

Esther Margaret Hood's reflections on Springhill

In those days, the early 1960's, Daphne Oxenford opened her radio programme "Listen with Mother" with "Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin..."

I hope you are sitting comfortably because now I'll begin...

Once upon a time, in Higher Cloughfold in Rossendale, a small girl aged six, maybe seven, was lifted onto a dapple-grey carthorse called Diamond. Oh! I couldn't even see the ground...

My granny – that's Mrs Taylor to you – took me round to the farm the first time – but after that I went by myself. Harry "our 'arry" looked after me, always. He had a brother, Billy, and a sister, Betty. And he had a mother, Mrs Spence. Even now, some 40 year on, I tremble at the thought of Mrs Spence. I think everyone trembled!

And yet she had a heart of gold. She gave me bantam eggs every now and again from the back larder in the kitchen (only two, mind) and very, very occasionally, a goose egg (one). She called me a 'duck egg' – but I don't think she ever gave me one!

When "our 'arry" was asleep after his lunch (because he'd been milking since first light), she would sit me on an upright stand chair until he woke up. And even then I'd to be still and quiet.

When he woke, he would clean his teeth at the kitchen sink – out of a little tin. I was always rather puzzled by this. But it turned out that the tin contained a form of toothpaste!

Then, away we went, up the yard. The sweeping went on...and on. Yet even now I sweep the yard with a brush like "our 'arry". Neighbours actually comment on how I brush down the path, and I just smile. How to explain?

I suppose I'm explaining now.

Over the years, I learned many things. Billy kept his alarm clock in a metal pail – apparently it made more noise! You kept away from that huge, hissing, white goose and you certainly didn't go near Glen, the farm's dog. He was kept on a big chain – always – but I was still frightened

I learned dry stone walling, how to lay a field drain, muck spreading. How to pluck chickens, collect eggs (those wretched hens couldn't half peck), how to spread lime and hay making. Diamond pulled the dray into the fields and we had big wooden rakes to gather the hay – which was frequently wet. Then, of course, it steamed.

Somehow, fuelled with Dandelion and Burdock, we make it back to the yard. Billy would nip aloft and Harry used a pitch fork to shove the hay up to him.

Even then, it was incredibly old fashioned. But I didn't realise. You don't when you're eight.

Diamond stood in that yard forever. Just every now and then she'd scrape her hooves on the cobbles – but "our 'arry" always looked after her. She foaled three times, although I only know the first one, and when she died, the knacker thought he would have to cut her in two to fit her onto his wagon.

Mrs Spence would have none of this. She sent him away to find a bigger wagon (which he did).

There were ducks, sells, sheep – mixed farming if ever there was - but most of all there were cows.

I gave them all names and Harry kept the list I made in the wash house. Harry taught me about breeds of cattle – Aberdeen Angus, Hereford, Friesian...his biggest cow was a Friesian and the only one I didn't name. she was called Marshall. Eventually I asked Harry why such a name. Seemed an odd name for a cow. "Marshall was the man who sold it to me." Well, its obvious when you know, but when you don't...

I used to be in time for the evening milking. Daisy, who had huge horns, was always first at the gate. The racket! She could have moo0ed for England. You had to stand clear as the herd came into the shippon and yet they walked calmly and into their own stall.

The first calf I knew I called Alice. The second, a Hereford, I called Teddy. But somehow he disappeared. The bullocks always disappeared.

Harry would give the cows cattle cake – it was rather tasty – but I wasn't so keen on sugar beet, though it would do in an emergency. There's always an emergency when you're nine.

Harry showed me how to move a milk churn without lifting it; we twirled it around. It was many years later that I realised he had only let me practice with empty churns.

It was fun for a little girl, but it must have been back-breaking work. For a tall man to sit on a three-legged stool milking by hand for hours on end would test the patience of a saint.

There was Mrs Hold, who always wore clogs, and donkey-stoned her steps weekly. Mr and Mrs Cunliffe, whose granddaughter, June, visited every summer. Mrs Murgatroyd whose bungalow was immaculate – and all clustered in this obscure little alley. I didn't think then that it was obscure. It was safe, it was home.

Its all gone now. Even the shippon has been made into two houses.

But Harry's still there – retired of course – still in Springhill Farm house, still speaking in thee's and thou's.

Mrs Spence, who kept her newspapers under the sofa cushions, is long gone.

Billy lives up the lane in a caravan. Betty died some years ago. She was a very great friend of my aunt. They used to watch Coronation Street and perm their hair. At the time of Betty's death, I lived abroad. But, of course, the grapevine always works. Sometimes you wish it wouldn't.

I wept buckets.

I remember Harry killing a rabbit: the sound of its breaking neck will live forever Yet I shall always treasure that Lancashire Life – until the cows come home.