

A LIFETIME FARMING AT ACTON

1960 -2015

BY JOHN A. BEST



Acton Village and Lough Shark

During the 1940s and 50s the farming community witnessed changes on a scale previously unknown. Until then, work on the farm had been carried out by all the members of the family. Men, women and children all played a part in both the production of crops and the care of livestock. At harvest and other busy times of the year neighbours were called in for help and seasonal workers were hired. The Second World War and the globalisation of markets led to changes in many aspects of work and social life. Increased use of tractors was one of the most noticeable examples of technological change. During World War II Ferguson tractors had been manufactured on an industrial scale and afterwards became an attractive investment for farmers.

I often think of the times we used to walk cattle through Poyntzpass on their way to pasture at Drumbanagher or beyond. We walked as many as one hundred cattle at a time up Church Street. By 1980 this practice had become impossible due to the traffic and I suspect that most residents now would not appreciate the deposits left by even a few cattle. As a teenager I was once sent into the kitchen of a house in Tunnel Road to retrieve a bullock. Crillys didn't know they had had a visitor! I was fortunate to come home to farm having obtained a



The 'Pass Street, Poyntzpass - looking north 1967

degree in agriculture in 1972, but it was only then that my education really began.

Our farm had always been a stock farm; predominantly cattle, with some sheep and one attempt at finishing pigs. Traditional beef finishing was superseded by pedigree Charolais, Simmental and more recently, Aberdeen Angus. Cattle numbers have been greatly reduced over the last fifty years as the area under wheat, barley, oats and oilseed rape has been increased. When I first started farming, store cattle were sourced from Enniskillen mart usually in the late winter and early spring. These cattle were frequently up to three

years old at the time of purchase and were put out to grass, traditionally on March 17th, and grazed until October or November. They would then have been taken by lorry for sale in either Allam's saleyard in Belfast (now St. George's Market) or the Shambles yard in Armagh.

Poyntzpass was well represented in these markets in terms of drovers, hauliers and cattle dealers – Trainors, Magills, McCombs, Lennons, Colman Murphy and Mick Gribben all notorious.



Ulster Farmers Mart, Armagh

Historically some cattle would have been bought by local butchers for retailing in Northern Ireland, but the majority were shipped live from Belfast to Heysham for slaughter and consumption in mainland U.K. Fat cattle were frequently exported live to the continent, in particular to Italy.

In 1969, through the foresight of my father, we were involved in the first importation of Simmental females into the U.K. We brought seven heifers from Germany with another twelve the following year. These were the first live cattle imported into Ireland in twenty years and the stock had to be quarantined and tested regularly to ensure that they did not put Northern Ireland's disease-free status at risk. Charolais were the other main continental breed imported from the early 1970s and we imported fifteen heifers in 1971 from France.



Simmental

Both the Charolais and Simmental breeds became very popular as terminal crosses to produce larger and leaner

carcasses than the traditional native breeds. Superior live-weight gain was another attribute of these new continental breeds. Now that we were part of the EU, there was a strong export market for carcass beef, particularly to France and North Africa, As frequently happens in farming, as in life, the wheel has turned full circle and Aberdeen Angus, a native breed, has replaced Simmental and Charolais. What started off some years ago as a promotion by Marks and Spencer, has been embraced by the consumer and there is now a strong demand from the major retailers for beef from native breeds, particularly Angus, Hereford and Shorthorn.



Charolais

During the 1970s, we were fortunate in being able to export many Simmental females to Texas. The cattle travelled to Stanstead by lorry. There they were put in crates and flown to Dallas where there was demand for a new breed with tolerance for the high temperatures to improve the native Hereford/Brahman crosses. This demand was fuelled by the fact that the purchase of breeding stock could be used as a tax break by professional people, in this instance, lawyers and doctors. The sales were high-profile events and my father sold Acton cattle in the Dallas Hilton Hotel. My wife Pat and I also attended a gala event in San Antonio. The trade to Texas ended around 1980 with an economic downturn in the USA.

With this demand for Simmental and Charolais exports, there was an incentive to increase the numbers of the progeny from pedigree breeding females, and we became involved in the early development of embryo transplant procedures. This involved removing a number of fertilised eggs from a cow and transplanting into recipient females. The technology is now very well developed and widely used in pedigree dairy herds.

When I started farming, there was a great disconnect between farming and food production. Among farmers at the time, there was a strong feeling that we could grow or produce whatever commodity we wanted to our own specification. We then considered it to be the role of a third party to purchase that product at the farm gate, and

pay a premium price, even though it may not have met the requirements of the market. This lack of market dependence was encouraged by a support system of guaranteed prices which sheltered the farmer from market demands and fluctuations. There is now much more consumer interest in the production methods and the provenance of food.

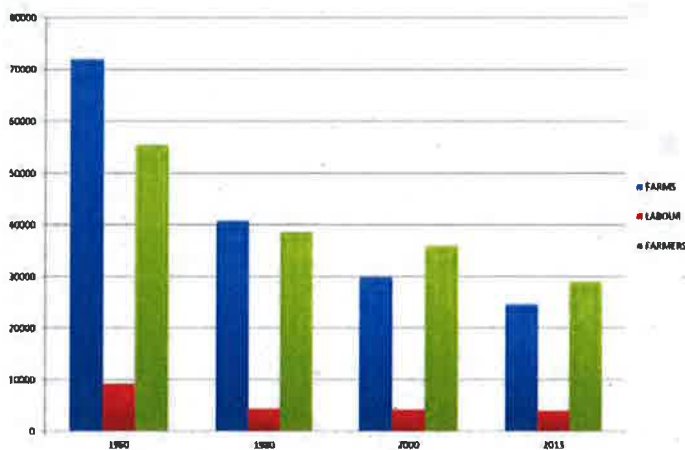
Traditionally, U.K. governments have always had some system of agricultural support to ensure that the population has a secure supply of cheap food to help maintain political stability. In my years in farming, this policy has been largely driven by EU membership and administered from Brussels.

POLITICAL CHANGES

Following the Second World War, food rationing continued well into the 1950s. Western Europe needed food security and a buffer against the threat from communist Eastern Europe. ‘The Mansholt Plan’ was the forerunner of the Common Agricultural Policy. In 1973, the U.K. and Ireland joined the Common Market of six countries which we all know now as the EU of twenty eight states.

Generous production subsidies and a heavily protected market lead to a rapid increase in farm production, enabling Europe to become self-sufficient in food supplies. This led to stock-piling in Intervention stores, with ‘beef mountains’ and ‘wine lakes’ as these surpluses were described at the time. Irishman Ray McSharry was responsible for reforming the Common Agricultural Policy by introducing the idea of removing land from production, ‘set-aside’, to control surpluses. Pressure from North and South America saw production subsidies removed and financial aid directed towards the environment and countryside. Production became more market-orientated, and this has continued in the most recent reforms in 2014.

TRENDS IN FARMING



Total number of farms and labour.

This graph illustrates the dramatic reduction in farms and farmers since 1960 as farms have had to grow to be economically viable. Since 1960, there has been a 45% reduction in farmers’ numbers and there are now 60% fewer farms.

The price of wheat has always been a reasonable barometer for farm commodity prices. While the actual price of wheat over the years has fluctuated considerably, the real price per tonne adjusted for inflation illustrates that a farm has had to continue to produce more to maintain a steady income. In real terms (i.e. adjusted for inflation) the price of wheat is just 25% that of the 1972 price when we joined the EU.

Year	Actual £ / tonne	Real £ / tonne
1972	£42	£483
1980	£113	£422
1990	£134	£265
2000	£83	£121
2014	£145	£145

Wheat Price

Consumer trends have seen potatoes decline as a staple food, with rice and pasta finding a place in many households. Rice is the staple diet of half the world’s population. Oats were the original ‘fuel crop’ in Ireland, being used to feed horses. Production of oats has also declined dramatically, as a result of farm mechanisation. There is much debate about the ethics of using wheat and maize to produce ethanol for fuel while so many people in the world are starving. Overall, there has been a move away from crops to grass production as the EU encouraged Irish farmers to maximise livestock production utilising our climatic conditions which are ideal for growing grass. While crop areas overall have declined dramatically, there was an increase in yields up to the 1990s, but as Europe became self-sufficient, financial support for scientific research was reduced and yields have tended to level off in the past decade.

CHEAP FOOD – SAFE FOOD – VALUE FOR MONEY – SUSTAINABILITY.

The consumer perception of food has changed dramatically in recent years, resulting in a much greater interest in the origin of food and sustainability of production methods. Animal welfare and convenience have become important considerations for consumers. In 1970, the average time taken to prepare a meal was sixty minutes; in 2014, the average was thirty two minutes. While other factors influence consumer decisions, price remains a primary consideration, especially in times of economic recession. Grocery market consolidation is a long-term phenomenon. In 1960, 20% of the grocery market share was held by the multiples; in 2010, that had risen to 90%, dominated in the U.K. by Sainsbury’s, Tesco, Asda and Morrisons.

In Northern Ireland the power of these major retailers in dictating prices and supply agreements to their producers is considerable. As farmers, we are very critical of the power they wield but it should be remembered that Tesco are currently the largest purchasers of Northern Ireland produce. As a rule, food processors now find the discounters, such as Aldi and Lidl, easier to deal with than the market leaders. In 1960, 25% of household income was spent on food and drink; today it is 11% with 22% spent on leisure activities. In real terms, over the past fifty years, food has declined in price due to greater efficiency in farm productivity and increased yields. Thanks to farmers, the consumer is now getting more for his or her money.



Combining barley beside Acton House 1960



A 1950s Binder

CROPS.

'You need a doctor occasionally, a solicitor as little as possible, a farmer three times a day...'

The main enterprise on the farm now is cereal production, the range of crops grown being determined by market requirements and the need to maintain a sustainable rotation.

The object is to maximise wheat acreage and grow 'break crops' alternately between each crop of wheat to help maintain soil fertility and reduce pest and disease pressure.

By 1980, the intervention support system adopted by the EU, and import tariffs levied on grain made cereal

production reasonably profitable. Initially, continuous spring barley was the main crop, but improving technology, plant breeding developments and higher yields meant that a winter wheat/winter barley rotation was the basis of the arable enterprise.

Being a grain-deficit area, Northern Ireland is dependent on grain imports to feed an intensive livestock sector. While intervention buying underpinned the U.K. grain price, we had a ready market at a premium in mainland U.K.

Wheat and barley are similar crops, subject to the same challenges from pests and disease, and so they are not sustainable in long term rotation. The need for a break-crop led me, in conjunction with Mortons, to grow the first **oilseed rape** in Northern Ireland. This brassica has proved to be an exceptionally good break-crop, growing very well in our climate. Initially, the harvested seed was shipped to Liverpool for crushing, but there is now a strong local demand for the oil as a protein source in poultry rations and also as a gourmet oil in food preparation. The same oil can be used as a fuel although falling crude oil prices have left rapeseed oil no longer an economical source of bio-diesel.

Oats traditionally were a staple crop on every farm in Northern Ireland but in the 1980s, the crop virtually disappeared with the rapid decline in the use of working horses, and because they are a much lower-yielding cereal than wheat or barley.

I reintroduced oats into my rotation in the late 1980s and it is now a significant part of our crop cycle as it does not suffer the same agronomic challenges as wheat. As a food, milled oats are seen as a healthy option, providing high soluble fibre, low cholesterol and low GI energy.

Our oats are grown for Speedicook in Tandragee who in turn supply both Asda and Tesco, and are also significant suppliers to Jordans' Conservation Grade brand.

Field Beans are a protein crop with the ability to recover atmospheric nitrogen and so they have a low requirement for inorganic fertiliser. Traditionally the main source of protein in livestock rations has been soya, and in Ireland we have always been totally dependent on imported soya from Brazil and the US. Increasing demand for vegetable oils from Asia and increased production of genetically modified soya has left conventional soya occasionally in short supply. Consequently there is an increasing interest locally in utilising beans as a protein source which can be produced in Ireland.

Willows grow rapidly and produce a large volume of woody material for processing into woodchip for boiler fuel. In the days of crude oil at \$150 a barrel, and a rush for renewable sources of energy, willow appeared to be a

very attractive option. However, a recession, falling oil prices and fracking have reduced the enthusiasm for woodchip burners. As water treatment becomes more expensive and unsustainable, I believe growing willow will have a part to play as a medium for bio-remediation – i.e. cleaning dirty water.

Over the years, I have grown both **flax and linseed**, but neither crop really proved successful. Dew-retting of flax rather than the traditional water-retting was difficult to control and the fibre quality was poor. Linseed proved to be low yielding and difficult to harvest though there is a strong demand for linseed oil.

Potatoes too were tried for a number of years, but they are not for the impatient or faint-hearted! After one good year in six, I gave up and left potato production to more resilient folk. Improving **biodiversity** has always been part of the ethos of the farm, and since 2000 we have been part of the Countryside Management Scheme to integrate intensive crop production with improving environmental conditions. This is a commitment to grow crops and cover to provide habitats and feed for wildlife and insects. Approximately 40% of the farmed land in Northern Ireland was under this scheme, but this area will decline rapidly as the current cutbacks in public spending are implemented.

DIVERSIFICATION

Over the past forty years, farm diversification has become an important aspect of many farms to hedge against falling returns from conventional agriculture and to provide more on-farm employment for family members. In many cases, the diversification enterprise has become more important than the original farm business.

Renewable energy is still very much part of the long-term solution to the high cost of energy in Northern Ireland and there are now many options open to farmers here from water, wind, solar, anaerobic digestion and gasification.



Composting green waste on the farm.

Sustainability has always been an integral part of any farm business, and the opportunity some years ago to turn garden waste into a soil conditioner by means of a composting process has been successful in reducing use of organic fertiliser and improving soil structure. There have been challenges but I believe that agriculture must be part of the solution in the future to recycle waste and improve water quality.

PEOPLE

People are a very important part of any business and farming is no exception. I have been very fortunate to have been influenced by a number of people over the years.



Don Best 'Let your eyes be your guide and your pocket your judge'

As an auctioneer, my father frequently began a sale with this advice to everyone present. I often think that in recent years many people in the world of real estate must have been walking around with their eyes shut and their hands in their pockets.

While I was at school, my father made a few half-hearted attempts to influence me away from farming, but only strengthened my resolve to work on the land.

Bill Buller

My uncle, Bill Buller, was a farming pioneer in his day and always took great pleasure in challenging anything I proposed. I eventually appreciated that by the time I had finished discussing any project with him, a full SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis had been completed without me realising it.

John Byrne

John came to Acton having completed his diploma at Greenmount. During the 1970s and 1980s he turned out many prize-winning Charolais and Simmental cattle and now breeds sheep and cattle on his own farm at Glascar.



Acton Fabian, Charolais Bull with L-R John Best, John Byrne and Garry Best.

Billy Cairns has been a steady, reliable member of the team for many years; now retired though still on call; never known to panic even when travelling by tractor on the Poyntzpass – Newry road at 8.30 a.m. with a queue of cars behind him.



Billy Cairns on the combine.

Billy's son **Nigel**, with **Eugene McVeigh** form the core team today. Having been on the farm for years, they must have learned how to manage me, and they are now going through that whole process again with the next generation.

FARMING AROUND THE WORLD.

Rugby has taken me to many countries that I would never have visited otherwise, and I have been fortunate in being able to visit some fantastic farms, and to meet some very dedicated farmers around the world.

A number of points stand out from those visits:-

- Wherever you go, there are good farmers and bad farmers. We in this country do not have a monopoly on either.
- Weather and bureaucracy are universal issues for farmers everywhere.
- The top farmers everywhere are very aware of their environmental responsibilities.
- We are now all competing in a world market. Any threat to production anywhere in the world affects us here in Poyntzpass. The world has become much smaller.
- It is very difficult to farm in a politically unstable environment.



Simon and Rory Best

THE ROAD TO THE FUTURE...

Having learnt from the experiences of the past, there are many challenges still for the next generation of farmers in this part of the world. Increasing world population will mean not just producing enough food, but the increased need to care for the environment at the same time.

I believe that here in Northern Ireland there will be many opportunities as we have the skills and resources to produce and process more food to help meet world demand.

Extensive use of GPS (Global Positioning System) technology and satellite imagery help to increase the accuracy of application and targeted use of fertiliser and chemicals. This technology has the potential to reduce costs and protect the environment.

As farmers, regardless of personal opinions on global warming and climate change, our livestock and the fertilisers we use are responsible for considerable levels of methane and nitrous oxide emissions. We also have a very important role in that we control the resources to sequester large amounts of carbon. It will be increasingly important to demonstrate that in this country we are managing these resources efficiently, otherwise we risk losing production to other parts of the world.

The EU must keep an open mind on the potential benefits of GM crops to both human health and the countryside. Genomics offer the opportunity to improve the efficiency of livestock production. There could be a world population of ten billion to feed by 2050 and consumers in developing countries are demanding access to diets based on animal proteins. The consumer must make the choice but that choice should be based on science not sentiment. There is, for example, a genetically modified variety of rice which can counter the nutrient deficiencies causing blindness in some developing countries.

Water is potentially a much more important resource than oil, with seventy per cent of world production currently irrigated. In Ireland, while we will never be short of water, farmers will be expected to protect water quality and to use water efficiently.

Farms here will continue to get bigger in order to compete in an increasingly volatile world market.



Combine on the Island Hill, overlooking Lough Shark.

To sum up the underpinning philosophy of farming: *'We do not inherit this land from our ancestors, we borrow it from the next generation'.*

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