**Hay Farm**



* 1. **Introduction**
  2. These are the reminiscences of three generations of my family who were closely involved with Hay Farm in Devon. A farm, small in size, understaffed and run down but one which was loved by us all and still is loved by those of us left who spent so many hours here and even more hours thinking about our happy times.

1.2 The farm was sold out of the family some 52/3 years ago but still when ever one or two of the last generation of persons associated with it meet together, tales are told and old characters and events remembered.

1.3 There were five brothers and sisters of our generation who spent all their summer school holidays at the farm with our mother and also joined by our father during his brief holidays. We left by train from Birmingham as soon as we could after school broke up bursting with excitement and anticipation, returning home at the last possible moment before the school bell rang. This five or six week period was the focal point of our year, it was the standard by which all the rest of our life was measured and still is at times. The summer temperatures are measured against fantasy temperatures of 50 years ago, the cattle we now see in the fields as we travel conjure up the Devon Reds at Hay Farm, the taste of food, milk and water can still be compared with the old days. Even the characters we now meet, and the countryside views we see, are measured against our remembrances.

1.4 However, as much as our life revolved around Hay Farm, our mother’s life was closer. She and her sisters had spent considerable parts of their lives here and she in particular probably regarded it as her first home with her husband and children even taking second place in her thoughts. I can remember this being forcibly drawn to my attention on the one occasion she travelled abroad. One of her sisters had died leaving just about enough money to her remaining sisters (mother included) for a holiday in Austria to see the Oberammergau plays. Mother’s wish to see the play was tempered only by the thought that it may prevent her from an annual holiday in Devon at the farm, for she said, “I wouldn’t wish to miss going to Hay Farm because of this holiday as I have never missed a year throughout my whole life”. Fortunately, she managed both.

1.5 Mother’s love of the farm was again exceeded by her mother’s affection. Grandma Polly, as far as I am concerned, was a shadowy figure who I can only remember lying in bed shortly before she died. She was one the farmer’s daughters of which there were four. The farm being inherited by the eldest daughter Hattie and run by her and her daughter Lily until it became too much for her during the 1939/45 war.

1. **Events**

**2.1 Walking the boundary**

The farm was quite small compared with most farms I have heard of but for that area of Devon it seemed to be average. The size did vary as fields were added or sold but the figure of 75 acres stands clear in my mind. It had great advantages of all the fields being adjacent to each other and these presented a continuous boundary.

One of the first duties we undertook when visiting was to walk this boundary. It was a matter of honour to walk the actual boundary and it was frowned upon to walk in the field inside the boundary hedge. The hedges were wide banks with hazel bushes growing thickly on their crest and the walker had to walk actually in the hedge squeezing between the bushes and trees but if this was completely impossible then it was permitted to walk for agreed limited distances in the field beyond the hedge.

* 1. **Adjudicating body**

Frequent mention will be made of actions which were of were not permitted by us youngsters annually invading the farm. A lot of these rulings were handed down from decisions taken by previous generations and became part of the folk law associated with the holidays.

In addition, the word of Aunty Lily was respected and honoured and should her mother aunty Hattie pronounce on any subject which affected us, then this was carved in tablets of stone.

All other decisions were agreed with little dissention by us, the third generation. Admittedly the two eldest ones seemed to have voices which carried more weight than us younger ones but that was a fact of life which I accepted automatically.

3.0 **Fred French**

Fred was the farm labourer and had held that position probably all his life. He milked the cows, hoed, scythed the grass, trimmed the hedges and loaded the carts with hay or corn. He did virtually any job but would not harness the horses or accept any job with responsibility. He lived in the village of Yarcombe about 1.5 / 2 miles away from the farm and walked to work at about 5am in time to get the cows in for morning milking. He went home after evening milking at 6pmish.

He lived with his sister Ada French who was the post woman for a number of years, but Fred was probably no burden as he ate all his meals at the farm. He usually had Sunday off and apart from shaving on that day it was not known what else he did.

Aunty Lily paid him weekly which entailed giving him his pocket money to be spent in Yarcombe Inn each night and the rest of the money deposited in a Post Office savings account from which Lily bought his clothes.

He always wore gum boots, summer and winter and a cap. Corduroy breeches and a shirt and waistcoat, Those clothes with his weekly stubble were his distinguishing features. He was perhaps simple but he did his job adequately and reliably as I cannot recall him not turning up at work. He was teased by the sisters of the second generation and perhaps to a small extent by us younger ones but he bore no malice and was as much a part of the farm as any other person there.

Cider was his drink and when working in the fields all day; bread, cheese, an onion and a flagon of cider refreshed him midday or occasionally put him to sleep.

4.0 **Cows and Dairy**

The farm survived on a mixture of cereal production and animal and dairying. There were usually between 12 and 14 cows, all having a flower or country name, Tulip, Buttercup and Daisy were perpetual and if one such named animal left the farm then the name was handed on at the first opportunity.

Visiting the farm mainly during the summer, the cows lived out of doors in the fields but came in twice a day for milking. The cowsheds formed two sides of the “Dirty Court”, so called because the centre of the courtyard held a dung heap onto which all the animals refuse was piled and which formed a festering fly breeding ground which seemed normal to us in those days but which must have been a foul source of infection.

I can dimly remember the cows being milked in the open court with mother and her sisters helping Lily and Fred French. The cows restive because of the flies and movement in the court and would wander and use their tails with great effect. The milkers would pursue the cows and endure the whipping from the tails. In later years the cows were all let into their shed and fed “Cow Cake”.

In the stalls each cow had her own allotted stall whose position was decided by the cows themselves. Occasionally a mistake was made by an animal lower in the order of hierarchy and whose presumption would tempt her to challenge her senior. This did cause a rumpus until rightful positions were regained and honour restored. Milking by hand in the stalls was hot sweaty job with the inherent dangers of a dung filled tail whipping your face and shoulders but at least you were reasonably static. As you got strong enough to assist, you were encouraged to help milk.

The milking debate was always on whether you should wet or dry milk. Either wet your hands with the first jet of milk and so allow your fingers to slide on the teat or keep your hands dry and extract the milk by rippling the teat with the muscles of your fingers.

The milk in open pails was carried to the “Milk House” of the farm and poured through the chiller to reduce the temperature as quickly as possible. The chiller had cold well water circulating through sealed stainless steel corrugated sheets whilst the milk cascaded down over the outside of these plates. It was imperative by law and a practical necessity to cool the milk to prevent it going sour. The milk ran into ten-gallon churns and held in a cool place until collected by the milk lorry each morning.

Cows in those days were not Tuberculin tested and were only seen by a vet when called in by the farmer. The milking was carried out into open buckets gripped between the gum boots of the milker (which in turn were often covered in dung and filth).

The cleaning of equipment was haphazard. Lily used to scald the equipment which meant swilling it with boiling water but as this was passed from bucket to bucket it was probably more incubator than sterilizer….

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