

Ewart Clough – interviewed in 2019 by Martin Vye

I'm currently at the home of Ewart and Jean Clough at Courtlands in Barham and I'm going to be asking them about their life here and farming in general. So Ewart if we can turn to you first of all. Were you in a farming family?

No, my father had a business school and I was supposed to carry on from him but once the war came and I'd done my National Service I didn't want to go into that so I decided I'd go into forestry and started off with the Forestry Commission and that's how I really got into it.

So that was in 1945/1946?

Late 40s.

I think you said you had lived in Folkestone before as a boy. With the Forestry Commission, was that locally here?

No in the New Forest. I went to a forestry school there for a couple of years but in the meantime my father was able to buy this land. There was a sitting tenant here and so he got it fairly cheaply, well by today's values very cheaply because there was a sitting tenant. Fortunately because I was ex-service through Lord Northbourne I was able to get the sitting tenant out and then he said "Well there you are there's some land there, get on with it". So that's how I started.

So we're talking about fifty years, more than that, sixty years. I'll come back to your life here in a moment, but I'm always interested in the soil, what your soil grows. Could you just describe what your farm covers?

It varies a lot from a very light soil over chalk which is only twelve inches deep, that's on this side of the farm but on the other side we've got clay and flint which is a much deeper soil but more difficult to work but very productive with a drift of brick earth running right down through the middle of it. That's the productive bit.

You sell Christmas trees and there can't be many people round who haven't bought a Christmas tree from you in the past. Is the land especially suited for trees or is it that it's not good for anything else?

No it would be good enough for agriculture crops across the lot but I think in the past because it was part of Broome Park and shooting, hunting and fishing they planted a lot of the woodland many, many years ago so that on the top they've got the woods for their pheasants and rabbits and so on and I inherited that when I took over.

Do you have shooting in your woods?

I let it off to a small syndicate yes and they raise pheasants.

That's quite common along the hills at the back here. So would you say your business is mainly forestry or a mixture?

No, we do quite a bit of forestry because at this time of the year when there's nothing much to do on the land I've got men on the coppice felling chestnut coppice to make stakes and posts and so on. That fills in a slack period labour wise and it works in very well with the arable and the sheep. We're coming up to lambing time and we're going to be very busy lambing.

How many sheep do you have?

Four hundred and some.

So it's an interesting pattern of the year because you've got lambing and then at Christmas time you've got the felling of the trees.

Yes there's quite a lot to do in the winter.

How many people do you employ?

At the moment four.

Jean, if we can turn to you. Have you been here ever since Ewart started here?

No, we got married in 1951 and he had been farming here for only about three years.

Did you come from a farming family yourself?

No.

So you didn't know what you were letting yourself in for?

No I didn't except I knew Ewart.

(Ewart) It has its advantages you've got nothing to rub out and you can start afresh. New ideas are taken up much more easily I think if you've got no background to fog it.

You brought up a family here. Where did they go to school?

They went to school locally, the girls went to the Langton and Andrew the boy went to Kent College. And two of them went to University and got degrees and the other two went to polytechnics and got qualifications there. We have one son and three daughters.

And Andrew is farming himself?

Yes he is, in partnership with us at Tuppington Hall Farm in Denton. He's gradually taking over.

I see so he's helping with farming here as well.

(Ewart) It's a partnership so he's got a much interest in it as I have.

Tuppington Hall is an amazing house. The History Society had a visit there and they were fascinated by it. What about your house here?

We built it and moved in in 1953, to begin with we lived in Folkestone and I used to go by bus every day to Dover to teach at Dover Girls' Grammar and Ewart used to come on his motor cycle up here to do the farming. We had the house built and moved out when our first daughter was born in 1953.

Obviously you have strong connections with Barham. Were you on the Parish Council Ewart?

Yes I was on the Parish Council. It was Alfred Ross who got me on to that. They were suddenly stuck. "Let's get Ewart Clough." No vote and you're in.

(Jean) You were chairman of Barham Parish Council for sort of for twenty years I would think.

How has life in Barham, in the countryside, changed over the last sixty years?

I think there has been an influx of, what would you call them? People who don't work in the village. Commuters. When we started a lot of people would work locally. When we started we had a baker and two shops, well that has gone now and a lot of the people work elsewhere. It's probably happened to a lot of villages round here.

On your farm, it hasn't changed that much? You've still got the same proportion of woodland and sheep?

Yes. Machinery has got very different.

(Jean) You use machinery to handle things much more than you did in the early days.

Countryside stewardship. I know there's been much more emphasis on governments, European Union saying they're going to help fund wildlife, diversity or whatever rather than paying for the crops. Do you think it's a good scheme?

I think it's important but quite recently there's been all this talk about the billions of people who are going to be inhabiting the world in the next century so we've got to concentrate on food production with an eye to stewardship as well. But you can't stress one more than the other they've got to go hand in hand. I think sometimes in the past they've forgotten that food has to be grown locally if possible. It's been so easy to go to Canada and South America and Australia for wheat and so on that they've forgotten that a lot of it should be grown locally and that will be important in the years to come.

Yes. Those of us who lived during the war remember that made the point that you've got to make sure that you've got food.

Those of us who can remember that far back. A lot of the politicians nowadays weren't even born then.

Thinking of sheep. There are a lot of sheep in this part of Kent and whereas I understand prices of wheat or oilseed rape go up and down, it seems to me that the numbers of sheep remain fairly constant. Is it still a good market for lamb?

Well, up until fairly recently they were almost a loss leader I think. The wool was virtually worthless and you got no more for your wool than it cost to produce it and now it's showing a little bit of profit in wool and also the price of lamb has gone up. So it's now profitable to rear sheep and I think they may come back.

How does the market work? A wholesaler buys up your sheep?

No. We lamb in April and by June there should be some ready for market and Andrew then selects them – I leave that to him – and they go to Ashford into the market and the buyers will come to Ashford and buy up and they'll probably go to one of the slaughterhouses. Sometimes they have to go a long way away but it's Charing, the slaughterhouse at Charing. So we don't sell direct to the public it's merchants who come and buy our lambs.

But it's still an agricultural market, I thought it might be wholesalers coming in. You have arable as well and that changes, rotation and so on?

We're on four year rotation. Two years grass where sheep graze and put their waste products back on then two years into wheat. It's a fairly simple system that seems to work and because we're fairly small we're able to get contract to grow seed wheat so ours doesn't go for milling it goes to a merchant for seed which means a little bit extra bonus.

But you have to work harder don't you because the seed has to be really good quality?

Yes, we have to rogue out any injurious weeds and so on, so it's a little bit more tricky but I think it's worth it to get that premium for the seed crop and I think you are producing something that's a little bit more valuable, it makes it more interesting.

What about scientific or technical changes? For example, have breeds of sheep changed?

Well I've got two agronomists from two different firms and they come and advise me when they look at the crops and say we should put this or that on. So I'm advised by these supposedly experts.

(Jean) We would say we are putting more sprays on them than we used to.

You can get advice but I detect by the tone of your voice you're not always...

I've got these two different firms and Jean, she does the books. She checks the costs and one is very much more expensive than the other so I can then say "Hey, come on, what are you putting on here that you don't need to?" It's a good guide.

Jean, perhaps a bit more about you. What did you teach at Dover?

I taught physics at Dover Girls' Grammar School. Fulltime when we were first married and then after we'd finished having children I went back and taught about two days a week. I retired when I was sixty and haven't been back since.

Just a little about the setting so that it's clear for people if they read the transcript. Can you just tell us a bit about whose land abuts you on each side?

I've got the crematorium on that side and then the golf course on that side and then on the other side it's Goddard's (he's sold some of it off now but it's all part of the estate) and then on this side is Groombridge.

Bob Akehurst doesn't come up to your land at all?

Just on the other side of the woodland he's got a couple of bits.

To sum up. Do you think this has been a good place to raise a family?

It's been a wonderful place to have a family, we're very fortunate.

And a good profession to be in?

We don't make a lot of money. Our accountant says it's a hobby rather than anything else. But I'm happy in it. What else can you expect? There's nothing we really need. We don't fancy long world cruises and things, it wouldn't suit me. We can have a holiday whenever we want. We can afford a holiday and we really want for nothing much.

Thank you very much, that was brilliant.