

## **MR ROB WRIXON**

**Born 1933**

Rob was born at Hooke, an only child, whose father worked for the Dorset County Council on roads and bridges. He went to the local village school and, from there obtained a scholarship which enabled him to go, as a weekly boarder, to the Beaminster Grammar School, the school that Ralph Wightman had attended some years earlier. Children came to this school from as far away as the Midlands, because of its agricultural bias. Maths was Rob's best subject and he achieved a good School Certificate, then did a year's practical work on a farm, followed by a year at the Farm Institute, now the Dorset College of Agriculture at Kingston Maurward. He would have liked to have gone on to Agricultural College, but family funds would not allow this, so he started work at a large dairy farm near Blandford.

After 18 months he went to do his National Service in the RAF, hoping that he would be able to realise one of his early ambitions, that of learning to fly. Sadly, he was going to have to wait another twenty years to do this, but when he came out of the RAF, two years later, he satisfied another of his desires by starting to keep pigs. He was keeping about 30 sows, plus all the piglets, doing a farm job as well and working all hours. Eventually the buildings where he kept his pigs were sold, so were the pigs and then started his long association with Streatfield Hood, firstly in the dairies. Inevitably, after six months or so, he thought it was time to set up a pig herd, which he did, at Axon. He met and married his wife, Di Tuck, from Symonsbury, who joined him in the farmhouse in that terrible snowy winter of 1961/62, when they were virtually isolated for six weeks.

In 1966 the young family moved to Boarsbarrow Farm, which then had a herd of 80 cows, but within two years, with Rob's leaning in that direction, they already had two piggeries and now, in 1991, it is a flourishing modern pig farm. Their two sons, John and Brian are also in farming. John did a mechanical apprenticeship and then joined the company as a cheesemaker and Brian, who has two children, was running one of the pig herds until stopped by ill health.

Just over 20 years ago, Rob and Di took up gliding and then flying. They joined a group of three other farmers, who shared a 'plane, based at Dunkerswell, in Devon and used to fly from there. Eventually they bought their present, small aircraft, that only needs a short runway and is ideal to keep on the top of Loders Hill. Rob does the maintenance himself and they can take off at a moment's notice, when the weather is right and there is time to spare.

Rob stayed at Boarsbarrow until 1990 when, sadly, he had to retire early, following a heart attack and he and Di now live in Bradpole. Undeterred by this experience, he still gives a great deal of time to his two special interests, aeroplanes and pigs!



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**MR ROB WRIXON, Born: 1933**  
**Boarsbarrow Farm, Loders**

**Interviewer: Pat Hughes**  
**Yondover Farmhouse**  
**Loders**

**Date: 28th October 1990**

**Side 1.**

Int: You weren't born at Loders, were you, you were born at Hooke?

RW: Yes, indeed, I was born at Hooke, which is a village approximately six miles north of here, that was in 1933, many years ago now.

Int: Can you tell me about your family, were they a farming family?

RW: No indeed, no. My father worked for the Dorset County Council on roads and bridges work. I think, being in the country, I helped local farmers during my school days and developed considerable interest in agriculture and the sports that go with country life. I think really, living right away in a village, one didn't really consider much else.

Int: Was there a school in the village?

RW: Yes there was the primary school, as we call them now; I attended that and then from there a scholarship, which enabled me to go the Beaminster Grammar School, which again, was agriculturally orientated to a degree. Indeed, at Beaminster Grammar School, agriculture was a separate subject and encouraged and it also was a boarding school. I was a weekly boarder, but some were full term boarders and some lads and girls, for that matter, came from quite a distance away, even in the Midlands, who sought somewhere with an agricultural curriculum.

Int: Ralph Wightman was there wasn't he?

RW: Yes he was, before me!

Int: Of course! Did you find it a good school?

RW: I was not terribly academic, but I used to enjoy my maths. I was quite good at maths and geometry, trigonometry, things where I could see an end, where I could see a purpose; where I could see a definite, practical purpose, I was quite interested. Of course it was wartime then, food was rationed, conditions were a little bit spartan, everywhere, I mean, specially so in a boarding school and we used to regard ourselves as Oliver Twist. Obviously it was nothing like as bad as that.

Int: You were always hungry, I suspect.

RW: Well we always thought we were. We were always up to a certain amount of mischief. We were weekly boarders and we used to cycle to school, a group of four or five of us would cycle the four miles to Beaminster to school and stay there until Friday afternoon and then cycle all the way back. We thought nothing of it really. We didn't enjoy cycling to school, but we loved the thought of coming back, even though it was all uphill.

Int: I suppose there was no public transport, no buses?

RW: Oh no. An interesting point is, that at one stage during that time, we used to get lifts from a lorry, that used to distribute German prisoners of war to various farms, for work and the German drivers often used to take pity on us and give us a lift, instead of us pushing our cycles up all these hills.

Int: They spoke English?

RW: Some a little, but most of them very little. Most of the farmers thought quite a lot of them as workers and indeed some of them, scattered throughout the county, remained; rather than be repatriated, they remained.

Int: Do you know any of them now?

RW: I don't know any of them now, but I expect, with a bit of thought, I could unearth one or two.

Int: You had land girls on the farms too, I expect.

RW: Yes, I doubt whether they were as useful as the German prisoners of war!

Int: Had the prisoners of war worked on farms before?

RW: They were very varied - I think a lot of them had a very practical element in their work.

Int: Were there evacuees?

RW: Yes, in fact several; we had a girl and then later a boy as evacuees, staying with us. There was quite a number in our village. A lot came, I don't remember the actual year, I suppose it's about 1940, the end of 1940, I should imagine. Most of them didn't stay that long, they found it rather difficult to get acclimatised. They were made very welcome, but most of them didn't stay too long.

Int: Did you have brothers and sisters?

RW: No, I'm an only child.

Int: At school, you were interested in maths and agriculture and subjects that had a practical application. Did you do the equivalent of 'O' levels?

RW: Yes, I remember getting quite a good School Certificate and I was hoping to get a Matriculation, so that I could go to University, or at least an Agricultural College, to obtain either an NDA or a BSc. Unfortunately I didn't quite make that grade, of getting the matriculation. Rather than try again - various things happened - I then did a year's practical work on a local farm, followed by a year at The Farm Institute, it was called, the Dorset College of Agriculture, as it's now called, at Kingston Maurward, in fact it was the second year it was opened.

Int: How long did you stay there?



RW: It's a year, the year course. There again, I was toying with the idea of going to Agricultural College, but there was various considerations, one of them financial, there was no bursary available, so then I thought, well, let's get stuck into something practical, something agricultural, as my ambition then was to farm on my own account of sorts, ideally pig farm. I was more interested in pig farming than anything else, I think partly because one could look at the economics of pig farming in a mathematical way, much easier than some types of farming. This is so, because the reproductive cycle is much quicker and growth rates can be monitored and it's much less weather dependant than other classes of livestock.

Then I did a year and a half at a large dairy farm near Blandford, starting at five o'clock in the morning and finishing between five and six in the evening, milking cows as a helper and doing other work. It was machine run. I could hand milk, but not very well. We're talking about the early '50s, '51 I should imagine.

Then I had to do my National Service. I'd had one or two deferments, it looked as though I'd have to - I quite liked the thought - so I entered the RAF, so I thought, well if they're going to have me for two years, fine. I was always interested in aviation, I'll see if they'll train me as aircrew. I almost got away with it, they almost did, I had a slight mathematical bent anyway, which helped. Then on the final medical examination they said, I don't think you're quite up to it because you might have trouble breathing oxygen, because of some slight deformity in my nose, at high altitudes you might have trouble. In an emergency we'd love to have you. That annoyed me and I dug my heels in. If I'd signed on for a five year period ..... I wasn't going to take the risk of signing on and then not being able to fly and then being stuck. I did the two years and then I came back home to Hooke. I was working for a local farmer at Mapperton and then I started finding a piece of land and some old buildings and started keeping a few pigs of my own. Then I was working then from early in the morning before I'd normally start work at seven and I'd have to look after these animals and be at work at seven and, likewise, do that work in the evening, and I enjoyed it. Then I stopped working for this particular farmer and then working for some agricultural contractors and, there again, working god knows how many hours a week.

Int: What sort of pigs did you keep?

RW: Originally it was the saddleback, the black and white, but they soon became less favoured to the landrace, large white type, because of the colour on the bacon, on the skin.

Int: How many pigs did you have?

RW: Oh then I used to have, say, thirty sows, p'raps, 300 pigs or something like that. Then it used to mean working very early in the morning, starting quite early, then doing a good day's work, then coming home and having some, having a meal and then on again until dark. I had no one to help me; various boys used to come along, just for the fun of it and give a hand, because sometimes we'd do some shooting as well, of various things; but very long, very hard, but I enjoyed it, it was enjoyable, it was profitable.

I was doing this for about three years, four years, until the particular farm, on which I was using these particular buildings, had to be sold and I had to vacate the buildings; So I realised I would have to sell these animals, but I thought, well, only temporarily, I'll give up the pig farm side of it temporarily, but, at that time also, I was doing some contract work, using a caterpillar type tractor, ploughing mostly very steep hillsides. It was during that period when, as opposed to now, there was a drive to produce more food, more food, more food, never mind the quality, let's just have more food. There was grants available to farmers to plough up very steep slopes. Very different pastures - what's regarded as valuable pasture now, by the 'green' people, was regarded as rubbish in those days, by the Ministry, and had to be ploughed up, and give you a grant to do it, and please produce rye grasses and please produce (?) and most of my time I spent doing these very steep hills, which was quite interesting. Then, I ploughed some very steep hillsides and reseeded some very steep hillsides at Broadoak, the other side of Bridport, belonging to Streatfield and Hood, which was a small company then, run by Commander John Streatfield.

Int: This was the end of the 1950s, 1960s. It always looks very dangerous, do the tractors ever tip over?

RW: They can, but what looks very dangerous, is not necessarily so, but, on the other hand, what looks relatively innocent, is dangerous. A short, steep slope, level on the top, level on the bottom, looks quite innocent, but can be very dangerous. I think all of us that were doing that kind of work, we work up to it very gently, but there was a challenge there, but fortunately, I was old enough then to be a little rational - I think it'd be very dangerous if one was much younger.

Commander Streatfield asked me if I would contemplate being a partner in one of the farms. I thought about this for some little while and thought yes, I would, because all the time I'd said, even when I was at agricultural college, I would not be farm manager. It's a horrid job, because you're just sandwiched, you're not independent, you make the last decision, possibly, and yet you have all the brunt and the battle. It's not you're land and you don't necessarily have the last say. However, so that we did. The company had three 50 cow dairies, one at the Axon farm, where I started and two at Denhay. That used to be regarded then as quite an enterprise, three 50 cow hers and we were making cheese. People would come miles to see three 50 cow dairies - how can you manage that, how can you do that on your own? Now of course, 100, 150.

Int: What was the difference? Is it the modern equipment?

RW: Yes, the main difference is the milking parlours, the way we milk them, the ease of milking them, the way we've mechanised the cleaning out and the feeding. I suppose you can also say, computerising the records and computerising some of the feeding. They wear these collars with special transformers on them, marvellous, it's a marvellous system. Like all computerised systems, it can be really fantastic, but when something goes wrong, you just look at each other, dumbfounded, nothing to even kick, you know and you feel so helpless when they go wrong, absolutely helpless! Pig feeding is also computerised and you get the same sort of problem.



Int: When did you start going into pigs?

RW: Indeed, I'd only been at Axon Farm for about six months, when I thought it's time we produced some pigs, so I set up the pig herd at Axon. Axon belongs to the Colfox family and was rented to the company and it's between Symonsbury and Broad Oak. It's 180 acre farm, lovely soil, it's quite high up and there's a beautiful view from that farmhouse. I was single then and after I'd been there about a year, I met and married my wife, Di. I remember the year 1962 or '61 we had that terrible snow, we were virtually isolated, for six weeks. My car didn't leave the farm for six weeks. We were young, we could take the milk down to the road, across several fields, about 20 gallons a time and then come back with two or three bags of cow food, very, very arduous.

I was at Axon for five years. We started with some saddleback crossed landrace and crossed large white and I think, as pig herds went, it was quite a modern herd then. There again quite a lot of people used to come and see this pig herd. That was before you had the very large ones of many hundreds. We had about sixty sows. We started by keeping the 'in pig' sows, those in gestation, running outside and then we soon found we were everlastingly chasing them, rounding them up and they were destroying hedges, getting everywhere, so then we kept them on concrete yards and bedded them well down in (?) straw and it's quite a successful system, rather laborious, but very successful and has been running 'till now. In fact, by the end of this year, that piggery will be shut down for the last time, because it's now obsolete.

Int: When you left that farm?

RW: Then I came to Boarsbarrow. Alexander Hood, as 'e was then, now Viscount, 'e bought Lodgers Court and the Estate from the Le Breton family, and as Lord Hood was a partner in Streatfield & Hood, he wanted to include the land in the company. I moved to Boarsbarrow 23 years ago, '66 I s'pose, something like that and we had a herd of 80 cows, quite a modern herd, quite modern buildings, but no pigs. Within two years, we had two piggeries, with my bent towards pigs and on we went from there. The company, you see, over the years, built up more dairies, therefore more cheese, therefore more whey, the bye-product of cheese making; therefore we produced more sows, to produce more piglets, to produce more bacon pigs, to drink more whey, hopefully to make more profit. It all interlinks. But of course, more pigs, more pig muck, more grass, saving in fertiliser costs and so on.

Int: Were they the same kind of pigs as you were keeping before?

RW: No, they were rather different, they were the hybrid pigs. Pig breeding has followed the poultry breeding to a certain extent, thank goodness, not gone to the extremes. We realised, it was generally realised that, although we could produce some good breeding stock, it was very difficult for us to get anywhere, with any degree of speed in improving the genetic potential. Then there were two or three budding commercial breeding companies set up, because everyone was realising this, that although you kept the female progeny from your best animals, it was very disappointing, you weren't really getting anywhere. You weren't making the progress that you thought you would. Instead of just producing anything, there was an emphasis on quality and quality invariably meant less fat; so we latched onto one of these breeding companies and some of these breeding companies have gone to the wall, but the company that we work with is still going strong and still one of the leaders, after 25 years. One of our herds at Boarsbarrow, we established as, what we term a 'multiplying unit', in other words, instead of getting ordinary breeding stock from this company, we get what's called 'grand parent stock' and from them we breed the females that produce the commercial stock.

Having set up that unit, we had gilts for sale, some of which we sold and gilts of our own breeding then, that we started the second piggery at Boarsbarrow. Then we restocked the piggery at Axon with this type of sow and then, I suppose about five years after that, we then said, well let's start on a green field site, so we could build and be able to expand without constriction and then we started a 200 sow unit at Beaminster. That, of course, breeding and fattening, right through to bacon. I was involved in starting that and then of course we installed a manager there and I phased out while he took control. Unfortunately he's left and there's another manager and various things have happened to me, and so I'm working part-time and I'm more involved with that unit now, than with the others.

Int: The ways of keeping pigs have changed a lot, haven't they? They've more or less gone full circle.

RW: Oh yes. The more you read and the more you listen to experts, as time goes by you're very reluctant to change from things you have first hand knowledge of. It's very difficult. I can remember, at the Dorset College, some years ago, we had pigs outside, not free range, but in huts and runs and we used to drag them along each day and then, of course, there wasn't the same insulation materials and we used to get problems in the winter.

Int: Do they suffer from the cold?

RW: They will suffer, but of course, if you've got a mother with a good litter, the mother, ideally, is no more than perhaps 16C, nice room temperature, a little cool if anything, but youngsters, for the first day or two and for the first week, probably, they (need) anything from about 29C down to about 25C. Now how can you get both? If you've got a good deep pile of straw, perhaps you can, the problem then is, mum tramples on them. If you keep the temperature right for babies, it's too hot for mum. Mum doesn't eat as much food, because she's hot, she doesn't produce as much milk and babies don't grow any more.

Int: How do you solve that?

RW: We go some way towards it. At farrowing time, they are restricted in a crate for about a three week period. They can move backwards and forwards, not a great amount, but they seem quite happy and they have bedding, various beddings, shredded paper, chopped straw and they can lay down. As they lay down, this metal arrangement, is such that it widens, so they have lots of room to lay down and the piglets have plenty of room to suckle and then, alongside, there's a special little creep area, with curtains, where the piglets can dive under and which is kept warm, so they have their little mini climate and you keep the building such that the sow is cool enough to maintain an appetite. Now, if you don't keep the piglets warm enough, they will suffer, they will soon get pneumonia and various other problems. But you see, if you don't provide a nice little warm area, which is quite close to mum, after the piglets have suckled, they would