THE VALUE OF LIFE STORIES OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Discussion

Jon Agar, Fiona Harvey, Sally Horrocks and Paul Merchant

Abstract: The National Life Stories project, 'An Oral History of Farming, Land Management and Conservation in Post-War Britain', recorded fifty long-form interviews. This is an edited transcript of a panel discussion reflecting on the themes and evidence revealed in the oral history testimony, held as part of the international symposium 'The Life Story in Oral History Practice' on 30 June 2023. The panellists were environmental journalist Fiona Harvey, historians of science Professor Jon Agar (who chaired the discussion) and Dr Sally Horrocks, and the oral historian and interviewer for the project Dr Paul Merchant. Topics discussed include: the economic and moral pressures to pursue maximised food production; the use of technology; the awareness of the degradation of the natural environment; the influence and role of expert agricultural advisers; the experience of change in the countryside; the uncertainties and challenges introduced under climate change; and the contributions oral history, especially long-form, life-story oral history, can make to understanding the past and present and opening up choices for the future.

Jon Agar: Hello everyone, I'm Jon Agar and I'm going to be chairing a discussion, and I'll introduce our panellists in a second. So our plan is, you've heard some of … an incredibly rich set of interviews from the project, and I'm going to be asking our panellists some questions about what they've heard and some of the themes that have come out from that, and then we'll be opening it up to a more general Q&A. So that's the plan for today.

Let me introduce my panellists and then I'll say a little bit myself. So we're delighted to be joined by Fiona Harvey. Fiona Harvey is an award-winning journalist who's covered the environment since 2004 at the, first the *Financial Times*, and more recently *The Guardian* where she is now environmental editor. She's written extensively on environmental issues, air pollution, biodiversity, farming practice, soil health and climate change, and a lot on climate change. And if you go to The Guardian website, and look up Fiona's work, there are 2,300 articles, of which most of the recent ones are about climate change. And given that we've just lived through a June which is the hottest June on record in this country, one degree higher than that famous drought of 1976 … there's no doubt that climate change in terms of the present and the future is a theme we'd like to talk about, and we'll be asking more about that soon, and I'm sure you have some questions as well. [Sitting] next to Fiona is Dr Sally Horrocks, who you've heard speak, introducing National Life Stories and their good work. [She] is associate professor of contemporary British history at the University of Leicester and a National Life Stories senior academic adviser on the science side. Her work concentrates on scientific careers and the use of oral history as a method for researching them, with a particular interest in women scientists and engineers, gender and scientific careers, as well as careers outside of the academic sector, and also on – going way back, because it's where I first met Sally – she was doing things on food science and food, I think, is rather important. I hope you've eaten.

Jon Agar, Paul Merchant, Sally Horrocks and Fiona Harvey.

[Next] to Sally is Paul [Merchant], who we've just heard give a fantastic overview of some of the insights and recordings. Paul is an NLS oral historian and researcher who has interviewed for National Life Stories since 2009 on all kinds of topics: climate science, geology, science, religion, agriculture more recently, with an extensive experience as interviewer on the project that we are sort of marking the end of today. But you're now also involved in a project at Exeter?

Paul Merchant: Yes, which is concerned with … scientists, nature conservation professionals and volunteers who've been concerned with biodiversity research that's involved them in a lot of collaboration across disciplines and across sectors. So that's very interesting and two of my colleagues from Exeter are here, nice to see them.

Jon Agar: Thank you, Paul. … I'll just introduce myself briefly. So I'm Jon Agar, I am a historian in modern science and technology, I'm at University College London. I've been involved with National Life Stories, in fact I'm a trustee, and generally advising on the history of science and helping out wherever I can. But my broad interests are history of modern science and technology, science and government and things like that.

So, before I ask our panel some questions, I just want to pause to say something about this panel: [it will be] talking about the environment, but the interviews focus on agriculture and land management and conservation science as it really applies to those fields. So you might be thinking, well, that's not the whole environment, right? You know, when we think about the environment we mean much more than that, we mean the international environment, the climate, the planet, or we might think about the seas, the marine environment. But when you think about the extent of land in the UK which is affected directly by farming, it's about seventy per cent, and you think about how every day we have a connection to farming and agriculture through the food that we eat, even when we don't reflect on that connection, if you're an urbanite like me, we nevertheless are deeply intimately connected with the environment whenever we're thinking about or talking about agriculture. So the focus on agriculture recognises the central place of agriculture in the many ways it shapes the environment. And with the interviews that we have, which are incredibly varied, we interviewed farmers and people who did farming practice of various kinds, different kinds of farms that Paul went through, people who are involved in land management in various kinds, from owners of grand estates, to gamekeepers, to people involved in the policy or communication side, from the president of the NFU, the civil servants, to the area supervisor of the Potato Marketing Board of Scotland, which is one of the best interviews. And people who do the science and technology. So we've got a wide range of interviews, fifty. Even then … we could even have doubled or trebled or quadrupled that number.

So, one more set of observations. [First, let's recognise] … what an incredible period of change is within the life-

times of the people that Paul talked to. Their grandparents would remember essentially the lingering end of the great agricultural depression that started in the nineteenth century, they lived through government intervention, which John Martin, one of our advisers, tells us started in the 1930s, but it's very much associated with the Second World War, the shift to production at almost all costs and intensification, the application of science and technology, the transformation of all kinds of practices and mechanisation, so everything from tractors to robotic milking, the introduction of Britain to the EC, the European Community, in 1973. [And then we have the] Common Agricultural Policy, up to Brexit. That whole cycle has been lived through … Big changes in rural society and economy. Big changes in wildlife and biodiversity loss. And at its heart, people.

[Second] … farming is often private, it's a private business often, it's dealing with private companies, it's intensely family oriented or local community oriented. It can be deeply stressful and insulating in bad ways as well as good, I suppose. But that's why uncovering those voices really mattered and that's why we think the oral history project is so important. […]

I'm now going to turn to explore what our panellists think. So my first question is, well, Paul, you gave us a wonderful presentation, we heard the voices of our interviewees, and I just wondered whether our panellists would like to pick out something that they found to be particularly surprising and tell us why. Sally, would you like to go first?

Sally Horrocks: Yeah. I mean to me, the thing that really jumped out at me was Paul discussing the kind of moral imperatives that people … the scientists as well as the farmers shared, [imperatives that were] oriented towards a strong ethos of production because they thought this would make the world a better place. They showed themselves to be very flexible and adaptable to doing this, but in terms of my own past research on food, a lot of that was about finances, about economics, about policy, and this adds something really different to that mix. And it actually made me think, well actually, maybe the food scientists I studied in my PhD felt a moral imperative to make food cheaper and more hygienic, and I couldn't reinterpret that material in that way, [but I can now] thanks to Paul's insights. But I think what he's also shown us here is that once there's a particular kind of moral imperative, it's very hard to shift that once … [it is] in place and ongoing. And I know we're going to talk about the future later, so I'll say the rest of my thoughts on that later.

Jon Agar: Thank you, Sally. Fiona, what struck you as surprising? … [You, in your role as a journalist] talk to a lot of people in today's world, but what did you find surprising from the voices from the past?

Fiona Harvey: Well, I thought it was absolutely fascinating, and thank you Paul so much, because I find it incredibly enlightening. And, you know, in twenty years of writing about this stuff, I've never heard or seen anything like that, really. You know, you don't get that from just talking to people as a journalist, you need to go a lot deeper. So it was fascinating to me. And what I think struck me the most was this extraordinary blind spot when it came to the environmental impact of what they were doing. You know, it was as if people were kind of seeing the … cutting edge of technology in farming: the mechanisation and the use of chemical inputs and so on, but they weren't seeing all of the consequences of that and the consequences that we know now. But it's strange that they weren't seeing the consequences, because if you think about it, we have known about a lot of those consequences for a long time. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, [an] incredible work … came out seventy years ago. So, you know, people have known about the impacts of some of the harmful chemicals that we've been using. Similarly, people have known about climate change for a long time. I wouldn't expect everyone to know the work of some of the nineteenth-century scientists who worked on climate change, but by the 1980s we certainly knew a lot about climate change, and by the end of the 1980s of course, Margaret Thatcher was standing up in the United Nations saying we've got to do something about the climate crisis. So it was there and people should have known about it and the government certainly knew about it, but they weren't really translating that into what's actually happening on farms.

[It] seems to me extraordinary that we've had such blind spots there, and blind spots in terms of wildlife as well. You know, if you asked farmers … seventy years ago, you would have got a lot more knowledge of wildlife, [there was] a lot more abundance of wildlife then, and now of course we've seen the number of small mammals and of birds and so on absolutely plummet. And part of the reason why that can happen is – and I think … this kind of project … has a very interesting insight in this respect – is this problem we have in the environment of shifting baselines, because you get used to things, you know, gradually. So if you were a farmer in, say, … the 1940s … you'd [have been] used to seeing badgers and voles and stoats and all kinds of wildlife all around your farm all the time, the decline [in wildlife has been] … quite gradual and you don't notice. So you don't notice when you hear the last curlew or you hear the last cuckoo on your farm, because you've got used to the … decline of … wildlife over time. … [It's] just extraordinary what we've got used to in this country. A lot of this country has become effectively a green desert.

Jon Agar: Yeah. I was totally struck by that as well. And I just wondered, Paul, because …you've told us what you found surprising already, but just on Fiona's point there, do you recollect any … longer memories of different abundance of nature on the farm or how that might have changed over time? Was there anything like that? Because some of these long memories might … capture some of that changing baseline, just because people are thinking back, perhaps nostalgically, to a butterfly-filled [past].

Paul Merchant: Precisely those kinds of memories of being children in the forties and fifties and being able to find birds' nests without really trying very hard, a sense that

wildlife could be stumbled across. And perhaps that leads to questions about how it might have been neglected, because a sense of it always being there, or a sense of abundance, doesn't necessarily lead to a pattern of worrying about it. But also, [I heard] stories of … the verges, sweeping your hand through the weedy sort of grass and finding insects on your hands. So yes, there are memories of abundance, but it was the same people who experienced this abundance, who, when they farmed, were focussing on production and technical change and not noticing wildlife at all. In fact, there's an interview with a particular farmer who was extremely enthusiastic about birdwatching as a child and when he started farming, still as a young adult, he was surveying birds for the British Trust for Ornithology, but on nature reserves away from his farm and wasn't looking at the birds at all on his farm, and then just thought in the eighties, I wonder about the birds on my farm. And it's the first time that he'd thought that the farm was an appropriate place to look for wildlife. So maybe there's a sense of wildlife being somewhere else.

Sally Horrocks: Can I just jump in there and say I think there's one example of a farmer who just happened to be a farmer on the fields near the village I grew up in, who we completely ran into accidentally, I didn't suggest him as an interviewee, and he'd been away from the farm for a long time and then came back and could see the change because of that distance in time for himself … [He] wasn't experiencing a gradual change, for him it was a more dramatic change and that got him involved in lots of farming conservation-type projects.

Paul Merchant: He was also very keen on shooting and, in fact, that kind of engagement with the land – shooting – was the one where people were alerted quicker to these changes because wild birds, if you're interested in shooting them, aren't incidental to what you're doing, they're important. And it was concern for populations of game birds that was behind early research on agri-environment practices on the Manydown Estate in Hampshire in the early 1980s.

Jon Agar: That's wonderful. And, I'd just like to point out, this is one of the strengths of the National Life Stories approach, because asking the questions about childhood, about experience with nature, for example, it goes across all the interviews, even if we're talking to artists or scientists or politicians, so in extent, some of this can be cross-checked. [We can ask research questions such as] are people working the land in a sense different [to others who do not, perhaps in the ways that they] …recollect nature. [We are able to ask such a research question] … because of the long-form biographical approach. … I was certainly struck by this strange disconnect, but also occasional recognition [of the impact on nature] with words like 'a desecration', for example, it's very strong.

The other thing I was struck by is the inter-generational side, the ways that fathers and mothers and sons and daughters came up in the way people told [us] about life moments. And sometimes the father or mother was a source of knowledge, we had plenty of examples of those, sometimes it was … [an event or] a moment of their life, hearing that the father had died and thinking well, now I have to run the farm myself, I have to look after the family. Sometimes it's a … remembrance that there was opposition, [that it was not] all [a] happy passing on of knowledge, sometimes there's intense tensions across generations, of course.

Jon Agar: … [A new] question, I think, [one] for Sally and Paul. … [Why] is oral history a valuable method for understanding the past of farming, conservation and the environment and what do you think in particular the life story approach reveals? I know you've both said something about this already, but it's … one of the focusses we want to think about over this last couple of days really. … [What are] the particular strengths and interests of this way of recording memory. Paul?

Paul Merchant: Yes, so it's the value of oral history to begin with, rather than life story [approach] in particular, is it?

Jon Agar: [Talk about] one then the other.

Paul Merchant: It forces you to confront the fact that the environment is not the outcome of these abstract forces like development or modernisation, but is the result of individuals acting, of deciding to do certain things, adding certain things, taking things away, spraying, chopping, for ends that seem sensible. It's not possible if you use oral history to avoid that, and it's quite useful if you want to think about how to change things in the future, that you don't depersonalise the environment. Also, in oral history no one … just collects one interview and there's fifty in this collection, and the collection allows you to find … [examples] of convergence. One of the things I found most surprising was the fact that it was a reasonably limited set of solutions that people were agreed upon across the country, across different regions, agreement on the right kind of grasses [and]… the agrochemical mixes, the approaches to land management that were sensible. It's not a rigorous sample, but there is a sense in which it no longer became surprising when someone told me that they moved to silage, or they simplified, or they met their ICI [Imperial Chemical Industries] rep or they'd been to an ICI model farm. I think there was a study by Paul Thompson and Daniel Bertaux on bakers, where they found that … after interviewing a certain number of bakers in the community, you got the same sorts of stories. And I think oral history, the collection nature of oral history allows you to get at that.

Sally Horrocks: There's lots of answers I'd give, but the one I focus on here, because I think it's come most strongly out of this collection compared to other science projects I've worked on, is, because of that collection's nature, the advantage here is [that] we can see the interactions between different groups, and from both sides. And as a historian of science and technology I've always been very interested in how knowledge moves, and the work that has to be done to move things from one place to another.

[H]istorians and sociologists of science talk about knowledge moving being a social process, and these interviews really show us how social it is as a process. So we see [examples, such as] … agricultural advisers [who] know what time to telephone people up when they'll be at home, or they're meeting them in the pub when the cattle market's on, their wives are in the labour ward next to the wives of the farmers they're working with, so they're developing their position in the community through that. Or they're giving farmers an opportunity to meet each other on dark winter evenings by rocking up at village halls with overhead projectors to give improving talks, which are a sort of legitimate form of sociability for farmers who are really hard working who might not … go out for an evening at the cinema, because that's not work, but they can justify this kind of leisure and work, and it's also a moment of knowledge exchange. And we discover from the interviews with the agricultural advisers how much the people training them and the people running the agricultural advice system were aware of the importance of those social processes, so they were given a lot of training in how to present. One guy talked about how he got his wife to do all his overhead projector slides because his handwriting was a bit illegible, and she had beautiful handwriting. So it was a performance for them and they were taught the sort of rudimentary … psychology about teaching to make sure that they could be … effective communicators in the community. But they were also moved around to make sure they didn't get too absorbed into any one community. [These episodes show the] strength of this collection, it's really been a very exciting thing to kind of hear about it and reflect on it.

Jon Agar: Super. And I'm going to come to Fiona in a minute … to ask about the future and the present, but just sticking with historical methods briefly. How different is it from the picture you get from a more document-based archive-based study of this subject, would you say, Sally?

Sally Horrocks: Okay, I'll stick to two points this time. The first, in a way, is the lived experience of policy change, that when, if you go to the National Archives and look at the documents around policy change you get this kind of very clean-looking approach, okay, you get lots of drafts of documents, but you don't understand the impact of that, the unintended consequences, what it felt like to live through it. And [I would point out] the different temporal nature of the policy impact versus the creation of those policies. And also, when there's a lot of policies being thrown at people at once, they don't separate them out and they don't remember them individually, or they don't even remember them as distinctly separate policies. They're not hot on policy detail, they know things are changing and there's forces pushing, but you get a very different understanding of policy change. And another thing I think is that actually what we've got here is access to material where there are no … archives, especially the commercial side of these operations, many of the big companies, the big players of the day, no longer exist, the whereabouts of their archives are not always certain, and anyway they don't capture the kind of things in those archives that these interviews get. You know, we have wonderful account of ICI representatives going to farmers with computer programs, putting their farm accounts through the computer program, advising them on the future. That's just the sort of thing written archives are never going to give you, that experience of that process. So [those] would be my two kind of headliners on that.

Jon Agar: Thank you, Sally. So we're going to turn to talk about the present and future of farming, [and] the environment in the UK. I'd like to ask Fiona, as an environmental reporter and editor, you see a lot of the country and you speak to a lot of people, so what are the big issues now and for the future of farming? It could be interesting to see the contrast between what we heard and what might be happening now.

Fiona Harvey: Well, farmers are facing an extremely uncertain moment, really, because we have an awful lot of things happening at once that are extremely disruptive to farming. … [The] big one obviously is Brexit, which a lot of farmers voted for and a lot of people in rural areas voted for, but which many farmers are very unhappy with now, because not only does it mean that the EU subsidies are gone and therefore farmers are increasingly reliant on subsidies from the UK, which are not forthcoming in the same way, but also the government is rushing round signing trade deals that are effectively opening up the UK to substandard, low-quality, low-welfare, sometimes frankly dangerous, and environmentally really impactful goods from overseas. And this will flood the UK with this cheap lower quality food, which is really going to hurt farmers. We're just at the beginning of that process at the moment.

Farmers are also facing the impact of the climate crisis. They [have]… seen these heatwaves that we've had, the first days over forty degrees. How can you go out and work in a field when it's forty degrees out there? I mean you can't, really. But also there are other impacts of the climate crisis, like the drought that we saw last year, which is not over yet. It may be raining outside but there's still basically a drought going on in this country. There's also flooding, of course, another impact of the climate crisis. You get both, you see. And farmers are having to deal with that increasingly. What happens is that you get, instead of … steady rainfall kind of throughout the year as we used to, you're getting periods of, short periods of very intense rainfall, which leads to flooding, particularly if it's falling on areas that are hit by drought. So you're seeing that happen. You're also seeing a lot of these chickens come home to roost from our years of intensive farming. You're seeing soils that have been farmed with all these inputs that are becoming exhausted, effectively, because … farmers didn't really realise that you can exhaust soils by putting too much of this stuff on, effectively. And a lot of farmers are having to … relearn some of the old methods that we've heard about.

We're also seeing [that] farmers are going to be held to account a lot more, because we're all terribly aware of what's happening with the pollution in our rivers, we're

seeing the water companies collapse under the weight of their own greed, but farmers are also culprits here, because it's not just sewage from these unruly water companies that's polluting our rivers and waterways, agricultural run-off is a huge source of pollution. And farmers are going to have to come to a reckoning with that, because I think people have had enough. So all of this is happening at once, farmers are having to bring down their greenhouse gas emissions as well, because we have an obligation in this country for them to do that, so farmers will be under pressure for that. You know, as a world we can't, in the global north … carry on eating as much meat as we do if we want to have a liveable climate. So … livestock farmers are going to have to face up to that. There are all of these kinds of impacts happening at once on farmers. And farmers are also being squeezed, not just by the forces unleashed by Brexit, but also the cost of living crisis affects farmers, … high energy prices, energy is a huge input cost for farmers. Fertiliser prices have gone through the roof, again, because of the war in Ukraine, because fertiliser prices are affected by energy prices, and also because Russia and Ukraine are big producers of fertiliser. So we've got that problem as well. But farmers are unable to reap the benefits that they ought to get of that, because … we've got food price inflation, which has been running at nearly twenty per cent for staples in this country, but the farmers don't see that money. What we see is the supermarkets who control most of the market here in the UK squeeze the prices, so a lot of farmers are making either marginal profits or … their costs [of production] are greater than the profits that they actually make. They're only able to stay in business because of the remaining government subsidies. So we have an absolutely broken food system in this country, it's appalling, and farmers are caught up in that.

Jon Agar: Thanks, Fiona. I mean, it's an extraordinary litany of issues that have piled on, some of which are a long time in the making, some are very immediate terms because of Putin and things like that, but what a moment to be living through. And I suppose one thing that comes out of the interviews, and Paul highlighted it and Sally mentioned it, was the adaptability and flexibility that farmers and others working the land have shown in the past. So, I suppose that leads to a … question I'd like to ask Fiona and Sally, and Paul as well … The importance of science and change and new techniques, [and] flexibility come through the interviews. Farmers [have been in the past] adaptable, flexible, innovative. … Is it the same now … and what might the future hold?

Paul Merchant: Well, we would hope that there are farmers just as nimble and enthusiastic as they were then, but the problem I think has been highlighted there by Fiona. Whereas in the sixties we heard of the excitement of all getting round as a community, quite a straightforward aim, quite an easily understandable aim, one that was quite easy to communicate and to get behind, and that is to increase production by altering the landscape and using inputs. They might be just as nimble and enthusiastic as they used to be, but the aims are so much more complicated that it might be difficult to get [agreement]. One of the speakers that I played said there was a general feeling that we should get our land more productive. How can you produce a general feeling out of this great mix of different aims?

Jon Agar: A good point, Paul. Sally?

Sally Horrocks: I would go back to what I was just saying about the movement of knowledge, and … think in terms of what we need to [do to] put the structures in place that will allow farmers to make new choices and to be nimble and in a situation where they're probably all firefighting and very anxious. … And although we now live in an Internet age [and] farmers are less likely to be sort of isolated from sources of knowledge, because they can log on (if their rural broadband is fast enough, and that's I think another issue that they face) … But recognising … the importance of the personal interaction … [we need to ask] what systems do we actually have in place now to support farmers in making these transitions, especially at a moment when the … policy environment is changing so rapidly … And … we don't have ADAS [Agricultural Development and Advisory Service] any more, we don't have the ICI advisers any more, [and while] we may now be slightly critical of [their past] peddling what they were, … [at] the time they played that really crucial role. So, you know, [we should think] about what can be done to support this community who I think sometimes do feel a bit let down and abandoned in terms of the challenges they're facing.

Jon Agar: Thank you, Sally. And Fiona, what can be done?

Fiona Harvey: Well, I think that … as a country we have to decide … what kind of future we want, because it's possible to shape the future. We're not just at the mercy of these forces, we can change them, we're human beings, we've already changed the planet, potentially irrevocably, so we can effect a great deal of change. So, you know, you can either just let things happen, you can just let these farmers carry on and fall prey to the forces of the free market, in which … small farms will cease to exist because, given all the factors that I've just talked about, they can't really exist, they won't be able to stay in business and make money. … [We] won't have small farmers any more, we'll have … big conglomerates [that] farm huge areas at once and have very intensive livestock operations, which we already have in this country. We have megafarms already, it's just that we tend not to realise it. And instead of having … the farmer at the end of the farmgate, you'll just have … one business that owns a huge amount of land and it employs a small number of people and the rest is highly mechanised. And if that's the kind of future that we want, then that's what we're heading for. I think many people would be quite alarmed by that future, not least farmers. And I think a lot of people in this country would say, well, hang on a minute … maybe we don't want [that future], maybe there is some value in having small farms. Maybe … our traditional view of what a farmer is, and what a farm is, is something we'd like to keep. Well, if that's the case, then we need to change our policies to foster small farms. And if we are going to

change our policies in order to foster small farms, then we'll have to give the small farmers some money to do that, and if we're going to do that, then I presume that we'll want some … return for our money. So that instead of saying … [just] produce food and get on with it, we might say, well no, hang on, we want you to produce food in this way, we want you to use environmentally friendly methods, we want you to … use agroecology and so on, we might want you to keep some of your land for nature rather than using it all for food … But this is a conversation that we need to have as a country, instead of just trying to pretend that we can carry on as we are, or instead of just trying to ignore it.

Jon Agar: Thank you, Fiona. … I'm going to ask one last question to our panel, then I'm going to open up for the thoughts and questions and comments from everyone. And my last question is whether … projects like this that are oral history projects that gather rich knowledge of the past and testimony and voices of the past, whether they will be a help to solve some of the problems that Fiona has described. So what needs to be done and how might an understanding of the past …, oral history especially, help us get there? Please tell me it can help. [Laughter]

Paul Merchant: I think, assuming that … human processes don't change too much over time, or human psychology, then reading off from the interviews, it would seem sensible to generate a new set of moral pressures that are acting on farmers, a new set of things that farmers are applauded for within their communities, a new set of things that they're proud about and ashamed about. And how to generate that discourse in the community, that general feeling acting across the community, motivating people, making them excited, making them act, is also, [and] you can also find clues for that in the interviews, through [something analogous to] that network of agricultural advice that was so successful in increasing production over a short amount of time. Farmers didn't do it on their own, they were supplied very skilfully and in a timely way with the information that they needed in order to apply scientific knowledge to boost yields. Well, what kind of knowledge do they need now in order to improve soil quality, to enhance biodiversity alongside production? There needs to be the same kind of community pressure, maybe national pressure, maybe international pressure acting on them, but in a way that isn't overwhelming, in a way that they can be excited and nimble and brilliant about in a new world.

Jon Agar: That's fantastic Paul, thanks very much. Sally, would you like to go [next]?

Sally Horrocks: I just thought, Paul's just put that so brilliantly, I'm not sure whether there's much to add to that. I guess it was striking in Paul's presentation that a number of interviewees talked about how they learned from talking to farmers around them who'd worked under different regimes and were … recapturing that past knowledge, so not just this collection, but any collection of interviews will capture that past knowledge and have it as a resource, so maybe we need to go back to the George Ewart Evans collection [recordings of rural life also held at the British Library], for example, and look again at that with a different set of questions about what we can [do], [and ask:] are there past practices which have fallen into abeyance which no one has shared with their neighbours who are interested in them that we might be looking at in the future, maybe varieties of particular plants that work well in different areas? That's a store of knowledge that we might draw upon to help.

Jon Agar: So we've got new moral pressures, we have sources of knowledge. Fiona, can the past help us here?

Fiona Harvey: Yeah, I think what comes across really clearly is that farmers do have a sense of mission and a sense of their responsibility to the public as … providers of food and as stewards of the land and so on. And they have a sense of responsibility from what they have inherited and what they pass on to their children, and I think that comes across very clearly as well. And I think that we should respect that and work with that, because, you know, farmers don't want to trash the country, but sometimes these missions are in conflict with one another. … [The] mission to … produce food and the mission to preserve the countryside [can be in conflict]. So I think farmers need to be helped … And I think what comes across in the oral history as well is how … nimble and dynamic and agile and interested farmers are …, as you said, Paul. Because I think sometimes people have this idea that farmers are sort of stuck in the mud, literally, and this is just not true at all. Farmers have always been on the sort of cutting edge of technology and society and so on, it's just that they haven't always been recognised as such.

Jon Agar: Thank you. Thank you, Fiona. So I hope that is perhaps a more positive note to end the panellists' discussion, but thank you very much. So we're going to take questions from the audience now.

Rib Davis: My name's Rib Davis. I've got to make a little public announcement first, but I have got a question. I'm the chair of the Environment and Climate Change special interest group of the Oral History Society.[1] One of the things we do is we compile a map of all the environmental and climate-change-orientated histories worldwide. We've got about seventy such projects on the map at the moment, but they're very English language orientated, so if anyone has any information about projects in non-English language parts of the world, we'd be very interested to add those to the map, as well as others [in the] English language. My question is, I was a seasonal farmworker in the 1970s and I wondered if you'd interviewed any seasonal farmworkers? […]

Jon Agar: That's great, thank you very much. And thank you very much for the question. So the question was, did we interview any seasonal farmworkers, and I think Paul, you're the best person to ask.

Paul Merchant: No, I must admit I failed, but not without attempting. We interviewed farmworkers, which is actually quite novel in oral history, to interview farmworkers rather than just farmers, and we interviewed farmers who talk about different sort of periods of casual labour, beginning in the sixties, local, often women and children, and then they talk about the later successive waves of European migrant workers. And I did, in two cases where I had interviewed someone who employed significant numbers of migrant workers from Europe, [ask] whether they could put me in touch with one of their workers or a representative of migrant workers, and they were very reluctant to do so for all sorts of reasons connected with the way in which they are employed and so on. We interviewed a district officer and a former director of what was the National Union of Agricultural Workers who talked about the various campaigns that they had to improve the conditions for seasonal workers by enrolling them in the union. But no, the short answer is, we failed to do that and it's important that someone does.

Jon Agar: I think it's fair to add that … [although] no seasonal farmworkers were interviewed, there is plenty of talk about seasonal farmworkers. There [are] stories of the women in the fields who are picking strawberries or potatoes, or … about going to informal labour markets in Tottenham, I think it is, for a farm that's just outside London, and what it is like to secure labour in that way. So there's some quite interesting detail about that kind of aspect, but it's all second-hand and … it would have been great to have a direct voice. […]

Paul Merchant: That particular farmer is David Mwanaka, who was born in Zimbabwe and came to Britain in the nineties, first as a journalist, and started growing white maize, and he's the one that picks up his labourers from that particular spot in Tottenham. And he says that they're quite good, but not as good as his mother-in-law, at picking white maize, she's much more hardy.

Jon Agar: Thank you. Yes please?

Alison Atkinson-Phillips: [My] name's Alison Atkinson-Phillips. I'm from the Oral History Collective in Newcastle. A bit related, do you think just because of the time period you're looking at and when you were doing the interviews, you're obviously interviewing people who are quite elderly, I'm thinking, do you think that that in itself has introduced a class bias into the cohort that you've been talking to?

Jon Agar: Thank you very much for that question. I think that's probably one for Paul as well, again, but anyone who wants to come in, just say.

Paul Merchant: So would the argument be that there has been a change in the class make-up of farmers over time since that…

Alison Atkinson-Phillips: Just that people who are less wealthy tend to die sooner.

Paul Merchant: [With] a sample of fifty … I don't know whether that was a significant effect on the sample. Perhaps it was. I would say that when the Covid pandemic started, we started actually setting our sights lower in terms of the age bands of the people that we were interviewing, just because we could justify interviewing someone in their garden, a farmer in their forties, but we wouldn't, we weren't prepared to, continue to interview the people as old as we had. So there perhaps is a greater diversity of ages than you might imagine. But it's a good point, which I hadn't really thought about. You mean that less successful farmers might not be around to speak to? I think more significant is the fact that the advisory group who helped us to select farmers were of course pointing us to farmers that they thought were particularly successful examples of farmers in different fields. So these were particularly, I don't know, particularly progressive potato farmers or particularly successful pig farmers, and what we perhaps lack in the collection are people who tried it and failed, or perhaps people who, yes, were taken out of business by the very processes that I'm describing. We tended to interview people who had done quite well out of it.

Sally Horrocks: I think one thing that would be interesting for us to do would be to look across the collections to see if we already have interviews with people who've spent some time in farming but left because it is a kind of weakness, if you like, of this kind of project, that you tend to go for people with long careers because they pick up lots of different aspects of the careers for the different roles they've played during their lives, and so people who've just dipped in and out are much less likely to appear. But they probably do already appear in other National Life Stories collections and certainly we've done work where we've looked across collections. And my favourite example of that is when I was looking in the British Library collection for anyone who had microbiology in their content summary. … I found someone who'd been interviewed as a garden designer, but as a student in the 1940s she'd been enlisted to help in the project to commercialise the production of penicillin. So you have those little snippets that come up in other interviews. So it might be that that material is already there, but it's not in this particular project because they're not people with those long careers in farming necessarily.

Jon Agar: Thank you, Sally. Thank you, Paul. Do we have another question? From the corner there.

Alice: Hi, I'm Alice. I just wanted to make a comment about the seasonal workers. I actually did seasonal farmwork for six months and the company that I worked for, I don't think they'd have a problem with people interviewing them. They're called Van Stomp, they're based out of Cambridge. … I worked with predominantly Eastern Europeans, people from the Czech Republic and Poland. There's a few English people, it was during lockdown, so I think me and a few others kind of realised that was one of the best places to be, in a field, playing music in our spare time, it was really nice. So that was just a comment,

but I also had another kind of pondering question. You were talking about farmers and big farms and small farms, and I was thinking, well, it just made me think about the way we live and whether changing the way people live in general, like a bit more of a structural change would be useful to take the pressure off the farmers. Because I see a lot of land not being used effectively. For example, in my garden at home … there's just flowers everywhere, but the whole garden could be full of vegetables, you know what I mean? And I wonder whether communities should be set up better so people can actually be responsible for their own food rather than depending on farmers. Because that's a lot of pressure isn't it, to feed the whole country. But actually, we can just be growing food in our back gardens. I had a friend who lived in Norwich – that's where I come from – in Norwich and she used to grow potatoes in like big shopping bags in her yard, because she didn't have any soil. So I think there's a lot we can do for ourselves.

Jon Agar: Thank you. I'll put the question to Fiona, if that's okay. Do we need big structural change and can we grow our way out of this in our gardens? Is that enough?

Fiona Harvey: Yeah, I think that is kind of happening to a limited extent. There's urban gardening going on and collectives being set up to do that urban gardening. Some of them are using sort of neglected spaces, some of them are taking private spaces, that were previously private that have been sort of given over to these urban collectives, and some of them are … reclaiming various areas. … [Those] are all good things to do and … we've seen a lot more … demand for allotments and so on, and we've seen a lot more people get interested in … growing what they can on whatever land they can. We've even seen … vertical farms, which are essentially in shipping containers and warehouses and so on, where the plants are grown kind of in horizontal stacks right up to the ceiling. And their input is … mainly water and a carefully curated set of nutrients so they don't need … soil to grow in. So there's that kind of sort of hi-tech urban gardening going on as well. The issue with all these things is that they're just not on a scale and can never really be on a scale that will feed us, because … you need a lot of land to feed people and you need a lot of land to grow the kind of staple crops, like wheat and other grains and potatoes and so on. You also need a lot of land for meat, if we're going to continue to eat meat, you need a lot of land for livestock. So it's a good thing that that is happening, but I think it would be unrealistic to expect that that could replace a lot of farming. […]

Sally Horrocks: I mean I should just confess, I'm one of those people who tries to grow lots of my own vegetables, and I think exactly what Fiona says, the amount of time and effort it takes is huge, and I think I'm a very inefficient food producer as well. But it's just not, from my own experience anyway, viable for everyone to do it. Certainly, if I had any children to look after, there would be no time for [such gardening] – I have dug up half my lawn though.

Paul Merchant: There is another element to that, and that's that the farmers sometimes point out to me that we weren't the only ones who didn't notice declines in wildlife or who were concerned with simple solutions. And just as farmers were using these bred varieties of ryegrass that grow quickly, it's the same sort of grass that was being used in lawns and the chemicals that farmers were using to make weed control easier were being used in domestic gardens as well and all sorts of things. So perhaps if farmers looked out from their farms on an urban population of gardeners who seemed to be valuing wildlife in an improved way, perhaps that might be some kind of stimulus, or there might be some sort of feeling of being in it together across the urban and rural divide. So that might be another advantage of the kind of gardening you're suggesting.

Jon Agar: That's a very nice suggestion. I think we had a question down here. Yes please?

Arlene Crampsie: Thank you. Arlene Crampsie from UCD [University College Dublin]. Really enjoying the panel discussion here from a whole range of different perspectives: a geographer, a small sheep farmer, all kinds of interests in the conversation.

Jon Agar: Are they very small sheep or is it a small [farm]?

[Laughter]

Arlene Crampsie: Both, actually. If they were a little bit bigger I might be a bigger sheep farmer. But I suppose I'm interested in the fact that the farmers you spoke to, Paul, don't have that sense of the change in the biodiversity around them, because I think – and I'm wondering – maybe you could comment on what the chances are that that has something to do with the type of farmers, because certainly from … the area that I'm in, even going back to the fifties and sixties, we'd have kind of generational stories about the loss of particular species, the corncrake in the Irish context being one that I remember being told about, my mother noticing changes in as a child. And I think, certainly from some oral histories in the Irish context, a lot of that is blamed, a lot of not noticing the changes, is blamed on farmers who mechanise and they're in tractors and they have the sound of the tractors and they're travelling the field from above, rather than the walked slow landscape that the smaller farmers who don't have that mechanisation would have [had]. So I'm curious about that. And then maybe a wider question about how the … nimbleness and innovativeness of farmers is potentially a downfall and potentially something that we can also draw on. So farmers work in terms of where the economic viability is and they transition very quickly when they're given incentives. We've seen it in an Irish context when they transferred from tillage into mass dairy production. I was laughing in the hotel that I'm staying in, there's Lakeland Dairies from County Cavan in the hotel, to facilitate a market, and now the farmers are being told that's not the way forward, you're causing environmental damage, but the incentives aren't there in the same way as they were to transition into that large-scale dairy.

Jon Agar: So there's two questions there, one which I'll ask Paul, whether it's an artefact of the farms that were chosen, the size of them perhaps, that explains some of the disconnect with nature. And the second question, which Fiona and Sally might answer, is to do with the [need for new incentives and the policies that make farmers transition quickly].

Paul Merchant: Yes, I thought about that quite a lot, that idea that is it these insulated machines or the speed of movement across fields that explains a process of not noticing. But I don't think it's about not noticing anyway, and all of the farms that we covered are not large. I can think of a small farm in Cheshire where Jill Hutchinson-Smith, the farmer, spoke about that bird and other birds, peewits, in her childhood in the forties and fifties and loving them. She took over in the sixties and moved to silage making. And it isn't that she didn't notice that that change in the timing of cutting was affecting the bird populations. She says, I grieve their loss, but we had to move to this to make a living to … I don't know, to look after the other organisms that they were concerned with, the cows. So, they know that it's happening … I said that one of the strategies is to say that they were distracted by excitement, but it's not just that, it's a confidence and the feeling that production is more important than wildlife. And we've got an interview with one of the ecologists who worked on the organochlorine effects on birds of prey, and when he talks about presenting the evidence to representatives of farmers' groups, they don't deny that this is happening, they simply say that agricultural production is more important than, say, sparrowhawks.

Jon Agar: Thank you, Paul. Would new financial incentives or other incentives help farmers change? Fiona?

Fiona Harvey: Yes, they would. […] If you incentivise the wrong things, then that's what you're going to get at the end of it. And if you want farmers to give some of their land back to nature through rewilding or through … just encouraging nature in the margins or wherever, then you have to help them to do so because you're taking that land out of production which … otherwise they could be making money from. […]

Jon Agar: Okay. I think [Indira, you have a question]?

Indira Chowdhury: Hi, I'm Indira. … [There] were two things I was thinking of when I think of farming in the context of India. One is the very successful – quote, unquote – green revolution we had which used certain varieties of wheat. Of course, now there's a lot of protests about Monsanto coming and giving certain kinds of seeds and there are protests about that. So I wondered if there was also a lot of GMOs [genetically modified organism issues in the interviews], and … at what point do hybrid seeds and … genetically modified things come into this kind of farming? And the other is something that has been observed in India where very poor farmers, who had no money to use pesticides or fertilisers, became, were trained to become, organic farmers around the eighties, nineties really, because … the land … was viable for organic farming, because it hadn't been destroyed. So … did you also talk to farmers who were organic farmers, how did they become that, etc.?

Jon Agar: So the question's motivated by parallels with India, and in particular stories of the green revolution [and later GM – genetically modified -foods], and secondly, about the conditions where organic farming would be encouraged or possible. And did we interview any organic farmers? Paul, did we?

Paul Merchant: Yes, we did. The principal example, the best example of that, is Helen Browning, who allowed me to use that particular quote in the beginning, but hasn't signed off her interview, which is why I can't discuss it any further. But yes, Helen Browning, who turned her family farm completely organic in the end and is now very well known, partly because she's director-general of the Soil Association as well. Lord Newborough of the Rhug Estate in Wales converted his complete estate to organic, partly inspired by his wife, his second wife's interest in food and concern with food scares, especially BSE, and argues that, I mean he's in quite a good position to be able to do this, but argues that he also likes organic because it's more complicated, it's harder, and he doesn't like the idea of just everything being simple and getting it out of a can and so on. So yes, we've got that. And the farmer who I spoke about who began to look at birds on his farm in the nineties found that there were huge declines over the period '82 to '90, and then worked out various ways in which he could try to introduce weeds into his farm, and farming organically was one way of doing that. So yes, we've got that. But we haven't, as far as I know, [an interview with a farmer who has] grown GM crops … I mean we've had GM trials in Britain and we've got interviews with the scientists who led the trials, we've got interviews with farmers who protested against the trials in the collection. We've also got an interview with the ICI Zeneca scientist who developed the first GM product that was sold on supermarket shelves in Britain, but only for about a week because it was taken off, and that was a tomato puree. And I think one of the problems with that is that it didn't have a kind of astonishing nutritional value that you could say to the public, look what GM achieved. What it had achieved is a slightly cheaper and easier to process tomato puree, which is a sort of …

Jon Agar: And tastier.

Paul Merchant: Was it? Yeah, according to its… yeah, that's true, that's true. But it might have been better if it had been some sort of remarkable vitamin-enriched, you know, broccoli or something … which was really cheap and you could say that you were sort of making children healthier or something, but I'm afraid the first product was a bit trivial, like these potatoes that fit through a chipping machine better …

Indira Chowdhury: But prior to GM there were the hybrids which were not really GM, so was there that kind of thing?

Paul Merchant: Oh yes, okay. Yeah, that's true. Yes, I mean the potato breeding was all about that. Yes, that's true.

Jon Agar: And there's plenty about, I mean the green revolution being new varieties plus inputs from insecticides, pesticides and … [there is] plenty of that in the interviews, for sure. I could ask about where organic and GM are going. I mean Fiona, what's your sense? Because they pull in different directions, right?

Fiona Harvey: Well, we will see more genetically modified foods. The government is intent on loosening the UK's laws now that we're outside the EU, but also the EU is looking at loosening its own regulations on GM, they're having another look at GM. And as we are facing a future in which we have already changed the climate of the planet, we're changing that climate further, and we have, you know, we're going to have nine billion, ten billion, eleven, twelve billion people on this planet, it really, we can't not look at GM in that context.

Sally Horrocks: I was just going to say, there's also a lot of push towards sort of things that are nutritionally similar to meat, but which are not grown by sending animals out into fields or putting them in feedlots. As a long-standing vegetarian I'm quite intrigued by this, but so far I'm not convinced I like it.

Jon Agar: There's a wonderful moment where the, I think it's the head of the NFU Scotland, just wonders out loud … wouldn't it be better to hold all this IP, intellectual property, as a public body rather than the commercial companies. And just in that one line you realise that there are the possibility of policy choices in these interviews here. So I think we probably have time for perhaps two or perhaps three questions and then we'll stop.

Roger Courtney: Roger Courtney, I was an interviewee for another oral history programme. It seems to me that in the change of farming, agricultural practice that you've described, there was a convergence between the commercial interests that were involved and what you've referred to as the moral interests. Question one, how important in that change were the commercial interests? Question two, it's not as clear to me that the change that is now required is as amenable to commercial interests. Can you see ways whereby commercial interests, who really have … many more resources than governments do to provide incentives and financial rewards for people making a change [can play a role]?

Jon Agar: Thank you very much. The question is about commercial interests, both as they might come out in the interviews, but also can they be … producing the kind of world, the kind of food that we want? So, did it come up in the interviews?

Paul Merchant: I hadn't thought of it that way, but … that analysis is certainly correct, that there was a strong convergence between what the companies were doing and what the farmers wanted to do and what the farmers felt was the right thing to do, certainly. So the ICI reps were moving in the same world as the National Agricultural Advisory Service reps, there was a strong overlap between those two things. I can't think off the top of my head how commercial forces could be used to push things in the direction we might want them to go now. There might be others on the panel who have got some insight into this. Can money be made out of promoting biodiverse farming? I don't know.

Jon Agar: Fiona, is there a strong role for commercial interest here?

Fiona Harvey: Well, I think that, you know, before the pandemic we were seeing increasing sales for organic food, and that's, I think, the proxy we have for farming that promotes biodiversity. I think that people … do want to see … farming methods that are in harmony with nature, but at the same time, we are in the midst of a cost of living crisis so it's a bit difficult to tell people when food inflation is running at … eighteen per cent a year … pay more so that we can have … better biodiversity in the fields. I think you've got to find some way … of increasing … the incentive to farmers without just passing the cost straight to consumers.

Jon Agar: Thank you, Fiona. [We have time for two very quick questions.]

Kirsti Bohata: Thank you very much. My name is Kirsti Bohata and I'm from Wales, from Swansea University actually, where I am leading a network called Narrating Rural Change, so this is fascinating and one question is really challenging. My question is about the idea of farmers as custodians of the landscape, because that's something that comes up again and again in current debate. They're also custodians of the Welsh language because … there's a very high proportion of Welsh speakers in farming. So I was really struck by that statement that farmers were not, according to this research, this archive, they were not really aware of environmental issues, because that's not the current argument, the kind of anti, the eco-colonial kind of, the rejection of what they perceive as eco-colonialism in Wales. So … do you find people talking about themselves as custodians of the land?

Riley Hickman: My name's Riley Hickman, I'm a PhD researcher at Rothamsted Research and with the UK Food Systems Centre for Doctoral Training. I'm … working on future imaginaries of small-scale farming in particular. So just touching on the discussion that Fiona … brought up on … land sparing versus land sharing, I'm curious … if you have a sense of the farmers' … view of what the future of farming might be?

Jon Agar: Thank you. So are farmers custodians? The old line of them being stewards of the land. Right? And then

the second question is [about the farmers' perspective on the future of small-scale farming]. […]

Paul Merchant: A few farmers did want to dismiss that sense of neglect by saying things like, of course farmers look after the land, and almost as a way of asking me to move on. So yes, but I mean the trouble with this idea of the custodians is that this is partly why nature conservation focussed on reserves and SSSIs (site of special scientific interest) for so long and ignored the wider countryside, because of that assumption that the agricultural community looked after the land. But this isn't a very convincing argument when you see what the majority of farmers did and do. And they hate the idea of land [sparing and] rewilding. […]

Sally Horrocks: I guess rather than talking about specific future imaginaries, the fact that farmers got involved in projects, conservation projects, for example, as pioneers in those projects suggests that they could imagine a different future for farming and they were willing to put their time and their effort in starting to move towards a different future away from the maximised production paradigm, but what they saw that future as being other than something different to what was going on now, I don't have a clear sense at the moment.

Fiona Harvey: I think most farmers want a future for small-scale farming, but it's difficult. The average age of a farmer in this country at the moment is about fifty-seven, so that tells you … we have an ageing population of farmers and we don't necessarily have as many younger farmers coming in to replace them. So if we want to have small-scale farms, then we need to have small-scale farmers, and at the moment, we probably don't have as many of them as we would probably need.

Jon Agar: So, thank you, Fiona. Well, thank you very much, I hope you found that an interesting discussion. I'd like to thank Paul for being on the panel, but also the presentation. I'd like to say thank you to Sally Horrocks for her presentation and being on the panel, and thank you to Fiona Harvey for all her very interesting comments about the current state and future of farming. So thank you all …

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