

Mervyn Cater

Interviewed by Sarah Day, 28-10-2011.

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TRACK ONE

When I first left school, I started work down at the Fen Street, right opposite the Fen, and we had one Suffolk and her name was Faithful. And I can tell you where she was born. Wherever the horse was born that was her first name, so she was called Hinderclay Faithful. So she was born at Hinderclay, and she was still at work and used to do harrowing, rolling and things like that, and a small drill, sometimes drilling cattle beet, because - that's another little 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 at work on the farm?' Dad said 'I'll think about that'. And they bought parsnip seed and things like that that would grow during the winter, turnips, and they sprinkled it in with the cattle beet feed as seed, and when the men chopped out they left half. When that was clamped and in February when they were very short of food for the animals they opened the clamp, and the men all feel their dinner bags with swedes and turnips and parsnips. And Mr Bedwell was very good to his workers and he helped them through the War by doing that. I thought that was a brilliant idea, and means of feeding the animals and the men, and the men made a very good job of the clamp because they knew their dinner was in there! So we ate a lot of turnips during the War because they were coming after February, because after the hay run out then you have to start going down to whatever you can find the animals, which was barley straw next, and then you would open the clamp. And if you open the clamp - that was one of my jobs by then - I used to go down. I'll tell you another time about Bonny - Bonny was a tiny little horse, she was a Suffolk, she was only 14 hands, she was tiny, and she only had got one lung, so she was Mervyn's horse because Mervyn was 14 by then, so me and her were about equal. And Dad used to leave her harnessed; I was to cart the sugar beet tops out with for cowmen on a Saturday morning, and she was my little horse. And she would do a little bit of harrowing, that's what proves that Mr Bedwell was a very kind man. This baby was born with one lung, always had that's tongue hanging out, difficulty breathing, but he said 'no, we won't put her down, we'll find enough jobs on this farm to keep that alive. And that worked for that's entire life little jobs, nothing heavy, but she was ideal for a boy. But that's an interesting story, ain't it? because he was

a very kind man, and you would be surprised how much help that kind of thing they could do, and everyone filled their dinner bag, the cowman, and there was 13 men on that farm then, that was a lot of families to feed. And he was really a very, very... a good employer.

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

By the time I was 15 all the horses had gone down at Hall Farm. And so the fact that I wanted to become a horseman like my dad, that all disappeared. So I took a tractor, a standard Fordson and a drag plough, 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, the pigs, the chickens, before I went on to the land at all. So that was a really interesting job and I loved every minute of it, but the trouble was that the money was... dreadful. That really was! Yes, we struggled - we've struggled all our lives just to manage on quarter pay, more or less. Because I can tell you the difference: I was helping my brother build a kitchen on the back of his house, and his pay packet laid there, he was a carpenter by trade, and I looked at it and that said 184 pound, and I said 'Is that a bonus, or do you...?' and he said 'No, I get that every week. Why?' I said well 'mine is 37 pound, 14 shillings. He said 'what?' I said 'yes, that's what me and Pat get, bringing up two children, on 37 pound and 14 shillings compared with the 184'. Well, that is too much difference isn't it? Well, the government won't allow farm workers to have better money, because all the prices of bread and everything else will rocket in the supermarkets, and that will create havoc. So farm workers do a lot of work for very little money. That's a terrific job.

TRACK TWO

>>> *I'll just introduce you. To this is Mervyn Cater, who lives in Redgrave, and I am interviewing him, and I am a volunteer for the Little Ouse Headwaters Project, Sarah Day, and the date is the 28th of October, 2011. So hello Mervyn, and I know you're going to tell me all about how you were born and have lived in Redgrave.*

Well, I was born at Pump House. My father was head horseman at Hall Farm, Redgrave. My mother looked after the children at school, at the private school, at Botesdale 'til she got married,

and they 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... I shall be 75 come Christmas. 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 five or six my mum and dad were strict Methodists. We went to church and Sunday school regularly. Being Sunday evenings we went for long walks, and that was when we used to go down the Fen. And when the troops all went into the War I used to go down to the farm and see my dad. Every day when I come out of school my mother would give me a beer bottle, an old beer bottle, full of hot tea put into a sock and wrapped in newspaper, and I would go down to Hall Farm and find my father, which was difficult on it's own, 'cause there was 360 acres to find him in, so that he could have a hot drink... ermm... just after three when I got home from school. But when I used to go down there I loved being with him, I love the smell of the horses, I loved being with 15 Suffolks, and I was brought up with them. And I've got one strange little story. Ermmm... 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 them 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. And... [chuckles] ... when I went to school a few days later the schoolteacher 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. She went round the whole class until she got to me, and she said 'And Mervyn what are you going to do?' and I said 'I'm going down the farm to milk a horse, Miss', and she grabbed me by the ear ... [chuckles] ... and marched me to the front, 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 schoolteacher the truth, always 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. Uhhh... 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 had 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 call 'fourses' at four 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, and no cheese. But as January turned in, they'd have an onion and dry bread. Then that would get even worse, just a red beet, uh... no eggs, not until the spring, so that you could almost tell just how well off they are as by what come out of their dinner bag. And I remember what I found really strange is only me and my dad had got sandwiches. They had all got this great big chunk of bread that they pulled out of their dinner bag, and that for them was quite normal. Now on Sunday evenings, when Dad had left off work, 'cause even on a Sunday he had to work until six o'clock, not all day but he would have to go down and check the horses. And we did that, ermm... when we went out for a walk we would often walk to Rickinghall to see my mother's mother who lived in Rose Cottage, almost opposite the White Horse at Rickinghall. And she... her father was Harry Bullock. He did all the burials in the village, and in Hinderclay, Rickinghall, Burgate, in this area he did all the burials. Well, 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 Cater, will you come and lay him out', and so my sister, when she was about eight or nine, started going with my mother to lay people out. And I think that's really why she become a nurse, and she was a nurse all her working life. And 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, 'cause Mum and Dad were interesting to listen to, and us children used to sit round on 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 five, I would think, I had been to Rickinghall to see Nanny Bullock, and on the way home we walked back up into Redgrave Park to check Dad's horses. And the minute they saw him they started to gallop from all different corners of the Park, which was 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 begin to shake and they all skidded to a standstill, and Dad would disappear in the hot breath and steam 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 had got that's toe down and there was something in its hoof and that weren't... wasn't walking at all very well, and that took a long while to limp to him. And he knew that I was the one who was interested in horses, and he said 'come on Mervyn, you come with me, we'll go see and what that old mare has got in her foot'. And we got to her and - you always had to say - he told me this - '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 that can smell that stone and examine it and know what it was that was in its foot. And I remember very well the mare went [hrèèumphhhhhh] as if 'that was what was the problem!' and I was then going to throw it away and he said 'Don't you throw that away; keep that in your pocket and throw it in the ditch. If you throw it down here she could pick that up again!'. So... Dad was, 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, errmm... and hear their stories and listened to their language. The only trouble was that I ended 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 be on the farm, I mean the school, mainly because I am dyslexic. I was dunce in every class of every school I ever went to, I never learnt anything until I left school. I knew more within a year of leaving school than I ever learnt at school. But I just love being in the countryside, and... long walks on Sunday evenings were quite a regular thing with us. And I remember very well one, it must have been a Sunday, evening in the summer, I should say September time, we decided to go for 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 and borrow the bier, which is what the name is for that trolley, and push the bier down to their 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 that hence the Bier Lane. 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 of the... and of course when Mr Musk and Walter Cater met, that was a two-hour job. So by the time we actually left him that was getting dusk, and we had still got a long way to walk. So going along by Fen Street one of the children - and 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 'there's someone on the Fen with a lantern'. And Dad said 'no, no, there won't be anyone on the Fen, not this time of night'. But we stopped and watched, and there was, there was a blue glow floating, and then suddenly disappeared, then another one appeared and we all thought it was someone with a lantern, but Dad said 'no that ain't. I know what that is, that's a will-o-the-wisp, they call it, that's gas that come up out of the peat and under certain conditions when that

break into the air that glow'. And my mother said 'well whether that glow or not that'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 and 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 was standing, that is the houses that were standing then... errr... 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 strawberries, wild strawberries and wild raspberries off Dad's plot. That's what we called it. And after... errmm... being down there about an hour that was getting dusk by the time we started out for home, I think it was me and my sister that were walking in front and we saw this glowing in the bottom of the hedge, and Dad said they were glow-worms. And I often wonder what happened to glow-worms. I am now 75 or near enough and I haven't seen glow-worms since. Whether the conditions are just not right I have no idea, but I've been walking around the countryside quite a bit but I've never seen glow-worms since. So I wonder whether 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 any more.

Errmm... could we stop it there just for a minute.

I'll tell you this just simply because we are talking about horses. Errmm... Pansy was my father's favourite horse. I'll... 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 it, her coat was that colour, and her mane was blonde. Strawberry blonde, and you can 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 a horse, though, 'cause during the War I used to go down there leading a horse though because there was no one else to do it, and my mum... if that horse saw my mum coming that'd put its head up and that would whinny loud so all the other horses would look to find Mum walking 'cause she always went to every horse and stroked it and spoke to it, and they

knew. And she was a beautiful creature, she really was. And Dad, 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 behind him and put her head in the middle of his shoulders and pushed, and he said 'I know what's wrong with her, she's hungry' and he had to break your conversation and go and feed Pansy. But this is one of the things that apparently no other horseman that I have heard of did, and he could do this and I can tell you how he did it. When all the men finished with their horses they brought the horse and they put it in the horse yard which was a great, big yard deep in straw 'cause that is 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... y'know, in the stable, they would be in the horseyard standing there cooling down, and he said it was a good thing for them to stand there and cool down before they were allowed to drink. When he got about half way through making their dinner he come out into the yard and he took their bridle up into... their lead up to their bridle so they could put their heads down to drink, and they'd all go and have a drink. And after they'd had a drink he'd go back and he'd get the rest of their 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 I've 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 seven I went down the farm and I said 'is there anything I can do to help?' He said 'yes, go and stand and watch that foal. That's all you have to do, lean on the gate and 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 when I whistle that'll do the same thing'. And that did. And all the years he kept all them 15 Suffolks he never had to clean his stable out after they had been in 'cause that was as clean as when they walked in. They'd walk out, and was no mess behind them, and that saved him - it must have saved him - many hours of hard work. Another little story I've got is one day I was leading the horse they were muck carting, so that would be... errr.. October-November. I was leading the horse to my dad 'cause he pulled the muck off the back of the tumbril on the heaps to be spread by hand, and as I walked past a field I noticed that there was hares running round a bit mad, and I said to Dad 'there's a lot of hares here'. He said 'you wait 'til the spring, there'll be a lot more'. So the next spring I started to take notice, and one day I saw a ring of hares sitting there, up on their hind legs just like a cat would, all facing inwards, and I just stopped and watched because I couldn't believe what I was seeing. That looked

as if somebody had organised it. So I went to Dad and I said 'I've just seen a ring of hares', but he said 'I haven't got time to talk, you go and see...' (I'm trying to think of his name - anyway, that don't matters, I will try and think of it).. he said 'you go and ask him, he is the oldest farm worker we've got and he's got a story to tell about them'. So I went and saw him and he said 'they are 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 they always... 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 will happen, 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 black cottages in Redgrave, what are now disappeared of course. But that's another little story, that... errmm... 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 the story about the parliament of hares. He was the oldest worker on the farm. I think he was in... almost into his 80s, which in about... that would be about in the 1940s, so... errmm... he was doing well for the hard work that he had done. He had worked as a labourer on Hall Farm for a lot longer than I can remember [chuckles], because even then I was only about eight or nine. But during the War, once the... 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 which... 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... they would hold their green card up, and then the farmer or the foreman of the farm would pick the biggest, strongest looking boys for 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 is that it was quite strange because he - my father - did that on behalf of Hall Farm, and he come home to have his tea and Mum said 'how did you get on with them boys'? He said 'they're absolutely useless, they're absolutely terrified of the horses'. They were brought... they lived in the village all their lives and yet they'd never been

close to a Suffolk, and to actually lead one is a bit frightening, because the first time I led one I couldn't actually reach that's head. So my dad cut a cane off and put a hook in the end so that I walked him with a stick, and 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're no good. So that's how I become working on the farm when I was too early, I shouldn't really have been there, but because he couldn't get anyone that was capable of doing it he said 'that boy Mervyn, he ain't very old but he love the horses, he wouldn't mind leading 'em', 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 hoe 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 a row... 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 you' was obviously to the right. The only trouble is, that when you are about seven, your arm isn't long enough to do it, so I had to actually walk to the right or walk to the left to make the horse turn... move over. But I did that for most of the War, but then I got more or less to work full-time, especially muck carting. And... the muck carting was dead easy for me, 'cause all they had to do was when the men had loaded the muck up down at the farm all I had to do was walk beside it. Mind you, a horse do walk at a heck of a rate, especially when that's pulling about three quarters of a ton of muck, that seem 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 into the middle of the puddle the water sprayed up around 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 had turned blue by the time I got home at night. But nobody seemed to take much notice really. I did but nobody else [chuckles] did. That didn't seem to matter whether Mervyn 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, if you see the waterhens, the moorhens, building high, away from the water, and there was going to be a lot of rain. And 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 I devised a method by which I carried a piece of string and a penknife and a spoon, tied the spoon to a long nuttery, 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, 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've 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 half a crown for a sackful of - what their heck do you call them? - 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 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 we called it then, I got seven and six pence, and I had found a man's watch on the farm, and he gave me a ten shilling note - and I remember that very well - his name was Sid Anderson, and he lived in that little house in the middle of Redgrave Park that look like a pepperpot. That's where he brought up his family, that 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 a pail to get his water every night. And this is a little story: this was 1947, the worst winter I ever remember. My father was coming up the village, around the village here every day, with two Suffolks dragging a snow plough, and one day he went past twice, and that must have been after three o'clock 'cause we were all home from school, and we were watching out of the window. And he went past and 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 they went all the way around the Redgrave streets with a snow plough. And when we saw him go past the second time I said 'Mum, there's something weird going on here. Dad has now gone past again'. So she come to the window and I remember it very well, she'd got a knife in one hand and an onion in the other, 'cause she was getting dinner, and she came and looked out of the window, and she said 'he's a weird old boy' she said, 'we'll hear when he get home tonight'. So, we waited and Dad came home, and we were never... we never spoke to him 'cause he was hungry when he come in, he'd sit down and have his meal and all we'd got was just an open fire, and that was 5 foot of snow. And he sat down and had his meal, and when he finished he pushed the plate away and lit his first cigarette after dinner - 'cause he was a chain smoker. We said, what was going on today, Dad? 'Well', he said, 'that's a bit of a long story'. He went round the village the first time, went back to the stackyard to put the snow plough away, and met Sid Anderson, and Sid said 'My wife hasn't

been to the shop 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 down with the snow plough and clear her a little path to get to Botesdale shops?' So off went Dad across the Park, round... all the way around this little house called the Dovey House then, round the Dovey House, and then down to the main road, the A143, out onto the A143, turned round in the middle of the 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 hand she said 'Mr Cater, thank you very much for that, I can get out now' she said, 'you have a drink, this will 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. Errmm... so he drank up, and after a few minutes he felt really warm, so she said 'would you like another one?' and he said 'yes, that was lovely', so he had another glass. Well, when he got back to the farm, he went into the stackyard with the snow plough and he couldn't let go of the handles, 'cause 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 then I shall sober up'. I don't know whether 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 else in the village laughed about it, 'cause Mr Cater just keep going round and round and round with the snow plough. But he did eventually sober up.

And now I can't remember which stories I've told you and which I haven't!

Transcription by TD Holt-Wilson

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