than the simple or boring jobs that involved tractor driving. Thus I clocked up a good many hours turning hay, rolling ground and chain harrowing, but the only ploughing I did was half an hour or so one Saturday morning just to give me an idea of what it involved.

One job tractor driving that I did for the whole winter was dung scraping during the two milkings. This meant getting up just before six a.m., an ordeal I finally adjusted to but not my idea of fun. That part of the job did point out to me the benefits of a wide brimmed hat as there was a drop of a foot or so over which the slurry was pushed, resulting in an impressive and all encompassing splash. I found out whilst doing this job that I had a great talent for missing what I shouldn't and hitting bits I should miss; in other words I demolished a few corners of walls and bent the scraper more than once whilst backing around corners into feeding passages. This might have had something to do with Mr Cullen's reluctance to let me operate more complex machinery. This was superseded by the accident I had during silage making. I was buck-raking the silage into the pit and the ever more urgency involved a greater incentive for speed. That's when the accident happened, which involved my being run over by the tractor. All of which sounds impressive enough until I own up to the excruciatingly embarrassing fact that I ran over myself with the tractor I was driving. I refuse to go into the details, but suffice to say that, due to at least a couple of feet of soft grass beneath me, three tons of tractor made little impression on me but left a fair imprint in the grass. After almost a dozen x-rays I was declared fit and more than just usually lucky, given four days sick leave and was back to

work again as normal bar a slight limp. All of which led me to seriously consider the benefits of banking or accountancy.

However, I persevered, and now I'm very glad that I did. For although I never intended to become a farmer, I feel that I have learnt a great deal about an industry that before was largely a mystery to me. What is more, I learnt about it from several angles in that whilst working with the men, Mr Cullen explained much of what was involved in management and his dealings with costing, people, feed representatives and other more peripheral functionaries. I learnt what a ten twenty herringbone was and how to use it; I learnt the benefit of multipower and learnt some of the tricks used to make show sheep look fatter or thinner, older or younger and how to make them put on weight in ten minutes. All of which might not seem very useful to someone who has no intention of becoming a farmer.

I feel that the usefulness of the pre-university farming experience, for me, was much greater than just learning about the job and the life. I learnt a great deal about myself and became more independent. I found out how people in other walks of life lived and had lived, and I met people and so ideas, that I would not normally have come across. If someone was to ask me what was the best thing to come out of my year's farming it is perhaps this last fact that I would consider as being most useful. I would recommend most strongly that anyone considering a career in agriculture should do a year's practical experience first and should make sure that they do so away from home. At the very worst it can only convince you that you are in the wrong industry.

Livestock enterprises in Birmingham

'I always wanted my own farm however, not being content with only farming in school holidays. Therefore I began by breeding guinea pigs which I sold to pet shops.'

Fergus Sinclair

My first farming experience was thrust upon me at the age of three when I encountered a bellowing cow in the darkness of an old shed in Aberfeldy. Although this was a bad introduction to the farmyard it did not have too serious an effect and soon after mum had dried my tears I was again cautiously prepared to investigate.

I consider however that I come from a deprived background. Not deprived of material possessions or schooling but lacking in contact with the land from which the food and a lot of the fibre necessary to my existence is produced. From the age of three to eighteen I lived in Birmingham, England's second city. I walked to school each morning on a bed of concrete, the soil beneath hidden and rendered useless. The animals I was encouraged to be interested in resided in the local zoo and although fascinating, were an exotic collection of multicoloured creatures having less relevance to my life than my best friend's canary. Milk was delivered to the door in bottles, the number controlled by a dial which I was not allowed to play with. The only plants in evidence were neatly placed flowers, attempting to make up for the drab appearance of bricks and tarmac.

I was however very lucky. When I was still very young my parents rented a cottage in North Wales to which the family often escaped. The countryside immediately captured my imagination and the fresh air tasted sweet. I was fascinated by the farm animals which actually produced the milk, meat and wool that appear so divorced from the land in our modern city environment. I soon began to live for the holidays which I

always spent on this farm, which is the site of the majority of my experience and is the home of some of my fondest memories.

The farmer who owned the cottage was very friendly and although when I was young I was more hindrance than help he always made me feel useful. I used to feel important as I counted the bales as they were stacked or stood in the road to prevent the sheep going the wrong way. I really enjoyed helping on the farm and was always enthusiastic, putting everything I had into the few tasks I was given, and urging everyone on when they stopped for a cup of tea. During term time in Birmingham I missed the farm and dreamed of developing the parks or amalgamating all the back gardens to produce a field.

Very luckily for me the farmer and especially his son Dei encouraged my interest in farming. They used to give me the back copies of *Pig Farming* and valued my help on the farm while always answering my persistent questions. I remember once being confused when I was looking at a boar because it had a flourishing set of teats on its underside which I associated with the mothering ability of sows. I soon realised the sense of the situation when I was told to take off my shirt and examine my own chest! Dei kept pigs which I was very interested in and before I was able to carry the sacks of food I used to feed his thirty sows on my own, carting the bags across the farmyard in a wheelbarrow.

Although the cottage was eventually sold to somebody else as the farm expanded, I continued to spend my holidays there, staying with Dei who married and moved into a new house attached to one of the farms they purchased. These farmers were a keen, hardworking family, working very variable land and constantly improving the marginal areas and always stretching their necks out as far as their sharp eyesight allowed. I always had to work hard for my keep, since they treated me as one of the family. As I grew older I became more and more useful and progressed on to more interesting

and responsible work which maintained my enthusiasm. I worked on the farm on every available moment that was long enough to merit the bus journey from Birmingham. I watched the farm grow from an eighty acre mixed farm to a four hundred and sixty acre enterprise concentrating on sheep and beef. I saw the farm specialize and introduce silage to replace hay for the winter feed for their suckler cows and I helped to build the sheep shed they erected to bring their lambing properly indoors. I saw the pigs and hens disappear and the fertilizer application rise at a phenomenal cost. They increased their stocking rate and reclaimed hill land and included it into their system. An accountant from ICI began coming to act as a secretary and they bought more land and a larger overdraft.

I always wanted my own farm however, not being content with only farming in school holidays. Therefore I began by breeding guinea pigs which I sold to pet shops and as the enterprise grew I began to buy my food in fifty six pound (25 kg) sacks which at the time I saw as a significant step forward. The enterprise was lucrative and I soon replaced the rows of hutches with a hen run, and began producing eggs. This proved very successful since fresh eggs were hard to come by in Birmingham and the neighbours clamoured to get them and were willing to pay a high price for the privilege. I soon increased my output by installing a light and time switch and changing the diet from pellets to mash.

I was not satisfied with the hens, however, since I could not help noticing the large amount of unutilized grass in Birmingham. So eventually after persuading my reluctant mother (the hens were not without their problems) that sheep could be adapted to Birmingham without dirtying the house, I purchased two Welsh Halfbred sheep. These aroused much interest, and nearly caused several car accidents when they were grazing on the roadside. They were however a very rewarding and lucrative business, I was able to keep a ewe for a year for less than the inflated price of her fleece which I sold

to local wool spinning enthusiasts keen to have wool from Birmingham. There was an inexhaustible outlet for the lamb.

The press discovered the sheep and the subsequent publicity attracted the health inspector. The house had to be registered as a farm and I was given an animal movement records book and sent frequent reminders about compulsory dipping of sheep (now discontinued). The inspector paid me regular visits and often took me with him round other farms.

I have had other farm experience working on an inefficient dairy farm in Gloucestershire where the farmer spent more of his time at the pub than on the farm, which was a sharp contrast to the attitude on the Welsh farm. I also attended a week long course at Warwickshire College of Agriculture which was interesting and informative and it was then that I decided to do agriculture at university.

My farming experience was essential to my desire to study agriculture, since it was through working in Wales that my interest in it grew. I think it is vital to have a practical knowledge of farming before studying it academically, since agriculture is essentially a practical discipline and it is always important to be able to apply what you learn about agriculture to the practical situation. It is evident from the widespread conservatism displayed by some farmers that many developments in agriculture have not reached some farms due to poor liaison between the academics and the farmers. I think the modern farmer should understand the scientific principles on which the rapidly changing face of farming today is based. Similarly the academic should ensure that his teaching and research is relevant and understandable to the farmer. As the complexity of farming increases I think it is important to guard against the farmer's task becoming that of carrying out procedures he does not fully understand which have been developed by secluded researchers working in a theoretical environment, as this could only lead to unacceptable mistakes.

I am glad of all the farming experience I have had, the most unpleasant and most gruelling parts perhaps being the most

important. I am aware of what good farming involves and the level of commitment that must be invested day in and day out to produce from the land. Running the risk of drawing conclusions from too little experience, I have seen farming changing on the farm in Wales in what I think is a fairly typical way. More specialization has occurred, the number of acres per man working has increased, the farm size has increased, the level and expense of manufactured inputs has increased along with the introduction of new technology and mechanization. While this has definitely increased the individual profit of the farmer concerned (which all farmers, who after all are business men, strive to increase) there is now less individual attention to each unit of land and stock and the farm work is becoming more divorced from the land which I am not convinced is necessarily a good thing.

Work on a Northamptonshire estate

'My teachers weren't very helpful, they had never heard of such a thing before. A boy didn't take 'A' levels and then go and get a job as a farm labourer.'

Richard Caplin

I think I should state at the start that agriculture was not my first choice of career. I had hoped, since the age of ten I'm told, to go to university to study veterinary surgery. So why did I end up working on a farm for a year?

Having sat 'A' level retakes I decided that I would rather know what grades I had before I applied to any universities. This would leave me with a year to fill in before I started at a

university. Working on a farm for that year seemed like a good idea at the time. I would see the background to large animal production and be able to handle the animals myself. I suppose that the thought of working on a farm appealed to my 'townie's' sense of romanticism too. Little did I know.

At first I went to my teachers at school and to local authority careers advisors to get help in getting a job. My teachers weren't very helpful, they had never heard of such a thing before. A boy didn't take 'A' levels and then go and get a job as a farm labourer. The careers advisors were even worse. They tried to offer me jobs in banking or insurance or as a trainee manager in any number of shops or factories. None of this was for me. I wanted to be outside and hopefully, I would eventually end up at a veterinary college.

So I was left to find a job by myself. My first step was to 'phone the local branch of the N.U.F. 'Wait awhile' I was told, 'I think we've got just the job for you.' Three weeks later I still hadn't heard, so I decided to advertise in the Farmers Weekly. I expected very little response but, much to my surprise, on the evening of publication the 'phone rang and someone asked if I would be available for an interview. 'Fine', I said, 'But what sort of farm is it?' 'Two thousand acres' came the reply: 'About five hundred acres of corn, a beef unit, a herd of 180 dairy cows and a flock of about 600 sheep'. The farm was a large estate in Northamptonshire.

This sounded just what I was after, all round experience. I jumped at the chance. That night I received another three job offers and in the following week I was offered eight more jobs. It just goes to show that it pays to advertise.

I expected my interview to be a sit down affair with me chatting about farming so I boned up on the up-to-the-minute agricultural issues by thoroughly reading all the back numbers of the Farmers Weekly which I possessed. Not a task I would recommend to anyone. Much to my surprise, however, my interview consisted of being shown all round the farm and a quick chat over a pie and a pint in the local, with my

interviewer, the under estate manager who was temporarily working as the farm manager, explaining what was going on and what the future held.

From this interview I learnt some points in interview technique which, I think, are very important. Don't turn up with preconceived ideas, know what you are talking about and be interesting and interested. But above all you should be yourself. Needless to say I was offered the job (or I probably wouldn't have included the account in this essay) with a full agricultural wage, my own tied cottage on the estate and free milk from the dairy.

So after a weekend's frantic shopping I moved to the farm in Northamptonshire and settled into my cottage. I started work on the Tuesday, not quite sure what to expect. I met the farm manager who was also new to the farm, having started a day before I did. I was introduced to the tractor drivers, three of them, all well past middle age, and sent with them to my first job – loading bales of hay onto a trailer.

My worst fears, that being young and inexperienced in farming, I would not be easily accepted as a fellow worker by my workmates, were never realised. Even though there was a great age difference and my background was completely different to theirs (me being born and bred in London, they having lived all their lives on farms). I was taken under their wings and helped enormously, aided when I got stuck and advised on the best way to go about a task.

To my surprise tractor driving was reasonably easy, in fact I managed to avoid any major catastrophes throughout my whole year on the farm. I think the major point to remember is to be aware of any load you might be towing or carrying. As long as you remain alert then accidents can be avoided. My first and only lesson on tractors, apart from advices given (often accompanied by curses and some expletives even I didn't know), consisted of being shown the pedals and told that 'The gears are all in the box. You'll have to find them.'

Although the farm manager was new to this farm, he had already proved himself over ten years by his management of another of the estate run farms in an area only about ten miles from my home town of Croydon. Thus he new Croydon quite well and since I knew his area quite well too we were able to start with some common knowledge and a mutual interest.

In the last ten years the farm has seen about four or five different farm managers and so the farm had had no consistent policy and was, to say the least, very untidy at the time I started there. I think this was probably due to the fact that the estate manager had wanted too much say in how the farm was run. The new manager of the farm, Richard had, in my opinion, only accepted the post on the understanding that he be given almost total control which, in view of his past excellent record, had been agreed. Also making Richard's position stronger was the fact that he was renting about 300 acres of his own to be farmed alongside the estate farm. This, I think, is an excellent idea as it gives the manager incentive to work and make the farm productive.

Although I think that Richard's policy, farming knowledge and general actions as a farmer were very good, I think that his personnel management left something to be desired.

Richard came to the farm with big ideas, an iron fist and a seemingly unlimited supply of money. In his first year the farm has been brought right up to date mechanically, with two large horsepower tractors, silage making equipment, a large new combine, several new trailers and implements and to cap it all a 1600 ton grain drier. In fact over a period of one year approximately £200,000 has been spent on new tackle alone!

Much of this expenditure was justified by the fact that the boss came with new ideas. In one year the acreage under corn was expanded from 500 acres to 1000 acres, all silage making was carried out by farm labour instead of contractors and the men were required to work six days a week from 7.30 am to about 9.00 pm most evenings. Although the boss had supplied the right tools, comfortable to work with and pleasant to use,

the men soon became demoralized by the long hours; Richard lives for his work, is not happy when he is not working. It would be fair to say that he is a workaholic. The trouble is he expects his men to be just the same and not to want any free time. I myself had several rows with the boss and soon was labelled as a rebel. I suppose I had less to lose than the permanent workers. Still I think we parted on fairly amicable terms.

There were nine other men working on the farm apart from myself. Three men in the dairy, three tractor drivers that I have mentioned and one other taken on soon after I started, a shepherd and an engineer whom Richard brought with him from Surrey. One of Richard's first tasks was to lay off one of the dairy men which did not help his popularity.

Even though the hours were extremely long I liked the overtime and we still managed to have a good social life. There was an estate club and a men's club in the village, both licensed and often frequented. Many functions, dances, suppers and the like were organized by the clubs and through these I came to know and love my fellow workers and all the 'village folk.'

There are only about three or four young people in the village, a handful of children and many retired and about-to-retire people. But even though the range of ages is wide, everyone mixes well with everyone else. There seemed to be almost no generation gap. I treated my fellow workers as I would treat my student friends and they treated me as an equal, not as a 'boy'. I found this attitude in almost all the local villages and I am sure that it made for the smooth running of the whole community.

Whilst on the farm I was given the opportunity to perform most tasks: bale bashing, fencing, drilling, ploughing and harrowing, lambing and building, including making a workshop, putting in cow cubicles and building a grain store. We spent about five months on the store, just bolting together bins, it became very tedious. We made our own silage and I

was able to milk the cows and during the winter, feed calves and litter the herd down. I was promised a chance to try combine driving, but due to the fact that we were still building the drier this never materialized.

I do feel grateful to the farm manager for giving me many opportunities to gain valuable experience but I felt, and still feel, a little upset that I was never given the chance to do things which had been promised I should do; poor management technique?

Overall I thoroughly enjoyed my year working on a farm. I gained valuable experience outside my previous lifestyle. I learned how to work with people and since I was catering for myself I learned to look after myself. In doing this I feel I matured a great deal and I would recommend that most people should take a year out before university.

I did not get into vet school, obviously, but I fell in love with the land and the life, hard as it is. I learned many techniques, how to handle and how not to handle people. Best of all, though I learned to love village life and, for the rest of my life I shall remember and love the 'Village Folk'.

Hard work and its rewards

'I was lucky at having found a farm that offered me responsibility, and it weighed heavily at times.'

V B McAlear

They did say I wouldn't get a lie-in on Christmas morning and they were right! I put that down to experience as I did when working all New Year's Day in sub-zero conditions getting

liquid water to animals when the tendency was for most of it to go solid. More experience came with lambing, again a lot of it in practically sub-zero conditions when it rained continuously. On days like these I used to wonder why I was doing this, when I could have done something a little less taxing, which did not involve a pre-university freezing and soaking.

However the good days did make up for the bad. 'Nature'll allus put it right' said the shepherd most of the time, and he was right. On hot days it is the best thing in the world to be out on the Fordson Major muck spreading, just as long as the wind is not too strong in your direction.

Putting bad days down to experience was just one thing; everyday could go down to experience. Always there was something new to watch or do. Everyday in my first full year of farming brought up something fresh. Of course I was lucky at having found a farm that offered me responsibility, and it weighed heavily at times – and diversity. Pigs, sheep, dairy cattle, beef cattle, calf rearing and eight hundred acres of cropping land, on a very complicated management system, or so the farm manager assured me. Consequently 'the student' had rather a lot to do, and when it's on an everyday basis with no breaks you just have to be keen to learn or the opportunity is wasted.

Of course the menial tasks came my way, in profusion, it would seem: shovelling out grain bins, mucking out bull pens and other fork and shovel driving jobs. However it is necessary to know how to do this sort of job before you can tell someone else to do it. In years to come when I am one of Anthony Rosan's team of managers with Fountain Farming it will be necessary to be able to gauge the time and manpower to be spent on a certain job, and if everything menial and basic has been done before then the job of man management will be easier – I hope- leaving more time for other tasks.

All the same with the menial tasks went the better jobs which needed a bit of skill; ploughing, combining and

lambing. The list is long but it would be nice to think that this is true of the way in which the farming ladder will be climbed whatever my destiny in the industry will be.

A year on the farm as the most junior member is a test of character and confidence. Determination is needed to get through long, often mundane and dirty days, to do jobs never attempted before. Determination was needed to find the job in the first place. Farmers do not like to take someone with very little experience and consequently I wasted pounds on letters, all with SAE's (of which the majority were not returned) and telephone calls and journeys to fruitless interviews. True grit eventually got me a job, simply by asking at the nearest farm!

A year as the farm student also meant being part of the work force. The men, although not the best educated people in the world, are the salt of the earth and certainly know their job and it was only necessary to watch to learn. Being at the receiving end of practical jokes was one of my privileges, like trying to start a 'doctored' tractor, or being left stranded in the bottom of a grain pit, and so on. This is, like it or not, part of experience. You are a little wiser about the working world testing your strength of character.

Farm students seem to be infamous for accidents. Perhaps it is because their mistakes are so glaringly obvious or do they actually crash everything or hammer tractors and implements until they break?. Unfortunately my momentary lapse of concentration caused one or two disasters. I emptied three tons of wheat from a trailer through its bottom when I drove it into a gate post. Quite embarrassing! I have now learnt to take corners a little wider especially having shovelled all the grain back in. Other accidents happened to me and others I just got blamed for.

Accidents did not deter me from carrying on, nor did working on Christmas morning and all those days when bed is a littler cosier than the cattle yards. Having very little time off made me appreciate it more when I eventually had some. It also helped me to save pots of money (it's not that the money

is good, but the hours were long!). Having so little time to spend/fritter, the money helped me accumulate money to mountainous proportions, until I came to Windsor Hall where they sap it all out of you.

Money management is very useful. To earn and be able to use thousands (one or two) rather than tens of pounds is quite different. How much to save? How much to spend? Those 'poor' people who miss this ideal early opportunity to have money of their very own are missing something, because they will have to wait beyond graduation.

A year's break from academic life might be appreciated by many people. It took my mind off figures, words and basic academy with its rather sterile approach to learning. There is no quicker way to learn than to put yourself in a completely new situation. Farmers' sons might think about doing a year's pre-university farming experience on another farm to give themselves a fresh look at farming. I feel that in some cases farmers' sons may see what is going on but never actually get their finger in the pudding because they are at boarding school for much of the year, or the workers don't like their presence. We of the 'non-agricultural' background are not necessarily as ignorant as it would be made out, and farmers' boys and girls are not as experienced, in all cases, as they would like to appear. In other words they might be encouraged to think about 'doing the year' which is compulsory for us townies. It might not have the same full kill or cure effect that people like myself might experience, but it would certainly broaden their scope in a few cases, for management change, later on Daddy's farm.

Finding a farm as mixed as possible is certainly an advantage in that it makes one appreciate the rather broad course at university on arrival. To study the management system and economics of a farm and then relate them to the course is useful in that it might make the course more relevant and so more likely to be retained in the memory. The value of a mixed farm is that there are more small economies and

systems making up the one farm and thus a student might more easily be able to relate to hypothetical farms postulated by the lecturer.

Now I'm here at university actually studying agriculture it is pleasant to recall the hard days I put in there and pleasant to be able to relate one's experience to the course, because so much work went into getting that experience. However I almost became addicted to the work and the freedom having been at school so long, and it would be nice to work again for a short while, but I will have to wait until Christmas when I shall freeze again and work on Christmas morning. I now feel the value of work in my body. Since leaving my adipose reserves have swelled to unenviable extremes and a once fit body has deteriorated, only to be hammered in December –again!

In short, I feel that the value of my last year at work will stay with me as long as I am in farming, which I hope will be a long time now I have overcome the first few hurdles. Let's hope that with Reading University I can do well for me and farming. A year's pre-university experience on a farm is really kill or cure and although I didn't need curing, I am further convinced farming is for me.

Animal based husbandry on the Sussex Weald

'My first morning milking was something of a disaster. I woke up about five minutes before my alarm was due to wake me up (at 4 o'clock) and turned it off so that I wouldn't wake anybody else in the house …'

Philippe Fabri

After my interview, in January 1980, to do this course, it was decided that I should do a year's farming experience after completing my A-levels. I therefore went to visit all the local farmers, wrote a lot of letters and generally tried to make it known through various contacts that I was looking for a job. These efforts were largely fruitless, though I nearly got a job on a big dairy and hop farm on the Kent border. This situation continued for a few months until just before I took my A-level exams. Thank goodness for that great British institution, the country pub: the landlord of a pub in a village about ten miles away rang up and told my parents of a Mr S from M who regularly took pre-college students. I was given a phone number and a time for when I was to phone that evening. Since I was in the cinema that evening I phoned from there and clinched an interview in the middle of 'The Life of Brian.' Two days later I had the job and not only that but there was more than one job on offer. I told a friend of mine who was also looking for a farm job, and he got the other one.

We started work in the beginning of August after having had time for a three week motorcycle tour of the British Isles. As is usual whenever I start work on a farm, it was the middle of the harvest, so the first week or so was very hard work indeed until I began to get into shape suitable for hay carting. This took up most of my time for about the first three weeks of work but I also had the calves and a few pigs to look after and I began to do some afternoon milking.

The farm I was working on was situated across the valley of the river Rother near a village called M in the Sussex Weald, an area just recently designated an area of outstanding beauty. The farm consisted of four farms forming a square of approximately a thousand acres, making it one of the biggest farms in the area. Out of the four farms only one was rented and this was the smallest containing approximately a hundred acres of small fields and buildings sufficient for winter housing for the larger beef calves and suckler cows.

Approximately one hundred acres was put down to winter barley which was then used in the making up of pig and calf meal. The straw was baled and used for bedding. However though the farm was self sufficient in hay it did not nearly provide enough straw, this being one of the major bought-in items over the whole year.

The farm also supported two dairy herds and it was these that brought in the farm's main income. The herd at the main farm where my boss lived, consisted of 170 cows and was milked by the boss and students working on a shift basis. The other herd was milked by a regular cowman called Dave, who had been working there about nine months prior to my arrival. He had 120 cows. At the time, all the milk was sold directly to the Milk Marketing Board who collected the milk daily by tanker. Other revenue came from selling beef cattle and porkers at the local markets. The farm ran a butcher's shop in the village to which at least one beef animal would go per week. Eggs from the hundred or so chickens would also be sold through the shop where amongst others Dave's wife was employed.

My first morning milking was something of a disaster; I was meant to start at five o'clock in the morning and milk with John, a student from Wye in his last fortnight on the farm. I woke up about five minutes before my alarm was due to wake me up (at 4 o'clock) and turned it off so that I wouldn't wake anybody else in the house. The next thing I knew was my father bursting into my room proclaiming that it was 6.25 a.m.

and what the hell did I think I was doing still in bed. I don't think I've ever moved so quickly in my life before, because I got dressed, went out and got my bike and was working by 6.40 am and the farm was a good fifteen miles of twisting B-roads away.

Soon after, Chris left and a milking rota was established; my friend William and I would milk every afternoon and also the four mornings of our weekend on. In addition, during the rest of the weekdays we would take it in turns to milk mornings with the boss; he would do it one week and I would do it the next. The rest of the time when we were not milking was fairly easy for a while and any odd jobs that needed doing we did, such as mucking out calf pens, calving and A.I. pens, carting things about between the farms and making up feed for the increasing amount of pigs and the calves.

At the end of October the cows came inside which made things easier in terms of getting them in the mornings; during the autumn we had a lot of fog and as the farm stretched down into the valley the fog stayed thick for a long time. This caused a very difficult situation to arise as anybody who has ever spent over an hour in pitch darkness with a feeble torch in very thick fog, trying to find 10 cows in a 30 acre field will appreciate. The cows were housed in a large barn and loose as opposed to being kept in cubicles. They were fed with hay in a feed passage twice a day after milking. The storing of this hay down the feed passage became one of our major preoccupations when not milking. Carting this hay from the barn stacked precariously high on a rather small flat-board trailer down into the passage used to take up at least three morning's work out of five during the week. This same trailer was used every afternoon to cart usually the 45 bales of straw/day to straw up the cows.

About this time came the second of the mailings from my Reading University supervisor, with a little project on the dairy enterprise on the farm. This was perhaps the most useful bit of correspondence I had during the year as it made me look

deeper into what was happening in the day to day running of the farm. It provided me with the impetus to know why I was doing things rather than doing them without question and this accumulation of more in-depth knowledge became of use rather sooner than I expected.

At 2 a.m. after bonfire night, William and I moved into a cottage to share with another bloke from a neighbouring farm to whose boss the cottage belonged. Shared between three the rent was very low. The reason for the move was that winter was coming on and the cottage was only three miles away from the farm. That was better than doing a thirty mile round trip at hours of the night when there would be every likelihood of ice on the roads. If there's one thing that I'm scared of on the roads, its black ice and I didn't want to drop my motorcycle if I could avoid it. Ironically a week later, coming to work after a weekend off at home, William overtook a car in a bit of a hurry and took a tumble on black ice at about sixty miles per hour. This broke his wrist again and he never came back to work on the farm. This left me as the only one to milk the cows and I became farm cowman. I then had to teach one of the sixteen year olds who was working on the farm to milk and he then milked with me in the afternoons and in the mornings during the weekends except he usually arrived at about 7 o'clock instead of 5 o'clock by which time I was well over half way to finishing. During the weekdays the boss occasionally used to milk mornings.

The parlour I milked in was a 6 x 6 abreast parlour with equipment from Gascoigne, Cush and Dent from Reading. The cluster arrangement was fitted with a float bowl for automatic cluster release which worked on the basis of milk flow keeping the float open which kept the vacuum sucking. This had a manual override so that the clusters would not come up before the milk had started to come through. The feeding was semi-automated, a dial was turned to the appropriate number of kilograms of concentrate cow nuts and that amount was fed to that particular cow. The amounts of food needed differed

from cow to cow and also at different times in the year and in their lactation. In case things got mixed up between cows, the amount of food the cows received was determined by different coloured tail tapes. Cows with mastitis were also denoted with an orange tape on the tail. A board in the dairy had the names and numbers of every cow and different coloured letters in it against all the weeks of the year so that at a glance it was possible to tell when a particular cow had calved, when she was due to dry off, due to calve, when she had been served and when she was due to return to bulling.

At the beginning of December, my boss went on holiday for two weeks and left me to run things. He asked me as a favour if I would move into his house for that time so I could be on the spot if anything went wrong. This he would pay me for so I gladly accepted as anything would be better than the extreme cold I was experiencing in the cottage I was staying in. The time that he went just happened to be one of the busiest calving times of the year with a lot of 'very new to the farm' cows due to calve and some heifers. Thankfully there was no calving so bad that I couldn't deliver myself, and I had got prediction of when the cows would calve down to a fine art, so none of them calved in the barn.

Unfortunately my boss was difficult to work for and the only way I was sure to do a good job as a cowman was to get to know every cow individually, essential for any cowman, and treat them all as if they were my own. Those two weeks in December keeping things running smoothly were I think the best of the whole year.

That winter we had quite a problem with mastitis which lost us a cow and a heifer and was primarily due to the lack of hygiene in certain areas. The cows' teats were well washed and dried before milking and teat dipped afterwards, the parlour was hosed after every session, jars and equipment I polished once a week and I scraped down the yards once a day in the winter so the problem wasn't there; it was the bed on which the cattle lived in the barn. It was strawed-up once a day

but it got too deep and the dung underneath began working so what had been near the bottom rose to the top and conditions for bacterial activity were more than rife. The barn needed mucking out at least halfway through the winter and this will be done this year. Also mucking out the barn was left until a couple of days before the cows came inside in October instead of giving it time to aerate and dry out. Neither I nor even the local vet could convince the boss that this was a mistake.

One of the cows taken ill was in need of veterinary attention and so out came the vet and gave me a series of antibiotic injections to give her. After four or five days she was beginning to make a bit of slow progress, and the boss came in and told me to give her something else because he didn't like what the vet had given her. I was forced to comply. When the vet returned he understandably got rather angry with the boss. The cow also died very soon after.

Work carried on through the spring with the milk yield obviously increasing when the cows went out to grass. The only Guernsey cow in the mostly Friesian herd must have been a little cleverer and greedier than the rest of them for by accident and watching us, she learnt how to switch on the feed and hence would always feed herself a large amount if she was not one of the first attended to. After this she taught a couple of others the same trick, and one of these took it even further and found the manual switch which would empty the whole hopper of feed. This could be quite tricky if all three came in at the same time.

No silage was made this year at all and most of the efforts were directed at making hay. For the first time they are now using big bales which are much less labour-consuming in collecting during the summer and to distribute and store down the food passages. This system should pay off in getting the workforce to be doing other more important things and also in the lack of overtime. The cutting of overtime has become a sort of obsession with the boss even to the point where he seriously disturbed his employees. He has cut a few mid-

morning hours from the other farm's cowman's day so that he still starts work at 4.30 a.m. and finishes at 6-6.30 p.m. but he gets nearly no overtime, just a few hours off before his lunch, which are pretty useless to him, and his pay has been reduced by about £15-20 per week, and he has a family to support.

The subject of managing your boss and maintaining an environment pleasant to work in was getting more difficult as the year went on. After the disgraceful way in which he treated a dying heifer, or rather the fact that he did nothing to alleviate its suffering and put it out of its misery for days until I had it shot and taken away, I began to get more resentful of the manner in which things were being done and that made things even worse. One day things came to a head. That morning I opened the gates for his wife who was taking his children to school and obviously I did not jump to it quite quickly enough. Some quirk of her background must have made her remark on this to her husband, for he came round in the afternoon and gave me a ticking off about it. I deeply resented that and told him that he shouldn't reprimand me about a thing which I did as a courtesy as I wasn't a house servant, just an employee. This led to an argument in which I think we both felt we had made a point, mine that I wouldn't stand being pushed about. Ever since then he was a lot nicer. I had spoken my mind and we were able to work much better together until the time when I left.

That year I spent working for Mr S was I think of great value in terms of boss worker relations. But apart from earning a bit of money – enough for a tour round Europe and a new motorcycle when I got back – I have learnt a lot about, and developed a healthy interest in, animal based agriculture, in particular dairying. That and the fact that it was just a year's break from intellectual studies will make me appreciate the good things about University life all the more, even if it is more difficult to get back into the habit or reading textbooks. I also learnt to appreciate the value of certain old fashioned ways; at the height of our troubles with mastitis, we were

losing a lot of milk due to having to keep the milk out of the tank because it was contaminated with antibiotics. At the suggestion of our milk recorder, we started to use cider vinegar instead. This was administered by drenching and actually worked very well with the milk going back into the tank as soon as it was clot free.

All in all it was a very worthwhile year.

Calf rearing on the Vale of Aylesbury

'The twenty cow suckler herd consisted of rejects from the dairy herd. They were bad yielders, mastitis cases or cows that would not fit into the dairy system.'

David Oakley

I think a love of the countryside is what prompted me to take up agriculture. It was certainly nothing to do with my family as we have no connection with farming whatsoever. Anyway after being told by the University I would have to undertake a year's practical experience I set about looking for a farm on which to find out what my chosen subject consisted of.

Luckily I did not have to look far as an old school friend was doing a similar year before embarking on an O.N.D course. The farm was only five miles from home in Tring and was just outside a village called Long Marston. So I visited the manager and was lucky enough to get the job my friend had been doing when she finished.

After the A levels and a bit of time to 'recover' I started on the 31st July 1978. It was a company of farms I was to work for, 'Thistlebrook Farms Ltd'. This consisted of Thistlebrook

Farm, with a dairy herd of a hundred and forty, a carousel parlour, a large silage pit, a two hundred tonne grain silo and various bits of other equipment. Whitwell farm was where most of the machinery was stored, there were beef yards and another moist grain silo. The land of this farm was used for heifer grazing, beet grazing and grain production. The other farm was Betlow Farm at the end of a rough winding one mile drive. It was here I was to spend much of my time.

The farms made up over seven hundred acres in all, but all the farms were within a mile and three quarters of each other. They were situated just to the north of Aylesbury, on very heavy gault clay soil -forming part of the flat Vale of Aylesbury. Rather than three separate farms, each farm interacted with the next, making them more like one unit.

Betlow farm consisted of a very old farmhouse surrounded by some modern stock yards and buildings with a large concrete apron. A lot of the buildings were put up during spring 1978 and made the foundations for a new beef enterprise. When I started my friend Ruth was still there, so she showed me the ropes.

I did not have to start work until eight o'clock, luckily. The first thing to do after checking the yards was to feed the calves that were suckling. The unit consisted of two passages where the cows would enter. There were five stalls on each side of each passage totalling twenty. The cow stood in the stall and ate some concentrates. On either side of the cow was a straw-bedded pen capable of holding two calves. While the cows ate, the calves suckled. The unit was designed by the manager, Robin Murell and there are only two similar units in the country. The twenty cow suckler herd consisted of rejects from the dairy herd. They were bad yielders, mastitis cases or cows that would not fit into the dairy system.

The cows graze outside in the summer and in winter are kept in an adjoining inside yard with self-feed silage. Each cow knows her own position in the unit and has a varying number of calves to suckle depending on her stage in the lactation.

Once the calves are suckling each one has to be checked to make sure it is getting enough milk, especially the younger ones which have to be watched because if they get too much milk, scours develop quickly with the usual bad results.

After the feeding has been done each pen has to be littered down, hay and concentrates checked and water bowls cleaned out. The health of the cows and calves also has to be checked and maintained. About once a week there are castrations and de-hornings to be carried out. Calves in the yards had to be fed as well. The feeding process had to be repeated at about four o'clock in the afternoon.

After feeding was completed in the morning I would go to the other farm to find out the duty for the day, this could be virtually any farm task, from tractor driving to mucking out. My first day at the farm was spent on an ageing Ferguson 165 tractor topping thistles on the dairy farms. It was quite an easy job but almost as soon as I got on the tractor I found problems – the number plate fell off and got cut up by the mower it was pulling. Luckily the boss was very understanding about this and many subsequent mishaps. After dinner I carried on with the same job, in the pouring rain and there were no doors on the tractor. I spent the next twenty minutes trying to start the damn thing. I thought I had all the controls in the correct position, but no joy, not a peep – I got out, checked the starter motor and connections, but they were all fine. Just as I was about to give up and go and ask someone, I noticed the gear range selector was in high, so I tried neutral, it worked and I felt an idiot.

Every one on the farm was very friendly and I settled in easily and began to enjoy the working life, and money!

Very soon the harvest was over, bales collected and all set for winter. Luckily a fine Indian summer meant all the drilling of winter corn could be done easily. I was now on my own in the beef unit, with Mr Taylor, one of the owners who lived on the farm, to help.

On the surface the job seemed relatively straight forward, but it was more than just feeding. New calves come from the dairy, some Herefords and Friesian bulls, the rest are bought in. Calves were weaned at approximately ten weeks. I had not given much thought to the problem until the first bunch of eight new calves arrived. I was confronted in the morning by eight screaming, hungry monsters. The first bit was easy, weaning eight, but the hard bit was deciding what calves to move within the unit, especially as I didn't really know at what stage of the lactation most cows were. Large calves had to be promoted to cows with more milk, smaller calves upgraded to cows with slightly more and so leaving eight spaces on cows with little milk, so the new calves did not get scours. Some cows also had to be cut down by a calf. So in the end I was left standing with the whole shed complaining they wanted feeding and me with little idea of what was going on! Luckily the manager was there, he was a bit cross, but he understood and we managed to sort it out! Next time I wrote down exactly what I was going to do beforehand.

With the approach of winter the pace of life slowed down somewhat, but feeding became harder as all the beef cattle were inside. So in the morning there was much more littering down, scraping out and feeding to do, including four silage faces to clean up.

Life also had its less enjoyable sides. There is little else more disheartening than arriving at work in the morning to find a dead beast, especially when you have been treating it for pneumonia for a week and thought the worst was over. It is also unpleasant having to ask the boss to phone the kennels.

One morning I arrived to find the contents of one yard wandering over the farm, about sixty cattle enjoying their freedom. It was a very frosty morning and after half an hour we had them all back where they should be. After a count I thought there was one missing. We checked all around the farm but with no joy. I think the others thought I had mis-counted in the first place. However, two days and a night later

I found the missing individual in the side loader muck-spreader by the ramp. Luckily it was alive and well. A bunch of them must have run up the ramp and one slipped on the ice and fell in.

The winter brought maintenance jobs, tree felling, building and clearing out the slurry lagoon. Soon Christmas was with us, and was great fun, visit to Tring fat-stock show and a few hours in the pub afterwards. The rest of the week was spent bagging off feed. During the winter a ton of feed was used a day, so a big stock had to be built up to see us over Christmas. The feed consisted of 16 cwt of barley, 2 cwt soya meal, ½ cwt fish meal, minerals and molasses. Doing this every day took up a lot of time. I did not have to work on Christmas Day, but I did on Boxing and New Year's Day. Most of the latter was spent defrosting pipes, after a heavy snowfall and frost.

With the New Year came worse weather, reaching a climax in mid-February. On the worst morning I got my car stuck in a drift on the farm drive, it had to be pulled out by a tractor. Feeding time was at its longest as we had run out of straw on the silage pits and I had to cart it from a nearby barn. Luckily the long cold mornings were broken by a very welcome cup of tea and cake from Mrs Taylor.

It was also about this time I had my most painful experience, while operating complicated equipment, I stuck a dung fork into my foot and suffered for my stupidity for the next two weeks.

The onset of spring was confirmed by a seemingly endless trail of fertilizer lorries to be unloaded in the sleet and rain! Some of the spring- calves duly produced, one old girl 'Penny' produced non-identical Hereford twins. The week before, the BBC had made a request on radio for a pair of such calves, and on 5 March a film crew came to film them. They were later used as an example on the documentary 'The Transplanted Self' shown in the autumn.

Eventually the real spring arrived and it was very wet. Luckily we had put in all but sixty acres of the corn in the

autumn. Also came the spring store sales. It was actually quite sad to see the cattle I had raised being sold!

The most hectic time of the year was the silage season in June, and unfortunately it did not go at all smoothly. Most trouble came from the self-propelled forage harvester. After several breaks, ranging from two hours to three days, it was sent back and a different make and model purchased. The weather was dreadful also, and another problem was removing tractors and silage trailers from the mud.

After silage came hay, a second cut of silage and more hay, then straw, making sure all the barns were full so as not to be caught short in the coming winter.

Despite all the animals being out, I still managed to catch ringworm, but luckily it was only very mild. One of the biggest messes I created was with the first fertilizer application on grass. I managed to turn the field into a yellow and green striped blanket, at least it showed me the value of nitrogen!

All too quickly the harvest was in and the days getting shorter. The combine was greased and put away, along with the baler. As the last cart of bales was pulled into the yard I could remember exactly the same moment the year before, and it seemed only months ago rather than a year.

I am in no doubt as to the value of the year, as I came on to the farm virtually an ‘agricultural virgin’; there was never a day went past without learning something: animal husbandry, crop protection, arc welding or just what plain hard work was like. I may have sampled a greater variety of skills at a college but I feel I benefited from the full-time paid work, with the always changing saga of farm life, not only our farms, but the surrounding ones. Also not only watching the agricultural year go full circle but being part of it.

I was very sad when it came for me to leave, it had been one of the most enjoyable and fast moving years of my life. I am sure the experience and information I gained will be of the utmost use in coming years at the University. If one word could sum it up I think it would be invaluable.

Dairy farming on the Sussex Weald

'One of the first things he asked to know was whether I was any relation to Mad Jack Fuller – this gentleman was a local M.P. in the last century, who gained notoriety when he had a false church tower built on realizing that the real tower was not visible from his house.'

Joe Fuller

Plumpton Agricultural College suggested that a Mr R of B Farm, near W, might be able to employ me as a cowman for my year's practical farm experience. My first personal contact with Mr R. was when he telephoned me to arrange an interview on receipt of an exploratory letter I had written. One of the first things he wished to know was whether I was any relation to Mad Jack Fuller – this gentleman was a local M.P. in the last century, who had gained notoriety when he had a false church tower built on realizing that the real tower was not visible from his house. He was not going to lose a bet about the visibility of the tower from his house that he had entered into with a fellow M.P. Recalling the story I replied with relief that I was not, he considered this a pity, Mad Jack's qualities were apparently admirable. Whilst recovering from this slight blow to my confidence, he was instructing me how to reach the farm, finishing with the salutary comment that 'Only a dumb cluck would not be able to find it.'

I took my father's car to the interview, double checking every signpost. I was somewhat anxious because the job outlined by Mr R sounded desirable and I knew that there was intense competition for such jobs. I thought back over the advice I had been given at school concerning interviews; this would be a good chance to put it into practice.

On arrival I met Mr C, the head cowman, who told me he would like me to do the afternoon milking with him. I palled, never having milked before.

It was interesting doing a job under 'test' conditions, fearing one's every move was being scrutinized. We had a wide ranging discussion and his candid style impressed me.

Mr R apparently was a gentleman, not a business man. He had a good deal of private income that enabled him on the whole to run his farm as a hobby. He lived off his private income which not only allowed him a huntin', shootin', fishin' life style but also enabled him to put capital into the farm. This unfortunately often took the form of selling cottages to service his large overdraft with the bank. He would however only receive part of the proceeds from such sales as other members of his family were entitled to a share. He had incurred a debt by building a new 10:10 herringbone milking parlour, subsequent huge increase in the interest rate had caused him financial embarrassment. Apart from the bank, one of his largest creditors, a local feed company, cut off his credit while I was working there. Naturally this caused great consternation, cutbacks were made all round, a major one being a 50% reduction in concentrate feed to the cows. As it was winter time, the consequent reduction in milk yield brought home a sharp lesson in economics. Mr R sold one of the estate cottages to gain a temporary reprieve. Mr C said that even though Mr R had other acute problems, and unfortunately he suffered badly from diabetes, he was not one to let his problems get on top of him; after all he could always take to the air. He had a Tiger Moth 1948 aeroplane which he used to fly from one of the smoother fields on the farm. Having been in the R.A.F. he could perform loop the loops, falling leaves and dive bomb you, most disconcerting when fetching in the cows. The machine was not insured and very seldom serviced and when I heard that he had advertised in the Farmers Weekly for any parts found in fields that might have dropped

off his plane during flight I was glad I had declined his offer of a ‘spin’.

I hope I have not given the impression that Mr R was an inconsiderate man, for he was not, he would give you all your entitlements without quibbling or making you wait. Mr C told me that I would receive the full basic agricultural wage for my age (not something that other potential employers had promised me). There would also be a considerable amount of overtime going. This meant that for the first time I could become financially independent, a fact much appreciated by my family. I opened a bank account and saved as much money as I could. I bought myself a car and during the summer had a wonderful holiday touring round Europe. These are not negligible by-products of a year’s practical experience!

One of the questions Mr C asked me was whether I was able to get up early in the mornings. I readily replied yes, at that time thankfully ignorant of what it was to get up at 4.30 a.m. and go out in the rain and bring in eighty reluctant cows through piles of mud. The year taught me what hard physical work and English weather really were, experiences I won’t forget if I ever come to manage men myself.

Mr C told me of the other two employees on the farm, B and I, or the Old Sweats as Mr R used to affectionately refer to them. I found that I had the uncanny knack of always going off to have some tea or tiddle when there was work to be done. B who was I’s brother-in-law and past retiring age was a very skilled craftsman. The work he did was sound and lasting, the only problem being that he seemed able to spend an infinite amount of time searching for the correct materials. I had many interesting discussions with B and learnt a great deal about the history of farming in the area, his experience spanned sixty years. B and I’s favourite pastime was moaning about the management of the farm and the work they had to do, mainly building jobs. It was interesting to hear the comments they made on the actions and attitudes of their employer. If I ever

employ men, I will remember what a tricky task it is to motivate them to work willingly and considerately.

The farm supported about eighty five pedigree Guernsey cows. Mr C gave me a few facts and figures about the farm which at the time I did not understand. He was a patient man though and during the year he took time to explain many of the figures produced by I.C.I and the Milk Marketing Board (MMB) which affected the management of the unit. This enabled me to have an insight into the farm as a whole, the I.C.I. forecasts and recommendations being particularly interesting. The MMB told us that the herd average fat content of the milk was 4.7% and the average total solids 13.9%. They placed us in a class 21 of their scheme and told us our twelve month average cell count was 240,000. The cows that produced these figures were milked in a 10/10 herringbone parlour with automatic feeding and gates. Eighty cows taking about 2 ½ hours to milk.

The farm consisted of 150 acres of Sussex Weald with a heavy clay topsoil, which caused the ground to become waterlogged during heavy rain. Practically all the land was south facing with a large number of woods and copses dividing up the fields and providing shelter. Autumn calving was practiced and AI used exclusively. During the winter months the cows were housed in cubicles, these having either a rammed chalk base or a rendered surface covering material called ‘Cieka’ which acted as an insulator. Wood shavings were used in both cases to encourage the cows to use the cubicles. The cows were fed silage from behind an electric fence, a Parmiter block cutter being used to transport the silage from the clamp. The silage was made by contractor, usually two cuts were taken and no additives used. The cows had access to a mineral lick and during milking were fed up to 3 kg of high energy 16% protein cake. The calves were reared on acid milk replacer after an initial three days on colostrum. They were weaned at about six weeks on to calf weaner pellets and best hay. At five months their diet was changed to calf-

rearer nuts, this being supplemented by hay and straw, or grass depending on the time of year. During the summer many of the followers were kept on rented grazing. At the time the policy was to increase the herd so that a large number of the followers were kept, many of which would enter the herd after calving at about two years.

Mr C outlined my work to me. This entailed working for eleven days and then having three days off, doing the afternoon milking everyday I was working and all the milking every other weekend. During the weekends when I worked, I did all the feeding, littering and checking of the animals. I took part in all the seasonal jobs on the farm such as haymaking, straw carting, muck spreading etc.

Combining the many discussions I had with Mr C and my practical work, the year enabled me to build up intimate knowledge of the running and problems of this type of dairy unit. Knowledge that I am sure will be useful in time to come.

Finally in our long talk Mr C told me something of himself. He told me the major influence in his life was his strict Methodist faith. This led us to go to meetings together and have many thought provoking debates. I am afraid that my agnostic views changed little over the year, and this lead to a little friction between us. But it was this very friction that brought home to me one of the most important aspects of the year's work, that I was learning to live and work harmoniously with people of different work experience and attitude.

P.S. When I finally had my interview with Mr R it consisted of a detailed list of my examination results and whether or not I played rugger. I have very fond memories of Mr R and his big family on the farm.

Hard work with crops in East Anglia

'Unfortunately my first impression came as a bit of a shock: the yard was inches deep in mud and cattle muck.'

P Fenn

When I first found out that I would have to work on a farm for a year before starting at University I was very apprehensive about the prospect. However, I found a job much quicker than I had thought possible and was pleased to accept an invitation for an interview and a chance to see the farm. Unfortunately my first impression came as a bit of a shock: the yard was inches deep in mud and cattle muck from the various boxes and stalls was scattered around the farm.

The farm management consisted of Mr Robbins and his son John. They take a student nearly every year for a year's experience to supplement the regular staff, although due to various cuts in the farm's scope I may have been the last to 'enjoy' their hospitality.

Although I was offered the job I did have cause at times to regret it. One of my friends, now doing Agriculture and Horticulture at Leeds, was after the same job and was passed over in my favour. He went on to find a job on a much bigger, money no object farm, where he spent all his time driving around, doing less work and earning more money than me. But on reflection I believe I may have been better off in my experience as he did not witness at first hand the constraints put on a business where there is a limited amount of money available.

The first few weeks of working on a farm turned out to be a bit of a shock for me. I spent three weeks doing absolutely nothing but pulling fat hen and nettles and thistles out of sugar beet fields. After the first day I was bent double and was in pain bent over or standing up. I did not believe that this could possibly last for long, but the days dragged slowly into weeks

and the weeks passed. But after a week or so my back got used to being constantly bent, and some of my blisters healed. So much so that I decided that this was after all not such a bad job, stuck in the middle of a field in the fresh air with the sun on my back. So it was here that I met most of the men with whom I would work for the next fifteen months. They ranged from the young boy straight from school, to the fifty five year old workers who had lived on the land all their lives. Although I knew it to some extent already, it was only slowly that it fully dawned on me that I might never know half of what some of these men knew about farming and took completely for granted. It was soon very obvious that going to a university meant absolutely nothing to these men and they were certainly more interested in me as a hard worker and the person I was now. Thoughts of the future cut no ice with them.

Soon I had met all the workers and had become fairly friendly with most of them and I was rapidly getting settled into this new routine. The first few months passed fairly quickly and consisted mainly of two weeks of harvesting early potatoes and two months of carrying bales from the fields to the barn with a tractor without a cab and so on light soils it was a rather unpleasant task mainly getting covered in dirt and chaff. It was always surprising the uncomfortable places that the straw found its way to. This was one job that was definitely made harder by the ‘roads’ around the farm that were really dirt tracks. In the summer they were rutted and dusty and in the winter they were rutted and very muddy. A regular early summer job was road repair with sand and stone from a nearby quarry and running over it with a two ton vibrating roller.

That first summer is chiefly remembered for very long days with aching arms and an aching left leg, as the tractor had heavy non-assisted steering, and there were sixteen bales on the arms above the front wheel, and a very heavy clutch. The warm days could not last forever and summer turned to autumn and then to winter with the start of the sugar beet

campaign. For our sugar beet we used a single row Standen Rapide tanker and carted the beet back to the farm on to a concrete pad from where it was loaded on to the lorry and taken to the Ipswich factory as permits became available. Fortunately this was a job I did only once a week as the boy that normally drove the loads from field to yard went to college one day a week. This job mainly entailed carrying loads from the field and between loads we would walk up and down the rows which had been harvested, picking up the missed beet, topping them if needed and putting them on the lopped row to be picked up on the next round. This was unpleasant when it was wet or freezing, because the tractor used was an old open Ferguson. I was lucky that the driver of the harvester believed that while I was there I should be shown as much as possible so he let me drive the harvester and instructed me on belt replacement, greasing and general maintenance of the machine. This was the easy way of harvesting sugar beet because in the middle of December when it was very cold and wet three of us had to spend four days hand harvesting an area of beet where the roots of the beet had blocked the drains and it had become so waterlogged that the harvester could not be driven on it. That was a very wet few days, although it was fairly warm while you were working. In fact it was very warm compared to the activities of the next few days.

Another of my winter jobs was to pick up sugar beet tops which were rowed up by the harvester, with a buckrake and loader, put them in a forage box and spread them in rows out on the cows winter stamping grounds, so it was one row every five yards. The electric fence was moved five yards morning and afternoon so after each milking they were given a feed of sugar beet tops and would either stay in the field until afternoon milking or until they were brought in the yard at night. I would put out about a dozen rows at a time and depending on where the tops came from it would take between two hours or all day. Sitting on an open tractor when it is

minus ten degrees and snow is falling, it felt like the coldest place on earth at seven thirty in the morning and looking back on it now I wonder why I am already complaining that it is cold walking between lectures.

At the farm I did most of the loader driving and this included most of the mucking out of the cow yards, milking and beef yards and all the boxes and stalls, some of which had been built one hundred years ago and were not meant for tractors. So I would spend a week at a time virtually covered in muck and ignored by my friends while I mucked out the cattle and tried not to demolish all the buildings, although quite often I knocked out pieces of wall or broke one or two roof supports.

It always seemed that I was breaking some piece of machinery, never by reckless or inconsiderate use, but just because of bad luck. If anything was worn out and ready to break it was always me that was using it. The worst thing was when I did what John Robbins considered to be impossible. I snapped one of the box sections supports on the loader although you could see it had already been partly broken. I still had to show him the loader before he believed I had broken it. But I must admit he never seemed at all worried or upset at what I broke, admittedly most of the machinery was fairly old and was only repaired after damage, newer parts were never bought.

Throughout the year that I worked on the farm I had the opportunity to try a great many of the normal farm jobs and had the advantage of coming fairly regularly into contact with the cattle, both milk and beef. On the livestock side it was mainly a matter of feeding and rounding up. We disbudded and castrated (using a ring) all our calves which were of course born on the farm and were either pure Friesians for milk replacement and steers for beef or Friesian x Hereford crosses which went for beef production. The system was a rather long thirty months involving two summers on grass and three winters inside with the animals being sold sometime

during the last winter, or more rarely during the last summer if the farm needed some cash.

In the year I tried my hand at spraying, which I disliked doing as not many safety precautions were taken, fertilizer spreading, using a one ton capacity vari-spread of which most of my time was spent on the seemingly endless task of putting compound and straight nitrogen fertilizer on the two hundred or so acres of grass scattered all over the county, which involved up to ten miles of travelling to get to the meadows and the same to get back. I undertook various seed-bed preparation tasks during the year such as disking, harrowing, rolling and rotavating. The only main tasks that I did not have a chance to try were ploughing, combining and bailing. But to do these would have caused a lot of resentment as most of my tasks were not 'boys' jobs which some thought I should have been doing, but the type of task the experienced men undertook. Although I was only there for experience it was thought I should not jump up the ladder so quickly.

Looking back at the year I can see that we suffered due to old, un-serviced machinery which led to much needless time wasting, especially at the start and end of a day, as well as a bad case of non-investment on the farm to bring some unsatisfactory machinery up to a higher level. We desperately needed a new grainstore, this year grain was for a time kept almost in the open. Perhaps some changes will be made with the money that will come in from the sale of the dairy herd which must go before the first of January 1981. I shall definitely be going back to see if anything has changed.

So after I have finished my year I can now say I have actually experienced most of the things mentioned in the lectures I receive. I thoroughly believe that doing an agricultural course with no experience is a waste of time, even though this is really a science based course. During the year I like to think I found out quite a bit about life. As it was the first time I had lived outside school and had been with other people who worked for a living; their whole outlook was different from

mine and it was a very good experience to see how others lived their lives. On the actual farming side, I would have liked to have been told more about the administration and finances of the farm, but this was an afterthought and not actually achieved. But I must admit I enjoyed my year of work as it was a chance to have enough money and time to do all I wanted to do and hopefully a help in some way financially to my first year of university.

‘Managing’ sows and sheep from scratch

‘My practical year was spent on a farm near Abingdon … I got the job by travelling round the area, asking at any prosperous looking farm whether they would like to employ a student for a year.’

J Franklin

My practical year was spent on a farm near Abingdon, some twenty miles from Reading. I got the job by travelling round the area, asking at any prosperous-looking farm whether they would like to employ a student for a year. At most places I was told there was no work. However, the Sunday before Easter at about five o’clock, I called in at Glebe Farm. I went to the house and was told yes, if I could get a reference from school, I could have a job.

Having supplied references, I turned up on the first Monday in August, to find I was the first person there, by five minutes, which must be better than being late Very soon the other staff began to arrive, numbering nine in all; three of us new students, four old students and two full-time employees. Then,

at 7.30 a.m. out came the boss who immediately sent the full timers and the older students off for the day, then asked us our names; Dick, Will and myself were soon dispatched on our tasks for the day.

The first month, being the harvest, we were too tired to notice anything, and it went past very quickly. The second month, I was assigned to the post of under-pigman, with the view to taking over the pig herd myself after a month. This was the way most of the farm was run, especially the animal side, two months on, two months off.

During the first month on pigs, I learnt a fair bit about pigs, and a lot about what could be neglected in the way of short cuts to knocking off.

By this time, all the older students had left, and two new students had arrived, one of whom came from the Agricultural Training Board. He was fat, unfit and lazy, but we soon set about changing that.

After my month as under pigman, I took over, not at all sure that I could manage, a herd of some two hundred and fifty breeding sows, nine boars, and piglets taken to store weight. The idea was that the sows were served indoors by boars in pairs, then moved outside in large fields. Then, when a milk line showed, they were taken into farrowing fields, where they remained until weaned at four weeks.

However at first, many sows farrowed in the wrong fields and had to be transported surreptitiously with their litters, to a farrowing field. This practice was frowned on by the boss, if caught, and by us, as it took time to move them from their huts. We soon learnt the hard way, which sows could be manhandled and which not, by climbing in the hut with them.

Towards the end of my month on pigs, my spirits began to lift, safe in the knowledge that I would have two months away from them. Wrong. I was told in my last week that the boss wanted to prolong my agony. It wasn't as if I had been very successful, achieving weaning averages of under nine per sow. So I had another month.

After the pigs, I had a soft life to contend with. This consisted of odd jobs, like fencing, collecting logs for the boss's fire and generally helping where needed.

The next job on the list to be avoided was lambing. This consisted of helping Joe, the shepherd, until he became Joe the tractor driver and had to go spraying. After that you were left on your own.

I thought I had got away with lambing as Harry got the job to start with. However, Harry always made his mistakes when the boss was about, leading the latter to considering him an idiot, unable to look after the sheep flock. So I got the job, a week before Joe went spraying. The good thing about lambing was it guaranteed 'extra' money by working long hours, and every third morning, an early start. Once Joe went spraying, I was left on my own, with just occasional helpers.

The general routine was pretty easy. It consisted of getting the lambed ewes out of the main pens and into individual pens with their lambs., But before this could be done, the individual pens had to be checked to see which lambs and ewes could be turned into a larger pen, and before that you had to see which of the larger multiple pens could take any more ewes and lambs and were still young enough to mix with the ones you wanted to put in with them.

If you had no room anywhere, you could sit down and pray (swear) or make another pen out of a corner of a pen with ewes waiting to lamb. Thus, it could be about nine o'clock before any new born lambs were moved into individual pens.

After 'moving around' came feeding hay and concentrates, hay was easy, concentrates not so. Eighty large ewes pushing one way made it difficult for me to push the other way and spread the food adequately. I would rather feed lions than sheep, as it is quicker and requires much less effort.

After these difficult jobs came the 'restful' jobs, such as bottle-feeding hungry lambs (which involved milking some very recalcitrant ewes), tidying up etc.

My life was further complicated later by being forced to put lambs and ewes out in fields, due to lack of room. They went out too early, as it turned out. This meant I had to feed sheep cobs to the ewes and check the field for poor or dead lambs. I didn't worry about dead ewes, as you could see them from the road and other people could pick them up with the land rover.

After the sheep work, I was assigned to help the permanent pigman, a new addition to the workforce. Jason was tall, very thin, with a prominent chin, sunken eyes and a quiet outlook on life. Working on pigs with Jason was good, as he was a very competent stockman, and I hope I learnt a lot from him.

Soon, another permanent pigman, Alf, arrived. His fault turned out to be a very short temper, which proved to be good fun when set off. This caused a New Zealander to take great delight in baiting him. Shane came from South Island, and was here on holiday from his regular jobs of managing one of the largest farms there and running a plant hire firm. It turned out he found everything funny in some respect.

While I was working on the farm, the boss decided to install a new drier for the harvest. He also decided to save money and install it himself (ourselves). This was a mistake. It took us some three months to install it from the groundwork to getting it running, during which time we had to put the barley through the old drier; which was very boring, involving starting it up at 7.30 a.m. and correcting it about every hour.

But putting the new drier in was great fun, involving up to eight of us clambering over the building, rebuilding it to allow things to fit, such as the burner. The method of passing implements from one end to the other involved shouting a warning, then throwing it so that if the catcher tried to reach it he would fall from where he was perched. Despite this, we only lost one hammer, inside the drier.

We had just finished the drier as the wheat became fit, and this was left to Alf, the maintenance man to run, as I was just leaving.

My last day on the farm ended hot, hung-over and very, very exhausted, having spent it stubble burning. This called for the feet of Sebastian Coe, the conscience of Nero and a total lack of concern for personal safety. Oh, and a box of matches and a fork. Despite all this, I hope to be back next summer.

Work with crop and pig enterprises

'I had a difficult time looking for a job. Indeed the description 'difficult' would be an understatement, it was tough, enduring rejections – '

Andrew Downs

My pre-university practical farming experience was based within a ten mile radius of home - a small village in the heart of East Anglia. The limit of ten miles was not arbitrary – basically it was about as far as I could cycle comfortably and still manage to eat and sleep at home.

It may seem that I was not too willing to leave home, that I was a bit of a mummy's boy who would be unable to fend for himself if he left the secure environment of his home. Well, I must admit that was one of the reasons why, when I wrote off for jobs all around the country (obtained from the Farmers Weekly of course), I was always able to shrug off lightly the multitude of phrases, such as 'Sorry,' 'We feel unable,' 'Unfortunately,' which I received in my replies.

You will probably ascertain from the above, that I had a difficult time looking for a job. Indeed the description 'difficult' would be an understatement, it was tough, enduring rejections – I needed stamina and a philosophical approach, on

the basis of ‘never mind, there must be a job somewhere if you can find it’.

What prevented me from pulling my hair out through desperation (apart from the fact it hurts), was that I had with foresight booked a summer student job in a local chicken processing factory (feathered to frozen item). This allowed me a breathing space of nine weeks to find a job on a farm. Apart from the time it gave me (i.e. during which I would be earning money), I found it a valuable experience of factory life – in the sense that while I was working there I could have been classed as a typical factory automaton.

I have already let it slip that I wasn’t too enthusiastic about leaving home – but I did not make my reasons too explicit. They were quite simply that I had a lot of ties at home (monetary wise!). I had some motorbikes to repair and sell and, on a social side, I had a lot of friends to whom I owed drinks (from my poor 6th form days), plus a rugby career I wanted to follow up at the local rugby club. All in all, I really wished to have a taste (though not 100% - since I was living at home) of life as a working man – the satisfaction of a hard day’s work and some well earned money at the end of the week.

And so after setting my scene in the rural landscape of Suffolk, surrounded by farms, but with not a farm to work on, though luckily temporarily employed, I would have to conclude that my letter writing efforts very sadly lacked results.

I found a job after six weeks, or, let me say, my mother found it (through a fellow nurse during a night-shift at the local hospital). My mother’s friend’s husband was an accountant who knew a farmer whose students had just left him (note reason unspecified).

In this case it may seem personal contacts triumphed over letter writing efforts in my search for a job. However I would not completely knock down my letter writing efforts since had it not been through my mother telling all her friends that her

son was having a terrible time trying to find a job on a farm – I would have never found this job – or the next one I was to have after another six weeks! But all of that later.

Obviously I immediately followed through the chance; I phoned up the farmer to ask him if I could see him that night (Thursday), cycled ten miles there and back – after negotiating a trial period of two weeks; finished work at the chicken factory (although on good terms, since I may have to work there again this summer) and started the next Monday.

His farm, similar to the one I was to work on six weeks later, though I would not say typical of farms in the area (indeed I would not like to say there are any typical farms in my area), consisted of one hundred acres of arable – all cereals (I did not notice any fields that had been used for break crops) and an eighty sow pig unit – all the pigs being fattened.

Why did I leave his farm after only six weeks? Well it would have been less, had I been offered a suitable job earlier! My reasons for wanting to move were more on the management side and not concerned with the physical aspects of the job. Basically the farmer managed me as one would a sub-human dumb slave – all of the things I am not. I had worked as a casual labourer on a local farm during the holidays and every Saturday since I was thirteen. That farmer was a friend of the family and always treated me on a personal basis as one would treat a friend (and a stranger) with politeness, respect and a touch of humour. Therefore this treatment was completely alien to me and I did not like it; but apart from that, I did not feel I was going to learn a lot apart from the intricacies of using a shovel.

So again my mother heard of a job going on a farm also ten miles from home – I snapped it up. The job suited me down to the bone. I was to have the job until a young chap to whom she had promised the job left school this summer. The man I was to work with (Robert) had worked on the farm for twenty years, ever since he had left the village school, and had literally witnessed the change from horses to tractors and from

four labourers to two. Robert was in fact the foreman; the farmer, a lady, was seventy six, and although old was mentally very lively. Basically all she did was meet the salesmen and pay the bills; Robert ran the one hundred acre farm, the crops were winter wheat, spring barley, winter barley and winter beans. There was an eighty sow unit on which all the pigs were fattened, thirteen sheep and one house cow.

Apart from six weeks from mid May to the end of June, when I travelled abroad with a friend, I worked on the farm for a whole year and enjoyed myself very much.

So much for perseverance you say, what did he learn? Well this is the hardest question to answer. It is hard because there is no definite answer. The boundaries of my learning and my experiences on the farm are too long, too diffuse to encompass in a simple answer. I would approach answering this question by asking another: 'What is the difference regarding my farming experience and attitude between me now and one year ago?'

Regarding my experience, a number of relevant points arise, which I shall lay out in the next few paragraphs. After these I will attempt to put in total how my farming year's experience has changed my attitude - for the time being at least – towards agriculture/farming.

I am definitely more experienced in the enterprises carried out on my farm – although I am still inexperienced in a lot of the enterprises that can be said to be under the scope of agriculture.

I have experienced what must affect most farms, except for the intensive systems, such as chicken production for meat and eggs, that is the changing cycle of events that occur with the seasons..

I have experienced – although I would like to state that it was not new to me – hard, sometimes tedious and often quite dirty work in all elements – which is the basis of farming even though in many cases a lot of the physical, dirty side of the work is now being carried out by machinery.

I have experienced a lot of the necessary routine of the work, particularly concerning animals – with feeding for instance; if one doesn't experience it, it is so hard to appreciate the better working environment (plus the increased efficiency) that can result if money is invested into machinery to cut down a lot of the time spent on routine work such as feeding.

I have benefited from all the experiences encountered in my practical year, no matter how large or small, the sum total experience has affected or changed my attitude to farming in a number of ways, some quite clear, but others so subtle that I will probably never appreciate them.

My attitude towards farm management, which involves a lot of contact with other people, has been strengthened considerably, particularly by my experience on the first farm! To treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself would be a very suitable motto, I feel. It has been strengthened not only in the way that it has become more important in my outlook, but also in my belief that it can be and is a major factor regarding efficiency, smooth running (and even enjoyment) not only of farming but of any enterprise requiring team work.

It seems a good point to end the essay on, and to round off I would like again to mention how much I enjoyed myself, not only on the farm, but off it during my year's practical. I would recommend the idea to anyone thinking of going to university no matter what degree they might be taking.

Pigs and pick-your-own in Kent

'The first thing that happened on arrival was the unprovoked attack by a neighbour's Alsatian dog, ruining a pair of jeans and creating the need for a tetanus injection.'

S Meineck

Until I was in the sixth form at school I did not have a clue about a future career, except that I did not want a job involving a lot of indoor or office work. Being more science orientated I wanted an outdoor job which utilized a lot of scientific knowledge in a practical way. This reduced my choice to either veterinary science or agriculture. On examining the qualifications needed for these subjects I decided that agriculture was for me, veterinary science requiring A-level grades that were probably beyond my reach.

I have not been brought up on a farm or had any real contact with country life, the rest of my family being involved in engineering. This was my main difficulty when job hunting, as most farmers were very reluctant to take on someone with no previous experience on a farm. I wanted a job on a mixed farm with easy travelling distance from home (Epsom).

Job hunting started in about May 1979 before the A-level exams. I wrote to about fifteen farmers after seeing adverts in the Farmers Weekly and from these I was only invited for one interview, the other farmers either writing to say they wanted someone with experience or not writing back at all, despite my enclosure of a stamped addressed envelope. I went for an interview on a farm in Kent, which was an ideal farm, quite near home. The first thing that happened on arrival was the unprovoked attack by a neighbour's Alsatian dog, ruining a pair of jeans and creating the need for a tetanus injection.

The attitude of the farmer at this farm was terrible, he paid his students badly and told me that he thought students ought to pay him to work there because we needed the experience to enter university. On hearing this I told him politely that his attitude to students was unacceptable.

I eventually found a farm near Reigate in Surrey after a hard morning travelling round the countryside calling in at suitable looking farms. This method, I thought was the most interesting way of finding a job and it proved to be the most successful.

The farm I chose was about 150 acres and involved an intensive pig unit which concentrated on the breeding of high quality, disease free pigs for sale as breeding stock. It was part of the Acredicross-Seghero Group, well known in the pig trade.

The remainder of the farm was a soft fruit and vegetable pick-your-own enterprise, growing essentially strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, blackberries, runner beans, broad beans, French beans, courgettes, potatoes and sweetcorn.

The farm owner and pig stockman were very pleasant indeed and the other workers were friendly. The terms of employment were fair, being paid the Agricultural minimum wage, which was to be raised a couple of pounds after I had settled in. On being offered a job I readily accepted and started work on the pig unit in the third week in August.

The first week I was not worked very hard, which was good because I was not used to a lot of manual work. I found it extremely tiring but soon settled into the routine of farm work, travelling fifteen miles from home by motorbike to start at 7.30 a.m. and finishing at 4.30 p.m.

I worked with the pigs for six months, during which I tried to gain experience in all the operations of the unit. The stockman was very helpful in training me so that I could get as much job variation as possible.

The pig unit consisted of a herd of 150 sows, aiming for a total of about eight farrowing a week. The sows farrowed in Lambert Gherkin farrowing houses and the piglets were

weaned early at two to two and a half weeks into nine cage pig boxes. Flat decks were also used for piglets of the same age. I was involved in all the activities of these stages, including ear marking, tail docking, iron injections and the general feeding and cleaning.

Right from the piglet stage, selection for potential breeding stock took place, looking for abnormalities and counting of the teats. None of the boars were castrated. On reaching 15-20 kg the pigs were transferred to either Trowbridge pens or rearing houses. The potential breeding stock went into the Trowbridges which were kept bedded with straw.

The final stage was the fattening house where pigs were taken up to bacon weight, being fed on high protein pelleted feed by automatic Big Dutchman equipment. On reaching bacon weight, potential breeding stock were fattened in pens of four or five pigs in a separate building where they could be kept on straw and their food conversions calculated.

While I was working on the farm a new sow house was erected, sows being kept in individual slatted pens. This made the working conditions much better, although I don't know what the long term effect on the sows will be.

One job I was given I always looked forward to was delivering breeding stock boars to farms, mainly in the south of England. This provided a welcome change and made a good day out.

I think that the most important thing learned from working on the pig unit was the correct treatment of pigs and being able to handle them properly and predict, in most cases, their reactions.

One of the most interesting jobs on the farm was the breeding programme, carried out to obtain two kinds of pig: bulky, broad pigs for good hams and jointed meat and longer, leaner pigs for bacon and other cuts. Some artificial insemination was carried out, but stock boars were mostly used, a sow being served twice, morning and evening or evening and the following morning. While I was there I

noticed the gradual improvement in pig quality especially in the two lines mentioned.

For the remainder of the time on the farm I worked on the land, only helping out with the pigs at weekends. The pick-your-own enterprise was very profitable, attracting people from a wide area, some people coming from London for a day out in the countryside. The farm was very attractive, with long south facing slopes, an ornamental lake of two and a quarter acres which was excellent for fishing, and an old stately home at the top of the hill overlooking the fruit fields and the lake. I am sure this alone attracted people to the farm during the summer months.

As well as routine tractor maintenance, the tractor work I did involved towing trailers, harrowing, power harrowing, rolling, straw carting and laying straw in the strawberries. Other jobs included several weeks fencing in the blackberries and raspberries planted last year. This was in addition to the stock fences erected around the farm. These were necessary for the cattle grazed in the fields being rented from the farm by a local dairy farmer.

In the summer months things were very hectic because of the fruit picking and I put in a lot of overtime. The jobs were relieved by the employment of about ten casual workers, supervising the selling of fruit and pruning the raspberries this being one of the major summer chores.

Since the previous December I had lived in a caravan in the corner of one of the fields by the lake. I bought the caravan because I was tired of sliding off my bike on the ice, which I always managed to find, even after a slight frost. Living on site meant that I didn't have to travel to and from work every day and it was also an advantage to the farm because I used to check the pig unit late in the evening, turn off the irrigation pump in the summer evenings and I was always available for overtime. Vermin control was my most enjoyable pastime and it also enabled me to have cheap, tasty evening meals when I cooked the rabbit, pigeon and even a squirrel when I was

desperate. In the summer there was no shortage of fresh fruit and vegetables for dinner.

The year on the farm was most enjoyable, despite the hard work and the cold, icy mornings. I found that I learnt a lot about the aspects of farming that I was involved with, but most important, I think it gave me a better outlook on life than I had when I first left school. I learnt to get on with other people I worked with and also learnt a fair amount about being independent which I am sure helped me in the very first few weeks at university.

One thing I was worried about in taking a year off from study was that I would not be able to settle back into the routine of study. After spending just a few weeks here, I think that a year off has in fact helped me to study, as working on a farm has put the university work into perspective and has given me something to relate the work to.

My final conclusion is that a year's work prior to university is a valuable and enjoyable experience.

Farming on the Belvoir Estate farm

'Thanks to a very complicated family connection and I think a certain amount of alcohol at a wedding, I found myself being offered a job on the Belvoir Estate on the Lincolnshire, Leicestershire border.'

Nicholas Johns

Being the son of a dentist and having relatively little previous farming experience, I immediately found myself in the category of UCCA applicants, 'required to gain up to one

year's practical experience', as the faculty prospectus so casually refers to three hundred and sixty five days of hard farm work. I should add that I was pleased that I would be able to take a year's break from academic work instead of simply transferring from one educational establishment to another.

All this seemed a long way ahead when I firmly accepted the conditional offer from Reading and I think I was more concerned with the prospect of A-levels the following summer at that time. I began to start searching for a farm to work on after Christmas and in my very naïve manner I thought that I should have no problem of finding employment. It soon became very apparent that this was no easy task. The usual replies of 'sorry I don't take students' or more usually the non-replies quickly made me change my view of the British farmer. I did have one reply asking me to come down for an interview, which I rapidly did, but my hopes were as quickly dashed as they had been raised, when I saw the farm and found that I was basically going to be sweated labour from the day I left school to the day I came to Reading. In fact I was never offered the job but I had already decided I did not want to be considered.

I think I was more wary of farmers by now but as time ticked on and I did my A-levels and still I had not found a willing farmer, I began to wonder if I had made the right decision to exclude myself from the only positive chance I had so far.

As so often seems to happen, situations like this suddenly sort themselves out and thanks to a very complicated family connection and I think a certain amount of alcohol at a wedding, I found myself being offered a job on the Belvoir Estate on the Lincolnshire, Leicestershire border about eight miles from Grantham. Naturally I didn't need more than a second to make up my mind and it certainly made me realize that I had made the right decision about the previous job.

First I think it is important to describe the structure of the farm and where it fitted into the estate in general.

Castle Farm forms the biggest single agricultural unit on the Belvoir estate. Of the seventeen thousand acres the estate covers, three and a half thousand are under the control of the farm manager, Mr Ward. There are also extensive areas of woodland controlled by a wood yard manager and a large game department which caters for the sporting interests of the Duke of Rutland who is the owner of the estate. In addition to the estate farm there are a number of tenant farms generally situated on the periphery of the estate.

Of the three and a half thousand acres under the control of Mr Ward, two thousand acres are sown with winter wheat, spring barley or peas – the latter grown under contract with a local freezing company. A hundred and thirty acres of potatoes are grown, mainly Red King Edwards and some Desirée. The other main crop is sugar beet of which there is just over a hundred acres. In addition to the extensive crop production there is a flock of six hundred Scotch half-bred (mules and Leicester x Cheviot) ewes which lamb from mid-February. There is a suckler herd of just under a hundred Blue Grey cattle, calving from September and a varying number of store cattle.

The machinery list for the farm is obviously extensive, Massey Ferguson being the chief supplier, with a good sales and service company based at Grantham. In all there are eighteen tractors plus four caterpillar tractors and three Massey Ferguson 750 combines. Naturally the cultivating equipment is also extensive. The amount of machinery indicates the size of this particular agricultural system.

The soil varies, as may be expected on a large farm, from a very red ironstone based soil around the area known as Terrace Hills, to a heavy clay at the other extreme of the farm. It is important to note that much of the land which the farm covers was extensively worked by open cast mining for the ironstone. It was reclaimed some twenty to thirty years ago which coincides with the time Mr Ward has been the farm manager.

There is a labour force of sixteen men which includes a full time shepherd and stockman and also an assistant manager who is Mr Ward's elder son, and a foreman.

I started work in mid-September just as the main bulk of harvest was drawing to a close. At my request I was immediately concerned with the sheep and although many other aspects of farming interest me, the enjoyment I get from working with sheep still remains very strong. I had seen a bit of lambing before this so I was not totally unfamiliar with the ovine species. It may seem strange to the outsider that there is a full time shepherd for only a six hundred ewe flock because I believe that it is now considered by many authorities that a viable flock size for a full time shepherd is a thousand ewes. I feel I can answer part of this by explaining that most of the sheep grazing is permanent grass spread fairly randomly about the farm. This obviously involves a lot of movement of the flock. It is also and perhaps more significant that there are no purpose built sheep handling facilities which makes the need for a full time shepherd more understandable.

I remained with the sheep on and off for much of the winter and I think this was when I had to learn to take the rough with the smooth. The recent policy of the farm, since the lamb war erupted has been to withhold the majority of the lambs for the New Year hogget trade. The main keep for the lambs during the winter period is kale and swede. I think putting electric netting up in fields of kale and swede for much of the winter could not be called one of the better jobs, but more importantly a very necessary one. I feel it is very important that no student should appear to get an easier or smoother ride than the other farm workers. Most of what you learn particularly on a very large farm is from the men themselves and not so much the manager. It is therefore important to have a good working relationship and a respect for the men.

Lambing is the other side of the coin to putting electric netting up on winter keep. The lambing season was a reasonably successful one with a lambing average of about

1.75 per ewe. I think it was the most enjoyable season in the year for me. However many times I see it, the pleasure I get of seeing a lamb being born and sputtering for its first breath will I think never get old. At the same time I fully realise there are many other aspects to lambing.

After lambing I started to gain a wider sphere of knowledge and spent some time helping with the spring drilling. I found now that I was no longer given the same amount of responsibility as I was with the sheep, which was understandable.

The period between drilling and hay making was one of much diversity for me, ranging from mucking out and carting to potato planting, sheep clipping and dipping and erecting rabbit netting around a forty seven acre field.

Hay making was long and wet and the bails heavy, but by now I found I was again being given more responsibility so I did a variety of jobs including swath turning, carting and obviously stacking.

Hay making almost seemed to roll into harvest and I suddenly found that I was part of a massive system which seemed to change up a gear as the combines started cutting. Having such large combines with an eighteen foot wide cut, the tables had to be removed every time the combines changed fields. They were lowered on to low loading trailers which could be run off their wheels to lay flat on the ground. One of my many jobs during harvest was to move these low loading trailers with about two tons of combine resting on them. This really brought home to me how much I had learned in a year because not in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine when I started on the farm that within the year I would be given such responsibility. I also spent some time in the drying barn where the twenty ton dryer was running for about fifteen hours of the day and using an average thirty gallons of diesel fuel an hour. Obviously there was also a lot of bail carting to do but the barley straw bails weighed nothing compared to the hay bails.

I stayed on an extra week after I had completed my year, mainly to see the end of harvest, but also simply because I enjoyed working there.

I have deliberately only given a brief account of the work I did over the year, because I think what is far more important is the value I gained from doing a year's pre-university farming experience.

Undoubtedly the most important aspect was to become accepted by the farm men because as I said earlier it is from them I gained most knowledge but also because I think it is imperative for every agricultural student to understand the sometimes very delicate labour relations on a farm. Many people would probably disagree with me but I feel the pre-college year for agricultural students should be compulsory. Farmers sons and daughters may not like this view but I feel that they too should spend a year working on another farm because otherwise they will have always been in the privileged situation of being the 'gaffer's' son/daughter, from where they will never gain as much understanding as an outsider would. Also I think another point to make is that working in your holidays does not substitute sufficiently for working every day for a year.

For someone from a non-farming background the pre-university year is also the basis of a new vocabulary, not just I may add four letter words, but farming has a whole string of sometimes very localised words and sayings.

In concluding this report of my own practical year I must make it clear that I do realise how lucky I was to find such a farm, but I would add to students who will soon be looking for a place to work, don't jump at the first opportunity that comes along. After all, the most important thing is to enjoy the year because it will form an everlasting impression in your mind.

3

Farmers’s Sons and Daughters

Farming at home in South Lincolnshire

'I once read in the Farmers Weekly of a Welsh farmer having said that wives are useful for standing in gateways and opening gates. I am sure that farmers must adopt a similar policy with their daughters!'

Isabelle Pridgeon

The farm on which I live is situated two miles to the east of the small market town of Louth in Lincolnshire. It comprises about one hundred and fifty acres of medium loam soil of which thirty acres are permanent grass. Wheat, barley, potatoes and drying peas are also grown.

Being a member of the fifth generation to live at the farm, I have often been involved in the daily work, sometimes not to my liking. I once read in the Farmers Weekly of a Welsh farmer having said that wives are useful for standing in gateways and opening gates. I am sure that farmers must adopt a similar policy with their daughters!

Through the years, I have always enjoyed helping with the sheep and cattle. Lambing time is particularly exciting, especially when I have to rear lambs. I can remember lambs with such names as Fleecy, Skippity, Cherry Blossom, Rhododendron, Sunshine, Loppy, Jacob and Earnie.

One year, which does remain clearly in my mind is 1976. During the autumn half-term I helped to pick potatoes. Due to the dry summer, the yield was low. It rained almost every day of that October week. When conditions were better we would literally poke the potatoes out of the ground with our fingers. A policy was soon adopted of 'if at first you don't succeed, cover it up and leave it.'

My involvement this year has been greater than most years. At the beginning of February a ruptured ewe lambed, unfortunately she did not live for long and I had the job of rearing her two lambs. Being completely black I christened

them Rob and Abel after Robert Mugabe and Abel Muyorewa. A few weeks later they were joined by a lamb from the field which was not doing particularly well. Quite logically I called her Jo after Joshua Nkomo. After persevering for a few weeks with the milk bottle, they soon began to nibble coarse calf starter and a little hay. On weaning them in August, they were eating four pounds of food each a day. However, like all good things there had to be an end. On September 12 they were placed in the van and driven off to the local market. Later that morning, as I stood in the pen waiting for the auctioneer, I realised what a gamble farming really was as far as selling products is concerned. Eventually a small group gathered around consisting of farmers and dealers. The auctioneer encouragingly told them that I wanted thirty pounds for the lambs which was a most optimistic price. However, this was nearly realized as Jo, Rob and Abel made £29.60 each. A few weeks later I received the subsidy, but my heart had sunk as I had left those lambs with blood dripping pitifully from their ears and their eyes gazing thoughtfully around.

We have a herd of forty Lincoln Red cows and use a Charolais bull. This year two sets of twins were born and I looked after a calf from each pair. They were named Buttercup and Daisy due to their fairly light colouration. When I left home to come to Reading they were each eating twelve pounds of food per day and large amounts of hay.

On the Friday when I broke up for Easter holidays, there was a frightening incident at night. A cow had calved the previous day, and now she had a prolapsed uterus. The vet was summoned immediately and the cow removed from the loose box into the yard where a bed of straw had been laid. It was a matter of time and every one worked efficiently. My father fetched the manure filler and a rope was secured around the cow's hind legs. Amid the surprised mooing of the calves, the cow was hoisted into the air. I assisted generally by threading the vet his needle, removing instruments from his case and fetching warm water. Luckily, the job was successful.

One of my tasks has involved doing business while the men are busy on the land. One day I did all the gathering while they were drilling spring barley. At this time my brother had glandular fever so gathering became a regular task. Many people find this monotonous and unproductive, but I find it very satisfying to see the once unsettled cows contentedly munching hay and straw. However hard a farmer works, it is essential that his business affairs are not neglected. I sold several tons of Desirée thirds for sixty pounds per ton, fetched calf milk and quicklettes from the town and booked lambs for the market.

In April it was the annual calf sale. The calves were about fourteen months old and were divided into two lots according to their colour. Unfortunately, last year ten calves died in infancy from E. coli. It is usually the best animals which die and this was no exception, the strong looking yellow bull calves falling victims to the deadly disease. Generally, the yellow calves sell better than the reds because of their Charolais appearance, but this year the yellows made £330 pounds each while the reds made £340.

During May there was a foot and mouth scare at the local market. A pig from a nearby village had been found to have several blisters and the market was closed. No livestock could be moved and the possibility of it all having to be slaughtered was frightening. We had sold some lambs that day for £36. Luckily tests revealed that everything was well and the next morning the animals began to leave.

August was a particularly busy time for me. In the morning and at night I shepherded the sheep and a few cows in the Home Field. I then drove to another field about two miles away, which we rent for summer grazing, to shepherd the cows and calves.

Roguing corn, know locally as ‘havering’ was my main task and I spent hours trudging across fields of flattened Maris Hunstsman wheat, my eyes fixed rigidly on the ground for wild oats. As the day grew to a close, I would amuse myself

by whistling the tunes for ‘Abide with me, fast falls the eventide’ and ‘The day thou gavest, Lord is ended.’ The seed barley, Koru and Georgie also had to be rogued and any wheat was removed. I suppose any crop can be rogued and I even did three acres of peas, making a total of eighty acres.

Combining followed and I was in charge of the drier. It is a responsible job and I soon learnt not to leave it, even for two minutes. The only time I did so was to fetch the Daily Telegraph from the house. When I returned, corn was pouring over the top of the dresser on to the floor. The elevators and dresser were promptly stopped and I biked furiously to the field in which the men were working, needless to say about one mile away. We discovered that the auger was at fault and this was soon repaired. Generally there was no trouble. The Koru barley was liable to pour over the top riddle on to the chaff bag and thus needed constant observation. Most of the corn came in fairly dry, although the Timor wheat had to be combined at 18% moisture content due to the windy conditions that day. I regularly cleaned out the corn pit when different varieties were being combined and spent literally hours brushing behind the elevator to find the last grain.

One of my favourite jobs is droving. This year I took the flock of fifty Suffolk x Lincoln ewes to be dipped. Probably droving cattle is more eventful and I shall never forget the time when our Charolais x Lincoln Red bull, Charlie pushed a police car. As soon as Charlie had walked majestically further up the road, the constable was kneeling on the road inspecting his car, which was luckily not damaged.

There have been several farms sold recently in the area and I attend some of the sales. Many farmers are too busy working to be able to afford the time, but I think it is extremely important to be aware of the land situation locally as well as nationally. In July, a farm in the nearby village of Covenham was sold for £2032 per acre. On the same day the Ministry of Defence sold land at Manby, some of which was still covered with concrete. This block of 270 acres realized £450,000

Farm equipment sales, I have discovered, are often not so informative. If bargains are to be obtained, then you have to go to a sale when other people are working. A group of elderly farmers can invariably be found reminiscing about the 'Depression' and other gloomy subjects. An outsider could quite understandably believe that farmers are quite odd if he could observe them at a sale. Some dress as though they have not a penny in the world and often wear jackets and jumpers on reasonably warm days. There are exceptions though, and in September I really enjoyed a sale. The farmer had died at the ripe age of ninety one and his will had been published at one and a half million pounds.

Being a member of the local Young Farmers Club, I went on an exchange weekend at the beginning of May to the Lake District. On the Saturday we went to visit a hill farmer near Glenridding. His way of life contrasted sharply with that of the typical Lincolnshire farmer. He farmed 4500 acres, most of which was rugged moorland and owned 2700 ewes. It appeared to be a very bleak, hard way of life. The enterprise did have some advantages. There was no £25000 combine to buy, but an occasional tractor and baler for the hay. He was extremely proud of an elaborate penning system similar to those in Australia, which had been built in 1961 for £2000. He obviously found great satisfaction from his work and I believe this is true of many farmers. I find the tasks rewarding and as the saying goes 'A job worth doing is worth doing well.' Over the years I have learnt to do my work thoroughly, whether it is rogueing corn, rearing lambs and calves or simply cleaning out the drier. It always gives me so much more pleasure and the work seems far less demanding. Farming is a most necessary occupation and I would far rather be a shepherdess in the Highlands of Scotland where I could savour the countryside around me, than work in an office or factory. However, every man to his own job!

Sheep farming in Cumbria

‘So after looking at vacancies in the Farmers’ Weekly for a few weeks I found a job which looked suitable and largely through being the only farmer’s son amongst the thirty six applicants, I got the job.’

Justin Adams

Coming from a farming background, many people I spoke to last summer were surprised at my intention to do a ‘practical year’, thinking that I would have had sufficient experience. At that point my experience was from my father’s farm, which is a four hundred acre Duchy of Cornwall leasing at Curry Mallet near Taunton in Somerset. This is primarily a dairy enterprise, with a flock of pedigree Dorset Down sheep for ram breeding and also a small arable acreage. I had worked at home during vacations and had enjoyed it, but I felt that to get the most out of the year I had available I should get away from home and work with a different type of enterprise.

So after looking at vacancies in the Farmers’ Weekly for a few weeks I found a job which looked suitable and largely through being the only farmer’s son amongst the thirty six applicants, I got the job. This was how I found myself working on an upland farm in West Cumbria

It was a great upheaval at first, because it was the first time that I had lived away from home and also because the attitudes and style of farming was very different from what I had been used to. The farm was a 170 acre unit situated in a small river valley and a very exposed moor. This land comprised about 50 acres of flat grassland possible to cut, known as the ‘inbye’, another 50 acres of steep grassland which it was possible to fertilize but not cut, known as ‘bankings’, and the remainder was deciduous woodland and ‘parkland’, which is really enclosed fell, consisting of gorse, bracken, thistles, cotton grass, bog, ticks and very little useful grazing.

The cattle were a mixture of pedigree Limousins used for bull breeding, Hereford-Friesian cross cows, which were crossed with a Limousin to produce stores, and also a few grading up Limousin cross cows, in all about 35 animals. Like a lot of the farms in that area, they also kept 200 deep litter hens, most of the eggs being sold to neighbours.

I was the only full time employed labour on the farm and all the major and physical jobs were done by myself and my employer, Isabelle, who was a 27 year old agricultural graduate and who also happens to be the strongest woman I have come across. She had a very strong and aggressive personality and was known locally for her shot putting and sheep shearing abilities, not to mention her voice which was formidable when the sheepdogs frequently misbehaved. Her father, who was a retired engineer from the nearby Windscale nuclear plant, did most of the minor repair jobs on the farm. There was also a man, Bob, who helped with certain jobs, mostly fencing, in between shift work at Windscale which employed 90% of the labour in the neighbourhood.

Cumbrians have a different attitude to employees than I had been used to, and I was not paid overtime although I worked it constantly. I think this is an inherited characteristic as traditionally the farming is very poor and marginal. There are still farms in the area without mains water and where shearing is done by hand. There is an attitude of suspicion and hostility to authority, and stories of how ‘so and so’ tricked the ministry by having his neighbours sheep as well as his own counted, thus getting a higher hill subsidy, seem to be regarded as a victory over intruding busybodies.

Due to the hard physical labour my nutritional intake rose to 5000 calories daily, almost twice the national average (and none of it due to alcohol). About half my time was spent on stock work, with the greater part of this being sheep work. Unlike the open fell farms, the sheep were gathered regularly for routine procedures, and the standard of husbandry was very good. Worming and vaccination routines were strictly

adhered to, as the results of neglect would become more quickly apparent on the marginal grazing than in better fed lowland sheep. In fact the stock at one time were healthier than me as I managed to contract ringworm and orf simultaneously.

The farm had good sheep handling facilities which was necessary as the ewes were wild and extremely agile, and I soon learned how to handle them with minimal bruising and backache.

Apart from winter feeding, the cows required little attention, except for the bulls which had to be exercised daily, which was quite a pleasant job as they were usually very quiet. With Limousins it seems to be the females which are wild and aggressive, I saw one leap over a seven foot high fence, inclined at the top, at Carlisle market, much to the surprise of the people the other side. Breeding Limousin bulls is a very lucrative enterprise at the moment and it was useful for increasing the turnover of an otherwise very small business. However it is unlikely that the prices will remain sufficiently high for this enterprise to maintain its profitability for many years. There is little money in the ordinary sucklers, so that looking after a cow for a year to produce a calf is barely economic.

One area was reclaimed whilst I was there; it was a very wet acid peat with a pH of 4.4 after the first application of lime. The peat was 3-4 feet thick on a fine alluvial silt interspersed with cobbles (a cobble is a Cumbrian term for any stone up to the size of a small car). So with the aid of a grant from the Ministry of Agriculture this field was drained, fenced, sprayed and drilled with a pioneer crop of shallow rooting stubble turnips.

The draining was an enormous task as we had to shovel 80 tons of gravel to infill to prevent silting up, and as there were places where a tractor and trailer would not go, I carried 15 tons up to 40 yards in plastic buckets. After this we started the fence which was a mile long containing 750 seven foot posts,

most of which I had to hammer in myself., The turnips were direct drilled as ploughing in this area needs a bar point plough and it results in a multitude of stones appearing in the following years. They were just coming up the week I left, but it will be a few years before the success of this reclamation can be judged.

There was a small amount of tractor work, which was mostly haymaking, fertilizing and dung-spreading, all other enterprises being contracted. Due to the unreliability of the Cumbrian weather, they were planning to increase the acreage of silage and make only the bare minimum of hay, and they made a small acreage while I was there.

Most of the skills that I learnt were manual, some of which I learnt on the farm, such as dry stone walling and hedge laying, and others I learnt on courses with the Agricultural Training Board, such as welding, dehorning and castrating. These courses were well organized and I recommend them to anybody wishing to acquire practical skills, not just from the agricultural point of view. I did learn a lot about practical farming and my own capabilities within this sphere. I found it a great challenge as I was fairly regularly cold, wet, tired and lonely, but I learnt how to overcome this sort of hardship, although I never intend to spend another winter living in a caravan. I became more independent, and able to look after myself fairly proficiently which was one of my intentions when I took the job.

I found that there was a greater cultural variation than I had imagined, and a very different outlook; although all farmers seem to complain about the weather, there was little else in common with what I had been used to. But it was not long before I was using the language of byres, stirks, dykes, yowes and wicks and I made myself part of the community. In retrospect, I think that I made the right decision, that I have a wide experience from this and the work I did was well worthwhile.

Varied farm experiences in Suffolk

'Fifteen months of outdoor work has taught me to appreciate the countryside and wildlife more than before. I am no longer quite so ready to call rabbits 'sweet'.'

Penny Williamson

Although at first seeming very daunting, my fifteen months of farming experiences flew by. Despite being advised against it, I worked on my father's farm till Christmas. This was simply due to the lack of openings, six letters ending 'don't call us, we'll call you' and several similar phone calls.

The farm, ten miles from Ipswich in Suffolk, covers 400 acres (160 hectares), consisting mainly of winter wheat but also growing winter barley, spring oats, spring and winter beans and sugar beet as well as sixty acres of woods and small areas of cover for pheasants.

Harvest proved to be my favourite time of the year, due to the lovely hot weather we had and there being very little manual work. Working on my father's farm was fortunate in that I was allowed to drive the combine during mealtimes, and surprisingly enough it was the regular worker and not me who knocked the spout off on a tree. The number of beef cattle on the farm varied from twelve to thirty five during the year, but being so few, only the headlands of fields by the roadside needed bailing, the rest being burnt.

After harvest came the busiest time of the year; ploughing, rolling, harrowing, sub-soiling, cultivating and drilling, all of which occupied me at some time of the year. It is a fairly spray oriented farm and so we did as much spraying as possible before the land became too wet. Unfortunately this point signalled the end of all tractor work and only then did I realize the number of ditches on the farm. Standing in the bottom of half-filled ditches, trimming them out, with rain dripping from

all corners, made me realize that three months work in the summer holidays is no true reflection of farm life as a whole.

At Christmas I decided to treat myself to a week off ditching and instead went turkey and cockerel plucking. It was interesting to meet the different types of people who go turkey plucking, varying from children having time off school, to people collecting their pension. I spent the four days before Christmas on another farm dressing and selling turkeys. I had done this the previous two years also and so was regarded as quite a regular, which allowed me to do the privileged job of the giblets.

The new-year started with clearing a wood of dead elms and replanting oaks, ashes and holly trees on a grant scheme. This continued till the end of January when I worked for three weeks on a neighbouring pig farm. This had seventy breeding sows, the best gilts being sold for breeding and the boars fattened and sold for bacon. The boss, David, had spent three years at Reading doing his agricultural degree and was extremely helpful, allowing me to tooth, tail and inject the piglets, and even let me castrate the boars. After these three weeks, David admitted that I would not have learnt much more by staying the whole year on their farm.

Immediately after being with the pigs, I worked for five weeks on a local dairy farm with seventy Friesians and a small calf rearing unit. Starting work at 4.30 a.m. did not suit me a great deal, but the experience was really good, having never dealt with cows before. Once again I was fortunate enough to be able to milk and carry out the different tasks on my own. I got on so well with the cowman, who had been there for four years, that I was invited back for two weeks in the summer when we put the irrigation equipment out and started irrigating. It was much easier to get up in the summer mornings than in the winter, probably because it was light.

During my time between winter and summer milking, we put a new building up at home. We weather proofed this by laying a plastic sheet under the concrete and so the base had to be

level and stone free to prevent holes being made in the plastic. We used a small cement mixer on the back of the tractor and it was my job to put buckets of stones and sand in the mixer all day, not a job I would wish on anyone.

Hoeing the thirty two acres of sugar beet was shared between me and the regular worker – an awesome task, but the beet were relatively clean and so it took just over the week to complete. I took part in the two stage lifting process last year, by driving beside the harvester with the trailer. Using a three row harvester, this meant that we lifted beet about once a week to keep the clamp full most of the time.

Once July arrived I started repeating certain tasks, but I felt a different person doing them – I felt considerably more confident and self-assured, almost as if I had been working full time there for several years. Since we were not particularly busy at home during the winter months, it was extremely helpful that I was able to gain more experience from other aspects of farming. I was also allowed time off to go to local, and a few national, agricultural shows with my father and fellow agricultural workers. Thus I have obtained a very broad agricultural education and hope that it will prove a suitable foundation for the degree in agriculture which I am just starting.

Although not directly related to my pre-university farming experience, the fact that I was club secretary at the local Young Farmers Club has obviously helped me to get really into the farming community, both talking farming business with friends there, listening to speakers every week in the winter and going to different farms and firms in the summer. It was my contacts through the Young Farmers that enabled me to obtain the turkey dressing job, and indirectly the pig job. Usually regarded as a group of people who sit around in pubs all day, which would probably be true if we didn't have to work, Young Farmers has made me look at agricultural systems other than our own in a different light and thus escape the trap of believing that all we do is perfect and there are no

alternatives. As well as this it has taught me to have a questioning attitude towards work, in case a fellow Young Farmer asks me a question concerning our farm which I should be able to but am unable to answer. Finally it has kept my writing hand half active during this year, otherwise apart from letters, I would not have put pen to paper for a whole year.

The representatives of firms became quite familiar faces, particularly one who came every other Monday. At the end of my time with the cows, I brought home a young calf – very generous though this sounds, it should be explained that it was going to be sent to the kennels. It was born with back legs splayed completely apart and the front legs knuckled over so that it was unable to stand. To make things look worse, it had one eye bulging out and the other sunken, almost as if one eye had been pushed in, forcing the other out. This particular representative followed carefully the changes in this calf, as it very slowly improved and was able to stand. However, as it became larger it began to deteriorate, being heavier on its hindquarters, it had trouble putting its front legs on the ground. After three months I felt the kindest thing to do was to send it to the kennels, which should really have been done at the very beginning. When I explained to the representative what I had done he seemed almost pleased and suggested that it had taught me a lesson; till then I had not looked at it in this light, but afterwards I realized that a farmer needs to be realistic and able to give something up that is bad, before it becomes too expensive or too late to give up.

Naturally accidents happened during the year, but one day supersedes the rest: Monday September 29th. I started the day rolling, which I finished mid-morning. I returned to the farm, unhooked the rolls and went to take the cage wheels off. How, I've never understood, but somehow one of the cage wheels had managed to fall off without the rolls hitting it. Thus I had to return to the field, find the wheel and put it back on the tractor – no easy feat on a bumpy field. We went sugar beet

lifting next, so I filled the tractor up with diesel, hooked the trailer on and bombed off down to the beet field. Halfway there 'Oops, where's the diesel cap?' Back I ran and fortunately found it on the side of the road where it had landed, having fallen off the tractor. They say things come in threes and so I was just waiting for the third thing to happen. This is the only excuse I've got for not moving the tractor and trailer when the sugar beet harvester carried on. Next week, off my pay packet was the cost of a new plough-light for the tractor. Naturally I got an early night that night, not daring to go out.

Fifteen months of outdoor work has taught me to appreciate the countryside and wildlife more than before. I am no longer quite so ready to call rabbits 'sweet', having seen the immense damage they can cause, particularly on some of our woods. There was also an exceptionally large number of deer around this year, a beautiful sight, especially as there have been two white ones mixing with the roe and red. However they didn't seem so 'cute' when I went to look at the new trees we had planted, only to find that the tops had been nipped off by the deer. We had put rabbit guards round the base of the trees, but could do nothing to stop the deer. I never saw any actual damage done by the several foxes around, but no doubt they considerably reduced the number of pheasants this year. These are examples of things not always being what they at first seem to be and not to judge anything simply by the exterior. Possibly one of the most important lessons my pre-university farming experiences have taught me.

If I obtain as much out of my next three years at Reading as I did during my year's practical, I will certainly not regret having made the move.

4

Students from overseas

Work on two contrasting farms

'What had seemed before like an endless number of relatively small pieces of land with borders always carefully trimmed, has now turned into fields of barley, wheat, potatoes, oilseed rape and other crops.'

Maria del Corral

For a foreigner like myself, working on farms in Britain for a year was like stepping into the heart of the country. What had seemed before like an endless number of relatively small pieces of land with borders always carefully trimmed, has now turned into fields of barley, wheat, potatoes, oilseed rape and other crops, each seed bearing a potential which is at risk at every stage of its development during the year.

Similarly the birth of a piglet of a litter of ten or twelve means weeks or months of a struggle for survival which is common to our own human existence.

During my year I had the opportunity to work on three different farms but the striking differences between two of those three farms I found particularly meaningful.

Farm 1 was an intensive pig unit of 150 breeding sows. Situated in Oxfordshire, it consisted of 200 acres of land sown with wheat and barley to be milled and mixed on the premises for feeding the herd.

Farm 2 was a mixed farm of smaller acreage with small numbers of different animals: pigs, cattle, sheep and poultry; the land was sown with wheat, barley and oats.

On Farm 1 there was a fairly clear pattern of work during the week with a set timetable and leisure in the evenings, whereas on Farm 2 a pattern of work was more of an aim than a reality and most of the time was spent in dealing with different casualties and doing one's best towards preventing the foreseeable ones.

In terms of my personal satisfaction I learned much more from my days on Farm 2, even though they were far fewer than those spent on Farm 1, since my responsibilities lay at a level not too far below those of the farmers themselves.

Working days on Farm 2 were long and full of excitement; holidays were full of work and work days full of fun.

Farm 1 was a self-contained unit much more than Farm 2. The amount of bought-in material was small relative to what was on the farm and the bulk of foodstuffs were manufactured on the premises. There was an excellent workshop with one very able and creative man permanently in charge of repairs and maintenance. On the other hand on Farm 2 there was not the time nor the expertise for repair-work and consequently the farm was largely dependent upon the external services available, which were often unsatisfactory.

It is perhaps evident that Farm 1 had been under the present management for a much longer period than farmer 2 had spent in charge of his farm. This meant that farmer 1 had learned about his farm a lot and about factors such as the condition of the land, the suitability of the soil for growing certain specific crops, the type of soil and how to handle it, the mineral requirements of the soil which may vary (and often do) over the area of the farm, and most important too, the available suppliers of raw materials and capital equipment who were known by him and trustworthy.

A farm involves so many factors continuously changing that the pattern of work is imprecise and this is more so the less familiarized the workers are with their particular duties. A student who has not been a worker before having been accepted to work on a farm, has to be very clear about practicing what the farmers call common sense, which turns out to be not at all common. Although in theory anyone should be aware of the fact that animals like men and like all living things are born, grow, reproduce and die, somebody who has not been in close touch with nature to the extent one is on a farm is often completely unaware of the detail and precision

involved in such functions of life and is unable to be a help rather than a hindrance when he/she first starts farming practice.

I went to Farm 2 for two weeks in March at first, which happens to be lambing time. I shall never forget the reaction I got from the farmer after I took three new born lambs with their mothers out on to the field. He shouted 'You idiot! Do you know what an idiot you are?' I had taken the wrong ones and they were too young. I was ignorant but his reaction made me aware of the fact that mistakes are no joke when life is at stake. I also learned that no amount of high school education would have taught me that those lambs were too young to stand the cold outside, but only experience and of course my own interest in preserving the animal's lives would eventually make me able to make the right decision.

On Farm 1 there was more room for awkward students. The team of workmen was a solid one, and everyone was aware of the work to be done each day because it had been discussed for half an hour in the morning with everybody's suggestions being taken into account to a considerable extent. Therefore if the students were to forget to feed the sickly pigs, somebody else would do it and perhaps tell the student to sweep the floor next morning, a task which students tend to perform with uttermost efficiency after having failed to accomplish many other tasks satisfactorily.

Profits were high on Farm 1 and low or even negative on Farm 2; on Farm 1 there was enough to pay for holidays in France and trips elsewhere with visits to farming establishments to learn about foreign technology. I attributed this contrast of economic success between the two farms to a number of factors, some of which I have already mentioned.

Farmer 1 stood on known ground in more than one sense. His inputs came from sources he had known for many years and hence his supplies of replacement animal stock, fertilizers etc and the various advisory services which proved to be most important arrived at the right time and were seldom the cause

for complaint. He had also found a stable demand for his produce through a marketing co-operative of farmers throughout the country which would receive all his ready-fattened pigs every fortnight and allow for any variation in numbers produced, while still providing the buyer with the right number of animals at the right weight.

Farmer 2 did not have such guarantees towards reliable supply of inputs and demand for produce. For one thing, on a mixed farm both his inputs and outputs were of so many different kinds that successful buying and selling depended entirely on the farmer's own ability and sound continuous decision making. More than once he bought an animal which was poorly and died after a week and he could not always sell healthy full grown stock but often had to sell animals at a low price because they were in poor condition and likely to die on the farm which would have meant considerable loss weighed against food, medicines and other factors through the year.

On this essay I have concentrated almost entirely upon the animal side of practical farming, the reason for this is perhaps that animals require much closer attention than crops in a day's work, although with crops, accurate knowledge and timeliness are just as relevant.

I cannot say I am more interested in animals than I am in plants, but I could say that it was easier for me to learn about them first since plant life is not so much in evidence and the work done towards looking after a crop has to be highly skilled. Accurate knowledge and know-how are essential since a slight mistake can cause the ruin of a whole crop. There is no room for trial and errors when it comes to applying a dressing of a certain kind to a crop and the rate and time of the application have to be precise.

Finally I would like to stress the importance I attribute to the theoretical and scientific knowledge besides practical experience in relation to farming. Only a certain amount of scientific education can tell a farmer whose advice to follow as regards a particular problem on his farm and the ultimate

decision is his own however many books and people he may have as sources of information to call upon in an emergency.

Farming near Bristol

'As time passes, things work out better than I first anticipated.'

Jason Yapp

I remembered well the first day when I started work on an English farm which was totally foreign to me. I felt apprehensive and doubtful about my ability to cope with the work. Most of the equipment and machinery were new to me. As time passes, things work out better than I first anticipated and I found myself enjoying my work. Each day I learnt new thing and way of handling tools.

After all I have come from a country whose farming system is entirely different from that of the English farm. At home in Malaysia we can only see rows and rows of tree crops in the plantation, whereas on this farm I can see grasslands which are like carpet stretching from one end of the horizon to the other. Animals busily grazing their way to fill up their stomachs before night fall. The most unique feature I came across on a British farm is its hedgerows, binding fields into different forms and shapes. The emergence of trees from the hedgerow add beauty to the typical English countryside. Not only does the hedgerow provide dimension to the fields it also forms a habitat for the lovely wild life which the Englishman admires so much. This is not true in some areas of Britain where the

hedgerow is replaced by dry stone wall as a common feature found in Yorkshire and the Pennines.

Those are my views of the English countryside and the farm. Before I go much further I would like to give an outline of the farm where I spent my farming experience. The farm is situated twelve miles east of Bristol near a village called Abson. Since it's quite near Bath, it used to be a Roman settlement. On and off we used to come across bits and pieces of Roman sword and armour. In fact the farm has quite a collection of the things.

The total acreage of the farm is about 450 acres (180 hectares) which is made up of three separate farms viz: Bottoms Farm, Home Farm and Hinton Farm. Of the three, Bottoms Farm is the largest comprising of 100 hectares and is the main site for the farm buildings. The farm buildings house about 120 milking Friesian cows and about 50 heifers and some calves. The lands are put under arable and ley with some root crops for winter feed. The soil types range from sandy loam to heavy clay with high water table. Some fields are very stony of limestone material.

Home Farm is situated about one mile away from Bottoms Farm. It has about 50 hectares of land, mainly put under arable crops - winter wheat and spring barley. Under a four course rotation sometime heifers were kept on one of two fields under ley. What I meant was that some fields were used for grazing by heifers when the field was under ley.

Hinton Farm is the smallest of the three with only about 30 hectares sown under cereals with one or two catch crops sometimes; the farm lies close to the M4 and very seldom were animals put there.

Basically the main enterprise of all the farms is a dairy unit with mixed arable crops. The farm is run with help of the son and the farmer himself. The workforce is made up of a head herdsman, an assistant, a foreman and two general farm workers plus myself. I would like to tell you that I was not paid for my work. I have to accept the work on a voluntary

basis because I can't find a farmer who would like to take me on. With time running out I had to place myself in that position. The farmer said that he can't afford to pay me and that left me no choice. So I decided to work without being paid. I believed there were many students who were in the same situation.

Let me briefly go through each enterprise of the farm. As I have mentioned earlier, the dairy unit is located on the Bottoms Farm. It has old-fashion type of milking parlour where the cows go in from the front and leave at the back. It can milk eight cows at a time. The cows are milked twice a day starting at 5.30 a.m. and 3.30 p.m. Fortunately for me I don't have to do the morning milking. I helped in the afternoon milking which usually finishes at about 6 p.m. I must say that the parlour was not very efficient since it takes roughly about 2 ½ hours to milk about 120 cows. Now with all the new parlours being built a man can handled 200 cows within one hour. In order to keep the cows calm while being milked some concentrates were fed to the cows. Heifers I think were most difficult to handle. They were very sensitive and I never liked to milk them. Tameness is one of the desirable characters favoured by the breeder and farmer. It's amazing to see how calm some of the cows can be. The average annual milk yield was about 5,000 kg as far as I can recall. Usually the milk production increases in the summer when the cows were flushed with young and luxury grass. Since production increases, the price of milk decreases due to high supply. In the winter, the cows were kept indoors and each cow received about 10 kg of concentrates a day. Hay was also supplied daily. We always face the problem of broken pipes due to deep frost and this had lead to failure in water supply to the cows. Winter is a hard time for the farm workers, despite of its less labour demand, the cold is always a problem. I shall always remember how I have to struggle through the snow across the field. That winter had an exceptional amount of snow.

The dairy unit had an annual replacement of 25%. Most of the cows were either served with A.I. or by the bull. The herdsman selected out the desired characters of the bull and then inseminated the cow on heat.

A.I has played an important role in improving the quality and superiority of a herd. An inferior cow will have to be culled. Only 25% of the calves were retained to replace the old cows and the rest were sold either abroad or to the Middle East or local dealer. Some may end up as veal or beef cattle. It is a great shame that some farmers produce veal from the calves.

In the summer the cows are let out to graze on the young grass. They are kept outdoors night and day. After the afternoon milking the cows were driven to fields closer to the farm buildings so that the milker and the cows don't have to travel too far for the morning milking. The cows were closely monitored for any sign of diseases such as mastitis, lameness or bloating. A veterinary surgeon visited the farm every week and performed pregnancy diagnosis on the served cows.

It's important that the herdsman should know each individual cow in its milking performance as well as its behaviour. Once a month the milk samples were collected from each cow and tested for quality by the Milk Marketing Board. This measured the fat content, butter fat and protein content of the milk. Higher price are paid for milk with high butter fat %. Well, I guess that's all I know about dairying production. Dairy unit is the best way to utilize grassland i.e. to generate cash flow from grass herbage.

Now let me turn my attention to the arable production side of the farm. Winter wheat was sown in October and small proportion of winter barley was also sown. The latter seems to be more popular now with farmers but spring barley is still predominantly grown by most farmers. The seeds will germinate and grow up to 3-4 inches and wait through the cold winter. At this time the cereals need less attention. Most of the time was spent on repairing machines or fences. When the season changes with temperature increasing gradually and day

length lengthened the crop will start to grow again. Spring time is the busiest time in the farming calendar. That's the time when the farm comes alive. Tractors began to roar up and down the fields, spraying fertilizers and weedkiller of different sorts. This peak labour demand lasted through the summer till harvest time. After which all the products were stored safely and machines packed away to await for next season.

In this country farming is a cycle of events repeating itself after one cycle. If the farmer is late for a crop or if weather doesn't permit then his aim is gone. That means you have got to think for another substitute or wait for next season. So farming is a very risky business as far as climate is concerned. Profits are based very much on the managerial side and decision taking and proper planning.

Now I asked myself what did I gain by spending a year working on a farm? By working on a farm we got the opportunity to learn how to handle tools and machinery and give us the chance to find out what is going on inside a farm. Here we got the chance of asking questions to the farmer and the workers. We learnt how to tackle the problems faced by the people on the farm. After all we will be the one who'll try to improve and innovate the farming system of the world. Farming is a risky business which is controlled by several factors. We all know that weather is one of them.

I have got a good example here to illustrate the value of the practical experience. Before I started to work on the farm I can never understand the articles written in the farming magazines or journals. There were a lot of words and expressions which made no sense to me. But now I can appreciate the language used in the farming world. We understand the problems and find ways of solving it. It's no use just to know how to do a thing without understanding why we do it.

Apart from seeing how the farm works it also gave us the opportunity to find out the feeling and relationship of the workers and the farmer. It will help for those who would like

to own a farm so that they know how to treat their workers. Farming needs a lot of hard work and to be competitive.

I would like to end my essay by saying that I have greatly enjoyed my year's practical training. It was very worthwhile despite the fact I was not paid for my work. It was nice to be able to get away from the academic life for a year. But to some it was a year of hard manual work which I must say had kept them fit. I realised that some students had real difficulty in getting a place to work on a farm. Still they got to do it.

Farming in Kent and the Punjab

'From the middle of October to mid-March I worked in India on the family farm at Manipur in the Punjab …A striking contrast to the gently undulating horizon of Kent.'

Bhupindar Pal Gill

Searching for an enterprise that consisted of all or even a few of the qualities of a mixed farm was a difficult task that I had not anticipated, especially where market gardening and horticultural activities comprise a majority of the agricultural land in Kent.

Jumping at the first opportunity I was successful in filling a vacancy at Court Lodge Farm, which consisted of 53 acres specializing in the production of spring onions, lettuces and cabbage.

Much of the time spent at Court Lodge in July and August (1979) consisted of working with irrigation gangs of four to six people. This involved moving aluminium spray lines by

hand every half hour to the next 12-13 yards from the original site.

A good soaking was essential to maintain the luxurious growth of a crop like lettuce. Disconnecting and reassembling 40 feet long sections of light but clumsy aluminium piping needed a heavy input of labour, where speed was the keyword to fulfil the water requirement of the whole farm for that day, through a network of nine to ten lines. Sprinkler nozzles with two jets at 35 feet intervals covered circles of 60-100 feet in diameter.

The production of lettuce was exceptionally intensive, where the first cut was made well before the last lot had yet to be planted. In this way two individual crops were harvested well within the growing season. Seedlings grown in peat blocks were planted, and irrigated soon after arrival from outside contractors.

Mature lettuces were cut by piece workers directly into two wooden bins held by a rear mounted push-off buckrake. This arrangement allowed easy loading and unloading of bins at the packing shed. Beds were sized such that tractors could easily straddle the plants without damage to the fragile produce, apart from human error.

Lettuces were cleaned, packed and priced on site ready for distribution to local demand. A large cold store was an invaluable investment on the farm.

Spring onions were drilled almost throughout the growing season, providing a steady stream of work well into the winter months. Onions were also washed and prepared on the site.

From the middle of October to mid-March I worked in India on the family farm at Manipur in the Punjab. Manipur is a small hamlet with a population of about 250 and lies three kilometres due south of Jalkinder, a city at the heart of trade, commerce, administration and property of Northern Punjab. This area is bounded by two tributaries of the river Sutlej, which is itself a major branch of the river Indus.

Here the land is 350 m above sea level and exceptionally [flat] due to the erosive activities of the Indus and its tributaries; a striking contrast to the gently undulating horizon of Kent.

Punjab is a sign of Indian prosperity and this in turn is reflected in the robust yet flexible nature of the Northern Jut (farmer).

Manipur family farm has a total of 60 acres, scattered in three equal proportions around the hamlet. The enterprise is managed and run as a joint family co-operation. The soil here is extremely sandy and problems of water deficit are overcome by the use of intensive flood irrigation, a system used extensively throughout India. Water is pumped from a water table through the use of 5-10 horsepower electric motors. Diesel engines are also used. The active unit is called the tube well.

This sandy soil allows simple cultivation, where soon after harvest a spring-tine harrow is used to till the soil and then smoothed with a flat wooden one.

Manipur farm specializes in the production of potatoes and in fact this whole area is a major potato producer in North Punjab, supplying produce as far south as Chandigarh. Three different crops are produced in one growing year: potatoes from October to February, followed quickly by wheat and then rice.

The farm has invested in three tractors (Massey Ferguson 350's), four to five implements and has four tube wells, three running on electricity and one on diesel. Three young men are employed as permanent farm hands costing 300 rupees a month per man, they look after 12 buffaloes and 3 crossbred cattle. Other duties involve irrigation, daily fodder cutting and crop harvesting. Fodder is grown on the farm as a mixture of clover and mustard and the animals are good utilizers of finely chopped wheat straw, dried maize plants and sugar cane tops. All the milk is sufficient enough to supply the four farming

families with butter, yogurt and ghee. Young bulls are ‘culled’ through a disputed practice.

Potatoes are first planted in mid-October. A labour force of twenty local women (paid 1 rupee per hour) are employed to lay seeds at regular intervals in furrows drawn by a two row ridger. Soon after planting the soil is flooded in sections of five ridges. Irrigation continues at two to three week intervals until one week before harvest.

The crop is lifted with an automatic harvester that spades out the tubers on to a revolving belt sieve which then throws the potatoes clear of the soil. The potatoes are graded and put into large bags. The farm holds a contract with a large cold storage unit where produce and selected seeds are kept until distributed.

Wheat is drilled within a few days of the potato harvest and large plots are divided into long beds ready for flood irrigation as soon as the seedlings are a few inches high. The plot is flooded three to four times before harvest in early May. Harvesting is still done by hand.

Maize is another important crop, both for flour and for buffalo fodder. The farm also has a small plot of sugar cane, uprooted every third year and replanted on a new site. This is mainly for raw sugar or just cane chewing.

NPK fertilizer is the most commonly used fertilizer and is applied by hand before and after planting the potatoes, wheat has two applications.

The main hand tool used is the kasheer, an implement with a blade at right angles to the handle, used in the opening and closing of irrigation channels. Another hand tool is the ruinba, comprising of a flat sharp blade below and parallel to the handle, this is used for hand weeding on permanent irrigation channels. A thothi is a curved serrated blade for sugar cane cutting and wheat harvesting.

5

Farming at home and away

Farming and non-farming ‘inexperience’

‘So, together with a cousin I went to Sicily to pick olives. Olives? Not grapes? Nope. Olives. At least that is what we were told. Great, I thought, a bit of fun, warm weather and bearing a somewhat indirect relevance to my University Course. Reading University Agricultural Department won’t mind that, I thought (I thought a lot in those days).’

Alison Rumbold

A better title of this essay would probably be ‘Pre-University farming and non-farming inexperience.’ It was only by gaining experience, or attempting to, that I discovered how inexperienced I was. My alternative title includes ‘non-farming’, because there are many skills and attributes useful to any agriculturalist which I discovered whilst involved in activities totally unconnected with agriculture. A great many people unconnected with practical forms of agriculture tend to see the farmer or farm labourer as a dense, slow-witted, coarse and somewhat untamed member of the community. What ever gave them that idea? Any sort of practical farming experiences teaches you that even if you are slow-witted and dense, it is best to overcome these failings as quickly as possible. My year off taught me that farmers, like the majority of people do have to be able to think on their feet and very quickly too. That was a fact I had always suspected to be true but which took twelve months and a lot of hard work to confirm. Since any career in agriculture has a fair amount to do with life, any form of experience of life is important in a pre-University entry year. This essay therefore includes some of my personal farming and non-farming experiences.

Coming from a farming background a year’s practical was not strictly necessary for me. Nevertheless, on the advice of

many friends, I decided a year ‘off’ would do me some good whether spent in the farming industry or not. Just how much good I was not sure, but I definitely wanted to get away from the family farm environment for a while (it has to be admitted), to see a little of Europe and hopefully of other types of farming. Having decided to get away from it all as quickly as possible, I stayed at home to work for the summer: picking strawberries, mechanically harvesting blackcurrants, grain carting at harvest and some odd-jobbing. After that lot from July to October it really felt like time to get away. So, together with a cousin I went to Sicily to pick olives. Olives? Not grapes? Nope. Olives. At least that is what we were told. Great, I thought, a bit of fun, warm weather and bearing a somewhat indirect relevance to my University Course. Reading University Agricultural Department won’t mind that, I thought (I thought a lot in those days).

Sicily was very interesting. We saw masses of grapes under acres of polythene sheeting, acres, sorry hectares, of good wheat land, several melons, lemons, figs and prickly pears and just about three olives. Maybe that is a slight under exaggeration, there could well have been more than three but we certainly didn’t see them. The day on which we were told to arrive for the beginning of harvest turned out to be the penultimate day. Super. There we were in the middle of a very remote part of Sicily expecting to pick olives which didn’t even exist. Apparently a disaster such as only occurs once every ten or twenty years had struck. The strong, hot Sirocco wind had almost totally destroyed the olive crop in August. Well, thanks for letting us know, we thought. We did manage to have one enlightening day’s work. Firstly nets are spread under the trees, little men with large poles beat the trees until the olives drop off, and then the labourers collect the olives in extremely heavy buckets. The best olives, if there are any, are picked by hand before the tree has the living daylights beaten out of it. The tree-bashers are in fact highly skilled, knowing

exactly which branch to hit to achieve the greatest effect and least damage.

The farm we stayed on (found by many devious and complicated means) was part of a co-operative incorporating the farm itself, two schools, a training school for mechanics and a church. It would be too complicated to explain the whole set up but we were found some work. Farm work? But, no, thwarted yet again. It so happened that the school caretaker was on holiday and we became floor wipers and window cleaners with vague, suppressed agricultural leanings. My cousin was very put out by this harrowing experience, it not exactly cultivating her best talents (sorry, obligatory agricultural puns). Neither was she reaping any benefits from being a window cleaner since we were working on a voluntary basis. So she decided to go home. Thanks a million, chum! I was stranded in Italy with a train ticket to Turin and an Inter-rail card. What next? I spent six weeks furthering my non-agricultural experiences. Those six weeks were very valuable for many reasons. Travelling on your own in a foreign country where you can't speak the language is very similar to being a farmer. Well, OK, quite similar. Quite simply you have to be capable of assessing situations, on the spot, whilst maintaining an overall long term plan. Sounds silly? It is not.

Next followed a brief restful interlude at home for Christmas. My only farming experience then was my father telling me that the wheat was bound to be a disaster because it had been wet during drilling and that as usual nothing was going right. The next six weeks flew by as I worked as a waitress in a Wimpy. Another useful experience. I learnt something very useful in today's farming world – how to deal with all <u>sorts</u> of people, from the senile pensioners who came in every Thursday morning, to the drunk who tried to run out without paying and only succeeded in dropping his false teeth under table one where someone else was eating their dinner. Not that farmers have to deal with drunks and O.A,P.'s <u>that</u> often. I also learnt how to make lots of cups of disgusting

coffee at very high speeds. It proved a useful skill especially whilst I was working on a sheep farm in Yorkshire.

Yorkshire sheep farmers seem to have a predilection for numerous cups of disgusting coffee or tea produced from nowhere at exceedingly short notice. That was not my only responsibility whilst working on a hill farm from March to May. Carrying bales, injecting lambs' bottoms, getting orange and very sore fingers from spraying their navels with iodine, running around the same field half a dozen times to catch one sheep, squirting ointment into blind sheep's eyes (and catching the damned animal first), getting stubborn calves to drink all their iron aid, milking the goat and the cow which couldn't get up after calving, were just a few of my daily duties as a female farm dogsbody. Half of the jobs were assigned to me purely because I am female. Men never milk cows by hand and definitely would not go anywhere near a goat's mammary glands. Neither do they like injecting lamb's bottoms. Not that I didn't enjoy the whole experience. I did, despite the bitter cold. Snowy mornings succeeded by downpours more suited to a rain forest, and the absence of days off. Nobody said it would be easy. I came to have great admiration for the Dales farmers, for their stamina which never flags even when morale is low. And it was low, not least on 'Black Thursday.' It began as every other day that week – bitterly cold, wet and 'Reet good lambin' weather.' Several soaking wet shivering twins were brought in before breakfast and left to dry out and warm up in a 'Lamb Reviver'. When we went to return the little darlings to their mothers half of them were dead. The 'Lamb Killer' as it came to be known was not used again that year. I did too good a job, not only reviving the lambs but also roasting them nicely. The more traditional method of using an infra-red lamp was then used as a reviver. The three of us, two men and myself lambed just over 1,000 ewes. Being thrown in at the very deep end meant I had to learn a lot very quickly and sometimes make decisions myself on the spot. This way of thinking did come in very handy. I was positively

discriminated against in some ways in that I was not as physically strong as the men and I could make better coffee.

Once the difficulty of learning some of the essentials of the Dalesmen's farming vocabulary was over, things went relatively smoothly. At first I hadn't a clue what "An owd you down wi't tremlins" or "T'law mistel damn bi middin" meant. After discovering that they meant a ewe with calcium deficiency and the low barn next to the muck heap – respectively, I was almost initiated. Complete acceptance with the farmers only came after falling over in the cow muck twice, not realizing the tractor had a double clutch, milking the goat and catching my first sheep and lamb which had escaped into a neighbour's field and ripping my trousers in the process. How to make a fool of yourself, to laugh about it afterwards, and most importantly not to make the same mistake again are all valuable aspects of character. It was surprising how much I learnt about sheep farming in such a short space of time.

Home again after having learnt how to recognise sheep and cows. Home to ten days flat on my back with some strange undiagnosable muscular disorder, commonly known as a bad back. Most people in the farming business will have experienced that at some time. Lifting sacks of sheep cake might be good for the waistline and the soul but not necessarily for the health. A hospital visit and a Velcro and cast iron instrument of torture called a corset, later, I was ready for action again. The year had almost come full circle. It was time to pick strawberries and blackcurrants again. Then came more grain carting and odd-jobbing. Harvest was hectic to say the least but with only one major breakdown and a miraculous spell of fine weather we managed to 'get done.' Other miscellaneous tractor driving jobs then came my way including a short burst of mole-draining on Tracey the Track Marshall, borrowed from a neighbour. It's very pleasant to sit on a Track Marshall driving up and down at negligible forward speed with your wellies getting hotter and hotter and eventually giving off clouds of evil green smoke. A lovely job,

allowing you to admire the countryside and listen to the birds sing, or at least imagine what the birds would sound like if it were not for the fact that all sounds are drowned by Tracey herself.

And so, as Samuel Pepys did not say, 'to Reading.' I have had a year packed with a variety of exciting experiences ranging from deciphering Italian train timetables to finding an approximated metric equivalent to a 3/8th Whitworth spanner and from learning how to say 'Youth hostel' in German to learning that Swaledale lambs do not have rubber rings put on their tails. I would not go so far as to say any experience is good experiences because that is untrue. An experience, however, whether good or bad can be put to use and there is a definite interrelation between all the things which one learns by experience. Hence my 'Pre-University farming experience' was enriched and made more valuable for me by being put into perspective by the many other things which I did in my year 'off.'

Farming on a Kibbutz and in England

'There was nothing for it, but to plunge myself enthusiastically into finding a job. This proved more difficult than I had originally anticipated.'

Jo Robinson

Having decided that I wanted to read agriculture my one moan was that I had to complete a year's practical farming prior to entering the University. This I really did not fancy. On speaking to agricultural students most of them appeared to

think it was a waste of time, and had not benefited them in the least, but no other courses appealed to me and so there was nothing for it, but to plunge myself enthusiastically into finding a job. This proved more difficult than I had originally anticipated.

Replying by telephone and replying to adverts in the Farmers Weekly was of no avail. When my female voice was heard I could immediately hear the farmer switch off – he was just not interested in employing a member of the fairer sex. Due to cut backs in expenditure he was employing fewer people and felt that the male muscle power was a better investment than any female could be. I was furious as I felt equal in value to any male, but week after week I was turned away. Only having a provisional driving licence did not help my case. The local National Farmers Union promised to advertise me in their monthly newsletter, the Job Centre offered me a gardening post, and the local farmers took one look at me (I am rather on the small side) and shook their heads apologetically. I tried to convince them of my strength, but all in vain – no they were sorry, but there were no vacancies for me. Maybe agriculture was just not for me. I decide to make one final concerted effort to find practical work. Obviously I was not wanted in England, but maybe there was work available abroad. In the summer I had been for a working holiday on a kibbutz, which is a small agricultural settlement, and had been invited back there. I jumped at this opportunity, and having spoken to the University about my predicament, was informed that kibbutz work was acceptable, as long as my work was, on the whole, associated with English agriculture. So a week later I returned to the kibbutz.

This kibbutz was a small community of about four hundred people, which attempts to be as self sufficient as possible. Profits made in any department are fed straight back into the kibbutz for everyone's benefit, and I felt that this provided a greater incentive to work, as I felt I was positively helping the community. My first place of work was the 'veget' or

cowshed. Here there was a herd of approximately three hundred large Friesian cows. They were a Dutch cross Israeli breed, and were milked three times a day – at 3.30 a.m., 11,30 a.m. and 5.30 p.m. The milking parlour had nine swing over machines of the Alpha-Laval type and accommodated between sixteen and eighteen cows at a time, depending on which of the five groups was being milked. They were classified by age and calving time. Group D were the deadly dread of the cowshed, as these were the young cows that had calved for the first time, and legs tended to be thrown at you from the most obscure directions, when least expected. When the last of these had been milked I involuntarily released a great sigh of relief. It was good to find myself still in one piece! Each group was given a set amount of concentrates and hay worked out on a computer, and was kept in a covered area, which had a main gate leading on to the path to the milking parlour. Due to a complicated gate system, to prevent the groups becoming mixed, it was not such an unusual sight to see a milker bolting from the cowshed in frantic flight having forgotten to shut a particular gate. These mistakes were most frequently made on the early morning milking session (twilight session) by bleary eyed milkers dreaming of their warm beds, or wondering if the alarm clock would ever work again having been flung across the room for the fourth time that week.

I was taught how to use all the equipment in the milking parlour and the milking and cleaning up techniques. Each session was worked by two people and took between three and a half and five hours depending on the time of year, which stint was being worked, or whether any calamities occurred. For example one evening we had a power cut, and had to grope our way out of the parlour and find help in the form of someone who knew how to work the generator. We finally finished at 11 p.m. not a happy state of affairs. Among my other jobs one that I particularly enjoyed was looking after the newly born calves who for the first week were kept in cages in a separate building. I worked in the cowshed, where

approximately 6500 litres of milk was collected per day, for six months and then transferred to the poultry.

The chickens were only kept for their eggs not for meat. They lived in big chicken houses in which they could freely fly around and each house contained approximately 5000 chickens, of which the vast majority were hens. My one great dread was finding dead chickens, as these I had to pick up and deposit on a trolley that I pushed through the building. I walked in circles for numerous minutes round the first dead chicken I found, before I could summon up the courage to move it. Some of them had suffered the most atrocious injuries, but it was survival of the fittest and gradually I learnt to accept the situation. I collected the eggs from the sheltered containers, and any that had been laid on the floor and placed them on the trolley, having to count the number obtained at each of the four collections and totalling them at the end of the day. There was approximately an 80% lay rate, that is to say eight out of every ten chickens laid an egg a day. After eleven months the chickens were sent away for slaughter and there was a free month before the new batch arrived, during which time the houses were totally cleaned out and disinfected.

I also worked in the avocado tree nursery for a short time. Here, we were growing the avocado trees from stones and then, when they were big enough they were sold to companies planting avocado trees.

When the novelty of working in the various departments had worn off, I found that although I enjoyed the work for short periods, it sometimes became rather tedious and monotonous repeating the same thing everyday, and made me realise and appreciate the necessity of machines to quicken the whole process. For my part I do not like this kind of factory farming. It is extremely efficient and intense with high productivity, but the cows and chickens were treated like machines and not like living creatures, which have feelings. Particularly in the cowshed, everything was extremely pressurised. All that anybody seemed to care about was ending each milking

session as quickly as possible. They had no time for the cow that was a little nervous or uneasy, immediately the kick bar would be brought into action and the cow shouted at. I am sure that if there had been fewer cows so that a little more thought, patience and time could be given to each of them, a higher yield of milk per cow would have been obtained due to the cows being generally more relaxed and happy.

On returning to England I was horrified to find that even harvest work was difficult to come by. So having made a repeat performance of previously job hunting I began voluntary work on the horticultural section of a large local farm. After working for a few days I was told completely unexpectedly that I would be employed as a casual labourer. My work mainly consisted of irrigation, planting seeds, hoeing cabbages and banging posts into the ground for stringing beans to. None of my enquiries had come to fruition, but I had now come to terms with the situation and counted myself lucky to be working with pay coming sometimes. However, once I had managed to obtain an entrance to the elusive English farming world things began to happen. I was working with some gypsies for a while who felt sure they knew some farmers who would provide me with full time employment through the harvest. The following weekend, I visited these farmers. I had just about given up hope having been turned away by them all when I arrived at the final farm on the list. This farmer was actually in need of students; I could not believe I had managed to convince him I was worth employing and began work on the Monday. Most farmers I had met had been rather conservative fellows, who did not feel it was right to have a woman working on a farm, but this time I had been lucky to hit upon a farmer who felt that females had a place in the farming world. The farm was 100 acre arable concern, mainly producing oats, barley, wheat and potatoes. There were about twelve farm workers employed, and then a number of students at harvest time, as the potato harvester ate up labour – needing

nine people at least to run it efficiently and the riddler needed at least a further four to sort and bag the hand picked potatoes.

My first job was corn rogueing which entailed walking up and down fields all day searching for wild oats, barley and cleavers. Most of the fields were pretty clean and often I longed to see a cleaver peering through the wheat just to relieve the monotony. However, there was one large field that was a nightmare. Paddy, the Irish farm worker, had gone with his tractor and spray to perform the task of spraying it, but it was later discovered that he had forgotten to turn the spray on! It even occurred to us roguers that maybe the farmer was endeavouring to harvest cleavers as they appeared to be at least twice as predominant as the wheat itself. The farmer was waiting for good weather to begin the potato harvest, but it took a long time to arrive. We spent a few weeks doing odd jobs. These consisted of cleaning the inside of corn bins, an excessively dusty affair, painting their outsides, while dangling at dangerous angles from ropes and ladders to reach the parts closer to the heavens, and painting fences.

However, eventually the yellow monster of a potato harvester was woken from its hibernation and put into action and the hand-pickers began work. To begin with I worked on the potato harvester, having to sort stones from potatoes and rotten potatoes from good ones, but later when the corn harvest began I was made ‘chief riddler’- an honour I certainly did not appreciate! Riddling for an hour or two a day is fine, but for sometimes as many as ten hours it can send you berserk. I really grew to hate potatoes, and even now cannot bring myself to eat them.

In the middle of the potato harvest we had a reprieve in the form of the corn harvest. Here, I drove the tractors, stacked bales on to and unloaded them from the trailer and stored them in barns. All this work I thoroughly enjoyed although I found it a real eye-opener. From this time onwards I would never try to convince anybody I was as strong as a male. It was only now, doing this work, that I realized how much stronger some

of the males were than me. I can now understand why most farmers are not so keen on employing females. Although, I do think there are certain jobs where a female can hold her own, and sometimes is preferable, for example in dairying, tractor driving and working on the potato harvester. As on the kibbutz I found much of the work monotonous after a while, but one of the advantages of English farming is the seasonal changes, so that many of the jobs are only for limited periods.

Although at the time I would have preferred to go straight from school to University I now really appreciated the year I had off and feel I have benefited greatly from it for two reasons. Firstly, I have returned to academic work fresh and, I hope, raring to go! It gave me time to sort my ideas out and to think about myself and what I wanted out of life. Also, I do not think it is a good idea to go straight from one institution to another, and the people who do this tend to regard University as an extension to school rather than an establishment in its own right, and so do not obtain so much out of it. In my year off I have met and worked with many different people - old and young, farmers, labourers, gypsies and students. It has shown me the conditions these people work under and so has given me, I think, a greater insight into people and their attitudes to life.

Secondly my practical year has been a great benefit to me agriculturally. I now appreciated the work that farm labourers do, and the problems involved in it. It also made me realise that however advanced we are technically, we are still totally dependent on the weather. From my point of view this is extremely good otherwise farming would be a fully mechanized industry and totally controlled by the human hand. The practical year should also add extra interest to the course as you can relate it to your experience.

6

Farming Away

Sheep and forestry in France

'I never knew all this would happen before I went out to work. I was just a simple, plain Barnsley lad, being thrust into the midst of a French peasant-farming background.'

Stephen Bryant

It was seven o'clock in the morning and what a sad morning this was to be. I was so happy last night, I'd helped one of our ewes successfully deliver a handsome set of twin lambs, one of the first times I'd done that, but this morning only one was still alive. It was the first one to go, so it rather took me aback, since I'd been used to successful lambings. That's the way it is with sheep, so I learned afterwards, one minute they are in good health, the next minute they can be dead. We lost twelve lambs in all, quite a lot from a small flock like ours. It knocked our percentage down from a respectable 150% to a meagre 130%.

Sheep – sometimes I loved them, sometimes I hated them. They are the easiest of the livestock to keep and clean compared with pigs or cows. They can be quite affectionate – especially if you get assigned to playing mother for about a dozen lambs whose mothers don't have enough milk, or don't want anything to do with them. It's really quite fun to have all these lambs jumping up at you, each wanting the milk. After a while (about two months!) of this, however, two hours a day, an hour's feed time in the morning and an hour in the evening, it can tend to be a bit tedious. Still, once they were out at pasture that was that, and only one poor orphan lamb rested in my care. He really used to like me. HIP!! I would shout, and he would come running across the field for his baby's bottle full of milk. Farming at its best!!

It wasn't all like that, one can be a good shepherd, but one must not overdo it. It was nice to see the back of them in early summer, by putting them up on to the mountain. Winter had

been long and to feed our sheep concentrates and hay every day in our wonderful 100 year old buildings had been extremely laborious at the end. The problem was that these buildings had been built when a family would live off about seven or eight cows. The cowsheds were thus of miniature proportions and about six feet in height. So we had twenty sheep in one shed here, thirty in one there, ten in another and so on! After six months in-wintering the muck was about thigh deep so we walked with a permanently bent back (runs in the family I suppose, my grandfather being a coalminer in the 1930's.)

After all this, and the round of injections, dipping (each one washed in bathtub by two heavily protected men), marking, putting bells on them, etc, this was the highlight of the year, getting rid of the creatures. In another three months time we would be back though, with a dog that didn't know how to obey (and hence totally useless) and about ten men running around a mountain top to round them up.

Sheep – the story of my life for more than half the year out before university. Sheep, the most stupid, yet the most likeable (speaking from my own viewpoint) animals. Sheep.

I never knew all this would happen before I went out to work. I was just a simple, plain Barnsley lad, being thrust into the midst of a French peasant-farming background. I arrived in France on 6 July 1978, a day I will never forget. I nearly got on the wrong train and would have finished up in Milan – and arrived at my farm one day later. I knew nobody, couldn't really speak French and had never worked on a farm before. I knew vaguely that a cow had an udder with four teats and that fertilizer made things grow, but beyond that there were one or two gaps (yawning several miles wide) which needed to be filled in. My bosses signed me up to work for them under the 'au-pair' system. I still laugh heartily when I read the conditions under which an 'au-pair' should work. In theory an au-pair works five hours a day, six days a week and earns a minimum of £60 a month. A minimum of ten hours a day

would be nearer the mark (with just two on Sundays) and half the pay were achieved in practice. Still, I enjoyed it – so who worries?

I arrived at the best time - the Monday after we started haymaking. Over the next seven weeks we made hay, hay and more hay, and in our spare time we made hay, instead of eating we made hay. We made hay in the sunshine, we tried many times to beat the rain to make hay. I even made hay in my sleep. I woke up one morning to find myself completely turned round in bed, my feet perched merrily on the pillow after an all-night session of dreaming hay. From one end of the day to the other, I walked around fields armed with a pitchfork, tuning hay over, scattering big piles of hay into small piles of hay, taking hay out of the shade and pushing piles of it down hillsides, a gradient of 1 in 2. We had to make hay in places where we could hardly stand up. In some places it was a case of 'three men went to mow a meadow', one to guide the mower, the other two to keep it from overturning into and rolling down the hill. It was all good fun but as my boss said, all very archaic; and he would have loved to have fields where he could mow and mow without stopping, fields flat and enormous where hay making was easy.

In some of our work we used a very solid, reliable one horse-power machine, twenty years old, by the name of 'Ragot'. Ragot was the last carthorse in a farmer stronghold of working carthorses and while I was there, in his last year of work. So I was lucky to see (and work with) this magnificent animal. I looked after him all winter, so by summer time he was quite attached to me, and would always come looking to me for his sugar-lump. It was very difficult if I was trying to do a job with him around. The hammer would be ready to swing and plant a staple to hold the barbed wire, and behind you would be a clomp of hooves and a nose, snuffling in your pocket and the job was held up for about five minutes.

Sometimes in working with animals, one could get the feeling of combating a greater intelligence than our own. The

horse was one example of this, but the cows on our farm were even more so. They were the most cunning, recalcitrant animals I have ever come across. They would not obey! The reason was that they had been brought up on a dictatorially authoritative regime and any weaknesses in new cowmen were thoroughly manipulated to their well-being. It took me a whole year of shouting and caning to convince them I was somebody to be obeyed. We did have two new cows, so I tried to cajole them along (with some success) not being convinced that shouting and caning were good measures to take against animals. One thing that was really pleasing to me to see was the cow and her newborn calf. How much the cow loved her calf and would lick it and follow it whenever it strayed away. Not so pleasing was trying to convince a cow that a new bought in calf was really hers. The hooves began to fly then, so it was back to the canes to subdue the animal.

I think if the forestry departments asked for a year's practical before entry then I could have got away with the work where I was. We must have spent about three months in the forest. We cut down rows and rows of beech-wood to fuel the farmhouse. My job was pulling the trees down in the right direction with a rope, de-branching and pulling it out into the open. We made fullest use of the forests 1 in 2 to 1 in 1 gradient, on wet, slippy days, all we had to do was move the logs for a bit and they would go screaming off down the mountainside. When we got some of the heavier trees out of the forest we had to put a guard on the road, since some of the trees were actually jumping the road. Besides the beech wood we cut down over £5,000 of spruce timber. My jobs here were pulling down the trees, this time with a special block and tackle system, and then debarking and getting the wood out of the forests. On one tree I was let loose to de-branch it with a sharpened hatchet – the work was a real joy, but not very practical when faced with over a hundred trees to do.

So then, what benefit did I derive from all this work? Did I actually learn anything while I was enjoying myself? Well, I

did learn how to drive a tractor, albeit not too well in the beginning. My boss seemed to stall and stall teaching me how to drive a tractor right until the last week I worked with him. He made some excuses about the mountains not being the right place to learn how to drive a tractor. Eventually I pestered enough to make him explain things to me and after a few days he went away on holiday and let me loose on my own with the tractor. It was then I saw what he meant! Driving in mountains is dangerous. Once I nearly finished up at the bottom of a sloping field by braking and clutching simultaneously on entry at the top. Unfortunately the brakes need to be really forced and I didn't force enough, so all I did was clutched and began to descend the hill rapidly. Fortunately I reacted quickly enough and forced hard on the brakes – rather a nasty shock. Another time I stalled going up a hill and had a really dicey time reversing out of it. The more dangerous situations were mixed in with the more ridiculous, and the neighbour's woodpile was a little bit better before, as opposed to after, I hit it.

After a while, however, I did get the rating of 'not bad' from one of the neighbours. From a shrewd French peasant that's – well – not bad. Sheep are my fascination now, and I can work with them and could work with beef cattle so I have derived some benefit from my year, but more than anything it was an unforgettable part of God's preparation of me for bigger things ahead.

Farming in the Hunter Valley, Australia

'And so I arrived at Muswellbrook, which is at the higher end of the Hunter river, lying about 150 miles from the coast at Newcastle. By this time I was feeling very worried, the area was so big, and remarkably dry, the cattle seemed to be literally living on dirt and water.'

J R B Blake

Having left school in July, I had fifteen months to myself with virtually no responsibilities. Before leaving school I had made a decision to go abroad and see some small corner of the world. Australia seemed an exciting and interesting place, and so I was left with the problem of obtaining an air fare, which had to be a return or else the Australian Government would not give me a visa.

I had no difficulty in obtaining a job in England, since I had worked locally on a farm ever since I was thirteen and so I was willingly employed for nine months, my boss knowing , or at least believing, that I was competent at milking and tractor driving, having done both for him previously.

By the time February came I had an air fare and a visa and had written to some friends in Sydney who were kind enough to meet me at the airport. So I left home for Australia in March and was met at the airport by my friends. After spending a few days with them I set off for the Hunter Valley, which I had heard from more than one source, was a good area to obtain work, and was not too far out in the bush.

And so I arrived at Muswellbrook, which is at the higher end of the Hunter river, lying about 150 miles from the coast at Newcastle. By this time I was feeling very worried, the area was so big, and remarkably dry, the cattle seemed to be literally living on dirt and water.

Now, with only £40 in my pocket, I had been told of a farm/property which employed students, so I set about finding it and to my disbelief and joy I was employed here, and much to my amazement I was the only student. My new boss was a Pomme, who at the age of twenty three had emigrated with nothing, and now had a 3000 acre property, small by Australian standards, but which nevertheless impressed me.

I was most impressed by the fact that this new boss of mine had done so well so quickly and as yet I did not understand why. After arriving in the middle of the afternoon, I found myself working until 11 p.m. that night, picking up lucerne hay. Then I very quickly learned how he had done so well for himself, it was due to how hard he worked.

Having finished that night and had a few 'tubes' and got to bed, I really did not know what the hell I was doing there. At six o'clock the next morning we were working again, this time baling hay before the sun rose. All the hay had to be bailed at this time to prevent the lucerne leaves from shattering which they did when the sun was up.

The same morning I was presented with a hat and a pair of gumboots, whose significance I had yet to discover. The hat was really important since the sun was so strong you needed something to keep it off your head. Having only seen the farm in the dark the previous night, I realised the necessity of the gumboots this first morning.

Having not had a chance to think at all, I had not really thought about the hay, everywhere was so arid, and yet here was green lucerne hay which I was picking up, and then I discovered the phenomenon of a walking irrigator. This took a long time to master, but at first I only helped to move it to a different run. Yet I was fascinated by the way they worked and soon learnt the art, which it was, since one of the two irrigators was not really reliable and often stopped walking and hence had to be regularly checked. The checking was OK in the day time, but on more than one occasion at night I rode the motor bike up the track behind the irrigator, only to have the boom

swing round and soak me, which was not a pleasant experience, especially when the only sign of life one could see was the moon. This irrigator also had a glorious habit of 'taking off' i.e. it used to walk forward propelled by the water jet, so causing all the wire to wrap around its wheels. Luckily I was never responsible for this happening, but my boss could have been described as extremely short tempered. In my four months of working on and around this property, this happened twice, and it involves about four hours work of painstaking untying the wire rope which cut ones hands to shreds.

In June we actually had some rain, in fact some 5 ½ inches more than they had seen in three years, falling in one month, and everyone was keen to get a wheat crop established in this dry county. As this went on my boss employed a local to look after his calves and pigs and run the irrigator which was watering the oats. The oats were grazed by the calves which were later sold as veal. It seems rather strange to me that we grow no feed oats here in England, despite the fact they grow all through the Australian winter, including in the frosty weather and that the Australians grow no brassicas for strip feeding, not even on their dairy farms.

In order to get the ground worked and sown we worked twelve hour shifts on the scarafurrow after the initial rain. This was an experience, since the first time I started was at night in a 'small' paddock of 300 acres, the night was cloudy and so there was no moon or starlight, and it took me forty minutes to find the diesel tank. Then, just when the sun was coming up the tractor got bogged down. This was unforgettable as the ground on top was hard, and yet if the crust was penetrated it was soapy underneath, thus one minute I was going along and the next I was up to the axles in mud. So after much cursing I unhitched the tractor, wandered around to find some logs, and got the tractor out of the hole, leaving the scarafurrow behind. Luckily I had a 20ft heavy chain and so was able to pull the rest of the machinery out with this from a different angle. I believe that it is incomprehensible to a farmer in England to

appreciate the size of everything out there. Despite having a John Deere 4440 and a 22 ft scarafurrow, one still seemed to drive round and round a single paddock for hours on end.

Then the rain began again: when this had finished we were ready to sow the wheat. This involved my boss driving the tractor with myself riding on the 18 ft drill which was modified to carry 12 cwt of seed in bags on it, and 24 cwt of fertilizer (double super, high N, P and K) besides the seed and fertilizer in the box.

On the first weekend I had no sleep for forty hours, since we had to get one block sown before the next rain was forecast. It was a really terrible job on the drill, since we were sowing at a rate of 12 acres an hour and were putting on 40lbs of wheat per acre with 60lbs of fertilizer. I never seemed to get a break from heaving one cwt bags on to the drill. But I was really chuffed when I was given an extra $100 in the month's pay packet for all the work I had done, the Australians not having an overtime system. But credit is due to my boss's work for producing really good food in the paddocks at the right time, hence I never saw a house let alone a bed for nearly two days.

After the wheat was in, there was very little to do, and so I got another job on the next door property, where a friend of my previous boss ran two thousand breeding Hereford cows. I was employed by him, since he had to test for brucellosis before moving up to the area of New South Wales known as New England. This was due to the fact that he had been bought out by the mining companies which are now ruining the Hunter Valley, because they have found some of the world's larges coal deposits here. On this particular property they are going to have the largest mine in the southern hemisphere, it is going to be opencast with a hole a mile deep in the end, removing 11.3 million tonnes of coal a year. Even in the four to five months I was in the area they had started to make railway cuttings in places in the Hunter Valley to prepare for the transport of coal to the shore.

Working with cattle in Australian style is so different, at any one time there may be five hundred head in the yards, the breeders being tested for brucellosis and ear marked so that one can recognise a cow which has tested positive.

The cattle are driven into a race, where about twenty head are jammed in head to tail and believe me these races are rock solid, with really heavy strainer posts about every four feet with heavy railing running between them, the side of the race being five feet high. Despite the height I saw two beasts jump over the top.

As well as brucellosis testing in this month, we culled all the heifer calves out, now about three months old and castrated all the bullocks which had been too young the last time they were brought in. Castrating involved three of us, two to pull the calf over and hold him down, one on the head and one taking the back legs; the third person cut the calf with a knife. The injection was not an anaesthetic but a general vaccination against such things as tetanus and blackleg.

But what really took the time is mustering the cattle, this is a hard task when chasing them out of paddocks of at least 500 acres, with creeks, washes and wooded areas, meaning that every inch has to be checked. All too often the ground was covered with rocks and long grass, hiding such things as fallen trees which are not much fun on a motor bike when chasing a beast which has broken from the main mob, since it is important to keep the group together. On more than one occasion I left the ground on the motorbike due to hitting a log. But the funniest thing that happened was when I was slowing down to cross a creek and picking a way across, the bike sank beneath me, leaving me sitting on the ground. What actually happened was that the bike sank into an underground wash, which ran into the creek. Very often the cattle had to be brought in over a period of two days, mustering and putting in a lock up paddock the first day and bringing them home on the second. Returning the cattle to their paddocks also took time.

All in all it was an extremely enjoyable experience to see this form of agriculture and the sheer size of everything is ridiculous, for after working for about four and a half months I hitched lifts around for two months, living off my earnings, and in Queensland I came across a property which was 7,000 square miles in size, roughly equivalent to the size of Cornwall. But what really sums up the wildness out there is that if you have a wounded cow and actually see it, one puts a bullet through its head, since the best price for a vealer cow is about £125 and it is thus never worth calling a vet out, except perhaps for bulls or dairy cattle. The thing which most horrified me one day when I was driving around a paddock to prop up a fence with the boss and he had left his gun behind, was that I had to cut this cow's throat. Despite the fact that the cow was down, with a half born calf, it was obviously going to die, but the experience was something I would not want to repeat.

Beef farming in Alberta

'I arrived in the middle of a beautiful fall, and was shown round the farm, which was very small, being only one quarter, that is 160 acres.'

Anna Wrobel

My experience in Canada was certainly an experience I would not have like to have missed. I learnt a lot, and not only about farming.

I did not really have a job on the farm, as I didn't have a work permit, so I was just general dogsbody and helped with

everything that was going. The farmer, Joe Day, was married to my mother's best friend Mollie, and that is how I managed to find a place in Canada. They invited me to come and stay with them for as long as I liked and I took them up on the offer.

I arrived in the middle of a beautiful fall, and was shown round the farm, which was very small, being only one quarter, that is 160 acres. There was a herd of seventy five cattle composed of thirty five cows with the same number of six month old calves, an eighteen month old bull, old 'Bully' and a four year old steer called Hercules. The cattle were a mixture of Charolais and Herefords (pronounced Herfords by the Albertans) with the older cows being Herefords and the bull a Charolais.

I will explain the presence of Hercules by saying that he was Mollie's pet. However he was not quite the parasite that Joe sometimes called him, because he was very useful when moving the cattle. All Mollie had to do was call Hercules by name and he would amble through any gate, even one most carefully avoided by all the other cattle.

My first task, after I had recovered from jet lag and the flu that is, was to help an old carpenter to build a cattle shed. The cattle slept outside all winter, except the cows when they were calving, and the bedding kept getting covered with snow and wasted, so Joe decided to have a shelter built. I had great fun building that shed, especially sitting on the roof alternately hitting the nail and myself, appreciating the panoramic view of the Rocky Mountains, which were 60 miles west of us, and singing at the top of my voice, either that or listening to Dale Blaine's very colourful war stories.

I soon got to know a few of the farmers round about, as Rocky Mountain House is generally a farming community. The only other industries were lumber and oil, the latter causing a great deal of dissatisfaction amongst the farmers, due to the misuse of the land they rented, and the poor rates they paid. We had an oil head on our land, and there were four

concrete pipelines crossing the farm in various directions, so the place was practically held together by concrete.

Most of the nearby farms' enterprises were beef cattle, with a few dairy and chicken farms. Oats and barley were grown, generally to feed cattle, but it definitely isn't wheat country, as the growing season is too short. The last frosts usually occur in May, and the first ones often fall in August. We had snow from November to April without a single thaw, even though it was the region of the Chinook, which is when warm air blows in over the mountains and can raise the temperature form -30 ºC to above freezing in one day.

During the winter we fed the cattle twice a day, giving them hay, sometimes supplemented with oat straw. You could tell the temperature by how hungry the cattle were; quite sensibly, the colder it was, the hungrier they were. The temperature was often down as low as -30 ºC and I was told horror stories about how it had sometimes reached -60 ºC. Luckily it didn't this year, but after forgetting to put on my gloves one morning I never made that mistake again!

We did quite a lot of fencing, having used a Caterpillar to get the posts in the ground before the ground froze. Caterpillars are very useful in Alberta, because a lot of the ground is still in the process of being cleared for the first time. The men who operate these machines are called 'Cat Skinners' and to English ears, it sounds like there are a lot of wild cats around the place!

The first calf arrived, rather unexpectedly on 19 January. The mother was a heifer who was due to be culled, because she was lame in one leg, and so they could not put her with the bull, because he would probably have knocked her down. The previous winter she had been kept in the yard with the weaned calves, and obviously one of these had been the father. Anyway, with no difficulty she produced a strong, healthy heifer calf, and it was named 'Anna'.

Calving mainly took place in March, with a few in February and April. All the calves were fathered by the bull running

with the herd, except those calves produced by two replacement heifers by artificial insemination, as they themselves had been fathered by this bull. We had another surprise in May, when a thirteen month old heifer in the yard went into labour. She must have been only four months old when she conceived, probably from the younger bull in the herd. We had to use a puller on her, as she was still so small and to add to the difficulties the calf was backwards. Fortunately, the calf was small and so we managed to get it out alive. However, the heifer then proceeded to prolapse, so we called the vet round immediately to put her back in and sew her up. This was no easy task, as she was obviously terrified, and the vet could only get near her when her head and one hind leg were tied up. She soon calmed down and made a very good mother.

Most of the cows had no difficulty with calving, but we had to pull a few, particularly the two heifers, so Joe decided to use a different bull next time for artificial insemination. Two calves out of the thirty eight died. Joe always brought in the cows who looked as if they were about to produce, but sometimes it is difficult to tell, and one cow had her calf in the middle of the night. Instead of staying under the shed, she had the calf in the middle of a snowdrift. There happened to be four hours between checks that night, so the calf was frozen before Joe found it. We called in the vet for another cow, whose calf, it appeared, had been dead for a couple of days, but she had been unable to abort it because its legs were hooked backwards. She didn't go without a calf however, because one was born at the same time, with the vets help as it was very large, which she proceeded to adopt, so the 'Big Bruiser' had two mothers.

In November we had to bring the cattle in and pour 'Cruformate' along their spines to prevent the warble fly larvae from developing. In the spring we ear-tagged and dehorned the calves and gave them injections of vitamins A, D and E, and selenium, which is deficient in the soil in Alberta.

In the summer we injected all the calves and eighteen month old animals against blackleg. One of the difficulties we sometimes had was rounding the cattle up, and Hercules was very useful in this, but some of our neighbours had different methods. I helped one of the neighbours with his branding and vaccinating against blackleg and we rounded up the cattle on horseback. We then had to take the cattle down the round to fresh pasture, and using a western saddle and wearing a Stetson, I now claim to have been on a 'cattle drive', even if the distance was only one and a half miles! We also had a neighbour who flew helicopters for an oil company and he sometimes used his helicopter to round up the cattle to save time.

As usual, we sold the yearlings in the spring, but the prices were really low, so after selling the steers in April, we kept the heifers until June to get a better price for them. Unfortunately, by then the price had sunk even lower! The steers weighed 750 lbs each and sold at 78 c (32p) per pound, which was 50 c (20p) less than Joe had received the year earlier and the animals were the same quality. The heifers sold for 69 c (28p) per pound, also weighing in at 750 lbs each. We sold the two year old bull because he was a nervous creature, in fact he practically demolished the loading chute when we were trying to load him to take him to market. The largest animal I saw for sale at the auction market was an eighteen month old bull who weighed over 2,000 lbs. he was a cross between a Limousin and a buffalo!

We sold the three year old bulls for $1000 (£350) each. Joe is getting quite a good reputation for the quality of his bulls, even though they aren't pedigree, so when we castrated the calves, we left four of them to become bulls, with a couple of prospective buyers already in view.

We had about seventy acres down to hay which was a mixture of sweet clover, timothy, fescue, brome and canary grass. It took over six weeks to get this crop harvested, partly because it was an exceedingly heavy crop, and partly because

it rained for at least half an hour practically every day. It was supposedly the worst summer for years, but whether the cause was the ash from St Helena's volcano, or the fact that I was in the country caused a great deal of discussion.

It was certainly a very interesting year, and I have not put down half of it. From knowing nothing about agriculture I now know at least which end of a cow is which. However, I feel that I could have learnt more on a larger mixed farm, but I still consider the experience of living abroad for a year to have been profitable and worthwhile.

Deer and dairy farming in New Zealand

'It was a family farm of 3,000 acres, principally a sheep farm. There were about 10,000 ewes and the equivalent number of lambs, plus about 180 head of cattle, two deer farms, containing about 40 stags and ten herds, a horse, cow and free-range chickens.'

Peter Caines

When I had my interview at Reading I was told I didn't really need to do a year of pre-university farming experience, as I had lived all my life on a farm and my father was a farmer. However I knew in my own mind that I wanted to take a year off and I still needed farm experience before starting my course at the University. I also had a yearning for travelling overseas by myself so I came to the conclusion that I should go to one of these four countries: The States, Canada, Australia or New Zealand. I chose English speaking countries because I wasn't too keen to spend a lot of the time

overcoming language barriers and I don't think I would pick up as much technical information on foreign speaking farms. I chose New Zealand because I thought its agriculture was very similar to ours because of its size and climatic conditions and my cousin had been out there the year previously.

So on leaving school I booked a fare to New Zealand via Los Angeles on the way out and Hong Kong on the way back. At the beginning of the holidays I met a New Zealander who offered me work, starting in late October. Apart from him I knew no other New Zealanders, all my other contacts were addresses that I had been given by friends and relations. I left on 21 October 1980. On flying into Los Angeles I thought it was raining, however it was smog and the temperature was about 80°C. Having seen Disneyland I took off for Auckland the following day. Auckland is not the capital city of New Zealand but it contains the most people, one million and a third of the total population. The next day I flew down to Invercargill which is at the bottom of South Island, to start work. I was fairly tired by then because the All Blacks were touring the U.K. and games were being telecast and this was compulsory watching for the Kiwis (from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m.) I was met by my boss at Invercargill and I started work on his farm the following day. It should be noted that it was spring at the time in the Southern Hemisphere.

It was a family farm of 3,000 acres, principally a sheep farm. There were about 10,000 ewes and the equivalent number of lambs, plus about 180 head of cattle, two deer farms, containing about 40 stags and ten herds, a horse, cow and free-range chickens. The farm was fairly flat, but on arriving I pointed out of the window at some mountains and asked how high they were, there was a laugh from the boss and he replied 'These are only hills, there are the mountains' and he pointed out of the other window! Then I began to realize that the scenery in New Zealand is a lot more 'exaggerated' than in England. When I arrived at the farm I didn't really know the back end of a sheep from the front end, but after four months

there, which included shearing, weaning and plenty of other stock work, I was a great deal more familiar with them. The flock was mainly composed of the Romney breed but a South Suffolk ram (Southdown x Suffolk) was crossed with some of the ewes to give a fat lamb which had a much faster weight gain than the pure Romney.

I was also introduced to motorbikes on this farm, something which I had always wanted to learn to ride. They were used every day; most of the time for stock work but also to get from A to B as one farm was five miles from the other. They were invaluable for moving sheep and also for moving cattle, the latter never having seen a human for the last six months. Naturally I came a cropper quite a few times but only one is worth repeating: I was checking for lost sheep on my second week on the farm in a paddock I had never been in before. I was bombing along, not really concentrating on what was in front of me and I went over a fifteen foot bank. I was in top gear at the time and the bike landed undamaged about fifteen yards away. Naturally I thought I had broken every bone in my body, but it was all bad bruising.

I spent quite a lot of time on a tractor also. We put in about 200 acres of grass before Christmas and about 200 acres of turnips and swedes. The New Zealanders were also trying to work on minimal cultivation procedures and this farm had purchased a power harrow (a glorified rotavator) which provided a seed bed on one pass. We were also occupied with making hay, this farm grew about 200 acres of lucerne, but the season was particularly dry and we only managed two cuts and 7,000 bales. Big round bales are popular over in New Zealand as is the flat eight bale handling system, but where I worked they were happy with a bloke stacking off the back of the baler – a very dusty job with lucerne. Talking about dust reminds me that we had to hose down the sheep yards before putting stock in as the dust was so bad.

Much of the time was spent drafting lambs for the freezing works and one day I was given the opportunity by my boss to

visit one of them. The freezing works is really just a glorified abattoir. There were five of them in the province where I was working. The one I went to was killing 19,000 lambs a day. There were seven chains working and the lambs just keep moving along on them as each chap in the chain performs one cut or action. There are butchers, shepherds, people in the freezers, gut-tray workers etc. The hygiene standards are very high with the floor constantly being hosed down and all the workers were in white. It often annoys New Zealanders who are forced to comply with special health regulations and then see the frozen carcasses thrown on the floor at Smithfield or other markets in the U.K. The freeze workers are a rather militant bunch and they spend a lot of time on strike, mainly because their job is very boring and they know how important they are to New Zealand and her export earnings. While I was there they all went on strike just as the drought took grip and farmers were very keen to get fat lambs off the farms so that there was enough grass for the ewes. Some farmers ended up using all their winter hay through the driest months (January and February).

Deer farming is really taking off in New Zealand. There always was an abundance of deer in the bush and highly skilled trappers and helicopter pilots have spent much time catching and selling deer. However now prices for hinds and stags are dropping off and there aren't as many deer left to catch in the bush. The value of deer is principally in the carcase but for stags it is also in the velvet, the young developing antlers. The value of velvet can vary depending on the grading (A-E) but grade A was fetching upwards of $250 (NZ) a pound and a good cut of velvet could be anything up to 5-6 lbs. The velvet is exported to the Middle East and used as an aphrodisiac. The market however has been swamped with velvet and my boss was only getting $50/lb as the grading became stricter and standards higher, however venison prices held steady last year after a big swing in the price of live animals for which people were paying $2000-3,000 at the start

of the deer farming boom. There is still a future in deer farming, because as far as stock units are concerned the deer is equivalent to the ewe, whereas the value of a deer carcase compared to the ewe is considerably more. Fencing deer is a considerable expense however, and the animals I was dealing with weren't very domesticated. One broke its neck by charging and trying to jump the fence when we tried to move them.

Having seen shearing out on this farm and working as a 'rousabout' – sweeping the boards and packing the fleeces into 180 kg bales, I toured around New Zealand and then worked on a dairy farm for two months. Again it was a family farm of about 400 acres with a dairy of 250 Ayrshires, Friesians and Jerseys, plus crosses. The farm was on the west of the North Island in a region called Taranaki which has a very high concentration of dairy farms. The central point of the region is a mountain called Mount Tymour which is about 9,000 ft high, with dairy farms radiating out from its base. We were very close to the mountains and the average annual rainfall was 80 inches, yet the cattle were kept out all the year. The parlour was a 44 x 44 herringbone and probably the biggest in the area. There was a rotary parlour in New Zealand which could take 70 cows on the turnstile at one time: the herd was 850 head.

There were several big dairy companies in the area, all manufacturing dairy products like cheese, butter, skimmed milk powder etc. The dairy farms were paid on the kilograms of fat and protein they produced and a volumetric levy of one cent a litre was imposed to pay for haulage and tanker drivers' wages. The bulk tanks were all owned by the dairy company and the milk had to enter the tanks at 6°C having passed through a stainless steel plate cooler. The milk quality controls were a lot tighter, there were sediment tests, coliform bacterial tests and plate cell counts as well as the standard milk quality tests.

The dairy industry in New Zealand was going through a good period, the sheep meat industry was struggling to find markets but had broken into the Middle East market (especially Iran), the wool industry was having its ups and downs and the only thing that was keeping the beef industry alive were the exports to the states for beef-burgers.

When I travelled around New Zealand I visited arable farms, hill country farms, sheep breeders and fruit farms. Breaking in land for agricultural use was very commonplace. Most of the flat land has been utilized so it is hill country that is being utilized by burning off the scrub, aerial seeding and topdressing with very successful results. In the North Island there was a widespread disease called facial Eczema which affects cattle, sheep and even deer, it was putting some farmers out of business and grossly affected the national output of agricultural products.

I returned to the U.K on 21 July via Australia – where I stayed for a month, and then in Hong Kong for five days.

I believe that the value I have derived from this experience is very worth while indeed. Some may argue that it wasn't experience of U.K. farms, but I feel much of what I have learnt can be applied to U.K farming. And for me, it wasn't just agricultural experience, it was experience in looking after myself. A practical year on farms of any nature in any country is always going to be worthwhile to people doing BSc courses in Agriculture. All the research and theory we do and discuss is all applied in practice. Agriculture is a very practical industry, that is, the money derived from it is produced on the farm, so unless people have a sound base in practical aspects of the industry they can't apply their theories and what they learn in the lectures. I was very lucky to have been brought up on a farm and have the chance to go and work on farms overseas, something I think I will always appreciate.

Varied farming experiences in New Zealand

'On Wednesday night, we managed to convince a sheep farmer that his dagging would be crippled without our assistance, even though I had never handled a sheep in my life.'

A. S. Park

Standing in Auckland airport, it suddenly came home how short a time it had been since we had decided to go to New Zealand.

It must have been one evening, after a hard day's work on father's farm, around the beginning of November, that Tom suggested we should go to New Zealand together. It seemed a perfect opportunity to combine the excitement and interest of travel with the experience of farming in one of the world's top agricultural countries.

I had spent the previous months since 'A' levels working at home on the farm and had often talked about going away somewhere for the year; now that the opportunity had arisen, I could see little point in waiting.

Three weeks later, after twenty four hours flying, we were waiting in Auckland airport for someone whom neither of us knew or would recognise, but who had moved out to New Zealand from my home village. Philip had kindly offered to pick us up, which was very lucky as it was all very foreign for that first weekend and really a bit awe inspiring for such simple country folk as Tom and I. However he looked after us well and showed us the sights of Auckland city.

It soon became clear that in order to go where we wanted in New Zealand, we would have to get a car. This can be appreciated when you realize that New Zealand is about the same size as Great Britain but that the population of the latter is about fifty two million and that of New Zealand about three million. We could not have been luckier. Philip's next door

neighbour was selling a twenty year old Vanguard 6 for two hundred pounds. It was a good buy, for we did about seven thousand miles in it in five months and never had a breakdown. We sold it about two or three days before we left for what we had bought it. I only wish I could have brought it home and kept it.

It was nice staying in Auckland but I was looking forward to getting out into the country and working. Primarily to gain experience, but also because we only had fifty pounds left between us.

The next two days were probably the worst of the whole trip. We drove from Auckland to Matawai about 270 miles, stopping at farms all the way asking for work. We thought we would never get any and the idea of catching the next flight home was not far away. Gradually an introductory patter developed which was based on the fact that we were agricultural students and that we could do anything, anywhere, anyhow, anytime as long as we got some money in return.

On Wednesday night, we managed to convince a sheep farmer that his dagging would be crippled without our assistance, even though I had never handled a sheep in my life. In retrospect, I think he took us on more out of compassion than anything else. We worked for two days, 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. in a big shearing shed, penning up and collecting sheep for five men who were dagging them, ready for the shearing gang.

From this point on our problem was not finding jobs but rather forcing ourselves to move on and refuse them. The next week was spent working alternate days on two vineyards near Gisborne. We were involved in making supports for long rows of young vines, tucking in and pruning older vines. It is interesting to note how strict agricultural workers in New Zealand are about their working hours. They insist on regular half hour mid morning and mid afternoon breaks, at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. During these breaks they consume vast quantities of tea, which I suppose is essential in those hot working conditions.

We drove around Hawkes Bay and there we were offered a job on a sheep and beef station. This involved spraying blackcurrant bushes which were growing as weeds on the hill slopes. For this job we had a four wheel drive tractor pulling a 1500 litre tank, petrol driven pump and about 150 m of hose. The slopes on which we were spraying were often so steep that if I was spraying and Tom was standing below me, I could put my foot on his head. The physical toil of working in conditions which rarely dropped below 100ºF combined with the fact that we were using 2,4,5T and had very poor living conditions made us decide not to stay long. However, Christmas was upon us, so after spending Christmas day with jam sandwiches and a bottle of wine on the beach, we moved on.

We were both feeling a bit downhearted due to bad treatment and the fact that it was the 'festive season', so as I had been in contact with a relative of mine, we decided to go over and see him. John Park lived in Hawera on the other side of North Island, and he welcomed us with open arms and made us treat his home as our own.

While staying with John, we managed to secure a job stacking bales for hay contractors. During the month that we worked for them we only spent about twenty days actually working, however with free board and lodging and 1 ½ p for every bale we stacked, we couldn't go wrong. This job really meant that we did not have to worry about money again in New Zealand, in fact I returned home with more money than when I arrived.

It now seemed about time to see the South Island. We took the ferry across and drove to Parnassus where I had been invited to stay with another relation who ran a sheep station. In Parnassus at 'The Sisters' farm we were also welcomed with open arms and offered a job. I learnt a lot on 'The Sisters' and I am truly indebted to Thirza and Doug for their patience and kindness. Over the two weeks we worked there we baled and

hauled round bales, helped with the harvest of the pea crop and drafted, drenched and dagged sheep and hoggets.

The week following our work at Parnassus was spent travelling down the South Island seeing the sights, comparing the dramatically contrasting countryside and weather and visiting farms. When we reached Invercargill I went to see a young New Zealander whom I had met in Britain and he kindly offered us jobs on their sheep station. We spent three weeks there dagging, dipping, drenching, drafting, helping the shearing gangs, fencing and spraying gorse.

We had about four weeks left before our flight back and it seemed that the best thing to do would be to travel slowly back, seeing all the sights that had been recommended to us and as far as was possible, revisiting all those people who had been so kind to us.

It would be impossible to reproduce here everything we did, however in brief summary, New Zealand is a country of striking beauty and contrasts and here are a few of the particularly memorable places we visited.

Milford Sound, a beautiful inlet from the sea, surrounded by 2,000 ft high cliffs; in the middle of Fjordland National Park, virtually untouched by man and can only be reached by an 80 mile track and through a mile long tunnel carved out of solid rock. Routeburn Walk, a three day hike across mountain ranges up to 5,000 ft above sea level, when we lived on milk powder and sugar. Franz Joseph and Fox glaciers, running out from the Southern Alps to the Tasman Sea on the West coast of South Island. Rotorua, a thermal area, where the ground is warm, geysers keep boiling up everywhere you go and the air is heavy with sulphur.

However, soon the date of the return flight crept up on us. We flew back home in May and despite having such a good time it was good to be back. I spent the remaining five months of the year working at home, where we have a 270 acre farm with 130 dairy cows and followers and some beef. I think that this was better than working on a different type of farm as

despite the fact that I have taken an active interest in the farm for many years, being away at school has always kept me out of the main business of the farm, other than for short periods during holidays. I learnt a great deal during these months, not only about farming, but also about building as we have been extending our house ourselves with the help of some casual labour.

Of these five months, probably the most important time was the last two weeks when my parents went on holiday. As fate would have it, the very week that my parents were to leave, two of our workmen handed in their notice. We managed to find a young lad, with little previous experience, who came in on weekdays to try and fill the gap. However, this essentially left the herdsman and I to run the farm. It seems a little ironic, that I perhaps gained more experience in those last two weeks than from the rest of the year.

In terms of agricultural experience, New Zealand was very rewarding, the agriculture there seems to be based on simplicity and efficiency and I think that it has a lot to teach us as we seem to be getting more and more mechanized and capital intensive. It is important to strike a balance between maximum production and returns on effort of the farmer.

I think that I have benefited enormously by taking a year off: firstly in being able to look at my agricultural studies from a practical point of view rather than merely from an academic standpoint, and secondly in understanding and knowing people so much better as I have met and talked to so many.

7

To Sum Up

The best industry in the world, farming

'You can't put a price on the enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from working and being associated with the best industry in the world, farming.'

Michael Green

The term or group of words 'Pre-University Farming Experience' may seem a daunting mouthful at first to the unwary, but once grasped it can be examined to find the meaning. 'Pre-University' is easy enough, it means exactly what it says, in that it refers to the period in time after attendance at a sixth form college or equivalent and before that higher level of academic striving, the University. No problems with definitions so far. Now examine the next two words with care. 'Farming experience' would mean 'farming that is experience' or 'an experience' The context in which the word experience is used by the University can translate into a very different one when it comes down to the level of the student becoming experienced, but I shall deal with this multi-meaning phrase in greater detail later.

This interim practical learning period of twelve months is a requirement that students intending to read for a degree in agriculture must undertake before getting back to the brain-testing business of learning the other side of the agricultural industry (from text books, lectures etc.) Those students who are fortunate enough to have farm-owning parents or guardians, are normally exempt from this year's detour as they are deemed to have gained enough practical experience at home to be able to relate the theory they will learn at University to the practical side they already possess. I feel however, that the experience that can be gained from a year's solo endeavour away from educational establishments can be so enlightening that this year's practical should be for every one without exception.

The period of employment amongst the bread and butter of the farming community should ideally be for a full twelve months and should include as many different areas and aspects of farming as possible. Which isn't possible as ideal farms are very hard to find and ones that take on students are even more elusive, but I have it from higher sources that they do exist.

The business of opening the door into farming wearing the label 'student' around your neck can be a testing experience for most and even harrowing and upsetting for those unprepared for the adult world of employment. Farmers tend to look at students through fogged glasses, they see an outline but aren't quite sure what is within it. I should explain that this applies to a select few farmers, and that the majority are quite happy to give us a helping hand on to the bottom rung of the ladder.

Part-time weekend farming was my own introduction into the working world and this acted as an ideal learning ground in which to serve a useful apprenticeship. Actually coming round to getting a full-time job for a year can be quite hard even with some years farming experience behind you. It involved for me much letter writing, enclosed C.V.'s, jars of fighting brew, plus a word in the ear for Michael (that's me), enclosed S.A.E.'s and so on. The reward, if you really try (or are just very lucky) is the guarantee of twelve months on a farm that will educate you with all you need to know about practical farming and more (hidden benefits).

Employment can be elusive at the best of times, and with the growing numbers of unemployed, threatens to worsen, but jobs are there if you look for them and you can hook one if you ask people, talk to farmers, reply to advertisements etc. I will admit that luck does play a little part in your finding a 'good' farm and the difference that the word 'good' makes to the value of your year's experience compared to 'a' farm job is very significant indeed.

The actual farm that you arrive at on day one can radically shape your observations and experiences during this year's

practice. It will determine whether or not you are happy and enjoying yourself, because I've found that enjoyment brings rewards from your work, it helps you to learn more from and about your work and the benefits to you are worth a fortune. If however you have to work on a farm where you are the 'scrap job' receiver, you won't, unless you like being lazy and getting bottom jobs, become so involved with the farm, its running and how the industry as a whole operates. Therefore the benefit to you as a learning student is severely diminished, perhaps even regressive in that it might leave you with a bad impression and an incorrect image etched in your mind.

I have in my year since July 82, experienced both types of farm that I have just mentioned, so I think I have a fairly good idea of what's what when it comes to knowing what you can expect to get at a particular farm establishment.

The first farm was in lovely Hampshire, the job being that of senior student/tractor driver and came with a little slate-roofed cottage with leaky window frames and a back door that used to stick close quite tightly. This business of living on one's own, having to do the cooking, washing etc was really character building and tiring on the old muscles; to think that my Mum's been doing all that for me since I was a wee baby. Good old Mum!

This employment lasted for four months which was on the whole very enjoyable and provided me with valuable knowledge. But the profits from a successful harvest relegated me to the position of general dog's body – due to the employment of a professional many years my senior.

In order to avoid the ensuing exploitation, I sought another job. Back to square one again. But this is where lady luck smiled on me, with a grin from ear to ear. I was most fortunate to meet in a house of Real Ale, a young farming student also on a year's practical – for a place in a College of Agriculture. He was able to give me the name of a farmer who took students on and was looking for one.

I approached the farm and interview with a certain wariness after my previous encounter with full-time student employment, but my fears were unfounded. The farmer was very nice and the farm was great. I was given everything I could have wanted (well, almost everything). There was responsibility, experience and lots (too much!!!) of the good olde honest, hard, down to the nitty-gritty WORK. “This is what ‘practical’ farming is all about” I thought on my second day as I was given, under supervision, the job of trying to deliver a calf from within this lazy cow that gave no assistance whatsoever, pushing at all the wrong moments and generally showing acute disinterest in what I was trying to do to help.

Bare to the waist, in the cattle crush, I struggled with this calf trying to turn it upside down, right way up, inside the cow. On went the calving stick (a pole with a screw thread and a ratchet handle) and after some more coaxing out it popped. The feeling of warmth and pleasure that I experienced when I saw that same lazy cow licking that fresh born, steaming, wet Charolais calf that I had just given a helping arm, hand and upper body into the world, was something that I will remember for the rest of my life.

Other memorable events from my year included:

the tractor that wouldn’t stop, driven by annoyed boss until it ran out of diesel,

the cow that suddenly became un-paralysed and charged me when I went to feed her with a bucket of concentrated feed nuts,

and last but not least: trying to manhandle a cow with a trapped nerve in her leg out of a muddy ditch/stream. In an attempt to get some leverage on the rope I was pulling, I put myself with feet braced against this really large boulder and: heave, heave, snap, whoops, …. splash!! Yes, I had decided to take up swimming.

And that’s hopefully what this year’s practical is all about, memorable and valuable experiences.

The benefit that you can get from whatever type of farm you are working on depends a lot on your own attitude towards farming and having to do one year's work. If you see it as a chore or just a holiday, then you are really cheating everyone, mostly yourself. This is because the year as a whole has so much to offer you if you take the time and effort to realize its potential.

As it stands, a year's pre-entry experience is in my opinion a very good and worthwhile idea and should be undertaken by all students of agriculture and horticulture. It offers the chance to be your own boss, develop your character, experience the real world at close quarters, to come out from behind the relative shielding of educational establishments and to get your hands dirty. It has been a fountain of learning and knowledge for me and has definitely shaped the way I now feel and the light in which I look at things.

In conclusion, I can say that I've now seen farming from the other side of the fence. I've spent most of this last year involved with farming in one way or form and that presented with the opportunity to recommend a student to undertake a year's practical farming, I would offer him or her the strongest advice to do so, as it is worth every minute, hour, day and month and the finish. You can't put a price on the enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from working and being associated with the best industry in the world, farming.

Epilogue

While enjoying compiling these essays, interesting similarities and differences due to location, type of farm and so on became apparent.

The exact location of the farms was not always clear, but as would be expected they were mostly to be found stretching from Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk in the east to Cornwall and Pembrokeshire in the west. Cumbria featured and perhaps Yorkshire since shippons were mentioned. There was a rare year on an upland farm in France, the exact location unspecified, and another on a beef farm in Alberta just east of the Rockies. Farmers' sons ventured to Australia and New Zealand, while a student from India after discussing work in Kent, went on to describe his own farm in the Punjab. Considering the location of Reading University, farms in the home-counties featured strongly.

Descriptions of soil type and conditions are sparse in marked contrast to climate. The dark, cold, wet and freezing days of winter can be a severe test of resolve. I recalled a bleak, wet November morning in an open fronted barn riddling potatoes through a small sieve; tubers that qualified were consigned to sacks with more to come from a clamp which seemed to stretch to infinity. I pondered the relative merits of this life as compared with other options. I was saved by *Phytophora infestans* wreaking havoc in the clamp.

I was not alone in feeling the effects of winter:

'That winter was a true test of my enthusiasm, and although it occasionally thinned, it never died.' *Elizabeth White*

'..we suffered from quite bad snow, some days the diesel would freeze and then we couldn't clear the lane for the milk tanker.' *Linda Trehearn*

‘Last winter was long and cold and left many experiences indelibly printed on my mind. Memories of the dark mornings when I woke at 4 a.m. cursing the alarm clock and staggered out into the snow and biting wind to find the roads blocked by drifts[…..]. As spring arrived such memories lost their sharpness.’ *Penny Street.*

‘Two very cold spells with temperatures as low as minus 10. One day even the milk froze in the pipelines and jammed everything and all the water pipes froze.’ *Andrew Evans*

‘However the good days did make up for the bad ‘Nature’ll allus put it right’ said the shepherd, most of the time and he was right. *V McAlear*

The farm sizes varied considerably, in 1952-3 the farm I worked on was 230 acres which in those days would have been considered large. The students did not always specify farm size, but apart from two very large estates of 2,000 and 7,000 acres, farms varied between 62 and 1000 acres, with a mean size of 312 acres. This of course ignores a farm of 7,000 square miles in Queensland! Average farm size however is rather misleading since a small proportion of very large farms can account for the greater part of the farmed area.

Dairy farms were well represented in the enterprises recounted. The average herd size was 108 cows, which compared with the 35 Ayrshire cows and followers on ‘my’ Lincolnshire farm in 1952-3. This breed receives no more mention, but the Friesian does not entirely dominate, since Guernseys and Red Polls put in an appearance. Recently there was considerable controversy over a planning application for a milking herd of 8,000 cows, not far from the farm I worked on in 1952-3. This would have caused a deep intake of breath then and even among the later cohort of farms. On these farms old practices lingered in the form of milking bales, but in general milking took place in more sophisticated parlours, and in some cases with automatic cluster release and semi-automatic feeding systems.

Sow breeding units were fairly common, varying between 80 and 500 sows; which compared with the one sow in the Lincolnshire farm in 1952-3!

Sheep featured on many farms with lambing almost universally considered one of the most rewarding experiences.

In general, arable farming is less well represented in the later farm cohort. While hand thinning sugar beet featured on one farm, the beet was mechanically harvested, in marked contrast to the hand work required on this crop and the potato crop in 1952-3. One student (*Maria del Corral*) mentioned in her essay that she had concentrated almost entirely on the animal side of practical farming, the reason being that animals require much closer attention than crops in a day's work. With the mechanization of crop production, few, but more specialized staff are needed, but work with animals is a daily requirement and labour intensive and it is not surprising that many students found much of their work was concerned with livestock.

The impact of farming on biodiversity received little attention, although the aesthetic appreciation of the countryside was not entirely absent:

'Over the year I saw the changes in its beauty – masses of bluebells, snowdrops, campions, violets, primroses and buttercups and watched out for the two resident pairs of pheasants, the pair of buzzards with single offspring, the half-white blackbird and the jerking white behinds of disappearing rabbits. It is a very lovely lane.' *Elizabeth White*.

but, tempered with growing realism:

'Fifteen months of outdoor work has taught me to appreciate the countryside and wildlife more than before. I am no longer quite so ready to call rabbits 'sweet', having seen the immense damage they can cause, particularly on some of our woods. There was also an exceptionally large number of deer around this year, a beautiful sight, especially as there have been two white ones mixing with the roe and red. However they didn't seem so 'cute' when I went to look at the new trees we had

planted, only to find that the tops had been nipped off by the deer.' *Penny Williamson*.

However, the impact of pesticides on biodiversity, brought to the fore by Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring, 1962*) did not arise as an issue.

Did we sink or swim?

What has emerged strongly from these essays is the almost unanimous consensus by the students of the immense benefit to them of this practical year, which went far beyond the mere practical value of the experience to their later studies. Their exposure to a world far more diverse than that experienced during their school days, resulted in growing maturity and an increase in confidence of progressing in the 'real' world.

No one sank. All swam more confidently into the future. The diverse benefits can perhaps best be summarized in their own words.

Relevance to studies

'By working for a year as an agricultural worker I learnt much about farming from the worker's point of view and for anyone hoping to go into any form of agricultural management this is of extreme importance.' *Isabelle Pearce*

'I think it is vital to have a practical knowledge of farming before studying it academically, since agriculture is essentially a practical discipline and it is always important to be able to apply what you learn about agriculture to the practical situation.' *Fergus Sinclair*

'I thoroughly believe that doing an agricultural course with no experience is a waste of time, even though this is really a science based course.' *P Fenn*

‘Working on a farm has put the university work into perspective and has given me something to relate the work to.’ *S Meineck*

‘Although at the time I would have preferred to go straight from school to University I now really appreciated the year I had off. My practical year has been a great benefit to me agriculturally. […..] I now appreciated the work that farm labourers do, and the problems involved in it.’ *Jo Robinson*

Commitment to the profession of agriculture

‘The one thing that I’ve got out of the last five years is a total and utter adoration for my job which is one thing that very few peopled indeed can say they have.’ *Joanna Lawton*

‘I realised that it was not a job at all but more a way of life. It was incredible how social, domestic and work spheres became totally integrated and how committed you become. It is a very good way of life though – totally rewarding and I learnt so much in the year.’ *Sara Brimacombe*

‘My last day on the farm ended hot, hung-over and very, very exhausted, having spent it stubble burning. This called for the feet of Sebastian Coe, the conscience of Nero and a total lack of concern for personal safety. Oh, and a box of matches and a fork. Despite all this, I hope to be back next summer.’ *J Franklin*

‘I would far rather be a shepherdess in the Highlands of Scotland where I could savour the countryside around me than in an office or factory.’ *Isabelle Pridgeon*

‘After a while, however, I did get the rating of ‘not bad’ from one of the neighbours. From a shrewd French peasant that’s –well – not bad. Sheep are my fascination now, and I can work with them.’ *Stephen Bryant*

Farming reality

'You know that what a farmer wants to do is not what he does. You also know that even when you are dog tired and flat on your back in the cow yard, looking up at the ewe you have just tried to catch, that there is a funny side to it somewhere.' *Kathleen Webb*

'I was always faintly surprised at the never-ending list of things to be done. There was never a second's rest, one job was started, completed as quickly and as efficiently as possible, and another got on with. Alongside this was the impressive planning, thinking ahead, preparation, decision-making. It never stopped. To be frank I was surprised and not a little put out by the sheer unromantic and business like way in which the farm was managed.' *Elizabeth White*

'I learnt a lot of new skills including how to mend almost anything with baler twine and how not to shear a sheep!' *Rosemary Cooper*

'Apart from learning many aspects of pig farming this practical year I have had a glimpse of the 'real world' and found things are not always as simple as we would like. Exploitation has kindled the fighting spirit in me.' *Helen Cottam*

'[In Australia] if you have a wounded cow and actually see it, one puts a bullet through its head, since the best price for a vealer cow is about £125 and it is thus never worth calling a vet out, except perhaps for bulls or dairy cattle.' *J R B Blake*

Exposure to diversity

'I found out how people in other walks of life lived and had lived, and I met people and so ideas, that I would not normally have come across. If someone was to ask me what was the best thing to come out of my year's farming it is perhaps this last fact that I would consider as being most useful.' *Lloyd Gudgeon*

‘I found out quite a bit about life, as it was the first time I had lived outside school and had been with other people who worked for a living; their whole outlook was different from mine and it was a very good experience to how others lived their lives.’ *P Fenn*

‘In my year off I have met and worked with many different people – old and young, farmers, labourers, gypsies and students. It has shown me the conditions these people work under and so has given me, I think, a greater insight into people and their attitudes to life.’ *Jo Robinson*

Working with others

‘Finally I discovered that for a working relationship to succeed, two elements are essential, namely trust and reliability. For my part I believe that I provided my fair share and I know that in return I received a wealth of experiences to draw on and a friendship normally so rare in employee and employer relationships.’ *Andrew Evans*

‘But it was this very friction [with another worker] that brought home to me one of the most important aspects of the year’s work, that I was learning to live and work harmoniously with people of different work experience and attitude.’ *Joe Fuller*

‘My attitude towards farm management, which involves a lot of contact with other people, has been strengthened considerably, particularly by my experience on the first farm! To treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself would be a very suitable motto, I feel. […..] it has become more important in my outlook, in my belief that that it is a major factor regarding efficiency, smooth running (and even enjoyment) not only of farming but of any enterprise requiring team work.’ *Andrew Downs*

Self reliance

'I also learnt a fair bit about myself: I really was interested, I could cope with the responsibilities I was given and I almost enjoyed appalling weather! I enjoyed that year so much.' *Elizabeth White*

'Being stretched in ways which I wasn't used to meant that I discovered myself and my capabilities and limits in areas that I did not know about. [….] though I had more money to do things with than at school, I had far less time to do it in, this I am sure resulted in better use of my time. This perhaps is one of the greatest personal gains that I have obtained before going to university.' *Tony Harwood*

'I learnt a great deal about myself and became more independent.' *Lloyd Gudgeon*

'I did learn a lot about practical farming and my own capabilities. I found it a great challenge as I was fairly regularly cold, wet, tired and lonely, but I learnt how to overcome this sort of hardship, although I never intend to spend another winter living in a caravan. I became more independent and able to look after myself fairly proficiently which was one of my intentions when I took the job. *Justin Adams*

'I believe that the value I have derived from this experience is very worth while indeed. And for me, it wasn't just agricultural experience, it was experience in looking after myself.' *Peter Caines*

'Overall I thoroughly enjoyed my year working on a farm. I gained valuable experience outside my previous lifestyle. I learned how to work with people and since I was catering for myself I learned to look after myself. In doing this I feel I matured a great deal and would recommend that most people should take a year out before university.' *Richard Caplin*

In sum

'There were times when I cursed the University from here to Timbuktu, but I would not have missed the experience for the world.' *Kerry Jonsson*

'I really enjoyed my year oh the farm, it was hard work at times and I wished I was inside in the dry and warm, but other times it was just like something out of a James Herriot book and everything seemed worthwhile.' *Ann Johnson*

'I was very sad when it came for me to leave; it had been one of the most enjoyable and fast moving years of my life.' *David Oakley*

'I think that I have benefited enormously by taking a year off: firstly in being able to look at my agricultural studies from a practical point of view rather than merely from an academic standpoint, and secondly in understanding and knowing people so much better as I met and talked to so many.' *A S Park*

'I can say that I've seen farming from the other side of the fence. Presented with the opportunity to recommend a student to undertake a year's practical farming, I would offer him or her the strongest advice to do so, as it is worth every minute, hour and month and the finish. You can't put a price on the enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from working and being associated with the best in the world, farming.' *Michael Green*

'I wish however that you could be with me, and peep out of the window at the night; the wind is still rocking the trees and the clouds are skipping across the sky in front of a most dazzling harvest moon. When Mr N came in tonight after shutting up the chickens, he said "it's a pity we have to grow old and die and leave all these beautiful things." It was quite an unexpected thing for him to say, but it does make you think, doesn't it?' *Paul Harris, 1953, extract from a letter to his fiancée*

Practical training for the 21st century student

The unanimous appraisal of their practical experience from the essay writers was that their love of agriculture was enhanced and that they had benefited from it in many ways. How relevant is that experience to the potential student in the twenty first century?

In the early 1930's when I was born, our house was on the edge of a small market town. The natural world was taken for granted. Martins glued their nests on to the walls of the houses, starlings nested on ledges in the eaves, cuckoos came and left with never failing regularity and the nearby fields were home for feeding and nesting plovers. The adjacent allotments were alive with cabbage white butterflies, whose caterpillars invaded bedrooms in the autumn looking for a place to pupate and survive the winter. There was no apparent conflict between farming and the natural world.

During The Second World War, the old technologies continued; while a strictly rationed (and unprecedentedly healthy) population had been fed largely by the activities of its farmers. The major change was the ploughing up of old pastures to make way for more crops to be grown.

In my account of farming some seven years after the war, I noted that part of a hedge had been removed, but that the largest field was 42 acres and the smallest 1 acre. A combine harvester was an innovation in 1953 and no pesticides were used.

Thirty or more years later, farms were fully mechanized, but the students did not mention the possible effects of changes in technology on the natural world. In fact the natural world did not figure very largely in their accounts, despite the furore created by the publication of

Silent Spring (*Rachel Carson 1963*) more than a decade before the student essays were written.

Writing in the Department of Agriculture Journal (*More Than Just a Different Generation of Farmers. 1986*) Stephen Hart, who farmed on the Chilterns, lamented the fact that the students he was showing round the farm were disappointed that he did not spend more time on the business aspects of farming, rather than on the natural life associated with the farm. Few if any could assign a species to any of the bird songs that could be heard. The result, he concluded, is an agri-businessman, a potential tycoon, but rarely a countryman.

I began my lecturing career in 1958 at Reading University. On my first walk around the University Farm adjacent to the river Thames, I wandered through a large tract of meadow land next to the river and disturbed a pair of snipe. In the 1960's these meadows were ploughed up since they were regarded as the most fertile fields in contrast to the rest of the farm which occupied gravel terraces. Snipe vanished from the scene.

The teaching of crop production was also undergoing a pronounced change. Based on research at Rothamstead, it had been demonstrated that given the optimum fertiliser treatments, cereal yields could be greatly increased. At the same time the science of crop production was undergoing a sea-change; total dry matter yield of a crop could be expressed in terms of the total amount of radiation intercepted by the crop leaf canopy and the efficiency with which that radiation was converted into dry matter. That efficiency (1.4g/MJ) was similar for most crops given an adequate water supply. (*Monteith 1977. Climate and the Efficiency of Crop Production in Britain*). Given appropriate climatic data, which fixes the

duration of the growing season, it is possible to use this concept to estimate potential yield and compare it with yields actually obtained.

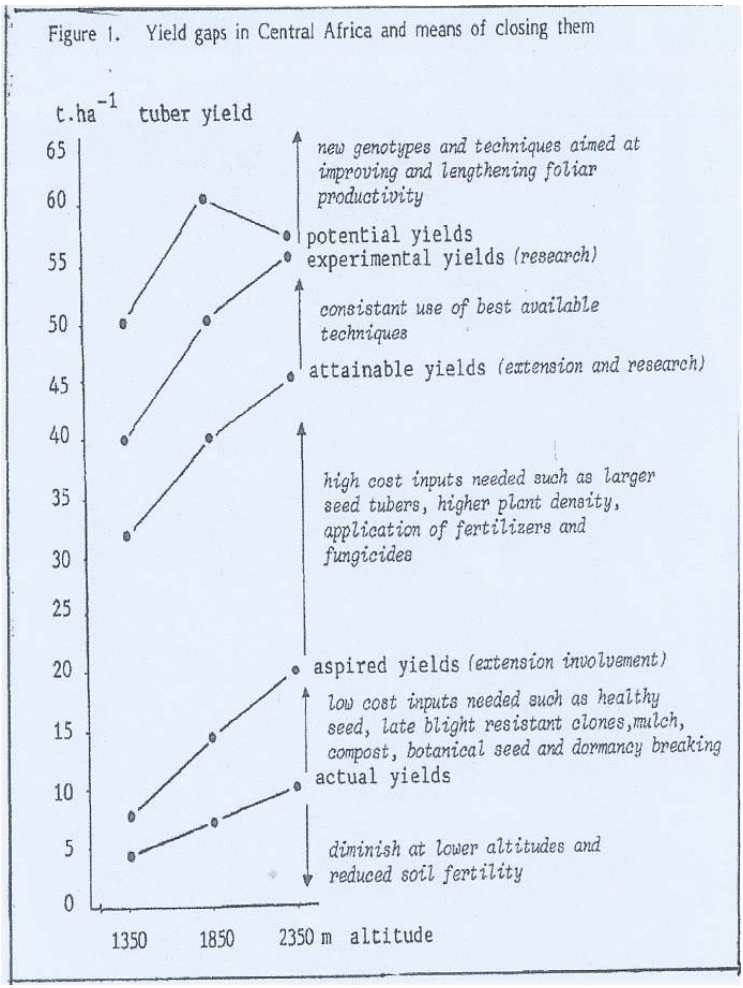

Figure 1 is taken from a study of the potato crop in Rwanda by Anton Haverkort, one of my postgraduate

students. (*Anton Haverkort. Yield Levels of Potato Crops in Central Africa. 1986. Journal of the Department of Agriculture*).

The data illustrate the effect of the altitude at which the crops were grown and the enormous gap between the actual yields obtained on farms and the yields that were obtained by the application of appropriate inputs. The best yields obtained experimentally at the highest altitude were close to the estimated potential yield.

The emphasis on pursing potential yields, with obvious implications for feeding a rapidly increasing world population, estimated to increase by 2 billion by the middle of the current century, has, probably inevitably, stressed the more businesslike aspects of agriculture. Unwittingly perhaps, the impact of this approach on the natural world tended to be neglected. However it does illustrate the potential for making the best use of current agricultural land without the need to convert swathes of natural forest for agriculture.

There is little doubt that economically, agriculture, except in times of war, was treated as just another business and would fail unless it returned a profit. This meant reducing costs to a minimum and increasing the size of the business. Organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) were however seriously concerned by the impact of farming on wildlife, which was most obvious in the loss of birds associated with traditional farming. A conference was held in 1970 (*D. Barber ed. 1970 Farming and Wildlife*) in which it was hoped to establish common ground between conservationists and farmers.

While the ‘Common Agricultural Policy’ has made some progress in meeting the costs associated with

farming to maintain biodiversity, there is little or no acknowledgement of the importance of maintaining biodiversity for the long-term sustainability of farming.

A warning note was sounded by evidence which suggested that the planet behaved like a living organism in order to sustain a living environment (*James Lovelock, 1979, Gaia*). All species have a largely unknown part to play in maintaining a habitable climate. Ominously it has been estimated that half the world's species will become extinct by the middle of the current century, due to a combination of a reduction in their habitats and other man made activities. (*Jared Diamond 1991. The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee*)

Agriculture is the largest user of land, and therefore in the forefront of any realistic attempt to maintain biodiversity. Unfortunately the current economic attitude appears to favour competition and profitability. In such a climate, industries which are responsible for climate change, claim that contrary to the evidence there is no reason to modify their activities. Recently it has become evident that insects, including bees that pollinate flowering plants, are in sharp decline. Independent evidence has implicated seed dressings with neonicotinoids, but the evidence is disputed by the manufacturers. The precautionary principle would indicate that their use should be suspended, but that is not supported by the current Minister for the Environment.

So what are the implications for the potential agricultural student?

A major problem is that the next generation of students will probably have little contact with nature. The 'home habitat' or the area in which a child was able to travel without adult supervision has shrunk to $1/9^{th}$ of its former

size and is most likely to be restricted to the garden (*Libby Brooks, The Guardian 20 February 2013*). Even if brought up on a farm, there will be no contact with the richness of bird life that I experienced some 70 years ago. If not experienced, how can it be missed?

The students of agriculture and the related sciences, are faced with acute problems in reconciling profitable farming with a crucial need to maintain biodiversity. Their task will be made more difficult if they are denied access to the natural world from an early age, and from a world in which species are rapidly disappearing. Their task will not be made easier if the prevailing economic goal is to maximize output and profits without taking into account the costs associated with the maintenance of biodiversity. Can their practical experience ensure that the students are exposed to a wider appreciation of the problems facing agriculture than an exclusive business approach can provide?

Much will depend on the prevailing political climate, which sets the economic parameters for the industry, on farmers and those responsible for their studies. The year 2012 saw the second highest rainfall recorded, and all branches of farming were adversely affected, with farm incomes falling dramatically. (*Farmers face crisis as 'perfect storm' strikes. The Observer, 17 March 2013*). Severe droughts in the USA and Russia also affected agricultural output. If such events, attributable to climate change, are to become the norm, then farmers may well be unwilling to employ students, while potential students will be discouraged from entering an industry in crisis. In addition, students now have to fund their degrees and will be looking to work in an occupation which can credibly give a sufficient return to enable them to clear

their debts. Potential students will be subjected to the grim logic of market forces.

However, agriculture is without any doubt one of the most important occupations on which the feeding and well being of the population depends. It is essential that the best brains and most well motivated students should be engaged in the industry, and steps need to be taken to make this possible. It is to be hoped that the future student should be able to echo Michael Green's conclusion that: 'You can't put a price on the enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from working and being associated with the best industry in the world, farming.'