

**You live in East Tuddenham now and I've come to interview you as a volunteer from the Little Ouse Headwater Project. Can you please tell me where you were born?**

I was born in Hitcham in Suffolk quite a long time ago. My name is Alec Bull and my father's occupation was owner-occupier of a small farm. I went to school in Bury St Edmunds but left when I was 14 to help on the farm during the war, so from then on I was working on the land, and I got married when I was 20 and we lived first in Icklingham in Suffolk and from there we moved to Timworth where I was looking after a herd of cows for two years. The farmer was one of those with a very short fuse and if he was crossed, you were off the farm within about five minutes. So I managed to get a week's notice and I put an advert ... this is relevant to how difficult it is to get a job today ... when I put an advert in the *East Anglian Daily Times* under my own name, two days later I'd had 11 replies. Some of which were suitable but I chose to go to Garboldisham with Mr John Laurie and we were there from late October 1951 until about the same time in 1952. That brings me into Garboldisham.

When we moved to Garboldisham we were moved in by the gentleman called Will Backlog who was the coal merchant in Garboldisham. He did the John Laurie's carting. Do you know where he was?

**I've seen your map and it shows he lived up on one of the Garboldisham Ling properties. Was he up in that area?**

No, he got a coal yard down on Smallworth, I think, down that way any how. Either on what they called the Common with the rest of the bit that joined Broomscot Common, where the mill is. Anyhow, we arrived there. I was to be one of six cowmen looking after 100 cows. Nowadays there's one cowman looking after 300-400, 500, cows and everything's done automatically. We worked a six-day week with a slight difference with a rolling day off; we started Monday off, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. But when we got to the following week we had Saturday, Sunday and Monday. We had a three-day weekend every six weeks, which was very good in those days. The pay was reasonable for the time. I think it was about £7 a week, I can't remember exactly. 5 til 5 nominally but with an hour for breakfast and two hours for lunch. If you had to work any overtime, like in the evenings, you didn't get any extra for it.

**Did they give you a house?**

Oh yes. We lived in one of the houses on the Ling, the first one you come to after the farm actually, got a nice pond in front of it.

**That was rent free?**

Oh yes. All the houses on the Ling at that time were occupied by people who worked on the farm. In addition to the six cowmen, there was a pigman, Billy Baker, who lived in a cottage at the top of the hill with his wife and 10 children and he had to double-up when there was illness or anything in the cowshed, and in addition to looking after a big pig unit he had to come in and do some milking. He also was excellent shoe repairer; he repaired everybody's shoes on the Ling and at the same time, I always found it hard to believe, he read three library books every week.

**Gosh that is a lot.**

Yes. Anyhow, he was one of the regulars. Percy Oldman who lived further down on the Ling who lived with his ... I don't know whether his mother was still alive, but certainly his father was, he was a retired blacksmith. He was the second cowman and he could turn his hand to anything because on two occasions he was called out of the cowshed, and Billy Baker had to come in, because on the first occasion he had to show the ordinary labourers on the farm how to lay a field drain, and on another occasion he was called out to make clay lump and bricks for repairs to the cottages and barns because most of the buildings at that time were clay lump. I should imagine he was one of the last people who knew how to do it. They didn't have a clay pit. They had very deep ditches and before he did any making of the bricks, two or three of the men off the farm would spend a week or so digging out the ditches another foot deeper to get the clay. It would then be laid in a bed, and straw would be spread over it and, from memory, they then had the cowshed because one horse was allocated for carting backwards and forwards to the cowshed, and that was called Bonnie. I seem to remember that Bonnie had to tread backwards and forwards over the clay to mix the straw in ... Percy then had to cut it out into blocks in to a mould and leave it to dry for about a fortnight and there you were. I think he must be one of the last who knew how to do that.

The head cowman was Fred Shaw. I think he had his own cottage somewhere down near the wood mill somewhere. I was never sure exactly where it was. Fred had a wife and one daughter, and I heard later that he died when ... he was 39 when I was there ... and I think he died when he was 49 because he used to smoke an ounce of Churchman's Counter Shag a day.

#### **That is a lot.**

Percy used to smoke 4oz of digger a week.

#### **These were quite strong tobaccos?**

Yes, the shag tobacco was hand-rolled in a cigarette. No smoking was allowed during milking, but it was all right the rest of the time. Next to us when we went there, though he hadn't been there long, was a little bantam cock with the name of the Ernie Toll?. Ernie would strut up and down with his chest puffed out as if he owned the place. He was only about 5' 3" but anybody crossed him he'd challenge them to a fight, and he lived with his wife who was 14 years his senior and an 11-year-old daughter. They also had a female lodger which was the reason why they moved rather suddenly. They were followed by a chap called Hugh England who was recently married to one of Fred Shaw's sisters. They were still there when we left. The third cowman, you might say, was Harry Shaw, known as Lauder because after Harry Lauder the Scots singer/comedian, but he was another of Fred's brothers and I think he was still living with his parents in the village. But later on, because I kept in touch with Percy Oldman until he died, when John died one of the sons took the farm on and they built up a big new cow area on the other side of the road, on a roundabout, so the cows come on and they moved round and by the time they come off again they're all done. That reduced the number of cowmen to three, and also they started using tractors for tidying up and so on, so Harry Shaw left at that time and the last I heard he was tractor driver at Manor Farm Honington right on the crossroads. There was Harold Pratt, known always as Harry; he was a bit of an oddball. He was a good cowman but he was a lad with a temper and on one occasion he had an argument with Ernie Toll? which ended up with Ernie lying on his back across the shelves behind the horse. Percy, who was very busy pulling Harry off ... they were quite rough and tumble days.

### **You remember what the fight was about?**

No, except Ernie was always needling everybody and actually, before he suddenly left, he got so infuriated with Percy because Percy used to feed the cows, do the dairy work – he was the second cowman – he came to me one day he said, 'Alec, will you do my work this morning I want to settle that ????' So I and Ernie used to have to do the mucking-out, get the straw and so on. So Percy was a real hard worker and anyhow they got to the stage ???? where he used to get the straw from straw stacks along the road. They had a whole line of straw stacks because the straw was brought fresh, the old-fashioned way, so they got a load of straw. Percy picked up his great big lumps there on the cart, which Ernie couldn't keep on top of and he got so furious that when he came out he had to stay on the load until he got to the yard, he slid down and sort of ???? going to give Percy a belt. Percy picked him up by the scruff of the neck and was going to chuck him in the horse pond when Lenny Bailey the head persuaded him otherwise. I don't know whether this is relevant to what you're hoping for. After that, Ernie very quickly found himself another job and they were on the move. The day they moved it came out that the female lodger was expecting. But the method of moving was rather unusual. We were having breakfast – our kitchen projected so that there was a window with curtains on that looked towards their backyard – and we're having breakfast and there's this tremendous crash, so I just went and peeped round the curtain and Ernie was throwing the brass bedsteads out of the bedroom window as the quickest way to get them down.

### **Possibly the stairs were too narrow?**

Could have been. Also I was talking about Harold Pratt, Harry, he'd been in the Navy and he used to regale us with tales of, because he was at Lossiemouth, tales of 40-gallon drums of aviation spirit being changed from one boat to another on foggy nights on the loch. Apparently he got away with it because after a few years, because he met his wife up there – she came from Glasgow – they went back up there and he started his own builds?? business. I don't know what happened to them after that. Who else was there? There were two Hoggs. I think the oldest one was Ernie as well, he lived in the cottage next to Percy Oldman and he was the gardener. I think he was in the 50s and his younger brother whose first name I don't remember, but he was always called Winecker which was a very good name for him actually. But they were the only two workers out of 33 on the farm who were over 40. They were all young and most of the work on the farm was piecework, sugar beeting, hedging, ditching; and one of Fred Shaw's brothers, who was called Stumpy, I don't know what his first name was, he lived in one of the cottages on the Ling, he wasn't very tall but he was a tremendous worker and he managed to lift ?? and top two and a half of acres of sugar beet a week.

### **On his own?**

On his own, yes. He was the leading light in that sort of thing and of course everybody had to do ... during the summer the cowman had to do light evenings. The cowman would go out and do some chopping out and singling? and so on but that was all done by the chain, which is 22 yards for people who don't know.

### **So you got paid a certain amount for doing that chain?**

Yes. I don't remember what it was. And the hedges were all trimmed, again piecework. I don't know, because the buildings were all clay lump and they were all tarred and some of them were tarred each summer between house? and harvest during the slack time, but I don't know if that was done piecework. I very

much doubt it was, or it might amount to a lot of tar being splashed about. Other people on the farm ... there's a very tall German prisoner of war, had been a prisoner of war, by the name of Lofty, lived in a cottage out in the woods north of ??? with a footpath across the Ling; he still wore, although it was 1952, he still wore the very dark brown uniform with the patches on the knees and so on. But he was married to an English girl and seemed quite settled there.

**What was his work on the farm?**

He was a general farm worker.

**So he did anything, ditching, hedging?**

Yes. Whatever came along. He was a good worker. I presume he had probably been on a farm before the war. There was also Farguson who lived in the old farmhouse near the piggery. He was a general farm worker. He was very accident-prone. We came across him some years later, after we came back to Norfolk permanently, and he'd had two major accidents since we'd first known him. I think he died quite a number of years ago now. I think they lived in Saham Toney. Can't think of anybody else that I knew particularly well on the farm. Of course, there was John Laurie. He died when he was only 49 I think; he had a heart attack. His oldest son, who was also John, by that time was farming at Colton Road. He had two daughters, Helen and Heather; I don't know what happened to either of them. I presume they married into a farming family somewhere else. But the youngest son, Jimmy, he was 16 when we were there. And because, as I mentioned to you Ernie Toll? was always fighting everybody, well Jimmy had been taught boxing at school so they egged Jimmy on to come and give Ernie a bout in the cowshed. That was the most hilarious thing you every saw. Ernie hadn't any idea ... everything got parried and he was made to look a right fool actually. I must have ... just some years back after I published a book on my life looking after cows, I had a letter from, no I had a phone call from old Mrs Laurie, because she was still alive, would we go over and see her, which we did. She was 92 at the time so I believe. She's got all her buttons, she was still very much alert and so on, although she was confined to a wheelchair or a mobility scooter, which I believe when we were there she'd recently managed to turn it over at the bottom of the garden and had to be rescued. But Jimmy had been divorced and was living with his mother at the time and he may still be there. I know the old lady died some time after that. Don't think I can say too much more about the farm.

**You were going to mention a bit about the coal merchant and how he used to help people move.**

Apart from helping people move, doing coal rounds and so on, he was also a general haulier and he used to all the carting, haulage for the farm including sugar beet to the factory, which reminds me that most of the cottages, including the one Fred had had down on the Common, had got large gardens, about half an acre or so. The chaps who were there permanently used to pool their resources. One of them, I think Percy did it one year, ploughed all these half-acre plots. They then all had the same crop, either potatoes or sugar beet, and the year we were there they had got enough sugar beet between them to send a lorry-load to the factory. John Laurie got a permit for them and they ...