

## Transcript of interview with Denys Ryder

Frogmore Mill, April 12<sup>th</sup>  
2013

Transcribed by Michael  
Blakstad



### Westbury House – outbreak of war, 00.00 secs

I was a Londoner – my parents lived in London, in Chelsea – and we were on holiday down at Thurlston, in South Devon, on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1939. It was on that day that Dad invited us into one of the rooms there, and he got out the wireless, it was called a wireless in those days, and we were asked to sit down and listen to an announcement. The announcement was from a man called Neville Chamberlain, and he got up and he said that he had been to see the Chancellor of Germany, and that if Germany had not withdrawn their forces from the Polish territory by 11 o'clock on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, then Germany must consider itself at war with Great Britain. We declared war on Germany, not Germany on us, a point which a lot of people don't remember. That was a great moment for me because at that very time, German forces were in Poland and I can visualise my father turning to my mother and saying "It is about time that Denys went to school with his brothers." School of course was Westbury House, which is at the western end of East Meon parish where we now live, and that is the story of how we came here. I was seven and a half at the time. Now, Westbury, before the First World War was in the hands of the Leroy Lewis family – I don't know how they acquired it – but in 1925, Thomas Whitehead and his sister acquired the house as a private preparatory school for boys. They stayed there until the mid-60s, when they handed the school over to a former pupil of theirs, Sherrard Manners, who I think a lot of us in the village may remember, Sherrard and Jane Manners took on and ran the school until 1977, when it closed, either due to lack of pupils or financial reasons. A school with 70 pupils was probably unprofitable, but that is what happened, and that is where I came, ten days later than the third of September 1939.



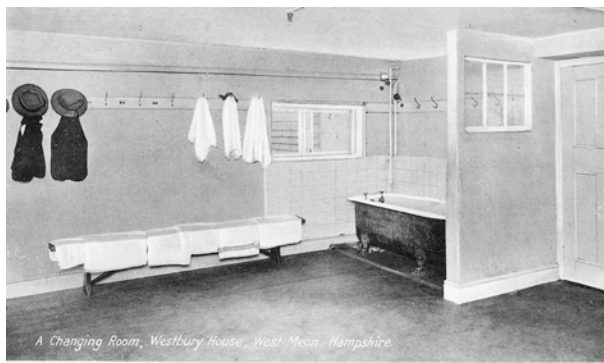
Denys with two brothers

### Meon Valley Railway, 2 mins 46 secs

At that time the school and all its activities centred towards West Meon, because the church was there, the railway was there – a very important railway because it was the Fareham to Alton line, known as the Meon Valley flyer line, and I have been on it many a time, going forward and backwards to school.



*A Classroom, Westbury House, West Meon, Hampshire*



*A Changing Room, Westbury House, West Meon, Hampshire*

Westbury House, converted as a boys' school

### Life at Westbury, 3mins 15 secs

Westbury had a real influence on my life, and my memories of the war years at Westbury between 1939 and August 1945 were of years in which I had a real freedom. We were allowed the ability to roam there, because outside the house was 125 acres in which boys could go on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons,

which were the half days of the week, boys could go and play and bully each other and climb trees and build tree houses and did everything out there until we were called back into the school.

### **Discipline, 4 mins**

Oh well, discipline. You're talking about when I became a naughty boy and Tom Whitehead, the headmaster, decided to beat me. Tom had two places where he beat boys, one was in his study, and he had the cane on the top of a tall cupboard, a drinks cupboard, he had there, and the other was in the squash court – at the top of the house we had a squash court, right next door to his bedroom, and inside there he had a very whippy cane, and he had occasion to beat me once on two occasions within 24 hours – I can't remember why I had been naughty the first time, but obviously the second time I had annoyed him tremendously doing something so he beat me – I got three strokes first time, which didn't really hurt me so much, but then I got three strokes the second time when he beat me, and that really hurt because it hit the same place

### **Sister Edith 5 mins 23secs**

Now Edith was a very interesting character. She was a spinster, very much so. She was in charge of all feeding arrangements, as well as teaching us how to play the piano. She was what one might call a bit of a battle axe, she had a well-puckered upper lip – it made her look like a concentration frau, if one can put it that way. But having said that, when I left school, I became very good friends with Tom Whitehead and his sister Edith and we remained so until his death in the early 1960s and hers in the late 1980s, so I had a long association with Tom and Edith Whitehead.

### **The War in Evidence 6 mins 2 secs**

I think there must be four occasions on which war affected us. One very much affected me, because I can remember a day on which a German fighter plane was being chased, I think by a Hurricane, and they came across the roof at tree-top level. And as it passed over the school, the Hurricane took a shot at the German fighter which was chasing, and the canon shells, they all fell out of the sky and fell right down in between us – I was on the lawn there with some friends, and these shells fell between us, and they were quite large shells, 100 millimetres or four inches long, the casings, and if they had fallen on our heads, you wouldn't be interviewing me now.

The second incident was when friendly fighters, from Goodwood and Tangmere, caught a whole group of enemy bombers somewhere over the East Meon/West Meon area, we believe it was over Seven Copse, Seven Copse is where the sewage works is now – it was in the form of a 7, a very clear 7 of woodland - they were probably doing a loop, bypassing Goodwood and Tangmere air fields on the Sussex coast, and decided to come down on the rear of Portsmouth, and drop their bombs and away they went. And of course the fighters caught them, and you get one of them caught by fighters with a lot of bombs on board, and the fighters caught them, and the next thing we knew was that Hen Wood was alight – Hen Wood is now Westbury Forest. Westbury Forest at the moment has big trees, 50 feet high, but at that time it was a series of small little hummocks,

anthills, it was downland, ungrazed downland, there were a few little bushes and trees in there, and they dropped these incendiary bombs, and the whole area went alight that night and it burned for two or three days after that. Then we were allowed out of the school, on one of our afternoons, and the Headmaster said 'No, not to go into Hen Wood'. Of course, boys are boys and you know what exactly happened, we all went in there. There was one lad, I can't remember what his name was now, what we were doing was to find these fin shells, of the incendiaries, they were small things, about six inches, and we were trying to pick these up as souvenirs, and one of these boys picked up a complete bomb, unexploded, and started throwing it around.

The third time was when we believe the German bombers were trying to cut the Fareham to Alton line. There were lots of bridges along that line, and lots of tunnels as well, and the most important part of that line was the viaduct – it has now been taken down, but you can see the remnants of it there, just before you get to Doctor's Lane, going into West Meon from East Meon. They came one night and they used land mines, the only thing they could use. The nearest they came to it was on John and Henry Marks' farm, about two miles away, they weren't very good with their navigation, and they dropped their land mine, and when these land mines went off, it was really a tremendous noise – we heard it in Westbury – and the whole hillside was very visible to everybody, from the East Meon/West Meon road, right up till the 1960s, when I think the Marks decided to fill it in.

I suppose the last of the interesting events which happened, near the end of the War – I think it was a week or ten days before D-Day, when we heard the noise of vehicles entering Westbury Drive, and entering the gates to the park, close to the house. This was the Canadians. At that time there were armed forces of all nations, situated right along the roads, right from London, along all the roads until the coast, where they were going to embark. The Canadians came and parked in Westbury Park. They stayed there a few days, we were told not to go near them, I don't quite know why, of course I do know now why, and those people moved off. What is interesting to note is that a year or so ago from today, we took down the old cricket pavilion on the Recreation Ground in East Meon, we were taking down part of the old packing cases of the Canadian Army, and I have souvenirs of it here, and they were old packing cases that were used to make the old cricket pavilion in East Meon.

### **Storage of records. 11mins 47 secs.**

Westbury is a very extraordinary house, it is only two rooms wide although it is a large, long and high building, three storeys high – four if you include the basement, and it was in the basement, where we had our changing rooms and the larder and all the other things down there, there was a great big dark, empty room with no windows in it at all, and inside there was stored a whole lot of records. Now we boys, when we heard they were records, thought they were 78 playing records, and of course they weren't, they were worthwhile records come down from London – they went all over the country of course, the records, in case of bombing – and we sat down there whenever there was an air raid, and we sat down there until the air raid finished.

### **Starting a farm 12mins 53 secs**

I always wanted to be a farmer, ever since the war years. In 1942 we used to take a holiday down in North Molton in North Devon right on the edge of Exmoor, we stayed with my granny who had a house down there down there, and when there wasn't enough room we used to stay with a lady called Mrs Crang (?). Now Mrs Crang had the grocery shop and also the baker, and the baker was a man called Dennis (whereas my name is Denys), and Dennis would take me up onto the moor to the very distant farms, delivering bakeries and groceries and stuff, and in that time we passed masses and masses of sheep and I actually loved that. Mrs Crang, who let us a house there, had this business, and at the back of the house she had some chickens in some old huts, so I had this combination, at the age of 10 and 11, of chickens and sheep, two things which ended up being very much part of my future life.

### **Farming at school 14 mins 15 secs**

I had a geography master called David Keith, and David started a farm at Charterhouse School, where I was, and I was one of the ones who would attend very often when we had to do sport or some other activity, and we had some cows there, and some chickens, and we had a tractor which we used to plough the ground with, and David Keith remained a great friend of mine until he died two years ago at the age of 94. When I left my secondary school, or public school, I went and farmed for a short period up at Stowe-on-the-Wold with my father's cousin, so he would be my second cousin, a man called Patrick Ryder, and Patrick put me onto the job of moving a lot of chicken houses with a cart horse and a chain, which I never did master, and he made me pick up potatoes in the field, and I was a very tall gangly child, and he would say, "Come on Denys, get down and pick the potatoes", and I would start picking potatoes walking down hill, and of course, if I had started at the bottom of the hill, walking up to pick the potatoes it would have been much easier to pick it up. And I had only been with him three months when I got a call from my friend David Keith, who said he was going to farm down in Devon, outside Torquay, and would I like to join him – and that was something I could not refuse. So then I went down to Devon, where I stayed fifteen months, milking cows fourteen times a week, if you do that for fifteen months you're a pretty good fellow. We were in the age of machine milking, we were one of the first machine milkers down there, and we were one of the first to introduce a Ferguson tractor, now the Fergie tractor is the most important tractor in the life of the farming community, it was the first one which had hydraulic arms on the back and all the implements were carried on the back. The Fergie system is something I could talk to you for hours about. And we made silage – now silage was something Devon farmers never made – but anyhow, that is another story.

### **Cirencester 17 mins 27 secs**

After fifteen months of milking cows my father rang me up and said, "I've got a place at Cirencester for you, would you like to go?" So I said, I'd love to – I am not an academic person by any means, but I thought it would be a good thing to do, and would I fit in, and of course I did fit in, I made many friends there, and enjoyed it to this day.

### Westbury farm 17mins 51 secs

Tom Whitehead rang me up when I was just finishing at Cirencester, and said to me "Would you like to come and farm at Westbury?" Well, I had no idea, I had no money in my pocket, my father was not a farmer, he was a retired diplomat, so I said, "Yes I'd love to ..." I rang my father up and said I was going to farm the farm at Westbury and he said "On, interesting, what are you going to use for money?" And of course I hadn't thought about that ... My father was a most generous and honourable man, and he provided enough cash to be able to buy stock and tractor, and I ploughed up 30 acres of the park, which had never been done before, and it was old, downland grass. I got five pounds an acre from the Agricultural Ministry – 30 acres, £150, a tremendous amount of money. I was the tenant farmer, and we ran sheep, pigs chickens, and I grew barley there. I was living at Westbury House, but of course I was beginning to want a bit more than (being among) the young boys there at the school, to be companions, and I was starting to go to Petersfield, and got embroiled with the Winton Players, which was a group of people there who had just started up acting, in Petersfield Town Hall, and I joined them. I needed something rather better to live in rather than Westbury where I was living, which would give me more space, as an adult – I was 22 then – and I met Kurt Walther with his wife Mary. Kurt was an ex-prisoner of war, he had met Mary up at Blueberry, near Didcot, at a camp there, and he came here to live up at Coombe Cross farm as the cowman for Cecil Kille. Mary left him after a bit, I think life in the country was a bit too quiet for her. He carried on living there himself, he was milking the cows up at Coombe Cross.

### Enter Brian Blacker 20 mins 51 secs

I had also met Brian Blacker. Now Brian Blacker, a very interesting character, he was the grandson of Lady Peel. Now Lady Peel the owners – more than the owners, they had built Leydene House which was taken over at the beginning of the war by the navy, it was turned into a naval station. Brian Blacker was living at No 1 Garston Cottages whilst Garston Farmhouse, he was having built. Why I moved from Kurt down to the village at Garston was, Mary left, and two bachelors living on their own wasn't quite the right thing, cooking for themselves. So Brian said, "Why don't you put a caravan up here in the garden of No 1 Garston Cottages?" This is where Adrian Pelly, another long-time member of our community, came to build his house, or came to live, and where he parked his car was where my caravan was. Brian and Jill his wife, who were lifelong friends, and I shall tell you in a moment about that, were very kind to me, they let me have an electric lead out of their house, so that I had electricity out of the caravan. The sanitary arrangements were fairly basic, an Elsan which I emptied myself. That was the start of a very long-term friendship with Brian Blacker, who still is to this day – he's now in his mid-80s.

David and Brian go hand in hand, literally, because they were identical twins – you could not tell them apart. I could, very much so, because they had different mannerisms, David one day was in Petersfield, it was market day, it was a Saturday, market day was Saturday in Petersfield, and he said to me "What are you doing now?" and I said I was farming at Westbury but I was looking really

for another job. A couple of seconds later he said "Would you like to look after my mother's farm, at Steep Marsh?" If you told me today, that someone would ask you to come on a farm and run it, without an interview, hardly knowing you, you wouldn't believe it, but that is exactly how it was. It was trust, trust which went through for 45 years, before David died, in 200, and trust with Brian, his brother, today because we set up a partnership at Steep Marsh. I went over there to run the farm, left the caravan, sold it, and went and lived in a place called The Gate House, a flat, at Steep Marsh Coldhayes Estate, and there I was manager of the farm and earned £13 a week, that was a lot of money in those days £13 a week. Then David decided to set up a chicken unit, a large farming chicken unit, a broiler house – he actually put up two, they were 10,000 square feet each, and they were the very first broiler houses put up in the UK. It was because David and I had gone down to a meeting at Chippenham, in Wiltshire, and we met a very interesting man called Geoffrey Sykes, he was a doyen of the chicken industry at the end, and he had just come back from America, and he had brought over the broiler industry with him, and we were one of the first ones to start it, at Steep Marsh. 1957 that started, and I managed that as well and David gave me an extra £3 a week, so I got £16 a week for my trouble, which was a lot of money in those days when you consider that my first job, with Patrick Ryder up in the Cotswolds, was £5 .53pence, it was £5. 10s 6d, £5 53pence today, and that was a lot of money – I could feed myself, I had a bicycle, I used to smoke in those days, I was a tremendous smoker, and I got £5 53pence. I was then an employee. It was just after that, in 1958, I started a chicken business, an egg production business, with David and Brian. We all put in £1,000 in the business, and the bank lent us £3000, we had £6,000, and £6,000 bought us a chicken house, two chicken houses, with 3,000 birds in each, and the birds themselves, and we started a business, egg production, at the same time that we were running the broiler business.

### **Growing the egg business 26mins 38 secs**

There were small little packing stations all around the country who would sell their eggs locally, to village stores. We joined a group called Sunrise Eggs, at Emsworth, and all our eggs went there. But as time went on, supermarkets, which were not very big in the 1950s, this was '59, '60, they had only just started. They started to expand their business, and we needed to get in on this. They were a very good outlet and they were paying very well at that stage. It was probably early '60s that our egg-packing station at Emsworth amalgamated with a lot of egg-packing stations around the company, and I became a director of Thames Valley Eggs, which was the mother company at Didcot in Oxfordshire, and eventually they moved when they amalgamated with Yorkshire Egg Producers to become the largest in Europe, it was at that stage, and we were producing for the supermarkets; that was probably in the early 1970s that that happened. I was a very ambitious man in my day, and somewhere in my mind I had set myself the idea of 100,000 laying birds. Now when we bought our first house, with 6,000 laying birds we were big, we were enormous! We were the big producers in the area. Well, we started with six, we added another eighteen which made 24, and then we added another 3,000 which made twenty seven, and then we added 15, and a 15, I can't tell you, it really went on, and I

eventually added up, by the time I sold my business, which comes later on, to 120,000 laying birds. I achieved my 100,000.

If any opportunity came up at that stage, I would grab it. There were two people, one was an elderly man at Grateley, near Andover, he had some chicken houses which he had put up, but he wasn't doing very well, and he wanted to know what he could do with it, so we started a business over there, we took over his buildings basically, in conjunction with him, and we had a broiler/breeder unit. Now broiler/breeders is producing the chicks for the broiler industry. We had the mums and dads and did all the mating and that sort of stuff, and we had 20,000 over there. And at the same time there was another farmer who I got to know because he had some empty houses and didn't know what to do with them. He had 12,00 birds and we went and put 20,000 laying birds in there. We had units at Baughurst, near Aldermaston, all these had to be supplied with young pullets, and during the 1960s and into the '70s, we had started some rearing houses, where young birds from 0 to 20 weeks of age were kept until they went into the laying cages. When I got fed up with being at Steep Marsh I used to dash over to Andover to see the unit there to see that everything was all right, then I would dash over to Baughurst to see what was doing there, then I'd come back here and sit down, in a chair, at the end of the day, absolutely fagged out.

I've always said there were three sets of people who were important to me. Firstly, my staff, I had 13 staff here, and various staff around at the other places, they were absolutely key to the whole team. The second one, of course, is the bank manager, most important, keep in with the bank manager! And thirdly was the vet. Olaf Swarbrick, who came from near Chichester. He became our vet and was our vet for all the time I was in the business. The first time I met him was rather a sad occasion. It was right in my first early days, the 1960s, he rang me up and said there was a particularly virulent strain of fowl pest which had started in East Anglia, and which was moving our way, because there was an easterly wind at that stage - it is a wind-borne disease, fowl pest. I'm afraid there was nothing we could do - it's a deadly disease - and one afternoon we got it. At that stage we had 18,000 laying birds and some 6,000 growing pullets, and they all had to be buried that one afternoon. They were gassed, we went in and took them all out and put them in a pit in the ground I could take you to the place, and show you where their burial ground is. My eldest son Simon, this was 1963, 64, he had just been born; he came out with a terrible rash on him, we always said he had fowl pest. He's now a man, he's just over 50.

### **Frogmore Mill 32 mins 46 secs**

I was sitting over at Steep Marsh, we were going on quite happily over there, we had our ups and downs, the poultry industry had always fluctuated like this, ups and downs, more people came in, more production, down, the price of eggs went down, then they went up, and I was sitting in my office one day when the phone rang. It happened to be Richard Burley. Now Richard Burley lived at Hockley Cottage in East Meon, he was Chairman of the Parish Council for quite a few years, and he was a solicitor in Petersfield, Burely and Geech. Unfortunately, as we well know, Hockley and another two cottages next to it burned down, that's another story. Very sad thing. Richard rang me up and as far as I can remember,



The conversation went like this. Richard: "You know you said you would like to come and live in East Meon one day?" So I said "Yes." "Well, there's a farmhouse coming on the market, in Frogmore. Are you interested?" I paused for a moment and then I said "Yes." I then said to him "Can we go and see it tomorrow, Saturday?" He said "I'll find out and ring you back." Twenty minutes later, back comes Richard on the phone. He says "Mrs Morgan" who lived there, with her 50-year-old son – Mrs Morgan, I would put her in her 80s – "she says, yes, come at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon and she'll show you the place." So I dressed the children up in the roughest clothes possible because I wanted her to see that I had no money – and in fact, I *had* no money, I had £1,000 in my bank at that time. I was earning a little bit more than my original £15.00. Anyhow, during that afternoon when we came over to Frogmore, where I am doing this interview with you now, I asked her the question, how much did she want for the property. "Oh" she said "I don't know, but I've got an agent coming over on Monday morning to tell me what it's about, how much it is." So I said "Will you ask him to let me know how much you want for it?" Well, Rosemary and I discussed it and we both agreed that the house had tremendous potential. It had friezes round the wall, 1920s, 1930s friezes, the paper was falling off the walls, but anyhow, we said there was plenty of potential there. We didn't even think about the price at that time and whether we could afford it. We continued to think about it on Sunday and on Sunday evening we decided that if we could find the money we would have a go at buying it. It was the first house we had ever looked at. On Monday morning I waited in, for this phone call, and by 10.30 I couldn't wait any longer, because I had in my mind agreed that we were going to buy it. I rang up Whiteheads, who were the estate agents in Petersfield, and asked if I could speak to the man concerned. I said "Can you tell me how much Mrs Morgan wants for Mill House?" He said, "I don't know. I haven't been able to get out to the house yet, but it's going to be either £9,000 or £9,250." Well, that was a lot of money in those days for East Meon. Houses in East Meon were going for £4,000, £5,000. £9250 was a lot of money, and certainly a lot of money for me. I don't really remember how long it took me to make up my mind, but without consulting Rosemary, I said "I will be into your office in twenty minutes, with a cheque for £925 – i.e. a deposit of 10%. And that was the end of the conversation and, as they say, end of story. I had 375 left in my bank.

### Restoring Frogmore Mill 37 mins 33secs





The mill before and during restoration, Denys sawing, below left.

The Mill house needed repairing. It needed new staircases, it needed new windows, and various things like that. It needed new heating and new waterworks – it was a very old-fashioned house. We engaged a firm in Petersfield – I can't remember their name – but one of the workmen in the firm was a fellow called Vernon Platt. I knew his father because he was a woodman for Brian Blacker over at Coldhayes Estate. We got to know him – at that stage he was 17 or 18. I actually remember him at the age of 11, I was in the swimming pool at Coldhayes and this little boy jumped in, aged 10 or 11. So I'd known him since then and I tell you now, he is still a very great friend of mine, he is 66, so I've known him for 55 years, something like that. He was one of the workmen there and I got talking to him, and he seemed to be an interesting, clever little fellow, and I said to him, would he like to come and help me knock the Mill down. The Mill consisted of a building which was in a very bad state of repair, the mill wheel was there, part of it had been sawn up for munitions during the war, for the metal, but the woodwork was there, the roof over the top was corrugated iron, and when we took that off there were boards, you could put your hand through them, the inch boards, they were so rotten. It was in a very bad state.

At that time I had three kids I was 32, Rosemary was 27, Simon was 8, Caroline was 6 or something like that, Oliver was 2, and having those running around a rather dilapidated mill was not a very good idea, so I said to Vernon "Would you like to come and knock it down?" Before doing so, I took pictures of the Mill, and that was a very, very worthwhile thing to do, because it was good that I had those pictures when I came to rebuild the Mill in 2005.

Vernon and I knocked it down, piece by piece, very heavy baulks of wood there, that was all there was left. Vernon had the strength and the knowledge, and the tackle, to get these heavy bits of timber out. I've got pictures of bits of the mill wheel, this and that, bits of the workings. Once the mill had been reduced in height, down to first floor level, we had to put a false front on because we had opened up the major part of the mill without any cover, half the mill was shown to the four winds, and we had to put a wooden front in there. But there was a big gap, and we needed an RSJ, rolled steel joist, and it runs 22ft from one side of the building to the other, and I went into Petersfield, and I found a 24ft RSJ sitting in a breaker's yard there, and I said "How much do you want for that?" And he said "A fiver." So I gave him a fiver, and that is still in the building today.

## Selling the Poultry business 41 mins 26 secs

Keeping laying birds in cages was beginning to be frowned upon as a method of producing food. Up to that stage they just wanted as many eggs as possible and didn't mind how they were produced. At the start of 1977, the British housewife had battery eggs, and all their shells were white. Suddenly, I never did find out, the housewife didn't want white eggs, they wanted brown eggs. It was because someone, somewhere down the line, had produced a few brown eggs, and they had come in from America. The breed that came in was called 'The Warren' and it is still the dominant breed today, forty years later. And they wanted eggs that were free-range. Suprisingly enough, free-range started in the UK in the parish of East Meon where you and I are. Up on the A272 at Bordean, there was a family up there they had some houses, they had chickens in these houses, and they let them out during the day and they became free-range. It was going back to pre-War, pre-1939, when all eggs were free-range, they were all produced by the farmer's wife. They had disappeared, because the battery production was so much cheaper – and you hadn't got the problem of foxes, you hadn't got the problem of predators, of birds eating the food and all that. Egg prices slowly went downhill. Eventually, having got up to 120,000 laying birds, one day, one morning, I woke up and said "I am not enjoying this". This was in 1983. We were living in Frogmore, Mill House, very happily, boys were growing up, gone to school and all the rest of it. I was going over to Steep Marsh every day to run the business. And I suddenly said "I am not enjoying this." And as is often the case, if the boss isn't enjoying it then the men aren't enjoying it, you're not motivating them properly. So I let it be known around the poultry industry that I was interested in selling. And very great friends of ours, with whom we had done business for some time, on the production of food and the transportation of food, from the various mills to our poultry, said to me "I hear you're wanting to sell the business." And I said "Yes, we are." So they came round and had a look at what we did. By that time the Grately, Andover, and the Baughurst businesses we had given up, so we were just here at Steep Marsh. I didn't mention earlier on, we had started a rearing business at Buriton, which is now the Buriton Business Park. If you go down the Petersfield road, the Buriton Business Park, that is something that I built myself. It has now been turned into light industrial buildings.

## Negotiations 45.05

Was it still the Blackers and you? Or just you?

We were still going. Rosemary and I had 68%, Brian and David had the remainder and our accountant at that stage had 5%. Those were the members of the partnership. David said to me, David Humphrey said to me, who I was speaking to, "We'd like to come along and have a look at it". And a few days later another friend, a Jewish friend, from up in the Reading area, came down and said "I hear you want to sell your business ...". That, of course, is always good news because one person, there is difficulty as to what sort of price you set. Two is easier because you can set one off against the other. Eventually, the price got up to what was thought to be acceptable by some of us. I say 'some of us' because Brian and David and our accountant partner, three of them, and Rosemary and I had the majority shares, the two of us, and we were a partnership – we were not a company, we were always a partnership. In partnerships it is always done by

number of votes of individual partners. The price got up to a certain price, and three of them said "Yes, we'll accept it", and Rosemary and I didn't like the price, we thought we could do better. So we were outvoted. It was the one and only time I really felt bad against my partners. I walked out of the room and thought for a moment, then came back in the room and I said "OK, if you're prepared to sell, will you sell it to me for £1 more than that?" And of course they couldn't refuse. And I went on, and sold it for £100,000 more, two weeks later, to the Humphrey brothers, than the price they had agreed. So it was quite a nice little deal for me. Two days before the sale to the Humphrey brothers, at the agreed price - there were two brothers, David and Peter - they came to me and said 'what are you doing with those old chicken house buildings?' They were the original ones we had put up in the 1960s. I said "They're redundant". He said "They're no good to me. And what are you doing with that building there?" I said "That's my offices." That was where we had the egg packing station. And he said "That's no good, will you take it out of the sale?" I said that was ok, and I gave them a price, yes, and he said "We'll reduce the price by that amount." I'll tell you what the figure was - it was £14,000. I eventually sold that for something like 500 times more than that. Because we turned those old defunct buildings into light industrial buildings, and it is still a light industrial site today. And the offices I still retain and I have in there a tenant who is called London Inkjet, and they sell printer's ink to 39 countries around the world. A small little business.

### Sheep. 48 mins 53 secs

Sheep - one of the things I told you originally was one of the things I loved when I was a young boy. I always wanted to do a bit of 'plough the fields and scatter' type of farming. And I met a fellow called Duncan Branch, and we set up a business of running sheep on the South Downs over the winter, a business known as 'sheep keep'. We'd get sheep from the North of England and put them on the land. If you look round this area today, you'll see sheep out on fields where you wouldn't normally see them, they're out on what's known as 'sheep on keep'. We had a thousand of these. Soon after that, there was a move in the English farming market to start producing a leaner sheep. That meant getting continental breeds, because the continental breeds were leaner, not fat. The English breeds were very fat on their back, they produced a lot of fat. By crossing the French and Dutch breeds with the English breeds, you could get a really good breed which the market at that stage was demanding.

When you said you had a thousand, on whose land?

Anywhere, anyone who wanted sheep on their land. We kept on moving it along, And that went on for a couple or three years. And then, as I say, we met some friends and we talked about the quality of the sheep, and I was introduced to a breed called the Bleu du Maine - from Maine, Bleu du Maine, Mayenne, which is northern France. We went across and bought some, we paid £250, which was a lot of money for a sheep in those days, it was a pure-bred sheep, and we brought them across to the UK here, and sale rings were set up in the southern part of the country, and lots of people would come and buy sheep from us, as we produced them, they were a prolific breed, we would sell them on, and some people would pay £700 for which we'd paid £300 ourselves, which was not at all bad. One of

the best prices for one of these sheep was a ram sold at the Royal Show ground for £7,000, which was utterly ridiculous. It was one of these bubbles in life. Things began to not go so well, more and more sheep were produced, and the market collapsed. Thank God I got out at that time, but there were plenty of people had put their pensions, put a lot of money, into this and had gone down.

Over what period did you trade sheep?

1985 to about 1995

And when you got out, you retired?

Basically, the end of the farming. I'm now a light industrial site owner.



### Rory Bremner 52 mins

Rory Bremner. Yes. Well, Rory came to live in the village, and we got to know him. He supported the cricket club and he lived at a house called Heycroft, a lovely old house which had been done up a few years before by one of the well-known people in the village, Freddie Standfield. One day, because I had spent three or four years going up to London to a charity which was run by my old school, called Charterhouse. We wanted to put on an event, at the Charterhouse school, in the Ben Travers theatre, a new theatre. I went up to Rory and I said "Would you be prepared to come and do a show for us at Charterhouse? At the Ben Travers theatre. That is, if I can persuade the headmaster, the then headmaster, to allow us to use it. Rory quickly agreed that I arrange to meet the headmaster, and in slight trepidation I went along to see the headmaster, in his study, at Charterhouse, and I thought - well, no beating about the bush, I'd come straight out with it - I thought he'd most likely refuse - because of Rory's reputation for slightly smutty jokes. These were his words: "Rory Bremner?" standing in front of his fireplace, "I used to take him when he was a boy at Marlborough, out in my car to concerts he was putting on in those days. He was in my house. I would be delighted to give permission." And that is a true story.

## Hells Bells Ball 54 mins 17 secs

Tell me about two of the things you initiated in the village. The first is the Hells Bells Ball.

Hells Bells Ball, yes. Well, there were friends of ours in the village, John and Hazel Rendle. John has unfortunately died but Hazel is still with us. They lived down at Drayton Mill, to the west of East Meon. John was retired and a staunch supporter of the church, in fact he was the treasurer. The Parochial Church Council had decided that the eight bells in the tower needed re-tuning. He had decided to have them taken down, taken out, and it was going to cost about £50,000. Quite a job for a little village like this. So John said to me one day, could I arrange an event? And I thought, what can we do? And I suddenly remembered an event that Bill Tyrwhitt Drake, another of the major landowners in this parish, at Bereleigh, had put on many years ago called 'Midnight Madness'. It entailed a large marquee and a lot of small marquees around it, and people used to have picnics in there and enjoyed themselves. Where the big tent was, there was a circus and things like this. It was a good evening's entertainment, and Bill made a lot of money on this. At that time the vicar was Peter Wadsworth. I went to see him and told him what we were proposing – to have an event put on, and to call it Hells Bells Ball. I asked him if he had any objection? Well, he was a man who could take a joke. In fairness to Bill Tyrwhitt Drake, who had suggested the name, Peter said "Of course we can have it." It turned out it was a great success.

The idea was that we would put it on, in Mascombe Bottom, one of the valleys up here, a beautiful natural valley, a shooting valley, and we set up a large tent and a whole lot of smaller tents, and we had a lot of events laid on, as well as a barbecue, which was provided by a firm in Stockbridge. 1200 people came to it.

I was talking to John Rendle about it one day, and I said to him "How are we going to do all the logistics?" And suddenly it hit me, Leydene! HMS Mercury – up on the hill, it was a naval station and it had a lot of facilities. I went up and saw, with John, the Captain there, Captain John Morrow, who eventually became the last captain of the Queen's yacht. He agreed to provide a lot of logistics, people and tents and that sort of stuff and we decided we were going to share the profits 50/50 between Hells Bells – the refurbishment of the bells fund – and the King George V fund for sailors. This is what actually did happen in the end.

I remember the weather just holding! It was very iffy ....

Yes, It was the evening of Midsummer's Day, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1990. 1200 people bought tickets and we had this marquee for 1,000 people where they could dance. We had security, because people could get in without paying if they wanted to, and my friend Duncan Branch, who I had done the sheep with, he had a lot of New Zealand sheep-shearers and I employed those to act as chuckers-outers. But before they did that, one of the events was, we had twenty New Zealanders and English sheep shearers, shearing sheep by floodlights, because by that time it was dark. I can always remember Mike Atkinson, whom we both know as one of the members of our community, sheep shearing with a *hand* shears, all the others were doing it with mechanical shears. We had a marching band provided by the navy, we had sky divers dropping in out of the dark, and a

thirty minute fireworks display provided by the navy, all free of charge. Out of this, although we had to share it, we actually made £5,000. It was one-tenth of the money for bringing the bells down.

### **Hooves, Heels and Wheels 1hr 00min 45 secs**

A few years later, I received a phone call from Alan Bulmer. Alan and Rosanne Bulmer lived up at Coombe; they were very keen on horses and they used to run horse trials up at Bereleigh, which is one of the estates here. Alan asked me if I would like to help organise an event for horses and walkers, based at Bereleigh. Well, we met for a pub lunch, and had this rather nice lunch, and I said to him, "why aren't we thinking of cycles?" That's how the name Hooves Heels and Wheels came about, it wasn't my name, it was Sarah Copley who thought that up. "Denys, you're always going on about your Hooves, Heels and Wheels." I thought, "That's a name, we're going to keep it."

It was a five mile course that we set up, for all the participants, and we had to have marking flags to keep people apart, because we couldn't have horses and walkers doing the same course in the same area, it was a bit dangerous. So I made up hundreds or thousands of green, blue and yellow signs, one for horses, one for walkers, and I made up a lot of other signs, and we used them for ten years, that event went on for ten years. It was a different course each year, sometimes we went into the next door village of Langrish, Ramsdean, sometimes we held it up at Bereleigh, up on an area there, we tried to vary it all the time.

And the money went to?

Well, it went to a lot of local charities, over the ten years, and we made £25,000 over the ten years., in spite of losing £6,000 in the first year, because that had to cover the cost of all the materials. That's basically what it was, it was a great fun event and people would come from a long way around, from Basingstoke, Winchester and all around. Mainly walkers, a lot of horses, and quite a few cyclists. But it was a great fun event. But eventually I gave it up, because noone wanted to take it off my hands.

You and Rosemary are, as far as I know, the only married couple who have been recognised by the village for your contributions to the community. Tell me a little bit about Rosemary and her part in all this.

Was I a good husband or was I not a good husband. I have gone through life very clear as to what I wanted to achieve. Rosemary has told me on many an occasion that I am very single-minded, and with that I must agree. It must have been very difficult for her to live with me, since I tended to think that what I was doing for the family was important. It was my responsibility to earn the money and keep the bank manager at bay. Rosemary's role was really much more important than mine. I've never underestimated Rosemary's contribution to bringing up our family, both as a mother and a wonderful cook, and as a housewife – oh, I mustn't call her a housewife, she's a 'household engineer'. As a family, we have been so lucky, having enough money to do sufficient things in life. I've always wanted to do that by providing education for my children, and she agrees 100% with that. Like any teamwork, there's only one room for one boss, and Rosemary has

graciously accepted that I am in that position. But she's been absolutely marvellous. She has spent 20 years as a parish councillor. This afternoon we shall be going out delivering Meon Matters, seven miles around the area, dropping these books off, and she does it without any qualms at all. I can only say that you should be interviewing her, Michael.

I will do, if she will let me. OK, Denys, that's wonderful.

**Ends 1hr 05mins 13 secs**