

An everyday tale of farming folk¹

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In this paper I want to question what it means to be a farmer in a time of agricultural change. I want to document my own transformation and focus on the relationship between that and my identity and learning. I am focusing on my own experience but in a way that is applicable much more widely. I want to speak as a practitioner. It is important that practitioners voices are heard when it comes to formulating policy or making decisions. It is also important that we as practitioners are involved in the process of interpreting and making sense of our own experience. I am telling my story.

In 1929 the Newsham family moved to Lancaster to farm as tenants for the Sandam family, (who were known for their trade links with Portugal and consequently the importation of port). My parents purchased Banton House Farm (now Forrest Hills) in 1961. The farm is 70 hectares of undulating open grassland with 2.5 hectares of woodland. The river Conder meanders through the valley. The main production was milk from 80 dairy cows; some beef and sheep were also reared.

The first venture into diversification started with a 1.6-hectare fly-fishing lake. A 9-hole golf course followed a few years later, together with two log cabins for use as training and meeting rooms for the local university and other businesses. (Newsham 2001).

Since diversification, my work has changed. It still revolves around the farm but there are no animals and no food is produced. Instead I work with people; mowing golf greens; advising fishermen to which flies are catching best that day; organising corporate activity events for companies; administering outdoor training facilities and meeting space for departmental away days from the local university. Attending and presenting at local, national and international conferences, talking to the “neighbouring” farmer, whether it is over the hedge or in Sweden, and designing workshops for students and organisations. This change has taken place over a 10-year period and has happened organically and incrementally. To me, it has not been a difficult change nor has it been particularly remarkable in any way. Yet I find myself often held up as an example of ‘good practice’ or asked to speak to groups of farmers or academics about my experience.

A more common view of farmers is of them being resistant to change. They are often traditional in their work and thinking. A neighbouring farmer looking over the hedge at one of our overgrown fields of tall grass and weeds, commented that my late father worked hard to keep that particular field mown and in good condition. From an agricultural perspective it did look unattractive and neglected but he was not seeing what the farm had become nor seeing it as a wildlife specialist might.

What I want to do in this paper is explore this apparent difference and to try to understand my own experience and identify some of the factors, both in my family background and upbringing and in my wider social situation, that have contributed to my ability to embrace change.

¹ The tag line from ‘The Archers’ BBC Radio 4 - a long running, rural, radio soap opera.

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I'll start with a story - a not untypical happening on the farm when I was around 10 or 11 years old.

The calf pen

SON Dad the tongue's² broken off the water bowl, it's been leaking all night, the calves bedding is all wet

DAD Bring the tongue to the workshop and lets have a look, it's cast iron so you could have a go at welding it, you'll need special rods, here they are, have a go.

SON I've got the tongue back on but its still leaking from the valve.

DAD You'll have to check the iron water pipe that leads to it. It's been in a long time, the inside furs up with rust. It could have some bits in it. There's some pieces of pipe in the old stable we don't need any more, rob them from there.

(I went off and found a spanner to fit the nut on the pipe but it didn't quite fit, so I put a bit of packing in to help it grip, at that point dad came along to see how I was doing).

DAD Watch that spanner doesn't fly off!

SON Ouch! It's cut my nose.

(The blood was dripping off the end of my nose. I still have the scar!)

DAD It's just a graze son, it'll soon stop.

SON I've attached the new piece of pipe dad, it's still leaking.

DAD Must be the rubber valve son, put a new one in.

SON Have we got any?

DAD No, but there's an old tractor inner tube in the workshop. Cut one out of that, the same diameter.

(Sometime later)

SON Dad, it's not thick enough.

DAD Cut a few out till you get the right thickness.

SON It's worked it's not leaking any more.

² The automatic mechanism that allows water to flow when pressed by a cows nose.

DAD These calves will need their bedding drying out. Fork the front out so the water can drain away, then spread a couple of new bales at the back. We better make sure they don't get pneumonia or joint ill after being damp. We'll give each one 5cc of penicillin. There's a new bottle on the shelf in the outside toilet, go get that, a syringe and new needle. Shake the bottle, put a bit of air in first or it splatters out; hold the syringe upright, flick the bubbles out.

SON Where should I stick it?

DAD In the muscle at the top of its back leg.

SON Will you hold its head for me?

DAD Get away son, you might have to do it yourself one day, get on with it!

From a young age, this is what it was like to grow up as a farmer. I was learning for real. It mattered. The calves' lives were at stake. I had someone there giving me guidance but they made me do it myself, even making mistakes.

“In these early hours she learns skills without knowing it is an education of one form. The way to hold down a ewe for clipping, with the upper body a brace and one leg an anchor, the strong arm free.” (Hall, 2002)

But I wasn't just learning the immediate task at hand. I was also learning how to learn and how to problem solve more widely. So I learnt to trust my own judgement, try things out, sometimes getting things wrong. Then if that didn't work the first time try something else. In effect I was doing what Argyris and Schon (1978) have called 'double loop learning'. Looking back now I realise that all these skills have been important in making the change to what I am doing now and how I do it.

These skills of taking risks and trying things out were important as a farmer and even more important when it came to diversifying; from milking dairy cows, rearing beef cattle and breeding sheep, to constructing a golf course, excavating a fly fishery and building lodge style classrooms for away days and management development exercises from the local University.

It also seems to help if you are able to accept being different. Even as farmers we were doing something different e.g. trying out 'straights'³ instead of relying on the manufactures compounds for supplementary feed and growing rye grass as an early spring bite⁴ for the dairy cows was even reported on the front page of the national farming press. Our location meant that we mixed with different people – students of all nationalities would periodically wander off the nearby University campus and watch us milking. We read beyond the farming press (e.g. we first found out about BSE from a New Scientist article sometime before reaching the farming press and sold all our beef animals before prices plummeted). A farming community is a social community, a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991). There are no explicit written rules but acceptance and belonging is subject to peer pressure; you are always judged by your neighbours. To do anything different you are talked about, maybe scoffed and ridiculed. By turning part of the farm into a golf course it was said that we had ruined a good farm. Some farmers may find this a stumbling block to change. Coming from a long-standing and respected farming family meant that

³ 'straights' whole food e.g. corn, maize gluten.

⁴ 'spring bite' cows first chance to graze in fields after winter housing.

we were more easily able to be different. You would also find support from family members; they would talk to you, not about you.

For many farmers, their view of themselves, their sense of self, their identity is closely tied to the work they do. This too can be a barrier to change. Sue Wrennal (Lancaster University) researching hill farmers and their identity found that it was often farmers wives who were more open to change, perhaps because, through children's schools and work outside the home they already had multiple identities. Having always lived and worked on the family farm I've always called myself a farmer. I still do even though when I recently went to a conference a representative from the National Farmers Union said, "a farmer is someone who produces food". Does that mean I've lost my identity? What do I label myself? What are the implications of this? For me though whilst identity is still important it is not about what I do but more about belonging to a place and community, being connected, being 'in place' (Hardy & Newsham 2004). This too has made the shift, from a traditional farming background to what I do now, that much easier. I still live and work in the same place. Much of what I do each day is very similar to what it was - managing the land, solving problems that arise, even the structure of my day is very similar - except I don't have to get up at 5.30am to milk cows.

So, in my own case, I can identify many factors that seem to have helped me make the changes I have made - individual psychology, family and upbringing and wider social context. Is it possible to learn from this and use it to support other farmers who either choose to or are forced to change and adapt as agriculture changes? Like me, most have qualities and experience that give them an advantage - they are independent and used to working long hours, and being fully responsible for themselves, for others and for their stock (as my story showed, responsibility is developed at an early age). But often these experiences and qualities can be taken for granted and not seen as important or significant.

One way forward is to be able to pass on my knowledge of what and how I've learnt.

The structure of the farming industry contributes to a passive structure, having reliance on other people, looking to them for the answer when they are able to help themselves. Take the farmer out of their day to day role, individually or collectively and involve them in active situations, workshops, mixing with different people. Identify, and make them able to realise the skills they have, react positively to their suggestions, and encourage ideas.

A local farmer said to me on a recent visit, weren't you lucky you already had a lake, but we excavated the lake, or others have said weren't you lucky to get out before foot and mouth. Is it being lucky, or is it by being active in decisions better prepares you for the unexpected. Being connected with what we are doing, actively seeking information, ideas, living in the real world.

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