FARMING II

A Year at Yarner Then & Now: Winter

WORDS by John Richards

Top: *Moving Exmoor horns, 2022.*
Above: *Tony* (on the left) *and his brother Robert with an Exmoor horn, c.1950; John with pup.*

Winter; a time to reflect on the year just gone, on the success of turning out some good stock and possibly receiving what you thought was a fair price for what was sold. And also a time to reflect on the challenges of the past year, whether climatic or bureaucratic or simply in trying to keep one's animals fit and healthy.

My father Tony recently informed me that he was born a farmer and fully intends to die a farmer! A commendable attitude indeed and one which I fully adhere to, at least occasionally. Farming is very much a vocation and working the land which many generations of one's own blood lines have spent their lives tending means that the place has a hold on a person which is very difficult to convey via the written word. However, in this article I will explore how different farming is now to how it was for Dad in his early career.

The first point of difference between this farm now and way back in the fifties is the size. We are now farming what used to be three separate farms and part of a fourth. This is as much a reflection of the opportunities my father's generation had to grow and expand, as it is a necessity to become larger just to remain a viable business.

Back in Dad's days most farms which came onto the market were bought by neighbouring farmers. Today they are often snapped up by lifestyle buyers who have made their wealth elsewhere and this is partly the reason why there is upward pressure on land prices. This makes it nigh-on impossible to see a return on the outlay through farming and makes it very difficult for the younger generation to find a way to owning their own farm.

Dad grew up here at Yarner with his younger brother and sister. He was a strong-minded and possibly rather feral child. I don't think he was going to do anything but farm and it's rather mind blowing to think that when he was a child in the forties he would have had a candle removed from his bedroom to ensure his safety during the night, whereas a mere eight decades later his own grandchildren

Top: *Exmoor horn ewes in the yard, 1930s.*
Above: *Tony aged three with the 'roadkeeper' Nath Cook, 1943; Tony as a young man on one of his ruby reds – he was more of a cowman than a horseman for sure.*

Below, left to right along both pages: *Ann, Mary hugging their mum Jenny, Sarah and John, with their little sister Helen riding the trike behind, May 1979, in the yard (note the quadrangle of 'shipins' behind them); John's grandfather, also John, c.1980; Tony feeding the cattle, Tarr Ball, 1989; feeding the sheep in 1994 with the help of the quad.*

have an iPhone removed for the very same reason. I digress, however the iPhone/candle comparison is somewhat mirrored by the monumental changes in farming during this time.

This farm is basically a hill farm capable of sustaining sheep and beef cattle, yet back when Dad was a child his father's Devon cows were being milked by hand and the milk was being turned into butter and cream. I can remember the days of hand milking a cow, but by then it was thankfully only one cow, fondly known as the house cow, as if she lived in the house with us five kids. She didn't! And she certainly wasn't a ruby red Devon. I can also remember her milk being turned into cream by Mum with the help of an amazing contraption called the 'separator'. Mum still has it. It runs on electricity and uses centrifugal force to push the cream out of one spout, and the watery part of the milk out of the opposite spout. Much as I'd love to see it creating the most amazing cream once again, hand milking a cow, twice daily, was a bind and a job which one could well do without at each end of the day, especially during the winter when the daylight gives way far too soon to the long, dark nights.

Back in Dad's early farming days his cows wintered outdoors by day, but would have been walked in to be chained up in stalls by night. These hill farms mostly only had old stone shipins back then, which housed the young stock, but the cows needed exercise from their nighttime stalls. During the eighties our quadrangle of shipins was removed to make way for a large, modern cattle building. Although sad to look back at photos and see the old shipins in all their

quaint glory, it's important to realise that farms on Exmoor also need to modernise to be able to compete, thrive and survive alongside other farms which lie outside of National Parks. We must never be forced to just be seen as museum pieces to be gazed upon in a sunny haze of romantic memories.

As we have modern sheds here now we calve our cows from mid-February to mid-March, whereas Dad would have calved mid-April to mid-May when the weather was more favourable. It's beneficial on many levels for us to be able to calve them in February/March because it means the calves are strong enough to take the rich May milk without getting scours. It also means that we can get calving out of the way before the crazy lambing period begins. We find that the cows hold to the bull better during May because on this farm the grass growth is much stronger then than it is in July, which is when the bull would be strutting his stuff if we calved April/May. It also means that we can sell the young stock at 14 months of age direct from the shed at the end of winter, when they are far more likely to pass the dreaded TB test, having spent the winter without possible contact with wildlife TB transmitters. I won't go into any details here with regard to bovine TB, other than to say that in Dad's early farming career it was unheard of to find it in cattle on Exmoor. Then protection was awarded to one of the nation's favourite wild animals, resulting in an unsustainable population explosion in said species, closely followed by a correlating explosion in TB cases in cattle. It's not rocket science... although with some of the suggested fixes aiming to rectify the whole shambles, I think rocket science an easier subject to study!

The food which our livestock lives on during the long Exmoor winter has changed little over the decades. At the beginning of winter the cattle are still fed mostly on hay, with some barley straw. This is the time when they need some extra belly filler. I suppose in Dad's early days the young cattle would have had some sheaves of oats which would have been cut by the binder, whereas nowadays the extra protein needed by the young stock is provided by bought-in concentrate feed.

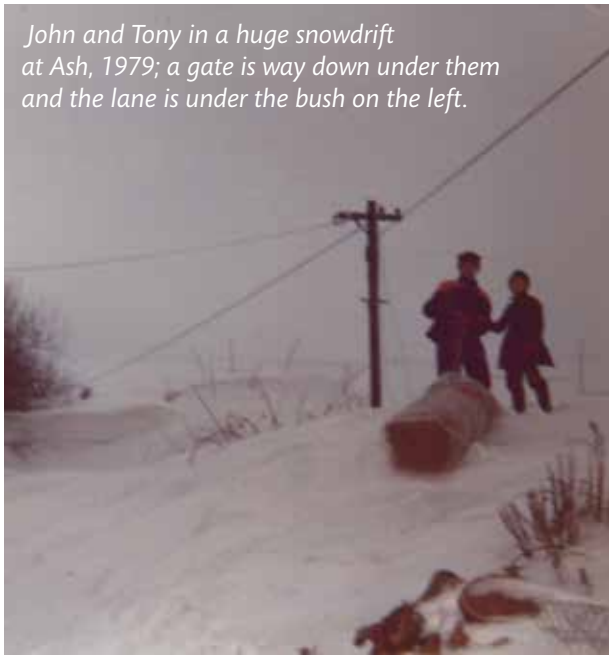
Much debate is currently circulating with regard to the origin of this feed, especially ingredients like soya. However, because we have stayed with the traditional native Devon cow, we have an animal which requires the absolute minimum in concentrate feed to thrive.

Throughout the post-war decade the need and the push for higher production led to a drastic reduction in native breed numbers, both with cattle and with sheep. The incoming Continental breeds, with their greater size and quicker growth rates, appealed to many for obvious reasons. What was not quite so obvious was just how much extra feed is needed to sustain the extra size and to obtain the faster growth. Of course, this all comes at a high cost – in terms of both pound sterling and the environmental cost associated with the production of the soya-/grain diets used. I'm grateful to my father for resisting the pressure to ditch our native ruby red Devons and Exmoor horn sheep here at Yarner, even though, for over 30 years, we have used a Charolais bull on two-thirds of our cows and the blue Leicester ram on two-thirds of our ewes to increase productivity.

Top: *A good example of a traditional ruby red Devon cow with her Charolais cross calf.*
Above: *Feeding the cattle in winter.*

It's always been the case that the priority on a livestock farm during winter is to keep the livestock fed. This makes the winter somewhat longer for cattle than sheep. Once the grass becomes a little watery and a little more scarce from late September onwards, the cattle need some dry hay to balance the wet grass diet, whereas the sheep will happily thrive on grass right through until mid-December – or even later provided an early fall of the white stuff hasn't arrived.

Digging out sheep at Exford Allotment, early January 1979, after the Boxing Day blizzard. Tony is third from the right as you look at the picture, and his brother Robert is second from the left.



John and Tony in a huge snowdrift at Ash, 1979; a gate is way down under them and the lane is under the bush on the left.

I suppose I can't write about winter here without mentioning the snow. I fear it as much as I fear a drought in the summer. Of course, I didn't live through either the winter of 1947 or 1963, although I feel I may as well have lived through '63 with the offloaded trauma of it passed my way by Dad. Actually, though, he was a very fit 23-year-old then, and I think once he and his brother, Robert, had beaten a path through deep snow with a mob of sheep all the way from Tarr Bull via Luccot, Bromham and Westcott Farms, they coped well through that horrendous winter.

The snow event which still haunts him to this day was a Boxing Day blizzard of 1978. Weather forecasts back then were not as accurate as they are today and Dad had walked sheep from rented land at Honeymead, near Simonsbath, to a piece of his father's land just Exford side of Chetsford. Snow was forecast and his story is that he should have shut them in a penned area but instead he let them go, and with the field containing a fresh bite of grass, they filled themselves and then lay down just prior to what was a pretty evil blizzard. If not for Mike Rawle looking in there after checking his own sheep next door, and getting them up on their feet, Dad says many, if not most, would have perished. As it was, I think he lost about 20, all buried under drifts up to 15 feet deep. When eventually the snow gave up its dead, it became clear that they had been crushed flat by the weight of snow.

The problem with snow up here is that it usually has a wind behind it which means it fills up the narrow, high-sided lanes and buries gateways, which makes getting feed to the livestock very difficult indeed. Upon a snowy forecast now I try to put the sheep in what I believe to be a safe place, depending on the direction of the wind, and I put feed on trailers ready for the worst-case scenario to play out.

One thing is certain; once a blizzard arrives it's too late to try to move sheep to safety and, in a very short space of time, it's also too late to try to move feed to them. You simply have to be prepared for the worst while hoping for the best. Unfortunately, this often means a lot of work which proves to be unnecessary when a weather forecast is incorrect. However, I would rather all the extra work involved than take a risk and be caught with buried sheep.

Here and right: *Recent winter feeding and moving.*

Alongside all the feeding routine, winter is mostly a time of farm maintenance and, with nearly 20 kilometres of earth-filled, stone-faced hedgerows here, there is always a section of hedge which needs cutting out and laying, or a piece of old wall which has crumbled, or a gatepost which has had its day. These tasks have mostly been made much easier over the decades, with the chainsaw replacing the axe and the mini digger replacing the iron bar to dig out a post hole or the foundation for a piece of stone wall. But one of the few things which hasn't changed here since my grandfather's day is the fact that it still takes a pair of hands, a good eye and the basic hand tools of a pickaxe, shovel and a sledge hammer to put up a piece of stone wall.

When I walk around this farm on a stormy winter's day and take shelter under a hedgerow with its stone-faced wall, I feel the toil of the previous generations and also the love for this farm passed on by those same generations, and I very much hope that the future generations here, whoever they may be, value it as I do, as a place of beauty, and a haven for all manner of life, from the smallest of bugs behind the stone walls to the mice and voles and the birds sheltering in the holly hedges. I also hope that in the panic and fear of climate change and in the clamour to re-wild our already wild places, this farm remains valued as a place of food production to help sustain our ever-growing population on this tiny island.

Top: *John feeding Exmoor horns in Lower Ground, 2022.*
Right: *Two pairs of before and after images showing the largest stone-walling project which has ever been undertaken at Yarner, 1995. John writes,"This was put up by me as a tribute to my grandfather John, who died whilst walling up the top end where the little holly tree can be seen. He always wanted the job done but I was only 22 when he died and it took me three years to build up the courage to tackle it. It wasn't a renovation... no wall existed there beforehand. All of the stone was hauled there to build it. The grey rectangle which you can see in the photo second from top is a little plaque which reads, 'In Memory of John Red Richards, 1913-1992.'*
Below: *John and Tony carrying out wall restoration work, 2022.*