Oral History Interview with Nick Atkinson

4th January 2019

Interviewed by Michael Blakstad at Upper Parsonage Farm

Nick Atkinson outside Upper Parsonage Farm

Nick: Initially George came to me in the year 2,000 and said he wasn't going to buy another combine and would we cut his corn for him? That went from combine to other machinery as well, so we ended up, turned round and pulled the plug; doing all of George's at Lower Farm, that was 200 acres, and that made us quite a tidy little unit – we were doing 700 or 800 acres then, we had just got rid of the dairy cows and the pigs. The dairy cows went primarily because we were milking cows right on top of the source of the River Meon and if anything had gone even slightly wrong the buck would undoubtedly have stopped with us. We weren't really big enough, we'd have had to expand in such a way that we'd have had a huge investment which we weren't prepared to do. If the River Authority had decided they didn't want us there, they could have turned round and pulled the plug, so we decided it wasn't worth doing. - we got out of dairy So we were falling away from livestock, George was falling away from arable, so it became common sense that we should plan together.

Michael So when did the split happen? When did you stop doing dairy?

Nick. About 2,000. About the turn of the century… sounds dramatic, doesn't it?

2.02 Michael The millennium … So how many acres in all do you farm, including the contract?

Nick. About 3,000.

Michael And how many people do you employ?

Nick. Two.

Michael. That's including …?

Nick. No, that's two over and above Matt and I.

Michael. So that's four of you altogether? Do you have any idea how many would have been employed a century ago?

Nick. A century ago? It would have been 50, 60? Let's go back to when we had cows, the mid 90s …. We were still up to about 7or 8 men then, and I had a small to medium-sized herd of pigs as well: there was myself and a girl doing that, there were two people involved in the dairy plus another three ancillary, yes there were a good 7 or 8 of us on the farm in the mid '90s. That changed dramatically with the departure of the cows, and, I have to say, the difference in farming ….

3.15 Michael So what were the differences in farming, just in that period?

Nick. Technology. It's scary. The irony, Michael, of us being sat here now: I have just left the farm with someone from our local dealership coming down to go through yet another tractor and the wizardry it can do, and it's quite scary, to be honest with you.

Michael. We did an interview with Tony Fry and he said there was no work left on the farms for blacksmiths because they were all covered by guarantee by the makers.

Nick. No, the more electronics they put on the machinery, the less you can fix it yourself In order to buy this machine we've got now, I 've sold two tractors: they will go to Eastern European countries, old Soviet Bloc countries, because they're the last of the John Deere tractors that a farmer can put a spanner on: they're ten or fifteen years old, and they like them over there because if they go wrong they can turn round and fix them, whereas everything we have now, if it goes wrong the manufacturer has to come and put it back together again.

4.35 Michael. So what does your new machine do?

Nick. What does it do? Well, it guides itself (**Michael:** GPS?) GPS. It talks to the machine we put on to it, that is what it can do today: the tractor, through the GPS signal, tells the fertiliser spinner when to start and when to stop in the field, in other words the bit you have done and the bits you haven't done. Also, what we have done, we have mapped our farm for nutrients, so in other words, someone has come out and tested all the soil and has told us the areas in the field that need nutrients, and the fertiliser spinner goes across the field and starts and stops at the correct place.

Michael. Is that without a driver?

Nick. No, you still have to have a driver. We're still… I know there's a lot of talk about driverless machinery, we are still quite a long way off of that. I think the responsibility of having 15 tons of machinery driving across a field on it own without anyone without human input would be a little bit dodgy at the moment.

Michael. So tell me, if you will, how much that machine is going to cost?

Nick. The tractor, I can tell you exactly, the tractor is something close to £180,000 and the spinner is probably £25,000 to £30,000. So you've got something close to £200,000 worth of machinery.

Michael. And the crops that you are growing, will they have changed in the last 10 or 15 years.

Nick. The botany has actually come up against the buffers a little bit. *(Coughs … call a halt)*

6.52 Nick The crop varieties and what have you, although they change, and we change with them, what you tend to get with crops is a breakdown in disease resistance, after a while, but in fact with the yield we seem to have come up against the buffers. In the '70s and '80s the yield difference from one crop to another, one season to another, it was at a gallup then. We seem to be going through, not even a jog, I'd say a steady walk at the moment, so far as yield is concerned.

Michael. Any idea why that is?

Nick. *(phone rings …)* They've come up against the stoppers a wee bit … As far as farming over here is concerned, we haven't got GM, genetically modified, because that is where the advances are at the moment. How that is going to change in the future I don't know.

Michael. Sue was saying that the government, Department of the Environment, environmental factors, affect what you are allowed to grow.

Nick. Yes, they do. GM: we're not allowed to grow genetically modified crops. We're all in environmental schemes, in fact everything we farm, the whole of the 3,000 acres of arable land, is under the higher-level environmental scheme; the geography of where we are, being the South Downs, probably dictates that more than anything.

Michael. Because we're in a National Park.

Nick. Because we're in the National Park.

Michael. What difference does that make, specifically, now?

Nick. Very, very little, to what it was before, but it looks as though in the future it's going to be easier to get onto the schemes, the environmental schemes. There's a thirst for it in the National Parks where there wouldn't be in other parts of the country.

9.30. Michael. Tell me about Upper Parsonage Farm. You built it in the late 20th century?

Upper Parsonage Barn before restoration

Nick. Yes. Dad bought the farm in 1971, in fact Mum's got a photograph of Matt and I as youngsters pulling the thatch off the barn and Johnny Powney who lived in the village. And sheeted it in tin, so for a long time the old barn was actually tin; we had two hovels that came out from it: this is where we kept our beef cows, our single suckler beef herd, we did that for – '80, '90 – thirty years, we had cattle in there. Obviously, the old barn itself became

impractical as far as cattle were concerned and the hovels – we called them hovels – where the cattle wintered, started to deteriorate and we'd actually built another shed up the way across the Meon, so the whole site was becoming derelict.

Michael. And you were departing from cattle farming?

Nick. Well, that was to come a little bit later. But yes, we were certainly downsizing on cattle.

11.00 Michael. So what was the thought in converting it?

Nick. Sue and I just thought 'are we missing an opportunity here to just test the water with the planners and see if we can get planning permission?' Now, without going into vast amounts of detail and meetings, and this, that and everything else, we got it! Don't ask me how; it's a mystery to this day, but I can remember standing out there on the bank with the eight South East Hants District councillors explaining to them why a farmhouse up here would be a jolly good idea and they must have believed me. I have to say that everything they gave us permission for – because it had an awful lot of restrictions on it, and still has – we abided by. It was for us to be able to look after the cattle and sheep which were in a very isolated part of the valley, and be far more local to them than what we were, but other than that, yeah …

The original barn in a fold of the South Downs

12.04. Michael. Did you restore the barn because you wanted to or because they said you had to, or both?

Nick. The barn had to be restored; initially, it had to be restored with the thatch, that was one thing, we then went back and said to the planners 'can we slate it?' because we weren't keen on thatch at the time, so we had permission to put slates on the barn, but then I just thought, 'I'll thatch it'. I just thought 'I'll give it a go' and I did it myself; it did a corner, and got on with it, and just went on with it …

Michael. You'd never thatched before?

Nick. No

Michael. And at first it was cream teas?

Nick. At first it was cream teas.

Michael. And how did that go?

Nick. The cream teas were very good. The problem with cream teas was: Sue could quite easily have a couple or three girls organised, have done all her preparations for a nice sunny afternoon, and a shower comes along at about 11.00 o'clock in the morning, and that's when people make their decisions for their day: so, it could be quite sunny in the afternoon when Sue's doing the cream teas but if we'd had wind or a bit of rain in the morning, something like that, or the weather gone a bit chucky, Sue would be stood looking at them, looking at three girls doing nothing all afternoon, and vice versa, she could quite easily say 'well, the weather forecast doesn't look that good for today, I'll just have a couple of us up there and see what goes on, and they could be queued up half way down to the village, trying to come in for a cup of tea. It was the variation of it that made it so difficult.

Harvesting Cream Teas at Upper Parsonage Barn

Michael. You've still got the B&B business?

Nick. We still do B&B, yeah.

Michael. Do you have to do it? With 3,000 acres to farm?

Nick. Sue enjoys doing it; she came out of catering before we were married and indeed, wedding cakes, she had a little business catering for weddings early in our married life, and she enjoys doing it.

14.37 Michael. And does Matt do the hog roasts because he enjoys it? Or because economically you've got to …?

Nick. That started, again, in the '90s when, economically, that's what you had to do. The word was 'diversification'; it's not a word I particularly enjoy. I have to say you can lose concentration on the job in hand, you know, everything becomes diversification.

Matthew Atkinson's hog roast at East Meon Country Fair

The catering industry isn't easy; having weddings in the barn was ok, you could earn some money out of it, but it wasn't easy money at 2.00 o'clock in the morning, trying to get people taxis back to Petersfield. In fact, it's particularly difficult. You know, nothing comes easy. Matt's hog roast business he does, again, he does that very well and he enjoys doing it, if you ask him.

15.32. Michael. Just describe the changes in what we are calling the parish of East Meon? It actually

describes the valley including Langrish, Stroud, Ramsdean, Oxenbourne and right up to West Meon. What are the changes you've seen?

Nick. The biggest thing: we're probably farming more akin to when my ancestors came down to Hampshire, which was arable and sheep, than we've come out of; the Cumbrians brought the cattle, because Hampshire was sick at the turn of the 19th century and these big estates had basically run it ragged. So they brought the cattle, they asked the Cumbrian Migration to come down – you've probably heard of the Cumbrian Migration many times before – to come down and bring their cattle with them to put some fertility back in the soil. Obviously, with two World Wars in the intervening years, milk production and what have you became a very big part of agriculture. Ironically, now, it has changed beyond all recognition. But, with us going into arable, it doesn't mean to say that there isn't a place for livestock …

Interestingly, one of the other changes, and the one that upsets me more than anything, when I started work in 1977, our cowman lived on the farm, and his name was John Street, yes he had come, I think he came up from the west country, the relief cowman was George Dowlen, Dowlen being an East Meon family, the tractor driver, one of the tractor drivers, was Nobby Whitear, another name synonymous, deeply synonymous, with East Meon and the farming community, another tractor driver was Tommy Newall, now Tommy Newall was related to the Vaughan family and what have you, they were synonymous with the village, they were village people. Now we have Ryan, Ryan has a tenuous link to the village, but other than that there's nobody.

18.11 Michael. I guess the size of farms has changed?

Nick. The size of farms has got a lot bigger. The economics of it and the technology involved, it is mostly the economics of it. I can think of nothing better than to have half a dozen chaps and women to give us a hand but it's just not economically there to do.

Michael. I've counted up to about 10 farms in the valley now, and there must have been about 30 at the beginning of the last century.

Nick. Yeah. In today's world, it's not a very sexy job, is it? It's not something people want to do. An awful lot of people, when a camera and a microphone is put in front of them, will turn around and say that they want to be a farmer and that it's the outdoor life and this, that and everything else; unfortunately that doesn't manifest itself in reality, because they don't want the cold and wet and they don't want to be working on Boxing Day or Christmas Day when everyone else is having fun, and that's the reality, I'm afraid.

Michael. You are, what, fourth generation Atkinsons in the valley?

Nick. Yeah.

Michael. And the next generation?

Nick. The next generation, yes, well, Jack at the moment is in Australia – how Australia has managed to cut its corn without Jack's helpin the past seems to be a mystery at the moment, he has been doing that and, yes, he is coming back on the farm.

Michael. Coming back here?

Nick. There is a group of kids out there who are very keen on it, who like the machinery and they are very techie, and what have you, and good luck to them because they are the future.

13.10 ENDS