

Interview with Michael Atkinson. Interviewer Sue Zirps



00.01 Introduction to Michael Atkinson and to South Farm

Michael My name is Michael Atkinson, I live at South Farm, East Meon where I have lived all my life. I am now in my seventy sixth year, Basically my grandfather and his family came down from Cumbria in 1906, and took South Farm, along with nine other Cumbrian farmers over a period of about ten years, took farms in and around Hampshire, and he lived until 1922.



The Land of South Farm is fully set out in the following Schedule :—

SCHEDULE OF SOUTH FARM.			
NO. ON PLAN.	DESCRIPTION.	A.	R. P.
378	Water Meadow	5	2 38
426	Ditto	7	1 37
428	Ditto	0	2 6
431	Ditto	5	2 3
483	Pasture	2	2 31
489	Ditto	25	0 30
Pl. 653A	One Cottage and Garden	15	
636	Arable	18	2 28
637	Ditto	13	1 12
655	Down	100	1 32
656	Arable	39	1 28
657	Ditto	45	2 10
658	Ditto	10	0 10
659	Pasture	2	3 23
660	Ditto	14	0 8
661	Yard and Buildings	0	2 30
662	House and Garden	0	1 19
663	Pasture	4	0 17
666	The Mill, Cottage and Buildings	0	1 37
667	Pasture	1	0 20
668	Mill Pond and Stream	1	2 34
669	Two Cottages and Gardens	0	0 31
670	Arable	25	3 33
671	Ditto	8	1 8
700	Row	0	2 23
701	Road	2	3 34
702	Plantation	0	2 24
703	Arable	25	0 2
704	Ditto	29	3 9
705	Row	1	1 4
720	Plantation	2	0 20
721	Arable	33	2 14
722	Row	1	3 39
723	Arable	29	2 0
724	Upper Barn Homestead	0	1 33
725	Plantation	0	1 29
726	Arable	23	0 21
727	Down and Wood	11	3 7
728	Row	47	1 26
757	Row	0	2 2
758	Arable	18	1 19
759	Row	0	1 37
760	Arable	18	0 4
761	Row	0	3 5
		A576	1 22

* South Farm as above described is let to Mr. George Atkinson on a Tenancy from September 29th, 1905, subject to 2 years Notice on either side, at the low Rent of £291.

Extract from sales particulars of 1908 auction of land including South Farm. Note that George Atkinson is already the tenant.

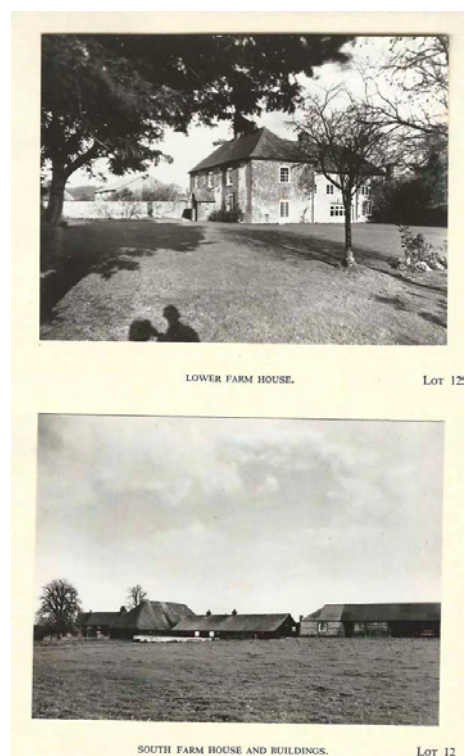
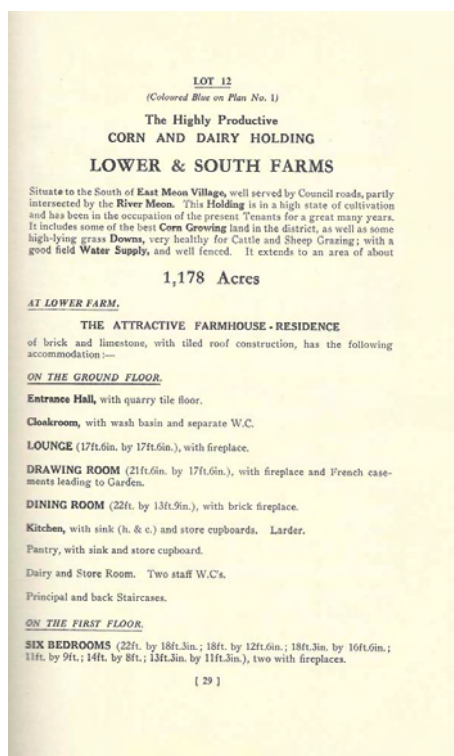
They were good stock farmers. We have been back, on several occasions, to look at the farm in Cumbria, It is only a little place, sixty acres. They were neighbours of Beatrix Potter before they came down, and it was a different way of life, but they did have predecessors, the Wren family came down before him and they did some pioneering at Riplington Farm, and my grandfather took South Farm, where we are now. He had two sons and five daughters. The youngest daughter, sadly, had an accident down in the mill, the first mill on the Meon, it was also the newest one, and she was tragically killed there, but the two sons, the late Wilson Atkinson's father was George and my father's name was Joe, and the two brothers farmed South Farm with their father, and thereafter they became the tenants of the Leydene Estate. By then the Estate belonged to the Peel family. It changed hands about three times in four years. Most of the details of what is known as the Cumbrian Migration are well documented in the late Freddie Stanfield's book, 'A History of East Meon'.



George Atkinson and family at South Farm

5.08 Michael's schooling and beginnings of farm life

My life here, apart from my school days, I went away to school, I left just before my sixteenth birthday and came back to work on the farm when the two brothers, George and Joe were farming in partnership by which time they had Lower Farm, on the other side of the road, now farmed by my cousin George. That continued until, they were tenants until 1952 when the Estate was sold up after Lady Peel's death in 1958. All the tenants, and there were several of them in and around the village, all went to London to see if they could all buy their individual farms, but the estate was bought lock, stock, and barrel by Sir Dymock White of Timothy, White and Taylor's fame. I don't think it was a great secret that he had sold out his interest in Timothy, White and Taylor, the chemist and he invested half the money in the Leydene estate, and the other half, I think I am right in saying, in 2% or 3% Defence Bonds. There is no prize for guessing what has made the most money over the years.



Particulars of Lower and South Farms from sale of Leydene Estate in 1953

He then turned round, and the very lucky Atkinsons and others in East Meon, because he sold off everything on the north side of what is now known as the South Downs Way. Our farm and Lower Farm, as well, where my cousin is, they decided to sell off and my father and his brother George were able to buy their farms as sitting tenants. We've been owner-occupiers ever since.

That was 1952/3. I know I was at boarding school when it all happened and there was great excitement as to whether we would be able to buy the farms in our own right, and I won't say it was all cut and dried. The late Tom Parker had a good deal to do with it. He was a farmer over at Droxford, and he was very friendly with Sir Dymock White and there were arrangements made, but never the less, the nuts and bolts of it were that we were able as a family to buy the farm as a mixed farm, as were other families in the village, the Berry family, Tosedevines, Butlers as well although their farm was never entirely part of the Leydene estate as it belonged to the Co-op.



Lower Farm

South Farm (to follow)

09.10 Lower Farm and South Farm

Lower Farm in the end was slightly larger. South Farm is 496 acres plus we had 60 acres which was rented which lays the south side of the South Downs Way, which we continue to

rent. Basically it was a mixed farm, it had a dairy, 35% to 40% of the farm was under arable crops that included Lower Farm as well. There is a lot of down-land, it all faces north and that is obviously uncroppable. A lot of it was cleared during the war before we bought the estate right the way from Teg Down, which is our furthest field against the South Downs Way right the way along the top of the hill, past HMS Mercury and right across to Old Winchester Hill. The War Agricultural Committee came in just immediately after the war they made a start, they cleared the lot, lock stock and barrel. Just as a matter of interest, the site which is being developed as we speak, i.e. January 2014, at Leydene, and I think I am right in saying that 20 houses are being built there, I can remember when potatoes grew in that field, right the way from there to the radio station where the reservoirs are on the top of the Downs. It was requisitioned by the Navy from the Leydene Estate before we were able to purchase. It was during the 'Cold War' and HMS Mercury, which was the largest signal school in the country, was very important strategically and it doubled in size and that's the reason why that field was lost.

11.53 Michael do you want to take us back to when you were born, and your childhood?

Basically speaking when I was born in 1938, just as war broke out, my formative years I used to go to Petersfield on the bus to go to school and until the time I went away for 4 or 5 years.

Sue Where did you go to boarding school?

Michael Started off at Broadlands, which is an appendage of what is now Churchers College, which didn't go down very well, either with me or them, we don't want to go into my expertise at school. I think, needless to say, I learnt a damn site more when I left school than ever I did when I was there. The only thing I did learn from school was independence and how to look after myself. I was away; I didn't see my parents from the beginning of one term till the end of one term. I was taken up by my Dad to London where we saw the sights; we went and saw the Exhibition in 1950. We always travelled across London from Waterloo to Marylebone station, or Paddington in a taxi so that we could see what was going on. In hind site I think I enjoyed school a lot better now than when I was there. As you get older you tend to reminisce. I learnt some independence basically, and very fortunately I've got three sisters, all younger than me, they've never had anything to do with the farm, they got married and went away. I was left here with Dad on my own.

14.40 Was there an expectation that you would take on the farm?

Michael Oh yes, my poor sons as well, well, I say 'poor' sons, that's as it was. There is a whole raft of farmers' sons in their late 40s and 50's, I think they're known as the reluctant farmers. Luckily most of them have prospered they have done pretty well for themselves, and not just the ones around East Meon. There are others, they have always been close family friends. This farm here in particular, we were talking about South Farm. What happened was, in 1958. When George Atkinson, G.W., my cousin's father, died, the farm partnership was broken up by my Dad, for the sakes of the two sons working on the farm, my self and cousin Wilson. It didn't go down terribly well at the time, but never the less, but it was the best move at the time because Wilson and I, in business would have been an absolute catastrophe together, but as individuals we used to see a lot of each other. We used to enjoy a very good relationship. He was a 'Dog & Stick' farmer and I wasn't. I say, I'm not a dog and stick farmer, I've had just as much involvement with cattle and sheep as ever we did at Lower Farm. Now it is rather different because, basically speaking, the way that cropping has gone, and where we had a dairy, sitting right on top of the River Meon, as did Lower Farm, ours was round about 90 cows when we disbanded it, Lower Farm's was slightly smaller. They basically came unviable. They needed a huge amount of money-

spent on them to prevent any contamination getting into the river. Our herd was disbanded in 1998. I wouldn't like to say when Lower Farm's was, but it wasn't very long afterwards. But it was really and truly circumstances had more to do with it than anything. By which time I was lucky to expand South Farm. We bought part of Oxenbourne farm at the top end of Harvesting Lane in 1971, I think it was. We managed to increase the arable side of our farm by 120/130/40 acres, so it became arable, more and more so. When the cows went in 1997 that took up nearly 100 acres that enabled more land to go into cultivation. It was all permanent pasture, around the Springs around the source of the River Meon, that went into arable. The current situation now is that we are farming, because of other additions we have made, rented and purchased, just short of 1000 acres in our own right. There's about 800 odd acres under the plough. The crops are winter wheat, winter oilseed rape, winter oats and spring barley. I don't have much to do with the cropping of the farm now that it is in the hands of my two sons Nicholas and Matthew. To go back, the staff in 1958, when the farms were split up after the death of George Atkinson from Lower Farm, there were 18 staff on the farm. It soon dwindled down, you could say because the farms were separated more or less in half to 9 each way. It wasn't before long that the staffing at South farm was down to five. It did increase, when we briefly had a herd of pigs, introduced by Nicholas, which meant a bit more labour was required, but the pigs are always noted to be 'copper or gold', they were outside and we had them for about 8 years. We decided it wasn't the best thing in the world. Then we concentrated back on the arable side.

21.46 How many people work on the farm?

Michael One full time and we have actually got an apprentice now, and Nicholas and Matthew, and what little input I have, which isn't very much.

Sue I suppose because of the mechanization you don't need so many?

Michael We've got a raft of heavy equipment, believe me. The great thing about it is the great bulk of the work is pre-cropping programme. Harvesting usually starts the last two weeks of July, you could say. Starting usually with oilseed rape, you could say. Winter oats comes shortly afterwards, wheat and such like after that. You're busy from that period right the way through to the middle to end of October, the whole thing will have been harvested, and 75% will have been put in for the next year. We can call upon a little casual labour to help; a local chap who lives in one of the cottages at Lower Farm, Steve Bowman. He helps us with the sheep at lambing time and at any other time when we are busy.

Sue And how many sheep do you have?

Michael We have currently 450 breeding ewes. We don't have any cattle at South Farm, we do have some cattle on the downs at Oxenbourne, but that is a separate business run by my son and daughter-in-law, it's a separate arrangement. But the big difference is that all our downland is in an environmental scheme, whereby we don't put any fertilizer on the downs at all. It is to encourage the wildflowers to come along. So therefore it means that we can't have as many stock per acre as we would have had 10 or 15 years ago. It wasn't that long ago we were running fertiliser across the downs with aircraft.

Sue Do you get any subsidy from the government to help towards keeping it environmentally friendly?

17.05 Michael No I wouldn't call it a subsidy. If we don't crop it and there are various things we do with the fields under the plough. There are corners been taken out, headlands which you are supposed to have a meterage from the hedgerow out into the field which isn't cropped and is let to grow off wild. I must admit I held up my hand at the time and said "What a waste of public money". There is no doubt about it, it has

encouraged an awful lot of wildlife back. Everyone around the village can't fail to see the buzzards. Don't confuse the buzzards with the Red Kites. There are plenty of those as well, and 20 years ago I wouldn't have known where to show you one.

27.00 Sue Can we just go back a little way to your childhood?

Did you gradually take over the farm from your father?

Michael It was just natural, really I was here. It's not the same as it is now. Work was always done in the house here by my Dad. When he wasn't fit enough to do it, I started to get involved in it. To be honest with you, by the time I was 25 I had taken over the running of the farm. Unlike my two sons, unfortunately they are quite a bit older, they are running the place now. But the paper work we had when I started looking after the business side of the farm, compared with now is astronomic. You need somebody permanently in to be looking after it all the time. It's called 'Red Tape'. Some, I accept, is necessary. Anyone who listens to the media, particularly the farming media, will know there's a big campaign going on to cut down on the red tape. A lot of public money is being pumped into Agriculture, or, put it another way, I don't know about Agriculture, it's Countryside. Trying to preserve it like it has been for many moons. Nothing is for ever, but never the less, money is being put out in, and it's up to farmers, you don't have to take it up if you don't want to. You don't take the subsidy. To be honest you can't afford not to.



Top left, George Atkinson, son of Michael's brother Wilson. Top right, Matthew, Michael's son. Below, Jane Atkinson, Michael's wife. All taken at East Meon Country Fair.

29.51 Did your sons Nick and Matthew, did they both go to College, did they have agricultural training?

Michael Yes they went to an agricultural college for about 12 months, they didn't go to university though. They both left school at 17 the same, a bit older than me. All my children have been off to Australia, back-packing or whatever, but in Nicholas' and Mathew's case, they went to work. One went shearing the other went harvesting. The one that went shearing looks after all the arable side of the farm, and the one that went harvesting looks after all the stock.

Now, in dividing the farms up, the cottages on the farm we had four and Lower Farm had four. Of those four cottages, there are 2 that are called Springholes, which is right next to the River Meon, and in 1959 I met Jane Barnes, as she then was, I had known her for some long time, as she was a friend of my sister's, and we started courting together and eventually we were to be married, and we were married in 1965, by which time Dad had had a stroke, he didn't enjoy the best of health, however, going back to the farm, the farm was my life, long before I left school, and basically speaking there was never any doubt as to what was going to happen for this business and me. It was made quite plain for me to get on and farm. I might just add that things weren't as rosy, financially, in those days as perhaps they are now. The commitment today in investment in equipment and buildings and God knows what is something to be seen. The income wasn't very high from the amount of work that was being put in. I tried to streamline it as best I could with the funds that were available, and the sad part about it was that we put up a lot of buildings for grain drying, the dairy and that sort of thing. I never thought for one minute, cause it was done by myself, I say myself, because a lot of it was done by the staff we had on the farm, it was all in-house staff and I never thought I would I would preside, or watch being demolished to be replaced with something more modern, which has happened in two instances. The dairy was demolished completely and we now have a cubicle shed which we use for lambing, and the grain drier which was attached, in those days, to the South Farm Mill, and we put a drier down there in 1961, I think it was, and that came out in 1986, it was there from '61 to '86, basically speaking it wasn't just large enough. You couldn't get lorries, once they started sticking 3 axles underneath an articulated lorry, there was absolutely no chance of them getting down to the mill to be loaded out with grain. So that was all change. One of the changes I have seen over the years, was, the Mill was disbanded, when the farms were divided it was the single most valuable single item on the 2 farms. Lower and South Farms. It is a three-storied building. It was built in 1896/8. It was a turbine water mill as opposed to a water wheel, it was close to the water-wheel mill. It was right on the river, a three-storey building, and it was fine. Quite how they were able to keep it dry inside, it was quite remarkable, really. It became redundant and eventually, after a lot of toing and froing with the planning authorities, largely down to my two sons, I have to say, we did eventually get permission to turn it into domestic three dwellings. Initially they would only countenance us turning it into an industrial building, i.e. offices. Well, it never happened and thank God it didn't, it's now very nice down there. There are now 3 homes down there, plus the Millers house which is known Mill Cottage and where the dairyman always lived in for the best part of 50 years. Basically speaking, that's part of the farm business and they are all let. The Mill itself was converted with the idea of letting the properties. That's one of our diversifications.

35.15 Sue What about your mother?

Michael When Jane and I got married in 1960, Jane and I went to live in one of the two Springholes cottages, where three of my four children were born. My father died in 1965, mother made it quite plain that she wasn't going to stay here, so we exchanged houses, she came out of South Farm and went to Springholes and Jane and I moved into the farm, where we have been ever since.

Sue And when was that, Michael?

Michael. 1966. After Dad died, which was just on top of Christmas 1965, - it wasn't the happiest of Christmases, I have to say, well anyway, there was, big, big changes, that took place, nevertheless, I've been lucky. *The* biggest asset, has been the help I've had from Jane over the years, because she's had to work damned hard here, and the life of a farmer's wife in those days, is somewhat different to what it is today, in so much as she was continually answering the phone. She didn't get too involved with the paper work, but she did look after this place (farmhouse) and anything she could do outside she would. She never got round to driving tractors. She had no farming background at all, only that she knew my sisters and also Belinda Moffatt. They were all went to school together. That's how it all came about, and we have lived here ever since. In the last 15 to 20 years there have been big alterations housing-wise. Springholes is still two houses, or three cottages, but one is twice the size than it was. Matthew lives down there, and Nicholas has a house on our land at Oxenbourne. We had some redundant farm buildings there and we were given permission to build a house over there, which we did. Sue, my daughter-in-law runs quite a successful cream tea business for a period of time and then changed to a bed & breakfast and corporate venue, which is a thatched barn which Nicholas took it upon himself to re-thatch, and made a very good job of it, and that is a venue for wedding receptions and such like. And that's been quite popular.



Harvesting Cream Teas



40.10 Michael Way back in the seventies we were advised, and I say we, farmers in general in the area, by our then NFU Secretary, council elections were coming up, and we were told in no uncertain terms by this very forward thinking man, that we needed to get off our backsides and get involved in village life. Because if we didn't, the way things were going, with alterations in the housing rules and such like, a lot of premises in and around

the village were used either for council workers or owned by the local authorities, or farm workers, some were sold off, as we all know, in fact an awful lot were sold off, and we were told we should be involved with the parish council, and that's exactly what happened. Cousin Wilson was there with me, he took it up a little bit quicker than I did. I think he was on the Parish Council a year or eighteen months or more before I went on. I looked upon it, if we were in a position, I mean we were landowners, we had various facilities at our fingertips that could be used for the benefit of the community.

One of the classic ones, really and truly, although we were paid for it, most of the farmers in the area had a snow plough fitted on the front of their tractors, so if we had bad weather, and believe it or not we did have some years when we had some pretty awful winters, we were able to do some things in that direction. Little jobs in and around the village that I got involved in was making car parks in one or two places which we were able to do in-house, because we had the equipment to do it, and I looked upon it as giving back something to the community that I spent all my life in.



My cousin became chairman of the parish council, and he decided to give it up; I was his vice chairman; I took it on from him. But I'd been on the Parish Council for 28 years of which I had been chairman for 8 ½. I thought it was time I was off it and let someone else have a go to be honest with you. I've been pleased to do what I've been happy to do, occasionally there are bits and pieces, I still do, but nothing like I used to do. I did have a lot to do with the development, which took place behind the village hall, below Duncombe and Garston Close. The houses there, known as 'The Green'. It took a lot of negotiating. It was a complicated 'tie up' between two families in the village that I don't particularly want to go into, they wanted to build on this area, and we were able to negotiate, Bill Tyrwhitt Drake who gave at agricultural value enough land to be able to put a football pitch on. The developer provided the pavilion and also the multi-sports pitch down there. And we secured the Green, where the Mayfair is held, that belonged to the village, and that, I consider to be the best contribution I made for the village. Rosemary Ryder had a hell of a lot to do with it. Cousin Wilson did a lot although he had given up the chairmanship, I came in as chairman at about that time. It's been very successful. Here we are in January 2014; I am very distressed to think we can't conjure up enough footballers in the village to warrant the football pitch, it's there and it's now being used by a club in Clanfield, though it's better being used than not used at all. So that's a bit of a disappointment. Time will tell

47.59 Michael

When I gave up the Parish Council I felt that the best thing was to cut off and leave it in the very capable hands of the two people who run the Parish as it were, that is Alan Redpath who is Chairman and Sarah Cowlrick who in fact I was instrumental in helping to secure for the village; I managed to persuade her to come and take on the job of clerk. She's an extremely efficient and responsible person for the smooth running of the finances

of the parish, she's the one who is actually legally responsible for everything. It isn't the chairman, to be honest with you.

It isn't a one-man affair, to be honest with you. One other person I should have mentioned right at the start, in addition to Alan Redpath and Sarah Cowlrick, Philippa Tyrwhitt-Drake does a hell of a lot for the village. She is very much involved with the school and is a Governor of the school, and the Tyrwhitt-Drake family with their help they put in a lot of help, just as I have and Wilson as well.

I know my old grandfather during the First World War, he was always doing things, I'm not suggesting things he was not being paid for, mind you, we've got account books showing that he had people on stone picking, making up roads, the contribution of the Atkinson family.

Sue And when the village hall was rebuilt, was that in your time of being on the Parish Council?

Michael Yes I was on the Parish Council. As a matter of fact, the late Herbie Goddard was most instrumental in that. He travelled miles because the family that owned the field, I think I'm right in saying, lived somewhere in Bedfordshire, and he was always going up to see them, to negotiate this way and that. Herbie Goddard was the guy who got that under way, and well done to him too, as I say it's not just the Atkinsons that got involved, he was Chairman for a long time, By far and away the longest member as Chairman of East Meon Parish Council was Isaac Wren, at the instigation of the Parish Councils, he was Parish Council Chairman from one year after that, after the instigation of East Meon Parish Council, until he died in, I don't know, 1927/8? Well over 20 years, he was Chairman.

54.33. That's the other aspect of our farming business I haven't gone into, that's changed somewhat, that I haven't gone into, but I'll do it now, one is the farm growing in size because of the fact that we've acquired more land, and we rent some more land we also do contract farming insomuch that George, my cousin, he decided that for the amount of arable land he had at Lower Farm, it didn't warrant the investment he needed to make. We already had equipment for two and a half times the arable area, if not, three times the arable area that we had, so basically speaking we ended up negotiating, Nicholas, my son, and Matthew, for us to do his arable work, which we do.

End of tape 1.

Tape 2

00.00 The other aspect of our farming business that I haven't touched on is the fact that we have taken on contract farming for two farms, one of them is George's, over the road, all you have to do is open the gate, from one side of the road to the other to go and do the arable work over there, it amounts to just over 200 acres. There, we see to everything, we till the land, we sow the seed, we put the fertilizer on, store it for them, store the fertilizer for them, here, and then we harvest it and it gets put in our barns and it gets dried and cleaned and what-have-you, as a complete contract, it works very well indeed, we've been doing it for eight years (much to my amazement that it has been as long as that). More sadly, it's not sad for us but it's sad for the family, we've got involved with another farm over in Clanfield, Manor Farm, Clanfield, it's a tenant farm on the Leydene estate, and the farm is run by the Rook family. About six years ago, now I suppose it is, the eldest son died of cancer, but prior to his dying, it had been made plain that his younger brother wasn't that keen on doing the arable farming, and Nicholas, my son Nicholas, was asked if we would like to do it for them, and again we got involved there. It's rather different from George's because they do have their own facilities for storage and such-like. But even more sad, the younger brother, as is probably well-enough known, was killed by a bull about four

years ago and that makes life that much more difficult, leaving a son and a daughter. The son is a bit young to be running the farm at the moment, he's there working on it, they have a farm manager, but we do all the arable. So that really means that our farming operation, that brings us up to close on 2,000 acres of arable land.

Sue. And you do all that with the two boys and one member of staff?

Michael. Timothy comes and helps us, that's Timothy Brook, he helps, and we do have other casual labour comes at harvest time for tractor and trailer work. The arable work is mainly done by us in-house.

Sue And does George have any staff?

Michael Yes, he does, he's got these two guys who look after all his sheep, he's a lot of cattle and sheep. He also has a farm away from the village, as you probably know.