

Interview with Gordon Wilkinson, 2017. Interviewer: Graham, Gordon's neighbour.

Graham: Right, I'm talking to Gordon Wilkinson at Crosslands, a Rusland village, about trying to gather some of his experiences of his farming in the area. So Gordon, can you tell me how you came to move to the valley, and when, and where did you move from?

GW: Yes, well we lived at Mountbarrow, the West side of Ulverston; Father was farm manager there, and the farm was sold so we had to find somewhere to live and Crosslands came on the market and he managed to buy it in the spring of 1947. And we moved here on the 26th of April '47, my parents and my brother- it was on Donald's and mine- 17th birthday.

Graham: Really?

GW: Yeah. So Father started to farm on his own account; at one time he'd been shepherd and then farm manager... so he started farming here on his own.

Graham: So were you working on the same farm?

GW: Yes we were.

Graham: And your brother?

GW: Yeah. So that was in '47. When we came, we'd no electricity, no bathroom, no inside toilet... [He laughs] we'd a few cows, and we used to milk them, in the under-house shippon and with stone lanterns hung from the ceiling, and all the milk was to carry up to the dairy adjacent to the house, where it was cooled, and [put] into churns, and then we used to take it down to the road-end. Few churns and we used to put it on the milk-stand at the road end. Well, every farm in the valley actually were putting a little bit of milk on in those days- I think there was twelve in Rusland and probably as far as Hulleter, and we all put- we all were milking a few cows and... so times have changed in that respect, whereas I think now there's only the one out of those twelve that produced milk.

Graham: Was there a tenant farm here, and did he have a dairy when you arrived? Prior to you?

GW: He'd been a tenant, yeah. Yeah he was a tenant, Mr Shuttleworth. We just had two horses, and everything was done by horse-power, of course, and everything was done by hand, and all the ploughing and the green crops and that, everything was worked up by horses.

Graham: So once when we were talking, you said when you first came you 'had nothing' I think was the phrase that you used...

GW: Well, yeah, very little.

Graham: Were you talking about equipment, or animals...?

GW: Well everything really; money in particular.

Graham: Well, it's a big undertaking, isn't it?

GW: Yeah, yeah. Everything was done by horse-power, as I say, and everything was carted in and out with horse and carts, we used to cart muck into the field, and it was all put into heaps about seven yards apart, each way, and then we used to go and spread it by hand at a later date, and

everything was done by hand. Haytiming- we had very little in the way of machinery and a lot of that was done by hand as well, turning the swathes, and of course it was all mown by horses with a mowing machine.

Graham: So were cows and sheep your main enterprises to start with?

GW: Well, we built up, yeah, we'd a few sheep, we kept building the numbers of cows up; the shippon held about 23, we could tie- they were all tied up by the neck, and everything- all the hay and straw was in the barn above, and in winter we had to just put it down... like a hole in the floor, into the foddergangs, and all the turnips and mangolds, they were in a building behind the barn as well, underground.

Graham: Which building was that?

GW: The big barn. And the turnips and things, they were all chopped with a turnip chopper, by hand, and then taken into the cows in swills- plenty of work, kept us going.

Graham: So 23 was the number you built up to was it?

GW: Yes, yeah. And in 1950- 1951, we had to build a new shippon because we couldn't produce milk- we weren't tuberculin-tested for tuberculosis. So we had to build a new shippon and dairy to comply with the nw regulations. So, when that was done we increased the numbers quite a bit.

Graham: Where was that?

GW: Behind the barn, in the back yard.

As I said earlier, everything was done by horses, we did all the cropping- we used to grow all our own potatoes and vegetables- we were quite self-sufficient- potatoes and carrots and peas and that in the field.

Graham: Did you sell...?

GW: 'cause during the war everyone started to plough bits, and we carried on for quite a while after the war, to, more or less to be self-sufficient, really. We always grew a few acres of corn as well, and for bedding we used to cut the bracken off the bottom of the fell, and roll it down the banking and home for bedding during the winter, which made very good manure. We started keeping a few poultry, and a pig or two, just for our own use, which, you know, again helped us to be quite self-sufficient in everything. We'd no communication- we'd no telephone, or as I said before we'd no electricity. The telephone- if we wanted to use the telephone we had to bike about two miles up to Force Forge; that was the nearest telephone box. But if we did really want something in an emergency, Miss Archibald at Cinder Hill would let us go- if we really wanted a vet quickly, or something like that- and we could use their 'phone. Eventually we did get telephones, of course, and for quite a while they were joint- we'd joint lines with, well for quite a while, ours was with Lands End Farm, and so that was... a bit different... of course we hadn't a car, we had to cycle everywhere, if we wanted to go to any dances or anything we used to cycle miles; I think we bought- we did buy a car- I think it was in 1949- so we went two years without! Father and our mother never drove; Donald and I learnt to drive, we both were in a hurry to get through the test and we failed twice, we both had to go three times before we got- [He laughs] – got a license! So eventually we did, and that was much easier.

Graham: How did your parents get around before that, did they have a pony and trap?

GW: No, no, they just... best way they could, really. Well there was a bus came into the valley, in those days, there was a bus stop at the old vicarage, and they used to just walk across to the bus on a Thursday to go to town. There wasn't many people had a car- I think Johnsons at Hall Farm had one, and the Archibalds of course, but- I think they used to share lifts, with neighbours.

Graham: You also started off with sheep, is that right?

GW: Yeah, we had a few yeah-

Graham: What sort?

GW: Well, we didn't breed the first year... well, we'd a few Dalesbred, and maybe Rough Fell, for a start... a few Herdwicks- a bit mixed! We used a Teeswater Ram. As time went on we developed a flock of Swaledales, and then we crossed those with the Blue-Faced Leicester and bred North England Mules. And the cows, well we just used to buy cows, and gradually we started to rear our own heifers, and eventually we built up and we were milking fifty, but by that time we'd altered the shippons into a milking parlour. That was in the early '60's, I think. And so we were milking fifty cows then.

Graham: You obviously had a milking machine at that point?

GW: Yeah, we'd a milking machine before that, sorry, in the shippon, and then we altered it into a parlour, which was I think probably the first one about here. Going back to the husbandry part of the valley, when we first came the valley was lovely green fields all the way down to the A590- absolutely everything, beautiful- and they were managed and ploughed and reseeded and cropped; and now it's all gone. To me it's a big shame, because it used to be so lovely coming up the full length of the valley.

Graham: When did the valley start to be flooded again, then?

GW: Well, it probably did flood with high tides, but the Pool [Rusland Pool, the river] used to get dredged every so often; the dredger used to come up every so often and keep it, you know, quite deep.

Graham: Did you run the sheep in the valley, or on the hills- on the fell?

GW: Well, our fell ground wasn't really fenced around at first, so we did that in '58, I think. We made it sheep proof- we could put cows up there, but we couldn't keep sheep, so we did that, and then we developed a hill flock of pure Swales, you see. And each year we brought so many in, into the better ground, and crossed them with the Blue-Faced Leicester.

Graham: So you sort of had two flocks, in a way, did you? A hill flock and a valley?

GW: Yeah, well one was pure and one was used for crossing. And then we had a little pure flock of Blue-Faced Leicesters as well, about twelve ewes, just kept those pure breed lambs.

Graham: What time of year did you lamb, when did you do it?

GW: End of March- April, usually. We sold quite a lot of the lambs, the wether lambs, store, we used to take them to Kendal and the farmers on better farms used to buy them to fatten on. But as time went on and we got a bit more ground, we used to fatten our own as well. We used to grow fields of turnips and graze the lambs on them. Some big changes!

Graham: So you bought land as it came up, did you?

GW: Yeah, yeah we started with 250 acre, and when we sold up we'd about 400 acre.

Graham: So the turnips and crops you obviously grew in the valley.

GW: Yeah, we couldn't plough every field, obviously. No, we used to grow rye grass, for strip-grazing, and maize, and then when we started making silage, about the mid-'50s, we used to grow all sorts of crops and put in there, oats and vetches and all kinds. Just to bulk the place up. That was all forked on, spread by hand and then it was all cut out and carted down home for a while and then carried into the shippens. And then eventually we put a silage pit up at home here and we self-fed silage- the cows just helped themselves to it. And so that was quite a step forward.

Graham: And so were other people in the valley making silage at that time?

GW: Not really, no, no. We had a really bad summer and one or two had a bit of a go as a salvage thing, but, no, we got a forage harvester, middle of the '50s... no we used a buck rake first, before we got the harvester, and we just reversed up the swathes until the buck rake was full and took it back to the pit and tipped it off and somebody levelled it out. And the buck rake, we bought it from a firm in County Durham, Taylor's of Consett, and it came by train, to Haverthwaite station. And I went down for it with the tractor.

Graham: But you continued making some hay, did you?

GW: No. Well before we started making silage we used to make a lot of piked hay, and we tripodded a lot as well, made it on tripods, but that was all hand- done by hand; it was all to cart back in again after. But there was a lot of very hard hand-work, wasn't there, in those days? In the early days as well, with a horse and cart, I used to go up- there was some woodmen up in the woods, and I used to go up in my horse and cart and cart logs down to the road for them, you know, something just a bit extra. But I loved the horses, I just loved working with them. 'cause I worked with them before we came here.

Graham: What kind of horses?

GW: They were Clydesdale. Well one had a bit of Shire in, wasn't quite as big, but- actually, there were two horses I worked with at Mountbarrow, and Dad bought them in Mountbarrow sale. And we brought them, so I was used to them.

Graham: So did you have tractors and horses at one point?

GW: Well, we did, yeah- well, the horses were going on a bit, we'd been here nearly ten years when we bought the tractor. And it was a new tractor, David Brown, 25D, and it was Five Hundred and Fifty-Five pounds. I often say to people, we could buy that in those days with a hundred lambs, but I think it would take- I don't know how many lambs to buy a tractor now. Unbelievable.

Graham: Several thousand, I think. So you missed the horses, when they went?

GW: I did, yeah. But once they came to their end, that was it... we finished up with about four tractors, I think.

Graham: All David Browns?

GW: Yeah, David Brown, David Brown- Case...

Graham: So was it just the three of you, on the farm...

GW: Yes, yes.

Graham: ...you didn't ever take other labour on?

GW: No, no.

Graham: And I guess your mother played a part did she in terms of the dairy and...?

GW: Oh yes, she was always there, managing the house, yep.

When we first came as well, fencing materials, if we wanted a new fence we used to fell little oak trees, and cut them up into five-foot-six lengths and we used to split them with a hammer, a big hammer and wedges, probably make about four posts out of a little tree, you know, it was the cheapest way, it was hard work but it was a cheaper way than buying them. And they lasted as well, a long time, because they were riven and not sawn, and the water didn't get in, so... and they used to pollard the ash trees as well, and use those for rails. Used to leave them out in the fields for a while, if it was winter, and the sheep used to eat the bark and that off them, and they always lasted longer when they were stripped of bark. Yeah, used to use those for rails.

Graham: So other people around and about, were they farming in a similar way?

GW: Yeah, there was quite a few quite small farms, such as Roger Ridding and Thwaite Bridge were- hadn't much land, really. The two Thwaite Mosses, they weren't very big, either.

Graham: Did they have cows?

GW: Oh yeah, they all had a few milk cows. I'm not so sure about Thwaite Bridge, after we came, because the chap that came to live there the year after, he came from Satterthwaite, and I think they stopped producing milk there, and he just went in for beef.

Graham: And so there are some flat level fields, aren't there, down towards the town, I've seen that's where people grew cereals and turnips... did you ever grow those as cash crops?

GW: No, we used to sometimes sell a few cabbage and peas and things like that- I don't know whether we sold them really, 'cause a chap called Joe Wright used to come around with groceries and vegetables and we probably- he took so many cabbage in payment for the groceries! And peas. Just when they were in season, you know, if you had too many, you couldn't use yourselves...

Graham: How did you grow the peas, were they on sticks?

GW: Yeah, well no; wire netting, as well, posts and wire, mostly.

Graham: How many acres would that have been, do you think?

GW: What, of peas? Oh no, just a few rows, down the field. It was more or less done for ourselves, really. 'Cause we also had the pig, two pigs or three, we used to butch the pigs and... everyone did, really. And we never really butched at the same time, so as when we... there was only a certain amount of pork that you didn't cure for bacon, or ham, which you sold- that you used yourselves, we used to give our neighbours so much, and then when they butched, you got a piece back. Used to

make a black pudding, and potted meat- brawn, out of the bits and pieces. Aye, it was all part of life.

Graham: Because I think there was a butchers?

GW: Yes, that had finished of course, before that.

Graham: It would have been in the 1980s would it, when you stopped? Retired?

GW: No, the 90s. '94.

Graham: And what had you got at the finish in terms of the cattle and sheep?

GW: Can't remember, now.

Graham: And were they black and white cows?

GW: Oh yes, we developed a pure Friesian herd eventually- our parlour got as so it wanted a lot of money spending on it, I don't know when it was, the late 80s, so we decided to go out of milk, so we sold all the dairy cows and we went in for beef for the last four or five years.

Graham: That must have ben a big change to daily routines?

GW: Yeah, it was a bit easier! Morning and night, milking... course, eventually we stopped self-feed silage, we went in for big bales. We got our own wrapper, bale wrapper, and we use to get a contractor to bale the grass, and everything was fed in big bales, in the sheds. That was quite easier because to make silage in a clamp, you nearly want all the grass ready together, whereas big bales you could just cut a couple of fields, or one field, when you thought it was at the right stage, and it made it much more flexible.

Graham: How did you divide the work between you and your brother? Did you specialise in different things?

GW: Well Donald did most among the cattle, and I did the sheep side; he did most of the selling of the cattle and I did the sheep. But we worked alright together- well together, with everything.

Graham: And the cattle would have gone to Ulverston would they, to market?

GW: Ulverston or Kendal, new-calved cows, there was two chaps; a chap where you are, Maurice Burns, and one here. They were both on the council, on the road, roadmen, doing all the roadsides. There was three or four in the valley in those days, used to cut all the hedges and the sides, keep it all nice and tidy... so that's all gone.

Graham: Yeah, I'm told the roads have got narrower because people are not cutting them.

GW: Yeah, that's right. It's the same with us, with the hedges really, they were all cut- trimmed off by hand and topped by hand and now it's all mechanical isn't it? We used to cut it all and rake it up and burn it, and now it's chopped up and left, isn't it?

Graham: So if the fells weren't walled when you came, did you build...?

GW: No, no, they were walled, but they were in a bad way, in fact, all up the right hand side belonged Rusland Hall estate; they wouldn't do anything, so we fenced inside the wall. And

Graythwaite, they fenced theirs, they did that themselves. But there was a lot of walls that were down, and we did a lot when we first came. My father was a very good waller. And hedges- Donald was the hedger, he liked his hedging.

Graham: And was that done mainly in the winter?

GW: Oh yes, when there was no leaves on or anything. But more probably towards spring when the sap was starting to run, they would maybe do more, it was easiest to.

Graham: And I guess you would have had more time to wall, then?

GW: Oh yes, aye, it was very seasonal. When we first came we were in Furness Young Farmers' Club, and Don and me used to cycle back down to meetings in Ulverston and Urswick, so- and then I think in '49 we decided and we got a few together and we formed a Young Farmers' Club up here. Yeah, we finished up with about forty or fifty members.

Graham: Where did you meet?

GW: In the Hall, in the Rusland Reading Room. We used to have little committee meetings, to spare the expense, at Rusland Hall, 'cause Mr Archibald was our club leader, and we used to- at the right hand side of the Hall, of the archway, was what you called a harness room, we used to have meetings in there, and then eventually they got made into houses.

Graham: What sort of activities did you do to attract people in?

GW: Well, we'd lectures, we used to get people to come in and talk on all kinds of subjects, and then we'd quizzes and dances ... all kinds, we had walling classes, hedging classes, poultry trussing classes, all kinds, really. Yeah, very good. Dr. Hill, Doctor who was at Haverthwaite, and he used to come around regularly, just calling on people, he was an Irishman, quite a character. Yeah, everybody thought the world of him, thought he was a great doctor, and he seemed to be able to sort most things out.

Graham: He made his own medicine?

GW: He did, he often said 'Yeah, I'll send you a bottle.' And most of it was white, I don't know what it was... there's not much you can really say about it, really, but of course there was the district nurses, they used to be available if you needed them on a bicycle, yeah. And the midwives, used to come to the houses. But fortunately, I never really wanted any of them. Can't really say much more about those, really. But they were available, they were there. What I was going to say before, we formed a young mens' club, in the hall, that would be about 1950 somewhere, a few of us got together, got the vicar involved, we'd a young mens' club we used to meet on a Tuesday and a Saturday, we'd about 26 or 28 members, we used to play snooker and billiards, darts, cards, that was quite good yeah. And then when everyone started to get televisions, that finished- they stopped coming.

Graham: But you had local dances, regularly?

GW: Oh yeah, aye, very good. Yeah and parochial teas, and that kind of thing, that was always in the hall, and the WI of course, mother was quite involved in the WI. And the show committee. I can't remember, when we actually put a bathroom in, but we had to find a different water supply, a bit higher up the hill, so the water level would put the water upstairs.

Graham: So you were taking water straight from the stream?

GW: No no, we had water, taps and hot water and everything, but it was all downstairs. I've a feeling it must have been somewhere about '52, so we must have gone four years without a proper bathroom!

Graham: Was that mains water or water from a well or...?

GW: A spring.

Graham: So you had your own pipe down from the spring.

GW: Yeah, we'd send our hogs away for winter and when we carted them home, they all came back with some of Graythwaite's sheep and were put in the park at Graythwaite, and they rang up, whether it was the morning after or two days later, and there was ever so many sickly, and they'd been eating Rhododendrons, there was a load of them around the park, and we gave them salt and water and made them sick. And- we saved them. That was either laurel or Rhododendron. But with travelling down I guess they were quite hungry, you know, and they put them into the park, before we got over to sort them out to bring home, and they'd eaten this... anyway, that's what we did, we drenched them with salt and water.

Graham: Would a vet have told you do that?

GW: I don't know, we just did it, I mean we hadn't time...!

Graham: In the '50s, walking here now, what would strike you most, do you think?

GW: I think the lack of manpower, labour, really is the... you know... a lot of work gets done by contractors now, because the labour isn't on the farms. See most farms had their own, maybe a son or two, working at home, and those that had a few in the family, those that didn't work on the farm were working in the woods, woodchopping and mostly, round here anyway, in the early '50s, so... maybe more so before we came, you know there were tales of families of four or five and maybe three of them would be working in the woods and two of them at home... yeah, and I think one of the other big changes was going from horses to tractors, really. Much quicker!