

MEMORIES OF DEMESNE FARM

By Mervyn Archdale

(From a letter written in 1993 to his cousin, Ann Perfect Carpenter)

I'll really have to start this by filling in a bit of my earlier history, otherwise it will hardly make sense, since attitudes will have a lot to do with what I remember, at the same time explaining some of the weirder aspects of life on Demesne. I think I arrived at Demesne in May 1943 and left in October 1944 after nearly 18 months of unremitting hardwork. I'd written to Chris to ask him if he'd take me on as I'd really run out of ideas as to what I could do; after spending a year - or almost a year - trying to get into the Services by fair means or foul, having failed the medicals at every turn. My medical history had started a lot earlier in 1935 when I was eleven and had, on the way from Prep school, scratched my knee on the wing of a London taxi and this had led to an infection in my knee, of which I still have memories of the incompetent and opinionated surgeon at Tyrone County Hospital who treated the crop of boils that appeared by freezing them with liquid nitrogen and digging the core out with an instrument like a refined apple corer. This gross mistreatment not only crippled me for the summer holidays, but then, on my return to school, I collapsed while playing cricket and was taken to the sanatorium where I remained for a fortnight, undiagnosed, before they told my mother: she was en route to the Sudan and when she got a wireless message to say that I was dying she transferred to a homecoming liner in mid-Mediterranean and got home in five days and through energetic action and getting hold of a mobile X-ray machine from London, I was diagnosed as having osteomyelitis, which is an acute infection of the bone marrow, for which the only treatment known at that time, was immobilisation and removal of the infected part of the marrow - not easy in my pelvis where it had settled or in my knee where it started.

I spent the next four years in various hospitals, nearly totally enclosed in plaster from my neck to my feet and was only cut out of it to allow me to grow or have major surgery. I also had septicaemia and went into a coma for some time and when I eventually emerged, sans education or any real experience of life, I only weighed four stone and was badly spoilt. I managed to get into Westminster School through a tutor who spent hours of patient teaching preparing me for the Entrance exam, rightly assuming that if I had a classical grounding it would work, which it did and it wasn't until I was there that I realised that I was almost entirely without any grounding in mathematics, the sciences, English, History, etc. Though I'd read books solidly for years that had been unstructured. This was 1939 and Westminster was evacuated to Sussex and split up. My house and another went to Hurstpierpoint and the rest of the school to Lancing College. This was most unfortunate because both places happened to be inside the 30 mile military evacuation zone round the coast which was announced after Dunkirk and the school itself in London was almost completely destroyed by bombing: so we were split up into individual homes and sent to Herford where we were bussed to a central teaching area. My parents were by now thoroughly alarmed by my total lack of education and the disruption which was going on; so I was taken away and sent to Campbell College in Belfast, or at least they tried to send me there in October 1941, which was just the time when the big air raids took place and the College was evacuated to an hotel in Portrush on the north coast, where I spent the rest of my school days - a record five terms in one spot. This in itself was disrupted by most of the

regular staff leaving to join the Forces and replaced by retired teachers who came back and my housemaster happened to be a very odd retired housemaster from Harrow with a beautiful 25 year old French wife. This oddity took a real shine to me because I had an English accent and was, of course, very sophisticated relatively speaking; as most youngsters are who have spent a long time in hospital, mixing with adults and reading, reading, reading - sometimes 3 or 4 books a week on every conceivable subject. This man - the Rev. Kittermaster - made me a prefect in my second term over the heads of boys who had been at the school for all their school life and consequently I had to fight for my position all the time; at the same I wasn't allowed to take part in sport as it was assumed that an injury would start up the osteomyelitis again. Anyway I eventually, having failed to pass a single examination, after gazing at the paper in complete incomprehension, left to try and join the Air Force and after trying in every conceivable way and by coming back to N.I. where the combined Services Recruiting Station could accept you for any sort of war service and where there was no conscription, I thought I'd get into the Merchant Navy but they turned me down too.

Incidentally, it was an odd coincidence that I got a letter from my old tutor, Paul Grotrean, with whom I still correspond, on the same day that I received your letter: he is now 80 years old and had read a letter of mine that was published and that coincidence is one reason why this preamble is so long. I apologise for it, but as you can see, I'm not averse to writing about myself and the more I wrote, the better I recalled things and hopefully the more I will remember about Demesne.

Anyway, at the time that I finally gave up hope of getting into the Services and being virtually unqualified for anything; I'd been to stay with your grandmother, my Aunt Cecil; she told me that Chris was desperate for help as he'd lost two men to conscription and why didn't I go and help him while I was trying to make up my mind. I knew Chris well, both from the Sudan - he'd even been to stay with us at Mountfield in 1936 with John Gaaskell - who incidentally was regarded by my father as being a bit of a "flaneur" and a dilettante, though a good administrator, though a terrible lad for the girls - incidentally I'd love to get hold of the book you mention by him, I've never read it and if you could send me the details I'd be most grateful - I've plenty of photos from 1906 up to 1947. I've also a very good photo of Chris doing the milk records at Demesne which I could get copied and send to you. I adored his first wife, Leila, who was my godmother and who died so tragically in childbirth, and of course I'd known Maudie especially well as she had been at Royston Chase where I'd spent any time out of hospital that I'd had when I was really ill; as well, Aunt Cecil had looked after us when my mother went out to the Sudan; at that time she was the PA - secretary in those days - to Dean Inge; a very famous intellectual cleric; which gave me a great respect for Maudie's intelligence: as well as that, the lifestyle of everyone at Royston Chase was most attractive. Somehow Aunt Cecil and Nini had enough money to keep up that lovely house and its grounds while all the family had strings of foreign friends so the whole place was very cosmopolitan. This then was the background to my arriving at Demesne in 1943 on a perfect summer's day and I remember looking out of my bedroom window at a full moon when the grass had been freshly mown and thinking that it was the most traditional English farming scene imaginable; the moon, the roses (in May?) the oil lamps, (a real shaker those) the drift houses behind and the thought of my not really knowing what I had to do.

The first thing to realise was that there was an incredible amount to do every day; not plodding agricultural work, but work done at a ferocious pace, just to get it done in the daylight hours: Chris was basically not a farmer - he was a teacher, headmaster, administrator; an academic really who would have been perfectly at home in some university as a reader in Greek History or something. His mind worked meticulously but slowly and one of my abiding memories, and I'm sure not mine alone, was of him sitting at the end of the table after breakfast, rocking backward and forward, eyes shut and really struggling to tell me what to do for the day - enormous pauses - groans - shouts - curses; ("I suppose we've got to sow that bloody field") while any sort of question from me jiggered the whole thing as he groped for answers but lost his train of thought. All sorts of bizarre considerations conditioned life at the farm: Maudie wasn't allowed to use the food produced for us to eat, only to the same amount as the rest of the populace, who were all strictly rationed; this of course was far from popular and as she hadn't time to grow her own vegetables and she was only allowed to use the car once a week for shopping my arrival was something of a relief, as I was perfectly prepared to steal the food (potatoes, cabbages, cauliflowers, etc.) and soon had the hens laying on more generous rations, as well as skimming the night 'befores' churns for cream early in the morning, which was the ultimate sin, but then I was perfectly placed to get away with it. I also shot a lot of rabbits, poached pheasants and snared regularly.

The one concession to all this was that a pig was fattened on leftovers and it was another abiding memory to have the kitchen hung with home cured hams and other bits of pig that were laughably considered edible. But as neither Chris nor Maudie had the faintest notion of how to cure ham, or smoke it - there was no smoker - and whoever it was that came in to help - (I've really forgotten most names) - was equally incompetent and though we lived 'high off the hog' for a while, it soon became absolutely disgusting; in effect raw pork covered with saltpetre on it and developing maggots nearer the bone. This of course had to be eaten - "think of all those who never see a decent bit of ham" - I'd have given my right arm for a decent bit of ham; until one day when it made both of us ill and that was that.

My first job was to be sent down to the 20 acre field across the main road, with the 'piece workers' to single marrow stone kale (?). These gangs of itinerant Irishmen and women - mostly from Donegal, Sligo and Mayo - were the best and hardest workers I'd ever seen and I imagine Chris sent me down there to get rid of me, as I was seriously outclassed. I'm not sure now of the rates per piece, but a piece was a perch and a perch was 5 yards and I think they got a penny a perch and an experienced worker could single one perch a minute and I remember the ganger saying that it was the best job in the world as they could make 'a dollar an hour': a dollar was five shillings - in Irish speak, so - as they worked ten hours a day that was 2 pounds 10 shillings per day and 2 pounds 10 shillings per week was the average wage for a farm labourer; so these itinerant workers were not popular, though they were incredibly efficient and as the plants grew fast, making them harder to keep going once singled out so that the whole field was finished in 5 days; as some of the field was mangolds and some of it carrots (I think) this made it more difficult; though each worker - I've calculated - needed to single 216 perches per day. If this is correct though it reduces the individual earnings to 18 shillings per day or 5 pounds 8 shillings per week, which sounds about right.

I myself was not paid - in fact I think I paid, or rather my father paid the usual apprentice fee of 2 pounds 10 shillings per month - this changed as I got more useful; though I can't remember ever being paid more than 3 pounds per week. It was most amusing to collect from Chris years afterwards - my insurance cards, none of which had been stamped; when I reached pensionable age, a good while back, they wrote and asked me where they were and I had to tell them that I hadn't been able to get hold of them! All this time, of course, I was being fed like a fighting cock by Maudie and damned good it was too, though I still remember her saying that she had never seen anyone eat as much: I suppose, with the long hours, the truly back breaking work and the fact that I was probably making up physically for all the years of enforced inactivity made my appetite greater; the rabbit pies, the chicken pies, the cakes, fruit, etc., you name it and I don't think Maudie was an enthusiastic cook at heart. I can't now remember names, but there was a woman who came in and she did some cleaning and occasionally cooking; once, famously, when Maudie had to do a terrible stint of jury service - in Manchester for some reason - which lasted for 6 weeks and nearly drove her mad as it was some terribly mucky rape case that she wouldn't discuss and entailed her having the car every day from 9.30 a.m. until about 5.00 p.m. [As APC remembers, it was a court case in Chester and it involved the murder of a small child by another child.] There was no pay, only expenses and I can still remember Chris' howls of fury each evening when she came home: "My God, Maudie! Still not finished. Can't you break a leg or something? It's not fair; Merk and I are starving to death; the farm is falling to bits; we can't stand it." As you know, Chris was sometimes a bit given to making a fuss.

I'm puzzled why I can't remember what happened to you and Johnnie at that time. Were you at day-school, or was it that Madame Weasel (as Chris called her) kept you so well under hatches that I never saw you, or were you so angelic that you tolerated Maudie's absence without protest? The French governess - she arrived while I was there - was a bit of a dragon, I think: you were her favourite - outrageously so - and it grieves me to tell you this - but you played up to her like mad and I think this was the cause of her early departure, as it was having a disastrous effect on Johnnie whom you had taken to bullying like hell. I remember giving you a hell of a slap one day for beating him with a small cricket bat and being tackled by Maudie about it. I would imagine now - because I do remember other incidents prior to this - that her influence, coupled to the fact that Johnnie was so much slower mentally than you, which Mademoiselle (Madame Weasel) found annoying; added up to her getting the push fairly quickly.

I hope - this is a suitable time to say this - that you were prepared for the flood of reminiscence that you have unleashed. I wasn't. I have found, though, that, even though I'm really frantically busy, I'm recalling more and more (like you) and it has driven me on to write.

I was intending to send you a couple of pages at a time, to ease the strain of reading all this at one go; but I've decided that authors are meant to suffer for their art, so I will finish in due course - a couple of sheets a morning between 6.30 and 8.30 - then send the whole heavy lump. Incidentally, I'm keeping a copy of this, in case I change my mind. A long delay happened after having written the above; sheer exhaustion after a fortnight's rewiring the house. Not a room that hasn't been turned upside down and with

everything all ahoo, nothing can be found and everything is covered in a thin layer of plaster dust from the old lime and sand mortar with which this old house is put together. Some job and Aureole is exhausted. The process is a bit prolonged, as the electricians have to up everything back to normal each night and leave us with the old system working, for Jo's sake. She is virtually blind now, so is foxed by holes in the floor or stray wires lying about; the men are marvellous though and very cheerful and considerate with her and I think that we only have another couple of days to go now.

Back to Demesne: - I remember playing with you two children quite often, largely during the summer; getting you up on the wagonload of wheat that was being brought in. Its incredible to think that we had three horses working then and an old 'Ford Production Fordson' as they were called. An old cow of a tractor which ran on TVO (Tractor Vaporising Oil) no hydraulics of course - our own Massy Ferguson hadn't invented them yet - so it was something between a horse and a truck; very slow, with spiked iron wheels which one put on to plough with and an old Lister-Cock Canadian plough which had a break away peg in the hitch - usually a stick out of the hedge - which broke if the plough hit a stone. It's hard to realise now, but farmers were under orders to plough up their old pastures and sow leys, as they were called; short term grasses that were more productive, responded to fertiliser and were ploughed up after three years for crops. It was pain and grief for Chris to do this, especially in Cheshire with its relatively dry and sandy soil which was hard on grass in the summer and much more suited to old established pasture that the ley; I remember ploughing up acres of grass with wild flowers, while Chris roared and cursed the bureaucrats of the Ministry. Quite right too. I remember a year later when I was working in Buckinghamshire with another farmer; staying with an old Sudan friend, Victor Whalley, who had somehow got the job as Chief Agricultural Executive Officer, though he knew nothing about any sort of farming except cotton growing in the Sudan. I went round with him a couple of times and he often said, "So-and-so won't do as he's told, so I must go and give him a final warning or I'll have to dispossess him." Amazingly draconian powers he had, quotas to be filled, permits for this and that, real Stakanovite stuff. Anyway, I had never been taught to plough and Chris was a real stickler for doing it right and the old trailer ploughs were hell to set for the backs and ? The foreman - whose name I've forgotten - gave me a very rough and ready lesson and away I went. What a mess. Of course Chris couldn't plough so when he saw my results on the first day I got cursed, and as the foreman refused to show me a second time I had to find another man at another farm to show me. I really only remember Salmon, the cowman, Billy Salmon I think, with his echoing, Hoe, Hoe, Hoeeee! cry to bring the cows in to milk and his marvellous athletic run and I used to make him run just to see him do so. Years afterwards when I watched Bobby Charlton, playing soccer for England, on T.V. I was immediately struck by the resemblance. He, Salmon, was also a very good waggoner and was the only one fully trusted with a chain horse, i.e. an extra horse on chains to help with big loads and indeed it was he who was ploughing the garden with the lovely Clydesdale gelding which, while turning in the confined space in front of the house, got its foot over the traces and fell on the stem of the coulter of the plough, which went up the inside of its hind leg and severed his femoral artery and he bled to death in a couple of minutes. Both Chris and Salmon were shattered by this and I think that ended horses at Demesne. I remember the immensely strong young man who looked after the bull - amongst other things - he was without fear and used to go into the bull's pen and feed it without a thought even though it was very unpredictable and the rest of us handled it

with care. It knocked down the wall of its house and got out one night into the US Army camp - it wasn't a Polish camp at that stage - and Chris and I had a nervy drive round after it in the back of a jeep with a couple of trigger happy 'Snowdrops', as the Military Police were called, looking for it as it roared round the camp; it actually went through a Quonset Hut with 60 men in it and out the other end without killing anyone, before we got it back by driving the cows into the camp to make it follow them.

Lord, how things come back, though not in sequence I'm afraid: I remember the US Army coming to Doddington. Hundreds of trucks coming down off the transports that came into Liverpool. The equipment far more sophisticated and modern than anything we'd seen before; two regiments of Engineers, I remember; one black which was greeted with fear and suspicion; of course, the US Army was completely segregated then and the blacks did all the menial jobs and indeed we never saw them. When they arrived though, the trucks were all driven by the black soldiers at crazy speeds; one towing the other to save petrol, sometimes two or three if there had been a breakdown and I have vivid memories of them thundering down the main road with, in a lot of cases, the drivers of the towed trucks lying across the front with his feet out of the window! I still remember what huge feet they all seemed to have and the fact that most of them were driving on the right of the road.

The Americans were absolutely stuck for training areas and they came to Chris and asked if they could level one of his fields for him with their bulldozers - of which they'd scores - as training. Chris was outraged but eventually relented and after some negotiation with the estate they did it and I remember being madly excited by the speed and efficiency with which the whole thing was done in a couple of days.

I (or rather everyone) cordially loathed the 'Yanks' for their loud mouthed, brash attitude and general air of 'coming over to get you poor natives out of a mess', and I still have a letter from my father warning me not to risk another fight with a soldier, 'because he and his friends will undoubtedly gang up and probably come over and kill you'. Sound advice, I'm sure, though I can't remember the incident. I've just cast my eyes over some of the preceding pages. It's terribly unstructured I'm afraid, and because one incident leads to another, I have not developed them - just as well maybe, or this might never end - so the result is a bit of a mish mash without sequence or real meaning. I think I should try and convey the atmosphere a bit, since it was important to me and has probably conditioned my approach to my farming life ever since.

First of all it was eminently reclusive. Maudie, I believe, hated it. She loathed farming and hated housework and I'm sure resented the loss of her rather intellectual life before marriage. Though not unhappy she was, I'm sure, a bit trapped and really missed the travel and the large number of highly intelligent friends that she had known. She and Chris got on very well and I hardly remember a row, though she got terribly fed up with Chris' mannerisms and also, with my untidiness and lack of consideration: I remember how I used to use the oil lamps to burn up the flies that settled on the low ceilings. This, of course, left oily soot marks on the ceiling and the lamp full of dead flies. It became a vice with me. An obsession. I used to do it on the sly, then clean the lamp; this made for endless work but could not be concealed and led to some fairly fraught scenes between us. Those lamps. God, how I loathed them! They all had their own names,

which I considered fairly laughable, and a fairly sacrosanct feeling had developed about them so that they were tended with great care and lauded by Maudie as providing such a nice light. This rather bizarre behaviour meant that it took Maudie hours each day, tending them and this was a subject of frequent complaint. As far as I remember, we had a lighting plant for the buildings, but oil lamps for the house! I don't think Maudie objected to my eating so much, though it must have doubled her work and she did all my laundry and sewing which I blithely gave to her without a thought; as I'd never known a life without packs of servants. With hindsight though, they asked a lot of me as a 19-year old. I never went out. Not anywhere. Not to another house, a dance, the pub; not even to Nantwich which I only went to twice in 18 months, though I used to cycle a bit on Sunday afternoons - I had every second Sunday afternoon off - though of course there was no petrol and that damned little Ford Popular Chris had was only allowed out on rare occasions. Chris got me up at 6.00 a.m. and inevitably woke me with the same cry of, "Come on Merk, we're late, it's ten past six"; we made tea downstairs and then milked; came in for breakfast at 9.00; a huge lunch at 12.30; an equally huge meal at 6.30 and worked in the summer till dark and in the winter till 6.30. So we never did less than 12 hours a day less an hour and a half for food, and frequently worked till 11.30 p.m. So really we were doing between 78 and 106 hours work a week and nothing else. Chris did accounts after breakfast and I did the milk records in the evenings in the winter but apart from some rudimentary studying that Chris thought would be good for me, nothing else. I don't remember seeing any locals at the house either, though some relatives came. I particularly enjoyed Cicely when she came since we got on so well. One evening we had rissoles for supper and I had left some hard bits that had been rather overcooked on my plate; afterwards, while doing the washing up Cissie said, "Oh! I love little hard bits, it's a shame to leave them," and proceeded to eat them. After a bit I said, "What are they like Cissie? I didn't like them, that's why I spat them out." The resultant shock, horror led us on to so much hilarity that we ended up in breaking a number of Maudie's favourite dinner service, which was far from popular.

When Maudie was expecting your sister, Ann, Kate, my sister came to look after Chris and me. I adored Kate, but I was in such a repressed frame of mind I couldn't speak to her and found things to do and even hid in the drift house rather than talk to her. She thought I'd gone bonkers, and in a way I'm sure I had as I considered myself trapped, with no future, no education or training, no money, not able to get into the Services and no plans. This was a hard time for Chris. I can't remember how it came about but the baby died and I remember how sorry I felt for Maudie when she took me in to see this lovely child with a head of black hair lying in this tiny coffin on the spare bed. Did she have a name? [Maud] Then talking to Chris and trying to comfort him and his talking to me for the first time about Leila and how he'd thought his life was over and his immense sense of guilt that she had died in childbirth and what a frightful experience it had been. I'd never seen a dead child before, indeed the only dead person I'd seen prior to that had been Leila and I'd been devastated by that as a child; so the death of this baby, whose arrival we'd all looked forward to, cast a pall of gloom over us all and when Kate left, to go back to her unit in Bedfordshire, I nearly left as well.

Few visitors came to Demesne. Your uncle Dick and Elizabeth for a week, which cheered us all up: he said at dinner one day, with that infectious laugh of his - "My God, Chris, I'd like to be able to see into your head sometimes and see if the wheels are

turning at all"; this after an immense delay, with Chris swaying backwards and forwards with his eyes shut, trying to answer some totally commonplace question.

At the time when Kate was looking after the house she heard roaring and moaning at the breakfast table so came in and asked him what was wrong: "God, Kate!" he yelled, "I've just realised it's my birthday and I'm 40 years old. Ye Gods! Forty! More than half my life gone and what am I doing here? It's stupid. Doing something I loathe, while everyone else is doing something worthwhile." It was this remark of his that influenced me 30 years later - amongst other things - to give up active farming and do more of the things I wanted to do. It was also a time - when Maudie was recuperating after the death of the child - that there was a period when everything went at a less intense pace and we sat about over food and talked; Maudie about Spain and how she loved it; about Vigo and Corunna; Roseires(?) and the Spanish relations and her time with Dean Inge, with its weird selection of literati and her fellow secretary, a hypochondriac, on whom they place bets to see what portion of her anatomy was going wrong on that particular day: 'stabbing pains in both nostrils,' as an ailment, has become a family synonym for some imagined ill, which has lasted to this day. As you know, your mother had a really earthy sense of humour; I suppose the best way to describe it is to say both she and Chris enjoyed the grosser sort of Gillray cartoon, the really scatological jokes; which I, being a bit of a prig, found shocking.

The one thing that never came out though, despite my curiosity which has remained to this day, because my mother would never tell us what really happened; was what happened to your grandfather - Aunt Cecil's husband - who committed suicide, ostensibly (according to legend) because he lost the naval codes for the Grand Fleet, while consul in Vigo [1920-1923]. That the consul should have the codebooks at all is unlikely; that he should lose them and think that this was a matter of extreme dishonour, is ludicrous. Have you ever heard?

I hope that when you do your marathon walk next year that you will revisit some of the places that the Guyatt family loved. Not only the Guyatt family, but the Talbot girls as well. My mother, Aunt Cecil and Nini, all spoke Spanish as a matter of course, as did the Guyatt family; in looks, they - the men- were all very Spanish; their thought processes too, especially your Uncle Tom, who really should have been an entertainer he had such a facility with the guitar which, when I was ill, he used to play and sing Spanish songs to me for hours. Charlotte Maud, who was a flamenco dancer supreme, as slim as a willow and could eat two 16 oz T-bone steaks at a sitting and taught both Angel and Kate to dance the Spanish dances in a way that woke up Omagh. Cicely, I'm sure, would have memories of Northern Spain that should not be lost. Perhaps Andrew has the tales in his mind. I must ask him. It would make a nice finale to your walk. Back to Demesne: the reason for this literary affluence; with its claustrophobic atmosphere and the tone that Chris set of continually kicking against the pricks.

He said to me one day when I said I really couldn't eat the duck's eggs, they looked so foul, though tasted good - they had been eating acorns and the yolks were shaded from dark green to black and smelt quite strongly: "If you do go into farming, Merk, you must leave all your sensibilities behind and make up your mind that you will never have any money". How true. Incidents like that have been coming back to me since I started this.

I'm sure you have grown sick of reading it - and I don't know how to stop. I haven't really told you about the actual farming. The soil on the farm was so light and blow away, that for years the place had been 'marled'. This marl pit was beside the 20-acre field across the main road and a place of particular fascination to me, with its very steep sides and the deep water - rumour had it at 70 feet deep; which was full of newts and the first place I ever saw a stickleback's nest. The marl used to be brought up in tubs by horses and a pulley system, then taken and spread on the land. Tom, the really traditional farm labourer, who was really the carter, told me that he'd 'marled' in his day though I can't really believe this as he was basically too young, but it must have been back-breaking work because the marl was likely putty when wet and set into lumps like stones when dry.

One of the things that Chris was very fussy about was that all the grass should be rolled each spring to consolidate the land and stop it drying out. I rolled it with the old 'Food Production Ford' and was under orders to roll it slowly - i.e. in 2nd gear at half throttle, which was possibly one and a half mph and with 15 foot of ring roller behind (i.e. 5 yards wide, an acre is 70 yards by 70 yards) it took me an unbelievable length of time to complete and I tried every dodge to stay awake while doing it: singing, shouting, reading a book - this impossible since one had to search to see one's previous track on the hard ground. OK when I started with dew on the ground but as it dried out, invisible. I even designed a rig so that I could walk beside it and steer, but I found that I couldn't see the mark from that level; it never occurred to me at the time but has since, that Chris might have set the speed so ludicrously low, unnecessarily so, to get rid of me for hours at a time; because I now know - having trained dozens of young men that a job that they can do unsupervised, that lasts a great length of time, is a godsend. That damned old tractor was most unpredictable to boot as its kingpins were so worn by the impossibly heavy, direct steering and coarse cut worn shaft, that it wandered about with a perceptible pause between turning the wheel and a response - like steering a ship. This amiable trait was responsible for me hitting an electricity pole with the point of the cutter bar on the mower, breaking the shaft; not once but twice, in the same field, much to Chris' fury, especially since we didn't have electricity.

The advent of new technology and methods which was just coming in was not easy for anyone and made for extra work while we all struggled to find out how to handle it. For instance making hay: this was still done with a mower designed for horses (thus not able to stand up to anything faster) as were the swath-turner and the hay rake; but then it was baled in a wire tying baler, with the result that the hay was too green for these big bales, (they often weighed 200 lbs.) they were murder to handle loading 120 bales on to a moving trailer in the field, by hand, was an acquired skill - and once brought home and put in a shed, rapidly heated and became mouldy. On one famous occasion we had to take it all out again - probably 2,000 to 3,000 bales, take it back to the field, untie it and shake it out, whereupon it started to rain: the result was indifferent hay of lung damaging mouldiness and the precursor of what is now an industrial disease, Farmers Lung, which I have! Thinking about the disaster with the hay reminds me of another disaster that happened when Chris put his barley crop, from the field, into the drift houses, which of course was what they were built to hold. When we came to threshing there wasn't a single sheaf that had not had its string cut by mice. I can still recall my fury and Chris' despair at the loss, which was calamitous; my fury was due partly because I had to try and fork out these, tons upon tons of loose straw, in some

manageable way onto the thresher so that the feeder could handle it and the dirt from the destroyed grain, mouse droppings, baby mice, chaff, barley awns, etc. that rained down on one the whole time as you struggled to lift a forkful up to the thresher and all to no avail as 90% of the grain had been eaten. How they coped with mice in the past when they built these damned (though beautiful) buildings: full of holes for ventilation, with massive timbers for them to run about on and interconnected to all the other buildings, I'll never know. I went out the morning after the threshing finished, by which time most mice had moved on, and killed over 300 on the walls and falling from the rafters. The cats were comatose. There were owls sitting on the rafters suffering no doubt from mouse indigestion and a carpet of dead mice - bagfuls - on the floor. What that story reminds me of is that the thresher was manned, or rather womaned, by land-girls. Great fun but not really capable of the killing work - railway sacks, as they were called, holding 18 stone of wheat = 252 lbs. 12 stone of oats, 2 cwt. [2 hundredweight] of barley, etc. - and it was always tricky setting the tractor, thresher and baler, which were belt driven; so that the belts didn't work their way off the pulleys. I was always called upon to set them after a couple of girls had tried for ages - to Chris' mounting fury - to get them into line and eventually had burst into tears. The land-girls were quite popular though, and came round in gangs to help with harvest jobs; others worked singly on a farm for 6 months or so: one gang had a friend known since childhood, Pat McAusland, who still lives her in Omagh; another famous occasion when a gang of North Country girls came and were helping with the hay and I had taken my shirt off, this girl suddenly took hers off too, saying it wasn't fair, added to the attraction of the land-girls over the other workers such as the Italian POW who came from a camp nearby. They were absolutely useless - they probably all came from Milan or some town like that - at farming, though full of fun and surprisingly well provided with food, which was a bonus; indeed one of them arrived with a whole dish of spaghetti one day and Maudie had a great day talking to him while he cooked for us all. Spaghetti was unobtainable for us, though, and Chris only ate it with extreme reluctance, though it was delicious. One has to remember that the "Eyeties" were then regarded with absolute contempt and considered pusillanimous, treacherous and comic; we found them great fun and quite able to communicate without a word of English and much better value than the rather stolid British soldier who had the snip job of guarding them. When I went on to another farm in Buckinghamshire and saw the German POW - I was put in charge of a gang of 60, lifting potatoes - and saw the relentless efficiency with which they worked and the contempt with which they regarded us; even though they instantly did what I told them to do; it was a real shaker and not at all what years of propaganda had led us to believe.

Another incident at Demesne was when I was talking to the driver of a lorry which I was helping to load with potatoes, and he started to count the bags in Arabic as a show-off; because he'd just returned wounded from the 8th Army in North Africa. I had instant recall of my own childhood Arabic - I spoke Arabic better than I spoke English at one stage, though never at Demesne, though both Chris and Maudie were Arabic speakers - and was able to count up to what was probably the limit of my ability when I was a child, in Arabic and without effort. I don't know if you knew that Maudie had once had a poem written in Arabic published by a Sudanese paper.

Recalling the land-girls now, makes me wonder how I fared without any girls at all in that 18 months of hard work. The incident of the bare-breasted land-girl obviously

impressed me, but I have not the smallest recollection of ever having felt the need to hunt up the local talent, never went to a dance, had no social life and went nowhere. It would seem incredible in this day and age. I do remember your two young cousins coming - were they Chris' nieces - aged about 12/14, who followed me about for a couple of days and my acute embarrassment when they saw the bull serving a cow and they had no inhibitions about asking strings of questions. I had great fun with the family though and remember their mother singing: "Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy" and Nat Gonolla's Three Little Fishes and The Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as many of the Irish songs: Kitty of Coleraine, The Mountains of Mourne, Galway Boy and the Percy French songs that Chris knew - there must have been a piano somewhere in the house, though seldom used.

I'm about reaching the end of the narration and I may try and get it off today as the compulsion to write this, at a time when we are furiously busy with repairs, has meant I've neglected my other paper work seriously - I'm sure if this is anything like what you had in mind I seem to have remembered little of note except farming disasters - some of which I haven't put down such as the outbreak of brucellosis in the herd, starting - how can I recall this? - with cow no. 54 and going on to make 20 or so cows abort, which in its turn led to infertility and a dramatic drop in the amount of milk produced. This plunged Chris into the deepest despair and for a time threatened the whole of the future of the farm. I can't remember all the details, how we got rid of the cows that couldn't be got in calf, where did replacements come from, etc. I suppose I wasn't geared to considering the management side in those days. I buried fetuses ad nauseum though. Brucellus abortus wasn't a notifiable disease in those days, nor was there a policy of killing a whole herd; thence no compensation, as there was years later; though I think I'm right in saying the slaughter policy was there for tuberculosis, as there was for foot-and-mouth disease. In a way it was remarkable that we didn't get brucellosis ourselves. When I'd been farming here [Northern Ireland] for twenty years, my neighbour got the disease in his suckler herd and though it was compulsory to report it, he didn't and kept quiet about it. Eventually, having lurked round this farm, unexpectedly coming over for breakfast and holding me up by talking for ages, he finally told me and I persuaded him to tell the relevant officials. Of course he was in the biggest possible trouble then; so he had a nervous breakdown and was put in the local psychiatric hospital for 6 months (actually not as long, though it felt like it). His wife couldn't cope so I and my cowman had to go over and see to disposal of his herd of 94 cows and their calves. I was terrified that my cows would get the disease and we used to keep two boiler suits at the end of the lane; strip; get into them; have a bath when we got back and, eventually, burnt the boiler suits. The vets from the Dept. of Agriculture blood-letted my herd continuously and tried to get to slaughter them, but I refused. I got away with it though until my super cowman developed it - a man with a young family - which meant he had to go to hospital for quite a long time and it took him over two years to recover. I discovered that he wasn't covered by my insurance, so went to see him in hospital and told him that if he tried to get compensation he would probably succeed but would ruin me and could do nothing. He readily agreed not to take action, so I set to try and get the disease recognised as an industrial disease; in which I eventually succeeded and that meant he got a far higher rate of sickness benefit; though it meant that I had to get a new Order rushed through Parliament at Westminster. Chris told me years afterwards that it never occurred to him that we all could have been at risk, including, of course, you children!

Another disaster that you probably remember better than me because it happened after I left, was when he had eleven heifers killed by lightning in the park, where they sheltered under an oak tree. It's nearly incredible now to look back and remember the odd skills that I learnt so many years ago, which have stayed with me. One of them was the skill I have at reversing farm trailers and I don't know anyone else that can do it; this was because of the old four-wheeled horse wagon, on iron shod cartwheels, which often had another tractor trailer behind it. Normally with a trailer, if you turn the front wheels to the right, the tail of the trailer goes right. This old wagon, though, had a bogey at the front for the two front wheels, which turned, so you had to do the opposite to get the back end to go the way you wanted which it would do at twice the speed as one set of wheels. If you had another trailer (4-wheeled) behind that it multiplied the effect eight times; this was the skill I eventually acquired and could do easily with full loads and to this day have no difficulty reversing on wing mirrors and can do so for miles at high speed and without getting a stiff neck. Well, that's about it, Ann. Things are beginning to run together in my mind and I can't distinguish fact from fancy; the years are running together a bit seamlessly. I don't know if I've conveyed the atmosphere or not; best remembered by me by planting out cauliflower plants, for example, which we did once anyway, with Chris rending the skies with his moans and shouts - cursing his sore back - "God, how I hate doing this", etc; miles slower than anyone else but refusing to stop and let us do it. Obsessive. Unremitting hard work. Boring. Claustrophobic. Yet at the same time, both Chris and Maudie were immensely kind to me, when I must have been a sore trial to them and probably, at least at the start; more trouble than I was worth, what with being totally untrained, with hardly any endurance and in a very mixed-up frame of mind at the time.

It's very striking how Robert Hort's experience paralleled mine, inasmuch that he quite suddenly realised that if he didn't leave that he would go mad and dash around in circles uttering shrill cries! As you can see, my writing has gone to hell too, so I'll send this off as it stands - no revision - apologies for all the bad syntax - alterations - bad punctuation, etc. I hope it won't be a greater task to read that the reminiscences are worth. I've really enjoyed writing all this and have made a copy, so that if you have any queries, just quote the page. There are a few more things I can recall, if Robert comes up with his I'll send them, but on the whole I've probably done more than you expected. My salaams to Rick and good luck in his retirement. Enjoy your walk, it sounds like a lovely idea. Any chance of your ever coming to this damp but lovely place and seeing something of what has kept me here over forty years?

Lots of love, Mervyn.

The Cottage Farm. 31st May, 1993