A Year at Yarner Then & Now: Summer

WORDS by John Richards

And so into summer we rumble. The change from late spring to early summer with regard to the weather is usually imperceptible. By the time it arrives the days are almost as long as they get. The soft, dewy mornings of May cease as the sun rises ever earlier. As does the farmer. There's no better time to check livestock in summer than before the heat of the day sends the animals to the nearest tree or hedge for shade. Here at Yarner the first major summer task is to take the wool off the ewes. They are much happier with their three-kilo fleeces removed and they are much easier to manage without a fleece on them. They move more readily, and without their sweaty fleece, the risk of fly strike vanishes at least for the next month or so.

I was tapping up my father recently for his memories of shearing and he began reminiscing with stories from his father's shearing days. Dad loves telling tales of bygone farming times, with all the capers and shenanigans which used to occur. My enjoyment in hearing them, often for the umpteenth time, doesn't quite match his enjoyment of telling them, but on this particular occasion I tuned in.

He told me that back in his father's early farming years, i.e. the thirties and forties, each farm would have a shearing date. On this day – or possibly for two days – the many neighbouring farmers would all rock up with their hand shears. The long stone barns would echo with the noise of sheep and hand shears, with up to a dozen men blade shearing – and no doubt just as many other helpers to catch the sheep and roll the wool and provide food and refreshments for everyone. According to Dad, within the rather all-encompassing word 'refreshments' there would be beer.

Not the Exmoor Ale of today either. This stuff was home brewed and very potent, although apparently its strength was never really measured. Dad remembers as a child trying a little, and claims the room very soon started spinning. He then proceeded to tell the story of one particular shearing at Oare Ford Farm, home to local legend of the time, Mr Jack Woolacott, brother-in-law of my great-grandfather. His shearing was allocated two days to complete, but at the conclusion of the first day, a Friday, the beer flowed in Jack's direction with much the same urgency as the river flows past Oare Ford Farm. Apparently, Jack slept very well that Friday night, as indeed he did throughout Saturday, only awakening on Sunday morning to find not a sheep or a sheep shearer in sight. Upon asking his wife why his sheep weren't being de-fleeced and upon learning that it was in fact Sunday, he simply remarked, "Oh dear, I think I must have missed a day."

By the time Dad left school, these shearing days had ceased and the hand blades had been replaced by a large, stationary petrol engine. I use the word stationary loosely because I'm told that this engine, which drove four

Top: *Shearing day at Ash, c.1930.* Left to right: *Bill Hunt, Ernest Richards of Broomstreet (brother to John's great-grandfather), Clifford Prescott of Ash, ?, Jim Land (with the big beard), who worked at Westcott Farm, ?, John's great-grandfather Richard 'Urch' Richards holding the bucket, Jack Woolacott, ?, Herbert Richards of Silcombe Farm, Irvine Ridd of Pit Farm, Tom Prescott of Ash, Nath Cook.*

Above: *John in New Zealand in 1989, 'crutching' as they call it there, or docking as we call it here.*

shearing heads, one on each corner, used to vibrate so much that it would literally walk around the wooden barn floor unless it was somehow fixed to it. Apparently the fumes were choking and the noise was deafening, with many breakdowns occurring. Dad said he didn't remember anyone getting too worked up about breakdowns. They were simply accepted. Another cigarette was rolled and a bottle of beer opened while the engine was fixed.

It wasn't long before the electric motor arrived, leading gradually to where we are now, with a good shearer being able to de-frock over 200 sheep in a day. Today the fleeces are rolled up with the beautifully clean greasy inside of the fleece on the outside and put into sacks of 20 to 25 fleeces. Prior to this they were rolled and then tied much like you would tie a Christmas parcel, before being thrown into what was known as the wool chamber, which, here at Yarner, was one end of the old stone barn. As the shearing progressed, so the wool chamber became ever more full, with the pile of fleeces growing ever higher. In my early teens I remember catching the fleeces as they were thrown up high into the chamber. I'd be literally right under the roof slates enjoying my game of catch and stack on the soft mattress of wool some 15 feet above the action. Oh for a mobile phone to have been able to film that action beneath me. Having said that, maybe concentrating on a phone camera would have prevented my child brain from storing such a memory.

For several years through the nineties Dad and I sheared all of our own sheep together. I was in my early twenties and he in his early fifties. Uncle Robert would be rolling the wool. Looking back, I so enjoyed those days shearing in that old barn next to Dad. Getting the job done, and done properly, was very rewarding. I do, however, regret not attending proper shearing courses which would undoubtedly have helped me and allowed me to shear in a much more relaxed way. This may, in turn, have helped my back. By my late forties my back had called time on my shearing days and today our sheep are given their annual grade one by the local shearing team known as the Hillbilly Haircuts, captained by Oliver Hill [see page 77 for an article about Oliver's business, in our new series].

Although shearing is incredibly hard and hot work, it is also addictive, and once you have learned how to do it you always feel the urge to pick up a hand piece and shear one more. It can also be difficult to switch off after putting in a nine-hour shift – something my poor mother found out back in her younger days when she awoke one night to find Dad attempting to shear her! Apparently the more she kicked the tighter he held her. Fortunately for Mum she has some of the Exmoor horn's finest attributes, which include being able to kick like a mule and, upon hitting the right spot, no doubt she was as relieved to be free as Dad was to find out he was actually in his bed rather than in his shearing barn.

From top: ***John and his father Tony shearing in the old barn, early nineties; Tony taking a quick break on the wool sacks; shearing in the new shed, c.2005, with John's mother, Jenny, with refreshments (but no beer!).***

Here: ***John's sister Sarah walking sheep back out to Chetsford land after shearing, mid-nineties.***

Right: ***The Hillbilly Haircuts team at work.***

From top left: *Three images of Tony and Robert haymaking, late 1980s, with Tony's beloved New Holland 376 baler; Tony loading a trailer with hay 1967, helped by a B&B guest; drought, possibly 1995.*

Hot on the heels of shearing – and on some occasions even before shearing is completed – comes the haymaking period, although nowadays we have a choice of either making hay or making haylage, which is pickled grass rather than dried grass. This takes a lot of stress out of our harvest because if the weather looks like breaking down before the five or six days in which it takes to make hay, we can ensure we make good-quality fodder by wrapping the bales in black plastic and thus pickling the crop inside.

I can remember doing this here for the first time in the horribly wet summer of 1987. I'd not long left school and recall being rather excitable at having several fields of gorgeous June hay laying on the ground ready to put into small bales the following day. I went to bed in my attic room underneath the slates but with the roof window open to allow the heat of the day to escape. At about 4am I awoke to find that thunder rain was pouring in through the roof window. That day was Dad's birthday, 26 June. For the rest of the summer it rained at least every other day until early September. By the time we did clear those fields, what was left of the crop was the colour of cardboard and of a similar feed value.

We managed to salvage some edible winter fodder during September only by cutting some awkward fields which had never been cut before. We baled them as round-bale silage and wrapped the bales. Even this provided some torment, with a thunder wind blowing up during the night before we intended to get the crop baled. I clearly remember large areas of the coastal fields being picked up by the wind and deposited into the tree branches around the edge of Culbone Wood. It all looked very pretty, but for a teenager just learning what farming was really like, that summer taught me a salutary lesson in never taking anything for granted when it comes to Mother Nature because she is most definitely in charge.

I suppose most things in life have changed massively over the last century. At times it has been rather too fast for us humans to cope with. Farming is no exception. In my grandfather's day horse power would have cut the grass and turned the hay which would then have been loaded loose onto trailers by hand. My father can remember hay being carted to a stationary baler to be compressed into bales. This preceded his beloved New Holland 376 baler which holds my first memories of making hay. In the late eighties and early nineties we used to make nearly 10,000 small bales of hay. They were all baled by Dad with that baler. It was Dad's job and he made it very clear that baling was absolutely not within anyone else's skill range. Uncle Robert was tasked with rowing up the hay in readiness for the baler and was regularly berated for not making nice, long, easy corners for the baler man to negotiate. I was chief bale stacker and prided myself on arranging the bales in stacks of 17. Five bales would be placed on their edge on the ground with three more layers of four bales in different configurations above. An arduous task in the heat of a summer's day but I thrived on it. My job would be made easier because a sledge which held up to eight bales was pulled behind the baler. On each lap of the field Mr Baler Man, providing he was paying full attention, would release the gathered bales alongside each pile from the previous lap of the field.

By the millennium, we, like most farms, had waved goodbye to the conventional bale, and moved over to the big square bale which involves relying on a contractor due to both the cost and the size of the baler, and the tractor needed to power it. The bales which it creates are equivalent to ten or twelve conventional bales and, of course, they are then removed from the field with ease and at speed by a loader tractor.

It sometimes feels to me as though us farmers are just hamsters on a wheel. All the changes in my four decades of farming have been made to enable us to do the job more quickly and efficiently, which I might add has often involved shaving our workforce down to the bare minimum. It feels as though the more efficient we become and the more we cut our costs, and the more hours we work to enable us to remain profitable, the more cheaply we are expected to produce the food which we grow. We don't actually become more profitable to allow ourselves a slightly easier life. We are simply paid less for being more efficient. Recently, I've even heard people in very powerful positions within Government suggesting that we need to find more ways to diversify in order to survive. When I see our glorious leaders working seven days a week and then diversifying with another job, I may respect their advice rather than view it with the contempt it deserves. This is perhaps not the place for a farmer to vent, so I shall cease forthwith before our editor goes at it with the red pen!

By mid-July our winter fodder is usually safely stored. We then hope for summer rain to wash in the previous winter's manure which is spread onto the cut hay fields, thus providing lush new grass to fatten the lambs which bid a fond farewell to their mothers before July ends. The ewes now begin three months of rest and recuperation after hopefully doing a fine job of rearing their offspring. They are moved to the least productive part of the farm where they will happily thrive on poor-quality grass but with a high-quality view, while their lambs are given the best diet the farm can offer in order to keep them growing.

Rain in July and August on this farm has always been priceless. A dry summer can slowly unpick a year's worth of hard work and has a lasting effect long into the next season. The dry summer of 2022 was an extremely difficult one here for that reason. Farming on the coast of Exmoor is a very different experience to farming inland. Rainfall is always lower on the coastline during summer. Added to that we have less soil depth which, as a result, holds less moisture and regular summer afternoon sea breezes further the loss of moisture. Provided we do get a decent amount of rain at this time, we would hope to begin selling fat lambs by early to mid-August.

As far as the sheep side of farming goes, this is the beginning of a whole year's worth of work bearing fruit. I don't get upset when I see the first lambs of the year leave. I just feel huge relief at the achievement of seeing strong, fit lambs heading off to provide top-quality meat for those of us who believe that meat is part of a healthy diet. Let's not forget that rearing livestock is part of a healthy countryside, because if nobody ate meat I'd have no reason to spend some of my late summer days in August stone-facing more of my beloved hedgebanks, just as my father and grandfather did. With no cattle or sheep grazing this beautiful piece of Exmoor coastline, the patchwork quilt that it currently resembles would be replaced with a monoculture of scrubland and the loss of a vibrant working rural community.

Top and above: *The big square baler at work; first prick of fat lambs.*