

## Transcript for Mervyn Cator

When I first left school I started work down at Fen Street right opposite the fen. We had one Suffolk and her name was Faithful and I can tell you where she was born. Whenever the horse was born that was her first name so she was called Hinderclay Faithful. So she was born at Hinderclay. She was still at work and I used to do harrowing and rolling, things like that, and a small drill, sometimes drilling cattle beet because – that's another story.

During the war, when Dad grew cattle beet down on Hall Farm he had a very, very good employer, the best in the area – Mr Bedwell. And he said to Dad, 'how can we help the men that work on the farm?' Dad said, 'I'll think about it.' And they brought parsnips in and things like that that would grow in winter, turnips, and they sprinkled it in with the cattle beet seed and when the men chopped out, they left half and half, then that was clamped and in February when they were very short of food for the animals they opened the clamp and the men all filled their dinner bags with swede and turnips and parsnips; and Mr Bedwell was very good to his workers and he helped them through the war by doing it. I thought there was a brilliant idea, a means of feeding the animals and the men, and the men made a very good job of the clamp because they knew that their dinner was in there, so we had a lot of turnips. And we ate a lot of turnips during the war because they were coming out after February. After the hay ran out, then you have to start drawing down what little you can find the animals which was barley straw next, then you would open the clamp, and if you opened the clamp then I ... that was one of my jobs by then I used to do down.

I'll tell you another time about Barney. Barney was a tiny little horse, she was a Suffolk, she was only 14 hands, she was tiny and she'd only got one lung. So she was Mervin's horse because Mervin was 14 by then, so me and her was about equal and Dad used to leave her harnessed and I used to cart the sugar beet crops out to the cowman on a Saturday morning. And she was my little horse and she'd do a little bit of harrowing; that was what proves that Mr Bedwell was a very kind man. This baby was born with one lung, always had its tongue hanging out, had difficulty breathing but he said, 'No, we won't put her down. You'll find enough jobs on this farm to keep her alive.' And that worked for its entire life. Little jobs, nothing heavy, but she was ideal for a bull, but that's an interesting story. He was a very kind man and you'd be surprised how much help that kind of thing could do. Everyone filled their dinner bag, the cowmen, and there were 30 men on that farm then – that's a lot. There were families to feed and he really was a good employer.

### **And then you said, Mervin, that all the horses had gone by the time you were 15?**

Yes, by the time I was 15, all the horses had gone down at Hall Farm. So the fact that I wanted to become a horseman like my dad, they all disappeared, so I took a tractor standard ??????? down at Fen Street and that's where I started on a mixed farm, which meant I had to milk every morning, feed the bullocks, pigs, chickens, before I went onto the land at all, so it was a really interesting job and I loved every minute of it, but the trouble was that the money was dreadful, it really was. We struggled all our lives to manage on quarter pay, but I'll tell you the difference. I was helping my brother build a kitchen on the back of his house and his pay packet lay there, and he was a carpenter by trade, and I looked at it and that said £184 and I said, 'Is that a bonus, or do you ...?' and he said, 'No, I get that every week. Why?' and I said mine was £37 and 14 shillings. He said, 'What?' I said, 'Yes, that's what me and Pat get, bringing up two children on £37

and 14 shillings compared with £184.' There's too much difference. But the government don't want farm workers to have too much money because all the prices of bread and everything will rocket in the supermarkets and that would create havoc, so farm workers do a lot of work for very little money. They do a terrific job.

**So this is Mervin Cator who lives in Redgrave and I'm interviewing him and I'm a volunteer for the Little Ouse Headwater Project, Sarah Day, and the date is 28 October 2011. So, hello Mervin and I know you're going to tell me all about when you were born and lived in Redgrave and this area.**

I was born at Pump House. My father was head horseman at Hall Farm, Redgrave. My mother looked after the children at the private school at Botesdale until she got married. I lived in the house over 60 years, 67 years I think it was, so I knew the house and I've only moved two doors down and I'm now 75 at Christmas so I've never been anywhere else really, so I do remember the fen and Redgrave quite well. One of the things that always interested me was when I was about 5 or 6, my mum and dad were strict Methodists. We went to church and Sunday school regularly but in Sunday evenings we went for long walks and that was when we used to go down the fen. When the troops all went into the war, I used to go down to the farm and see my dad every day. When I came out of school my mother would give me a bottle, an old beer bottle, full of hot tea, put it into a sock and wrapped in newspaper and I would go down to Hall Farm and find my father, which was difficult on the farm because there was 360 acres for me to find him in, so that he could have a hot drink, just after 3 by the time I got home from school. But when I used to go down there I loved being with him, I loved the smell of the horses; I loved being with 15 Suffolks and I was brought up with them.

I got one strange little story. Dad had a foal born and that died during the night and the mare obviously had got milk, so he had to milk the mare or she would get milk poisoning, so I went down to see him and he said, 'Boy, you're shorter than I am - you milk her.' So I went down every day when I come out of school and milked this mare. When I went to school a few days later, the school teacher stood at the front and she said, 'What have you been doing?' to Dawn Rust that used to live in this house, 'and what are you going to do when you get home tonight?' So Dawn told her what she was going to do, help her mother or something like that, and she went round the whole class until she got to me and she said, 'and Mervin, what are you going to do?' I said, 'I'm going down the farm to milk a horse, Miss.' And she grabbed me by the ear, marched me to the front, and put me in the corner and put a big dunce's hat on me because she didn't know any different. And from then on I learnt don't tell a school teacher the truth, tell them what they want to know. So I got out of that one.

But one of the things that my mum used to speak about was that when the young men all went into the war, all the old men who were 70 and 80 who had been working on the farm all their lives, came back into work. Some of them a few hours a week, some of them full time, but their speech was different. They came to work with half a loaf of bread and a hole dug in it and a piece of cheese or an egg, a boiled egg, or a red beet or something and they would cut pieces off the bread and whatever they'd got to go with it, when they had their breakfast and dinner and they would have even enough to go into the evening which we would call foursies at 4 o'clock; and my mum said to me if you watch people, what they bring out of their dinner bag, you can tell just how well the family are doing. So I started to take notice, and she was right. Just after Christmas, everyone had got goose grease to go on their bread, no cheese, but as January turned in, they'd

have an onion and dry bread, and then that would get even worse. Just a red beet. No eggs, not until the spring. So you could almost tell just how well-off they are by what come out of their dinner bag. And I remember what I found really strange is that only me and my dad had got sandwiches. They'd all got this great big chunk of bread that they pulled out their dinner bag and that for them was quite normal.

Now on Sunday evenings when Dad left off work, because even on a Sunday he had to work 'til 6 o'clock, not all day but he would have to go down and check the horses, and we did that when we went out for a walk. We'd often walk to Rickinghall so see my mother's mother, who lived in Rose Cottage almost opposite the White Horse at Rickinghall, and her father was Harry Bullock. He did all the burials in the village and in Hinderclay, Rickinghall and Bergholt; in this area he did all the burials. When my mother was brought up she was taught to lay people out, so in the middle of the night we'd get people knocking on the door: 'So-and-so has died, Mrs Cator, would you come and lay them out?' So my sister, when she was about 8 or 9, started going with my mother to lay people out and I think that's really why she became a nurse. She was a nurse all her working life. She was ward sister in the end, at Bury Hospital.

I think the interest in death and just talking ... we always talked a lot, our family did, because Mum and Dad were interesting to listen to, and us children used to sit round on a Sunday evening and listen to the stories that Dad told, about horses mainly. Because he loved, idolised, his horses, and his horses loved him to the extent that when I was about 5, I should think, we'd been to Rickinghall to see Nanny Bullock, and on the way home we walked up into Redgrave Park to check on Dad's horses, and the minute they saw him they started to gallop from all different corners of the park, which is 184 acres so they were a long way away. And I used to go and stand beside him and watch them coming, and I do remember slowly withdrawing behind Mum as each one weighing over a ton was thundering towards you and the ground began to shake, and they all skidded to a standstill and Dad would disappear in the hot breath, the steam, that was coming off the horses because they just idolised him, they just wanted to be with him all the time. And I remember very well that a horse was coming in the distance on three legs, and that got two???? down and there was something in its hoof. And that wasn't walking well at all, and it took a long while to limp to him and he knew I was the one that was interested in horses, and he said, 'come on Mervin, come with me, we'll go and see what that old mare's got in her foot'. And we got to her and you always had to say, he told me this, you always had to say 'let me look'. Walk to the horse's head and say 'let me look', and then pick up the foot and the horse seemed to know that you were there to help. And I prised the stone out with his knife and I was then going to throw it away and he said 'no, you never do that. You take the stone to the horse and show it. Hold it in the middle of your hand and offer it to the horse so it can smell that stone, and examine it and know that it was that in its foot.' And I remember very well the mare went [horse noise], as if that was what was the problem. I was then going to throw it away and he said, 'don't you throw it away; keep it in your pocket and throw it in the ditch. If you throw it down here, she could pick it up again.' So Dad, because he was head horseman, and I loved horses, I spent quite a lot of time down the farm with him and I loved to be with the farm workers and hear their stories and listen to their language. The only trouble was that I finished up with a broad Norfolk accent, the only one in the family, because I loved to be with them. I would rather be with them than at the school. I hated school, mainly because I'm dyslexic. I was dunce in every class of every school I ever went to. But I never learnt anything until I left school, but I knew more within a year of leaving that I every learnt at school. But I just loved being in the countryside and long walks on Sunday evenings was quite a regular thing for us.

I remember very well one Sunday evening, late in the summer, I should say that was about September time, we decided to go for a walk down towards Redgrave Fen and we went down Bier Lane, whether you know what Bier Lane is named by or not ... In the church is a trolley that you can put a body on and anyone who was poor enough at the other end of the lane could walk up the lane, borrow the bier, which is what the name is for that time, and push the bier down to the house, collect their relative that had died and then push them back to the church free of charge so that they could get a cheap funeral. And hence Bier Lane because that was the lane that was always used to go to Fen Street. So we walked down Bier Lane and we met Mr Musk who had the farm at the bottom, and of course when Mr Musk and Walter Cator met, that was a two-hour job. So by the time we actually left him, that was getting dusk and we'd still got a long way to walk. So going along Fen Street, one of the children, we had got several children with us, because that was one or two of the children came out of London, and one of the children said, 'someone's on the fen with a lantern.' And Dad said, 'no, there won't be anyone on the fen, not this time of night.' But we stopped and watched and there was a blue glow floating, and then it suddenly disappeared and then another one appeared. And we all thought it was someone with a lantern, but Dad said, 'no, that isn't. I know what that is - its' will o' the wisp, they call it. That's gas that comes up out of the peat and under certain conditions when it bites in the air, it glows', and my mother said, 'whether that'll glow or not, it's time you children were in bed', so we had to leave it and go home but we were all interested.

And then another night we went down in the spring and Dad was telling us that each house in the village has a plot on the fen and that was numbered and named by the house, so that we were allowed to go down and dig peat, cut wood and reed to repair our thatched roof off the fen. There is a map somewhere, and I think I know where it is, there is a map somewhere with all the names of the plots and the numbers and every house in the village should have a plot (that's the houses that were standing then), but my father knew where our plot was and we used to go down the lane opposite Mill Lane, turn left and that was the second plot up on the left and we used to go down there in the spring and often we would get wild strawberries and wild raspberries off Dad's plot. That's what we called it. And after being down there about an hour, it was getting dusk by the time we started out for home, I think it was me and my sister who were walking in front and we saw this glowing in the bottom of the hedge and Dad said that they were glow worms. And I often wonder what happened to glow worms because I'm now 75 or near enough and I haven't seen glow worms since. Whether the conditions are just not right, I've no idea, but I've been walking round the countryside quite a bit but I've never seen glow worms since. So I wonder that was because that was wet on the edge of the fen down there, I just don't know the reason why there are no glow worms anymore.

I'll tell you this simply because we're talking about horses, Pansy was my father's favourite horse. I shall have to tell you what colour she was because you wouldn't believe ... if you get a really good oak dining table, with that lovely gloss on, her coat was that colour and her mane was blonde, strawberry blonde, and you could imagine how she stood out; you could see her at half a mile away, her big blonde tresses hanging down. She was beautiful, she was also very powerful, 17 hands, weighed at least a ton and a half, and she was Dad's favourite horse. She loved him, he loved her. Well, when I used to go down the farm, my mum used to sometimes come down when I was leading the horse out, because sometimes during the war I go down there and lead the horse out, because there was no one else to do it. And my mum, if that horse saw my mum come it'd put its head up and it would whinny loud so all the other horses would look to find Mum walking

because she always went to every horse and stroked it and spoke to it and they knew. She was a beautiful creature, she really was. I remember Dad standing in the stackyard, chatting, when that was time for her dinner, and she got so fed up with him standing there she walked round behind him and put her head in the middle of his shoulders and pushed. He said, 'I know what's wrong with her, she's hungry.' And he had to break his conversation and go and feed Pansy.

But this is one of the things that apparently no other horseman I have heard of did, and he could do this and I'll tell you how he did it. When all the men finished with their horses, they brought the horse in, they put it in the horse yard, which was a great big yard, deep in straw because that was where they were going to sleep, and all they done was just let them stand there while he was making their dinner up, their bait as he called it. Actually in the stable they would be in the horse yard just standing there cooling down, and he said that was a good thing for them to stand there and cool down before they were allowed to drink. When he got about halfway through making their dinner, he'd come out into the yard and he'd tuck the lead up into their bridle so they could put their heads down to drink, and they'd all gone to have a drink and after they'd had a drink he'd go back and he'd get the rest of the meal ready. When he come back, he'd just stand there and give a long, low whistle and they would all do a wee or toilet; they all slowly, very slowly, straddled and done a wee and no other horseman that I'd ever heard of did that, and I didn't know that he was special until talking as we are now to Ewart Evans who wrote books on heavy horses. He said, 'I've never heard of that before.' And I can tell you how he did it because when I was about 7 I went down the farm, 'is there anything I can do to help?', and he said 'yes, go and stand and watch that foal. That's all you have to do, lean on the gate and watch that foal. And every time that do a wee you whistle, and every time that go to the toilet, you whistle. And when that grow up, every time I do a whistle it'll do the same thing.' And that did. And all these years he kept all those 15 Suffolks, he never had to clean their stable out after they'd been in because it was as clean as when they walked in. They'd walk out and there was no mess behind them and that saved him, that must have saved him, many hours of hard work.

And another little story I've got is one day I was leading the horse ... they were muck-carting, so that would be October/November ... I was leading the horse to my dad, because he pulled the muck of the back of the tumble on the heaps to be spread by hand, and as I walked past the field, I noticed that there was hares running around a bit mad and I said to Dad, 'there's a lot of hares here' and he said, 'you wait 'til the spring, there'll be a lot more.' So the next spring I started taking notice and one day I saw a ring of hares sitting there up on their hind legs just like a cat would, all facing inward. And I just stopped and watched them because I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It looked as if someone had organised it. So I went to Dad and I said, 'I've just seen a ring of hares'. He said, 'I haven't got time to talk to you; you go and see' (... I'm trying to think of his name, anyway it don't matter ...) 'you go and ask him, he's the oldest farm worker we've got and he's got a story to tell about it.' So I went and saw him, and he said, 'they're talking over where they're going to have their babies.' I said, 'how do you make that out?' He said, 'well, that's what you call a parliament of hares and all the males meet so there's no arguments for later on; they'll have a nest, a little dip in the ground in one field, and they'll put two babies in that and they'll have another dip in another field and there'll be two babies in that and they'll never have two nests in one field, so all arguments are stopped.' And I said, 'however do you know that?' He said, 'well, do you see that's what'll happen and you never see them fighting when they're breeding.' Whether that's the truth or not, I don't know, but that's the story he told me. I'm still trying to think of his name. He lived in the back cottages in Redgrave that have now disappeared of

course, but that's another little story that would be of interest to someone, I'm sure.

### **Shall we put that in?**

I've just remembered that was Jack Driver that told me that story about the parliament of hares. He was the oldest worker on the farm. I think he was almost into his 80s in about the 1940s so he was doing well for the hard work that he'd done. He'd worked as a labourer on Hall Farm for a lot longer than I can remember because even then I was only 8 or 9. But during the war, once the young men went, there was just so few men that my father used to come, and all the farmers used to come, to the school and all the biggest boys ... this is quite an interesting story ... the biggest boys in Redgrave school were allowed to go and help with the harvest, and they all had a green card, and the oldest one would hold their green card and then the farmer or the foreman of the farm would pick the biggest, strongest-looking boys, or whatever he thought was right, and take them off to help with the harvest or whatever farm work was going on at the time. And that was legal, they were allowed to do that. The only thing was that was quite strange because my father did that on behalf of Hall Farm and he'd come home to have his tea and Mum said, 'how did you get on with them boys?' He said, 'they're absolutely useless, absolutely terrified of the horses'. They lived in the village all their lives and yet they'd never been close to a Suffolk; to actually lead one is a bit frightening because the first time I led one I couldn't actually reach its head so my dad cut a cane off and put a hook in the end so that I could walk them with a stick. I put it into the hook on their bridle and they seemed to cope with it quite all right, but these other boys were absolutely terrified of the horses, so he said, 'half of them I had to send back to school because they were no good', so that's how I came to be working on the farm when I was too early, I shouldn't really have been there, but because he couldn't get anyone who was capable of doing it, he said, 'that boy Mervin, he isn't very old but he loves the horses and he wouldn't mind leading them' so he went back to the school and asked whether that was possible that I could be allowed to do it. So in the meantime, I was allowed to go after tea every night leading the horse out for him and then we'd go back to work two or three hours, and this was another thing – the command was 'to you' and 'away from you', so you led the horse down two rows of sugar beet, in between the two rows, and if Dad said, 'to you', I had to pull my arm towards myself to pull its head to the left, and away from me was obviously to the right. The only trouble is that when you're about 7, your arm isn't long enough to do it, so I had to walk to the right or walk to the left to make the horse move over. But I did that for most of the war, and then I got to work more or less full time, especially muck-carting which was dead easy for me because all I had to do was when the men had loaded the muck cart down at the farm, all I had to do was walk beside it; mind you, a horse does walk at a heck of a rate when you're walking beside it, especially when they're pulling about three quarters of a ton of muck, that seemed to be scrabbling along all the time. So I was more or less running beside it. The worst part was that every puddle we went through ... when this great big hoof come down in the middle of the puddle the water sprayed up round my legs; of course we weren't allowed to wear long trousers, I only had short trousers and leather boots and my legs were running with cold water, and when that was freezing, my legs would turn blue by the time I got home at night. But nobody seemed to take much notice really. I did but nobody else did. That didn't seem to matter whether Mervin was frozen.

But that was how I came to see what was going on on the farm and there were stories that the men used to say. Jerry Matthews, Mr Matthews, I don't know why they called him Jerry, but he told me that if in the spring you see the water hens, the moorhens, building high away from the water there was going to be a lot of

rain. He guaranteed that that was true and I learned off him to watch the ponds, and of course during the war we couldn't get eggs so I devised a method by which I carried a piece of string and a penknife and a spoon, tied the spoon to a long net?, reached out over the water and lifted the eggs out of the nest, and I was told by older boys to mark one with a pencil and never take that one anymore, always leave one egg in the nest and then every day she'll lay you another egg just like a chicken, and you'd got one egg for your breakfast every morning. So us boys used to visit the ponds all the war and take eggs home while they were available because in the autumn we were sent, which was a rotten job – we all hated it but we never had any choice – for a half a crown for a sackful of acorns; acorns were pig feed. Pigs loved acorns and there was no other food for them during the war and they were glad to feed them with anything so us boys, mostly boys, we could earn half a crown a sack. The trouble was that it took you a month to fill a sack at least and that was every night after you come home from school and all Saturdays. The first day I went actually beating, as they call it now, brushing as we called it again, I got 7 and 6 pence and I had found a man's watch on the farm and he give me a 10 shilling note and I remember that very well. His name was Sid Anderson and he lived in that little house in the middle of the Redgrave Park that looked like a pepper pot. That's where he brought up his family, it was then a family home. He lived in there, there's a well in the wood behind that house, a beautiful well, lovely clear water and he walked across the park with the pail to give you the water every night and this is another story this was 1947 the worst winter I ever remember.

My father was coming around the village every day with two Suffolks dragging a snowplough, and one day he went past twice and that must have been 3 o'clock because we were all home for school and we were watching out of the window, and he went past with these two Suffolks, which was his pair of horses, Pansy and Smart. Smart was a half-horse, a castrated male, he was 17 hands as well, a big lad, and Pansy was 17 so they were both big, powerful horses and he went all the way round the Redgrave streets with the snowplough. And when we saw him go past the second time, I said, 'Mum, there is something weird going on here as Dad has now gone past again.' And she came to the window and I remember it very well, she had a knife in one hand and an onion in the other hand because she was getting dinner, and she came and looked out of the window and she said, 'he's a weird old boy. Will he ever get home tonight?' So we waited and Dad came home and we never spoke to him as he was hungry when he come in. He'd sit down and have his evening meal. And all we got was an open fire and that was five foot of smoke, and he sat down and had his meal and when he finished he pushed the plate away and lit his first cigarette after dinner because he was a chain smoker. We said, 'what was going on today, Dad?' He said, 'that is a bit of a long story.' He went round the village the first time, went back to the stackyard to put the snowplough away and met Sid Anderson and Sid said, 'my wife hasn't been to the shops for two weeks because living where we do in the middle of Redgrave Park, there is no clear road. I don't suppose you could go there with the snowplough and clear her a little path, do get to Botesdale shops?' So off went Dad across the park all the way round this little house called the Duffy House then, and then down to the main road, the A143, out on to the A143, turn round in the middle road and back. When he got back, Mrs Anderson stood there with a great big jug in one hand and a tumbler in the other and she said, 'Mr Cator, thank you very much for that, I can get out now. You have a drink, this'll warm you up.' So he had a tumbler and my father, being a strict Methodist, didn't drink. I don't. None of our family just don't do it, I don't know why. So he drank up and after a few minutes he felt really warm so she said, 'would you like another one?' and he said, 'yeah, that was lovely.' So he had another glass. Well he got back to the farm, he went in the stackyard with the snowplough and he couldn't let go of the handles because he fell over, so he had to get up and hold

the handles and he realised he was drunk. He'd never been drunk before so the only way he thought ,I can't stand here all day so I'll go round the village again,, so he came all the way round the village again and he thought 'if I walk long enough I shall sober up'. I don't know if he did or not by the time he finished but when he come home from work he was sober again; but we laughed and everyone in the village laughed about it because Mr Cator just kept going round and round and round with the snowplough, but he did eventually sober up. And now I can't remember which stories I've told you and which I haven't.