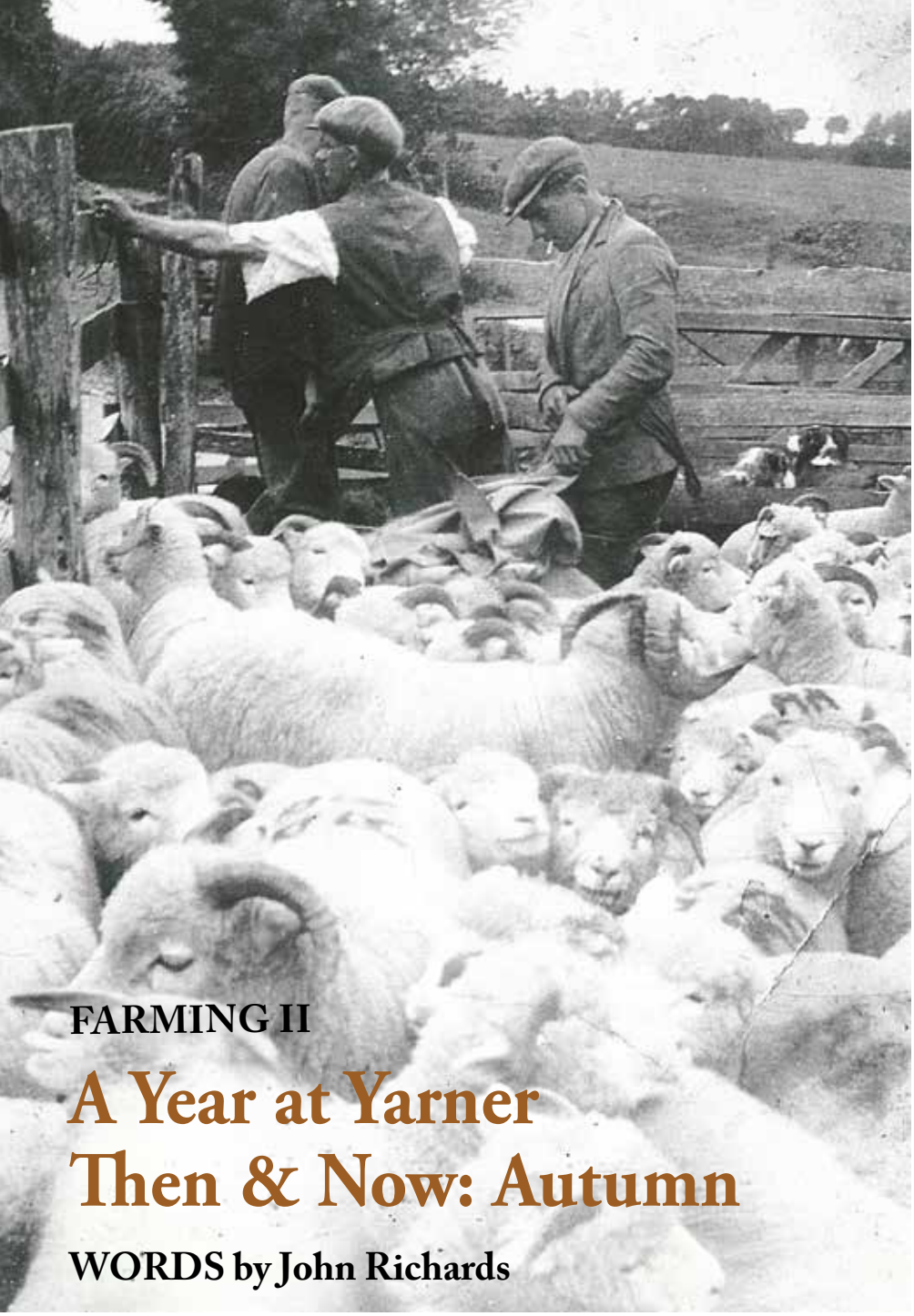

FARMING II

A Year at Yarner Then & Now: Autumn

WORDS by John Richards

While exploring just some of the changes in farming over the span of three generations here at Yarner, we arrive at autumn. This is a good place for my opening set of articles for this beautiful magazine to end because, in some ways, autumn is the end of the farming year for many a livestock farm up in the hills of Exmoor. As is often the case where something ends, so there is also a beginning. It feels like the end of a farming year because this is the time when we must reduce our sheep numbers by selling our crop of lambs and the older ewes from the flock, before our winter sets in. At the same time it can also feel like the beginning because, as we say goodbye to the current crop of lambs, we are also busy planning the creation of next year's crop.

Contrary to popular belief, farming sheep doesn't just involve running a few of them into the sheep yard from the nearest field one day and selling them. Much thought goes into the breeding side of the operation. I've always found this particular part of what I do as a farmer fascinating. Making the choice of which rams mate with which ewes determines the future strength, appearance and performance of the flock.

This is where I think my father – and more especially my grandfather – had a much easier job on their hands in keeping a good flock of Exmoor horns going. Back in the mid-1900s there were dozens of large flocks of Exmoor horns.

Now there are fewer than ten, although the many small 'show flocks' and the hobby flocks are thriving, which helps keep the breed society afloat. It's very difficult buying breeding rams these days with the genetics becoming dangerously limited. In fact, there are usually fewer than 50 young rams on offer for sale each year, whereas back in the mid-1900s there would have been 150-200.

I am just old enough to remember the days when the local autumn livestock markets contained a majority of traditional Exmoor horns. Now it's unusual to see them in our local markets at all, except on the Exmoor Horn Society annual sale days. These are specifically for the breed and the main one is held on the penultimate Thursday of September each year.

For a few years around 1980 I was allowed my annual day off school for this particular market. Back then it was held in Exford where the Exmoor National Park yard now sits. I was allowed this day off school for two reasons – the first being that Mum and Dad thought I would learn more there than I would at school. They may well have been right. Secondly, back in those days we used to walk our annual consignment of Exmoor horn ewes into the market from our field near Chetsford. This involved navigating the road into Exford from the Porlock direction. My job was pretty much the same one as Dad's dogs, but of course I had the additional ability of being able to shut the many driveway gates before the leading sheep could spot their chance to race in and eat some precious flowers or leave an unwanted calling card. I enjoyed that day of the year much like most children would enjoy Christmas Day.

Livestock markets in those days were so much more than they are now. They contained a buzz of excitement and even to a child it was obvious that some of these farming folk hadn't seen each other for a very long time. There was a bar on site at that Exford market. I would be removed from proceedings by Mum long before what was sold at the bar began to affect the balance and behaviour of the over-exuberant, largely male farmer customers.

It was at these, "My goodness I haven't seen you for ages" kind of functions where Mr Dick French would start singing his songs. His grand finale would be the song which contained the chorus, "These old clothes I am wearing, they are all torn to pieces." Upon the conclusion of each chorus he would remove one item of clothing until he stood naked but for his Wellingtons. He would then neck his pint quickly but never quickly enough, before giving the empty pint glass the unenviable task of covering his dignity. I digress here and apologise for briefly morphing into my father by telling a story which possibly had to be witnessed in order to reap the full experience. Fortunately, you're all spared that.

I think nowadays we all socialise much more and have found other, slightly less offensive, ways of showing our joy at seeing friends we haven't seen in quite a while. Strange though, how the mental

Facing page, first image, top: *My grandfather, John (in the waistcoat), with his brother Dick (smoking a cigarette), at Yarner, c.1935. We do not know the name of the other gentleman.*

Facing page, bottom image, left: *Me bringing the sheep home, October 2023.*

Facing page, two smaller images: *Sidney Rudd at a show with an Exmoor horn ram, c.1950s; a more 'modern-day' Exmoor ram at Yarner, 2001.*

Above, left and right: *Father, myself and Uncle Robert on market day at Cutcombe, early 1990s; Yarner cattle at Cutcombe Market, 1996, with Peter Huntley (current auctioneer) at the rostrum, and Jack Hosegood, Father and Tom Rook.*

Bottom, left to right: *Exmoor mule ewe lambs at Blackmoor Gate market, 1996, the right-hand row are Yarner's and on the left are Alan and May Collins' lambs; ram in the kitchen, 1996; Charolais x Devons and Devon steers just before market, September, c.1990.*

Above, left to right: *After tupping, opposite the Culbone Inn, November 1991; Exmoor horn ewe lambs, autumn c.2010; Exmoor mule lambs at the same time.*

Below: *From lambs to full-grown ('full-mouth') ewes, bound for Cutcombe Market, September 2023. Cutcombe was the only market for Exmoor horn females last year.*

health of the farming community today is not in great shape. Farming can still feel isolating to many and I suppose nowadays there are different pressures involved which simply didn't exist 50 years ago. We have reams of paperwork to fill out on market day which are basically a license to move the animals. We have to plan to sell only if we haven't brought animals onto the farm in the previous six days. We have to make sure every animal has an identification tag in each ear and one of these even has to be electronic. I can't imagine trying to sell that idea to my grandfather, and Dick French would probably have offered his pint glass to whoever dared suggest it to him. It's difficult enough on a market day just to get your animals ready to load onto a lorry, often in the dark, while hoping none have escaped, gone lame, soiled themselves, etc. All this paperwork has apparently been introduced as part of giving the public confidence in the safety of the food which we produce. I'd almost be able to believe this to be true if the multi-nationals were prevented from acquiring products from the other side of the world whenever a cheaper option is available.

As the traditional Exmoor horn ewe became less popular, those who decided they still wanted to keep them had to find different ways to increase their productivity. So during the 1970s my grandfather reluctantly agreed to allow a different breed of ram to be used on a percentage of the flock. The Suffolk was used first, which increased the carcass weight of the lambs, and the first cross female was found to make a nice ewe. Then the Border Leicester was used with equally good results. Then, during the 1980s, the Exmoor horn was pretty much saved from becoming a rare breed by the discovery that by using a blue-faced Leicester ram on the Exmoor ewe, we could produce a 'first cross' ewe now known as the 'Exmoor mule' which will rival any other mule in the country.

It seems to take the very best traits from both parents' genetics. From the Leicester father comes high conception rates, good size and huge milking ability and from its Exmoor mother the offspring derives good shape, docility, hardiness and longevity. So, here today our flock of Exmoor ewes are mated with enough Exmoor rams to produce replacement ewe lambs, with the remaining two-thirds of the flock being crossed with the blue-faced Leicester. We then sell the majority of the female lambs at market for breeding but keep some of the smaller ones ourselves which seem to thrive well alongside the Exmoor horn.

As for the cattle here in autumn, they have, by early October, been munching on some hay to complement the ever-decreasing grass. By the end of October they will head into the confinement/comfort of the sheds for the winter and the calves will be removed from their mums after a period of once-a-day suckling. I liken it to teenagers heading off to uni: not a great experience for mother or child but independence is a necessity for all.

Above: *Heading home for the winter, October 2023.*
Right, first two photos: *Before and after, early 1990s.*
Third photo down: *Out near Chetsford. This field has supplied many hundreds of tons of stones for walls built here. It's the stoniest field on earth. My grandfather bought it in the 1950s without knowing how the stone would be found when he ploughed it and how it would hold our hedges together!*
Fouth photo down: *My daughter Martha with her own little piece of wall, 2018.*
Bottom: *Me in October 1999.*

As autumn progresses our sheep numbers decline almost on a parallel with the declining daylight. It's funny how farming and nature are so often in tune with each other. As I sit here in May writing this article everything outside is bursting with new life and I'm equally frenetic in trying to keep up with all that needs doing, whereas in autumn everything slows as the leaves fall and the light fails ever earlier so that I'm forced to slow and finish my days earlier. I do try to get some stone walling done before the clocks alter. Looking back at old stone-walling photos I find many of the dates on the back are September and October. Autumn is a melancholic, contemplative time and I've always found stone walling helps lessen the melancholy whilst enabling the contemplation.

It could be said in my 55th year that I am fortunate to be entering the autumn of my own farming life. Many of us have lost people very dear to us who weren't lucky enough to even reach this stage of their lives. I now realise my stone-walling projects here over the decades are a kind of map of past events in my life. Some are very personal, like the piece I was working on when my younger sister was married at Culbone Church. There's another smaller piece which Jen 'helped' me with in our early courting days.

Am I even allowed to use that word anymore? This piece even contains a large pebble from a romantic amble to Embelle Wood beach. Others are a reminder of loss in my life and there's one lengthy piece I was working on while hearing the incomprehensible news of what came to be known as '9/11'.

I think most of us are keen to leave some sort of legacy. I will leave my stone walls. Long after I am gone from this land I have no doubt they will still stand.