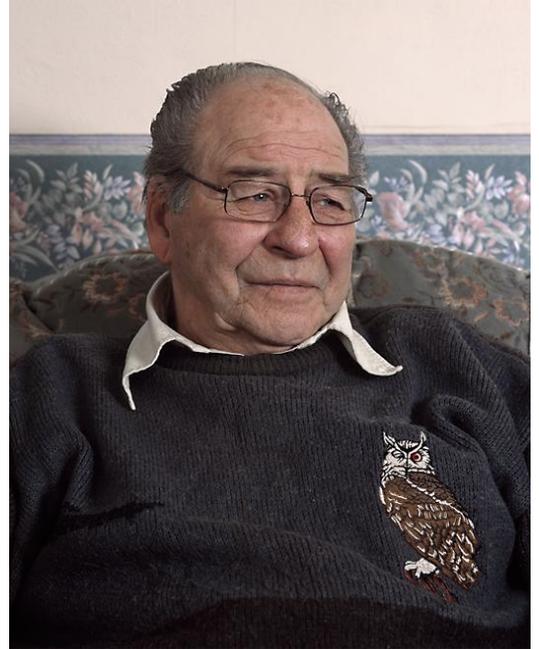


# Mervyn Cater's stories

*Some memories from Mervyn's early life in the Little Ouse valley.  
He was born in 1936 and has lived all his life in Redgrave*

## **Milking a horse**

My father was head horseman at Hall Farm, Redgrave. One time 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 when I went to school a few days later the schoolteacher stood at the front and she said, to each child 'What have you been doing after school?' 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 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 school teacher the truth, always tell them what they want to know.



## **The horses loved my dad and wanted to be with him**

Dad loved - idolised - his horses, and his horses loved him, to the extent that when I was about five we walked up into Redgrave Park one day 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 stood beside him and watch them coming, and I do remember slowly withdrawing behind Mum as each one weighing over a ton was thundering towards us and the ground begin to shake and they all skidded to a standstill, and Dad disappeared 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.

## **Getting a stone out of a hoof**

I remember very well there was a horse coming in on three legs, and that had got that's toe down and there was something in its hoof and that wasn't walking well, and that took a long while to limp to him. 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 I prised the stone out and I was going to throw it away, and he said, 'No, you never do that, you take the stone and offer it to the horse so that can smell that stone and examine it. And I remember very well the mare went [hrèumphhhhh] 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!'.

## **A strange blue light on the fen**

Going along by Fen Street in the dusk one evening 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 it 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.

## **Glow worms**

Another night we went down to the fen in the spring and 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.

## **Training horses with a whistle**

Before my father put the horses in for the night he'd 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 can tell you how he did it because, when I was about seven I went down the farm and 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 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. 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.

## **Special permission to go to work at the age of seven**

During the War, when the young men went to fight there was so few men left that the oldest boys in Redgrave School were allowed to go and help with the harvest or whatever farm work was going on. The only thing is that most of them were absolutely terrified of the horses so they were no good. And that's how I came to be working on the farm when I was too young. I was only seven. My dad said, 'Mervyn ain't very old but he love the horses, he wouldn't mind leading 'em', so he asked the school whether I could be allowed to do it. ... Muck carting was dead easy for me, 'cause all I had to do was walk beside the cart. 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. 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 did.

### **A fresh, wild egg every morning**

I learnt to watch the ponds. During the War we couldn't get eggs so I carried a piece of string and a penknife and a spoon. I tied the spoon to a long nut twig, reached out over the water, and lifted the eggs out of the nest. I always left 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.

### **Gathering acorns for the pigs**

In the autumn we were sent to gather acorns - which was a rotten job, we all hated it, but we never had any choice. 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 anything. So us boys – mostly boys - 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.

### **Clearing the snow in 1947**

In 1947, the worst winter I ever remember, there was 5 foot of snow. My father came round the village every day, with two Suffolks dragging a snow plough, and one day he went past twice, and we were watching out of the window. 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 said, 'He's a weird old boy, we'll hear when he get home tonight'.

We waited and Dad came home, and had his meal, and when he finished he pushed the plate away and lit his cigarette. 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 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, there is no clear road. Could you go down with the snow plough and clear her a little path to get to Botesdale shops?' So off went Dad across the Park, all the way around this little house, and down to the main road and back. When he got back, Mrs Anderson 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 glass, and my father being a strict Methodist didn't drink; none of our family do. But he drank up, and after a few minutes he felt really warm. 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 he thought 'I'll go round the village again, and if I walk long enough I shall sober up'. 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.

*Interviewed in October 2011 by Little Ouse Headwaters Project volunteer, Sarah Day  
Transcribed by Tim Holt-Wilson, passages selected by Nicky Rowbottom*