

Farming at Dangells

Richard and Mary Stevens



Richard and friends

GROWING UP IN MAIDEN BRADLEY

Richard: "My grandparents were from Witham Friary and my parents moved up here in 1939 when they got married. They lived at No. 70 High Street, and farmed at Dangells – there was no house here then."

"Our house at No. 70 High Street was thatched back then. I remember when the thatch was taken off and it was tiled. The thatch was so deep – about a metre thick. You always had to be careful with the chimney, not to start a fire. We had a Rayburn in the kitchen which was warm. I don't remember being cold. But there was always ice on the inside of the windows in winter. And yes, we had electricity and also the toilet was inside the house."

GROWING UP IN NORTON FERRIS

Mary: "My dad worked as an agricultural worker after the war – he had served in the war, fighting in the middle east for five years with the Wiltshire Yeomanry. We moved to Norton Ferris from Tisbury in 1956." We came in a cattle lorry, with my mum and two younger brothers in the cab with the driver, and my dad, my elder brother and me in the container, with all our things from the house. I remember I was given a pair of jeans – for the first time. I always had to wear skirts and dresses."

"Our house in Tisbury had been built after the war for agricultural workers and it was quite modern with an inside bathroom and running water. The house in Norton Ferris had no hot water, and a toilet outside and my mum had four children by then! There was electricity in

Norton Ferris but not in our house – I think we had it by the '60s. My dad had no car when we moved – he cycled from Tisbury to Norton Ferris to view the farm. In the '60s he got his driving licence and bought a car."

"We had 8 dairy cows to start off with – all Ayrshires from Scotland. I remember we had to wait 8 weeks to get the all-clear for TB. We had 50 acres and my dad slowly grew the farm. When I was a teenager, I think we had about 30 dairy cows. My brother still farms there."

"I had three brothers, but we lost my baby brother. He died of dysentery. Nowadays he would have survived. That was hard for my mother because she had left her family behind in Tisbury. I still remember hearing her crying."

GETTING MARRIED, AND FARMING AT KATE'S BENCH AND AT DANGELLS

Mary: "We met at school. Richard was in the scouts and I was in the guides – in Maiden Bradley. We got married at Kilmington Church in 1967 and the bungalow was built here at Dangells for us.

Richard: "In 1959 my parents moved from the High Street to Kate's Bench, and I used to help with the milking. Mary was still going to help her family at Norton Ferris. We had a car and we could both drive. We had a Rayburn in the house but no electric – there was a generator outside."

Richard: "We all farmed in partnership as a family until the 1990s, when the families grew and we split 700 acres in two, so there are now two separate farms (Dangells and Priory) of 350 acres each. We gave up Kate's Bench and it isn't a farm anymore – it is leased to the council and so is Newmead. It is sad because it means they are not part of village life anymore."

"We brought the 100 cows from Kate's Bench to Dangells, and we had barns here to keep them inside in the winter. At Kate's Bench, they had to stay outside in the mud. We also had help here at the farm - I remember Chris Downes and Colin Venables worked here."

LOSING OUR DAIRY COWS

Richard: "We sold our dairy cows in 2007. We had to because they changed the regulations, and we couldn't comply. We didn't have the proper slurry store and it needed investment. It was hard to make a living. It needed three people alone just to move the cows across the road safely... It would be easier to shoot yourself than sell your dairy cows."

Mary: "It was so quiet after they had gone. We had the routine of starting at 4.30 to do the milking and then again in the afternoon. It was the silence. I didn't like being in the garden in the afternoon because it was too quiet."

Mary: "There used to be 12 dairy farms; now there's just one. And just 4 working farms left."

FROM DAIRY TO BEEF CATTLE – KATE'S BENCH HERD

Mary: "Our son Jeffrey joined us in partnership at the farm and we bought 60-80 beef suckler cows from the Strattons in Kingston Deverill. Geoff wanted to do something more specialised, so we also bought 7 pedigree Charolais heffers to breed – so we breed heffers and bulls. You need a prefix for a breed herd – they're called the Kate's Bench herd."



The pond on Bradley Lane



WHAT'S CHANGED AT THE FARM

Richard: "I think a lot of the cow stalls are the same, and the bull pen, but the house is built on the old rickyard, and there is an extra grain store. We used to have to pitchfork the haybales and now we don't do that – they're too big and its mechanised. I remember my dad using a horse and cart! When we got the modern combines in the '80s, that made a big difference. Before there were no cabs on the tractors. It was so dusty."

Mary: "And noisy. Richard's hearing isn't good because of the noise on those tractors. It was cold and wet too. When it rained, to keep dry they used a sack – they made a corner out of them to keep dry."

Mary: "At Norton Ferris, we used to have to prong out the manure by hand, but I think by the '60s, we had a dung spreader. Perhaps the other thing that has changed is Sundays. As a girl, I don't remember people working on the Sunday other than milking, but today it is like any other day."

Mary: "I helped with the milking, with everything. I remember at harvest, I'd even take out a roast dinner to them when they were working in the fields."

Richard: "I remember I was bailing straw up at Rodmead in 1976 when we heard on the radio that Lord Mountbatten had been killed."

THE FUTURE

Richard: "I'm sure there will be self-driving tractors and combines, lots of automation. But perhaps that means people will lose the skills as they'll rely on machines more. Perhaps it could be lonelier – on your own, working with a machine."

Mary: "But at least communications are better. When my dad was away, my mum had no means of keeping in touch. That's changed so much."

WHAT'S CHANGED IN VILLAGE LIFE

Richard: "I used to go to Sunday school as a boy in the chapel – it was United Reformed. And I remember there was a pig club – for people who kept a pig in the garden. The local slaughterman would kill the pigs for the families to eat. And there was also a small quarry up by Bradley wood, in the field by the entrance – that stone was used for building in the village. I also remember the milk man – Mr Crabbe. He pulled a hand cart and delivered milk in pint bottles. And there was an old blacksmith – it was a distinctive sound, the hammer banging on the anvil."

Mary: "In the '50s we were still on rations, but we ate seasonal food, what was growing and we always had roast dinner on Sunday. We'd have beef or pork or lamb – chicken was expensive then. My mum hardly ever left the farm and she had no phone so I don't know how she did her orders. But the butcher and grocer would deliver her shopping to the farm."

Richard: "We all had radios then and you could take the accumulator [storage battery] to the garage in the village and they would charge it for you. It was a big battery that we used to run the radio. We bought a telly, black and white, for the Queen's coronation – a lot of people did. It was expensive – it cost us a week's wages. When Princess Anne got married, we bought a colour one!"

The view of Maiden Bradley from Dangells

