

You could always make a living out of farming

Tony Dixon was born in 1935 and interviewed in 2009

I went to infants school at Selside. I remember we used to toddle off with our gas masks and dinner while the war was on. In the winter the school's windows would be frozen up and we'd just get 'em to thawin' off by going home time. One of the things that always intrigued me was, the school was thirty yards away from a house which had a washhouse with no windows. Every now and then we would have air raid practice. We would all go into this building out of the school, shut the door, all in the complete dark complete with our masks. I could just never understand how we were going to be safe in there but not in the school, because it was so near.

Then there was a barrage balloon that came over one day. It had broken loose at either Grange or Barrow. It came over the school, it was only twenty or thirty feet up with a long rope trailing behind. It caused quite a bit of excitement. I can also remember Cooper House farm, which was just over the fields, being bombed. There were incendiary bombs being dropped as well. There were hundreds of the things. All that was left of them when they'd gone off was a little heap of white powder and a metal fin.

There was a thing called the War Ag Committee. It dished out how many acres of ploughing each farm had to have. They weren't really popular because a lot of farmers didn't really want to plough. We finished up with forty acres growing mainly oats turnips and potatoes. As the war further developed the prisoners from Bela Prisoner-of-War Camp came to pick the tatties and what have you.

We started milking by machine in the forties. It was my job to get the petrol. I didn't mind. I could do a bit of bird nesting, there and back. All field birds, in fact I am convinced I got a cuckoo's egg. There was one nest, a sky lark's which had one bigger egg in it. I was sure it was a cuckoo and blew it and put it in a show case.

We ploughed the fields with horses until about 1950 - 51. Then the horses fizzled out just after. They weren't doing enough work and they got a bit excited. Our first tractor was a Fordson, complete with spade lugs. My grandfather never took to it, he was very good with his horses – Clydesdales. Our farm was 203 acres, quite big for a farm in those days. It had been bought by a millowner from Oldham and he sold it to me father in 1954. My father bought it in 1954 for £7,000. You could always make a living from farming but, how can I put it? It's the same old story and just as true today. In a farm you can either pay yourself interest on the money that's in it or you can pay yourself a wage, but there's no way can you do both. That's just as true today as it ever was. Later on my father said "If you'd £5,000 to stock a farm you needn't start you could retire". Nothing has changed, apart from the number of noughts on a bit of paper.

We did a few hedging and walling classes through the Young Farmers. The nearest to me was Grayrigg and it was roughly the same as it is now: stock judging competitions, hedging competitions, walling competitions and there was a public speaking competition at that time. Then we would get the feed mills, Bibby's or Lever's or African Oil maybe, which were mostly based in Liverpool. You would get a trip once or twice a year to go round their feed mills and then we'd go to a show at night. I can remember one such trip we went to see 'The White Horse Inn', complete with revolving stage and a waterfall. I'd never seen anything like it, not on that scale.

In those days we were paid every six months. At the end of the first six months I'd thirty pounds left. Everybody says you should save, and you should, but I believe looking back at that thirty pounds, if I'd spent it all would it really have mattered? So maybe this generation that spends everything is, perhaps, right.

Interview No 0151

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