

On the edge or back from the brink? Adaptability and change on family farms

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Reports of the death of the family farm appear to have been premature. With the series of crises that have afflicted British agriculture over the last seven years, many had begun to predict the imminent demise of family farming. Our research amongst family farmers in North Devon, bruised and battered by BSE, severe economic recession, Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) and bovine TB, suggests just the opposite. As one farmer remarked “a lot of people said, you know when foot and mouth came round, they wouldn’t be going back to it [farming] ... sat around a table and said ‘Well, what’re we gonna do? What’s the alternative?’ There is no alternative is there? It’s a farming area, farming people and we’ve got to get on with it”. Our research found that families had continued to survive in farming through determination and adjusting both their farm business and their households, but that such survival had taken a toll on them.

Mr Mattern (not his real name) recalled watching the pyres of burning animals move up the valley towards his farm and the raw emotions of that time “... there were people in tears and one thing and another, but I mean it wasn’t no good getting like that. I mean I knew I didn’t have it but you dreamt you had it every night, and every morning when you looked at everything it was a greater period of stress, you know, than if you did have it”. The Farmers on the Edge research project (funded by the Countryside Agency) investigated how family farmers were adapting to the vicissitudes of the agricultural recession. Initially, FMD delayed the field work taking place. It was one in a long line of problems besetting farming families in the area. It was the most dramatic and traumatic certainly, but their problems ran far deeper.

By the late 1990’s farming incomes were below those during the recession of the 1930’s, whilst the effects of BSE still were rippling through the agricultural industry as major export opportunities were lost. Then the 2001 FMD outbreak led to the destruction of over 4 million animals, and whilst the disease itself *directly* effected a minority of farms, many more were placed under movement restrictions and farming families across the country were subject to the anxiety generated by the threat of the disease. In the area that we focused on in North Devon, these restrictions were reinforced by those put in place to control bovine TB, which was becoming widespread in the area. The crisis in farming was ongoing and for many people getting deeper.

The Farmers on the Edge project aimed to examine the reactions of farm household members to the events described above and to identify what changes they had made to their lives to cope with them. The farms in the

survey were drawn from a larger sample originally surveyed twenty years ago by Professor Michael Winter. Matt Reed, who conducted most of the fieldwork, was often the first 'outsider' to visit the family after the end of foot and mouth.

The project focused on a relatively remote area of North Devon, characterised by rough grazing, a prevailing westerly wind and high levels of small, owner-occupied farms. Farms in the past have been mixed, raising sheep, cattle and a few arable crops, which in turn has created a diverse 'patchwork' landscape. Despite the relative remoteness of the area and its traditional appearance the recent past has seen a range of changes that together point both to a decline in the cohesion of the farming community and a shift in the wider social role of farmers. The one time commonplace practise of neighbour-helping-neighbour has now all but disappeared other than in emergencies. Even membership of the National Farmers Union, which could have been considered near 'compulsory' twenty-years ago, has seen a dramatic fall as farmers increasingly felt that it no longer represented them or their best interests or as one farmer pithily captured it 'The NFU – bugger them!'

At the same time, farm family members have withdrawn from participation in civic society. In the past many have held positions such as school governor or sat on the parish council but fewer are involved today. This is perhaps partially a cause and partially a reflection of the very few farmers who knew the names of their non-farming neighbours. It is also a reflection of the high levels of pressure and work that characterises the modern family farm. One younger farmer whose family had adopted a strategy of working longer, harder hours in order to survive reflected that "...it's got worse really in the way its more pressure, pressure all day, seven days a week. You just can't shut it off, you know. This is the trouble when you've gotta be there and see to everything. And ... that's the problem init .. its pressure, mental pressure".

Nevertheless, the farmers we interviewed are not about to give up. Having survived foot and mouth they are now coming to terms with the realities of the post-FMD countryside. For many this simply means attempting to survive by avoiding risk of any kind and working long, hard hours. This 'belt-tightening' approach may aid short-term survival but an unwillingness to seek external capital and take risks may have implications for future survival. Some are in danger of succumbing to a downward spiral leading to depression, further isolation, lack of awareness of the successful and less personally costly

strategies adopted by others and a movement away from the networks of association frequently important in successful business strategies. The popular media frequently presents family farmers as the bastions of the rural community but our results suggest that social capital – networks of friendship, association and civic participation - has not been renewed in the way that it was before the recession and FMD.

Despite the obvious hardship continuing to be suffered by many farmers we did not find any examples of extreme poverty (e.g. inability to meet basic needs) although there was significant hardship. Many were reluctant to admit to 'going without' (e.g. skipping meals or turning off the heating) although others admitted to delaying household expenditure and to readjusting their material needs for the sake of the farm business. In some families women took on additional work to support the farm business, whilst in others pension plans were cancelled and savings used to make ends meet. One family supported its adult children on the pensions of the retired parents.

It was clear, however, that most were committed to remaining in farming or at least remaining on the farm. For many who were asset-rich yet cash-poor this is just as much a lifestyle decision as it is for those who dream of escaping the city in search of the rural idyll. Yet many important issues remain unresolved. At a time when, more than ever, farmers are being called upon to become rural entrepreneurs many farmers in the area were unable to conceive of a clear future direction. This was partly connected to the distance they felt existed between themselves as farmers and the major factors driving future change but also reflects increased isolation and lower levels of social association both with other farmers and wider society. Isolated farmers with a business in a 'holding pattern', whose personal well-being has been severely eroded over recent years, will not find it easy to take advantage of policy initiatives designed to facilitate the transition to rural entrepreneur or countryside manager.

For many a first step must involve overcoming isolation, rebuilding networks of association and being given time and space to think and plan away from the constant seven days a week pressure of running the farm. The very characteristics that have enabled many to survive – the willingness to work excessive hours and forgo personal wants - threatens their ability to reconnect to the wider rural economy and society. Policy makers should also recognise that there may be several steps on the road to rural entrepreneurship and that measures to help rebuild social associations and opportunities for business mentoring may be just as significant as grant aid. Many farmers we interviewed have looked over edge and have returned; their longer term survival rests on the ability to recognise the personal and social costs of survival as much as the economics of farming.

