

8

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

**Interviewer: Pat Hughes
Yondover Farmhouse
Loders**

Date: 28th October 1990

Int: 28th October 1990, Side 2.

We were talking about 1992.

RW: If I may repeat what I read in a farming magazine some years ago, which sums it up quite well; if you imagine quite a large cereal farmer in East Anglia, sat by 'is fire one evening with a problem, scratchin' 'is head and smokin' 'is pipe, no doubt, musing over a problem; and this problem turns out, should 'e buy another combine, or should 'e try an' make his existing one last another year. Now he's talking about an outlay of p'raps £60,000 or more. Now in Greece, another farmer, sat by 'is fire, scratchin' 'is 'ead and smokin' 'is pipe, and 'e's musing over a problem, a problem of similar magnitude to him, an identical problem, and his problem is, should 'e buy another donkey. Of equal magnitude; however can we get things equal£

Int: That puts things in perspective.

Int: I am speaking to Mr Rob Wrixon, and I would like to know a few biographical details. For instance, what was your wife's maiden name, before you were married?

RW: Tuck, which is quite a local name. She came from Symonsbury. We had been married four years before we went to Boarsbarrow, that was when we were at Axon Farm, at Symonsbury, that very, very cold winter, I think it was 1962. It was in February of that very, very cold winter!

Int: How many children have you had?

RW: We have two, two boys, John and Brian. John's done a mechanical apprenticeship, since then he's come to us and he's one of our cheesemakers and Brian was running one of our pig herds. Unfortunately he had breathing problems, mainly to do with the dust in the piggery. One can wear masks and various things like that, quite expensive and sophisticated masks, but even so, the particles are so small that it's almost impossible to exclude them, so he was advised by a specialist that he no longer worked with the pigs, which was a very great disappointment to him and to all of us, because he was doing so well. Now he's helping in other ways round the company, mainly with tractor driving and maintenance work and all sorts of things. I daresay he'll find his slot and hopefully things will fall into place.

Int: Is this called 'farmer's lung'?

RW: Not exactly, but it's a similar problem. I doubt really if it's fully understood, but the effects are very nasty. Although one become associated with the dust for several years, with seemingly no ill effect, suddenly you have problems and it's the toxins associated with it that makes one feel terrible. It's done no lasting damage, fortunately.

Int: Have you got any grandchildren?

RW: Yes, we have two, a boy and a girl, Brian's children, about 2 years and six months.

Int: Farmers are having quite alot of problems at the moment, with subsidies being removed and going into the EEC. Can you tell me how this affects a big company like yours.

RW: Very much so, I'm afraid. To start with, there's terrific uncertainty; with any business one's very reluctant to invest money unless one has some confidence, not just in the product that you're marketing, but in the demand and the price structure. At the moment and indeed, for the last few years, it's been very, very difficult to foresee the market trends and I think now it's becoming more difficult, not just for the Common Market, but with the Common

Market in association with the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. I think we're going to get a lot of products coming to the Common Market from the Eastern block, perhaps not immediately, but as soon as our specialists have helped them sort their agriculture and produce more food, then the only thing they will have to export is food and I think we will be expected to look on them sympathetically. Their standard of living is much lower than ours, therefore their cost of production is lower and I think that will throw our markets into confusion. Even at the moment, there are already signs of that happening in the bacon market.

Int: You're getting a lot of bacon being imported, are you?

RW: Also a lot of hams are being imported, which is playing havoc with the price. The market is in a terrible state at the moment. Some of it is being imported from Holland and some from Poland.

Int: What about the removal of subsidies?

RW: Subsidies don't really affect us, our company as such. As far as I know, there's no subsidy on milk worth speaking of, unless perhaps some surplus, storing surpluses for intervention.

Int: You feel that, even in a big business, because of the lowering of prices of the pigs, the business is affected to a certain extent.

RW: Yes definitely, both in the dairy and, in our case, making cheese. The pig prices are very low now and look as though they will be low for some little while and, to be quite honest, there's virtually no profit in them at that price. One just hopes to hold our own and be as efficient as possible and, perhaps in six months' time we shall return to a profit situation. We've had this before; if we can weather the storm, we're usually alright for a year or two then. But as regards cheese, it's unfortunate at the moment, there is a surplus of cheese - there has been for a while and it looks as though there will be for some months yet - but there are one or two unfortunate aspects, one being that we produce the cheddar cheese, the main cheese and, I like to think we produce very good cheese, more at the top end of the market and we supply our main customer must be, I suppose, Waitrose, the supermarket. We are negotiating with Marks & Spencer; I hope perhaps we shall be able to do a deal with them and that would mean that 60% - 70% of our output would then go to the specialist market. The general market stability is very balanced or imbalanced. An interesting point is that, if you take for instance the French Brie, now that's a very popular cheese, not only in France, but also here. Good luck to them, they make a very good cheese, but you see, they will only make so much Brie; the moment they think they have made sufficient, they will stop, to prevent a surplus and to prevent their price dropping. Then they will stop and say "right, we'll make some cheddar" and they make cheddar; they don't really want it, so they dump it on our market cheaply. They can afford to do that in order to keep the brie price and we suffer because of it.

Int: Can we not export our cheeses to France and do the same thing to them?

RW: France aren't too keen, but the French are more patriotic than we are, I'm sure that's so. I think the general public don't seem to worry about where a product's made.

Int: What about the situation with the smaller farms? Do you think they are going to be more badly hit in the next few years?

RW: I'm not sure - very small farms, possibly, but providing a dairy farm is large enough, say 60 cows or so and is run well, mainly with family labour, especially owner-occupiers, with no rent to pay. I think most of the smaller farmers are too prudent to have too heavy an overdraft, I think, providing they're efficient and keep with the times, they could weather the storm.

Int: Do you think they're going to have to diversify?

RW: Very difficult to be able to diversify. Obviously, if a farmer is too small to be viable, try and think of diversifying in some way, really it's very difficult.

Int: If they have surplus farm buildings, they have been encouraged to build holiday units.

RW: Unfortunately, I think this can spoil the village unless it's done very carefully and it no longer becomes an agricultural village and it just becomes the outskirts of Bridport.

Int: There's really going to be surplus land now, isn't there. Will all the land be able to be used for farming?

RW: It's very, very difficult, one can set aside land, but it still has to be looked after, otherwise it becomes a wilderness and a liability. It wasn't that long ago that I can remember that we were being urged to produce more food, we just never had enough. Of course we're producing more now, but in the world, there's still a net shortage.

Int: So you reckon we're never going to overproduce, because there's always someone who will need it, somewhere in the world.

RW: It's very difficult to know or envisage what will happen, because if we're a member of the Common Market and we're fully integrated, this is a huge area with vast differences and agricultural climate generally, but if one takes this country in isolation, we don't really overproduce. We do not overproduce in dairy products, there are imports; pig meat, we probably produce 75% or 70% of what we need in this country. Beef, I'm not sure if we are self-contained in beef. It's a very political problem.

Int: There's one very interesting part of your life, it's to do with flying. You are very, very keen - when did this first start?

RW: Just over 20 years ago. I've always been interested in flying, but never thought I would fly. I'd hoped to in the RAF but it didn't work that way and, just over 20 years ago I was quite ill. I'd been working very hard and we'd had quite a lot of sickness on the staff and I'd been working very hard, stupidly so, I suppose, and I suddenly had a pneumonia. I had a cold and just stubbornly worked through it and that developed into pneumonia and pleurisy and I was in a pretty bad way for about six weeks and everybody said what a fool I was and that I must have a hobby, so both my wife and I started to learn to glide. In fact, my wife was doing it far better than me. Then someone slipped up and landed the glider in the road and it was pretty well bent and there was long waits and an old glider which we didn't like and then I started to learn to fly the piloted plane. Over the period of a year, I learned to fly and thought, where do we go then, owning an aircraft was out of the question, so then we hired club aircraft occasionally and, for some years we didn't fly that much; and then I joined a group of three other farmers, who shared an aircraft for a period of about four years, which was based at Dunkerswell, in Devon. One by one, they more or less gave up flying, they just left me doing most of the flying. They were sharing some of the fixed costs and after about two years they realised this and said, well you'd better buy it or we'll sell 'er; so then we sold that aircraft and then I was without one for... I did very little flying for about six months or a year and we thought, oh, I must do something, so then we bought this little aircraft from Redhill, about eight years ago.

Int: The little yellow one?

RW: Yes, that's right, it's a nice little two-seater.

Int: It's got a Rolls Royce engine, hasn't it?

RW: Yes, well most of them have, it's a Rolls Royce or a light engine, they're very similar, it's a very small engine and it just comes under the category whereby on operates it on what's called a permit to fly, as opposed to a full certificate of airworthiness. I won't go into the details, but financially it makes a lot of difference. It means that one doesn't have quite the same restrictions and they are very, very simple aircraft, most of the maintenance done by oneself and approved by a local inspector and it really is fun flying, as opposed to the expenses of business and commercial flying.

Int: How did it come about that you made your own runway up on the top of the hill?

RW: Well, we kept this aeroplane at Dunkerswell for a short period and then, of course, the whole object of fun flying is popping up when you've got an hour to spare in the evening and p'raps, at short notice, as farming governed your life anyway, it governed when you could have time off; you couldn't plan anything a long way ahead, or even a few hours ahead; you suddenly found, later in the afternoon, you'd got things up together, you'd got an hour or a couple of hours to spare, let's fly, whereas if one had to drive an hour first to get to the aircraft and then an hour back, it's out of the question. So, this particular aircraft was very suitable for short fields. It can fly reasonably fast, but it can also fly very slowly, which is essential for short airstrip operations and we get a tremendous amount of fun from it. There's quite numerous farm strips around, I mean within half-an-hour's flying, without trying to count them up, there must be about eight, I think, eight or ten farm strips that one could land on. We don't fly far, we go down to the Scillys sometimes, we like it there and various gatherings, and so on.

Int: People come and land on your strip, don't they?

RW: Yes, providing, obviously, they've got a suitable aircraft and providing they're suitably experienced for a short strip.

Int: Mostly you take off over the main road, don't you, over the dip?

RW: We always take off heading into wind, normally we've got a wind with a south westerly element, you see. With a wind northerly, we have to fly the other way; we try not to take off over any houses.

Int: If you hadn't quite got off the ground at the end of the runway, you're off the ground anyway, you can't help it!

RW: Yes, it's very short, it's only three hundred yards, but it's every bit as good as one that's 400 or 450 yards long, with a tall hedge on the end. People liken it to an aircraft carrier, really. It's great fun, great fun.

Int: Does your wife fly as well?

RW: Yes, she quite enjoys flying, I think she enjoys going places as much as flying. There are times I wish she would get a pilot's license, but she doesn't really want to, but she's quite capable of flying it and holding a better course than me and of navigating.

Int: Do your sons fly, as well?

RW: No they don't, they're not really interested, that's just the way of life. I wish my father'd had planes that I could fly, when I was young, but there we are.

Present address: - (Jan. 1992)

14 White Close

Bradpole

TEL: Bridport 421447