

CHURCH FARM

SALLY AND ROB HIGGINS



Grandparents and parents of Rob Higgins

CHEESEMAKING

Rob: "My grandparents made cheese in Witham Friary. They were heavily involved in the Frome cheese show. My grandmother made cheese at Tynemead – cheddar and Caerphilly. When we came here to Church farm with the cows, we carried on making cheese – we had one cheesemaker who went on to be a judge, and then Jean Ball was our cheesemaker until she got married to Doug in 1962. We stopped when Jean left. That we when we gave up the pigs. Cheesemaking goes quite well with pig farming because you can feed them the whey. I think we had about 20 sows on the farm when I was growing up."

GROWING UP ON CHURCH FARM

Rob: "My parents came here in 1949 and they had 450 acres. We were all brought up in the old farmhouse on the farm. When my parents first married, they lived in a caravan in the paddock and my grandparents were in the house. There was a very hard winter and so they moved into the house – around 1952. All three generations lived together in that house. I was born at Bath hospital as was my sister, Susan."

Rob: "There was an aga in the kitchen, and an open fire in the front room, and a bathroom inside. I used to get dressed in the kitchen by the aga before school. There were gaps under the floorboards, and I remember the wind would make the carpet flap and lift up!"



Jean Ball cheesemaking

"I went to school in Frome and then to a boarding school in Bridgewater, aged 10. I think my family thought I'd get a better education and wanted us to do well. I remember having to wear shorts all year round at school and so now, it doesn't matter how hot it gets, I refuse to wear shorts!"

GOING TO CHURCH

Rob: "Granny was a church goer and we used to go every Sunday. Everyone had their pew, they were unofficially allocated and we sat in the second one. You'd never sit in someone else's pew. My granny and mum were also in the church 'work party' – they'd all meet up to knit and crochet and then before Christmas, they sold whatever they had made at the Church Fayre so villagers could buy them as family gifts."

LOSS OF THE FARM, AND REGAINING THE FARM

Rob: “My grandfather died in 1976, and my dad died a few years later, in 1979. I was 24 years old. It’s a bit complicated, but due to a legal technicality I lost the tenancy so was offered a Partnership with the Duke (then Lord Seymour). In 1981 we built the new Farmhouse and The Duke moved into the old Farmhouse, now Church house. In 1988 the Partnership ended and I took on a tenancy in my own name”

Sally: “I had gone to agricultural college to study as a Farm Secretary and had started my own mobile business. I started doing the books for Rob’s father before he died, so that meant that I could carry on doing this, while Rob managed the farm. He was 24 and I was 22. We’d just got married.”



EXPANDING DAIRY FARMING AT CHURCH FARM



Rob: “There have always been cows here on the farm. I think to start with there were about 60 pedigree Ayrshires, and my grandparents walked the cows up from Witham Friary to Church Farm. They say the younger villagers all came out to watch the cows arrive.

“Later we bred some British Freisians and some Holstein. And now we have a few Ayrshires again. When my dad died, we had about 80 cows; by 2000, there were about 110; and in the last 10 years we increased the herd to about 200. We have just bought another herd, so we’re at 375. I’m not sure if that’s more or less than all the dairy cows that used to be in the village in the past – most of the farms were quite small at that time.”

Sally: “The dairy model allows for regular inputs and regular income – when you rely on an annual harvest, you’re investing all year to get an annual return, whereas with dairy it is a regular, constant income.

Rob: “We sell the milk to three outlets – the bulk of it goes to Wyke in Bruton for cheese, as well as an independent dairy there, and also to our three milk-stations (Maiden Bradley, Mere and Codford). It is better to have more than one outlet. The most important thing is the milk quality – the butter fats and the solids – our milk has always been ideal for cheese making and you get a higher price for milk that goes to make cheese.”

delivering animal feed and Grandfather Higgins on his tractor





view of Church Farm

LAND STEWARDSHIP

Rob: “We’ve taken on more land so we’re now at about 720 acres – we have the land attached to Manor Farm, and we’re also farming Long Knoll.”

Sally: “We converted to organic farming for about 10 years, but we stopped because we couldn’t make it work financially. The organic inputs were expensive, especially the cattle feed and then demand dropped off – making it impossible to sell all our milk at the premium organic price.”

Sally: “We do our best to steward the land. We do rotational planting of crops and grass to restore the soil, and all the muck goes back onto the land. We also leave field margins, add clover in the silage fields, maintain hedges, put up tree sparrow boxes, barn owl boxes, and sow bird cover in the winter. Nature is very important to farmers. We manage the SSSI on Long Knoll – we have cattle up there in the summer to eat the long grass, and sheep in the winter – that protects the wildflowers.”



WHAT'S CHANGED, WHAT'S THE SAME

Rob: “When my parents were farming, there were 14 farm workers, and now there are 4 or 6 who are mostly family members. Sometimes students come for work experience. The tractors had no cabs, and it would rattle and the noise was phenomenal – my hearing got permanently damaged. Now there are cabs and suspension which makes a big difference.”

Rob: “The way the animals are fed and bedded has changed; we used to cart food to the cattle in the stalls manually. Now the cows are in covered barns, so they are free to move around. Food is given to them by tractor and feed mix wagon and they can choose when to eat. Before there were in fixed stalls. Milk was put into churns on the farm and collected by lorry; today it is a tanker lorry.”

Rob: “The hay and straw baling was very laborious, very hot, you’d get blisters from the string and the weight, and scratched. Lots of people from the village would help out and each farm always helped each other if someone needed something, that’s true today. Farming today can be lonely sometimes with less staff on each farm.”

Sally: “Each day can be stressful. The buyer determines the price of the product so you don’t always know what the value will be when you sell it. Every day you wear lots of different hats. There’s paperwork, stewardship, cattle health, milking and many other jobs.”

KNOWING THE COWS, LOSING COWS, MILKING COWS

Rob: "You still know each cow individually – you recognise them. When I was at school, they all had names. Now they have a number but that's for record keeping. But you are hands on with the cows twice a day for milking, so you get to know them and their characters. Like a family member."

Sally: "I remember when my dad sold his cows when he retired. The silence around the farm hit me."

Rob: "The cycle of the day hasn't changed that much, the rhythm of the day. We're still milking the cows, cleaning the udders, attaching the equipment. But it's more automated. You stand in the pit and the cows come on either side of you, above you. It used to be just 4 cows being milked on each side, then 5 on each side and now 10, so 20 in total. It takes a long time though and we're looking forward to having the new milking parlour. We start every morning at 4.30 and finish at 9.30, and then again from 2.00 to 6.30."

THE NEXT GENERATION

Sally: "There's a phrase we use, 'hefted to the land' usually referring to animals but applies to farmers also. If you farm an area of land for generations, then you become bound to it. Farming Tenancies used to be for a lifetime or generations, but now tenancies are changing often becoming much shorter term. It can make it difficult to invest long-term. We've taken a risk with our investment, but our two sons are driving that forward and are very committed. The future is bright."



Brian Riggs

Young bull and fully grown bull

