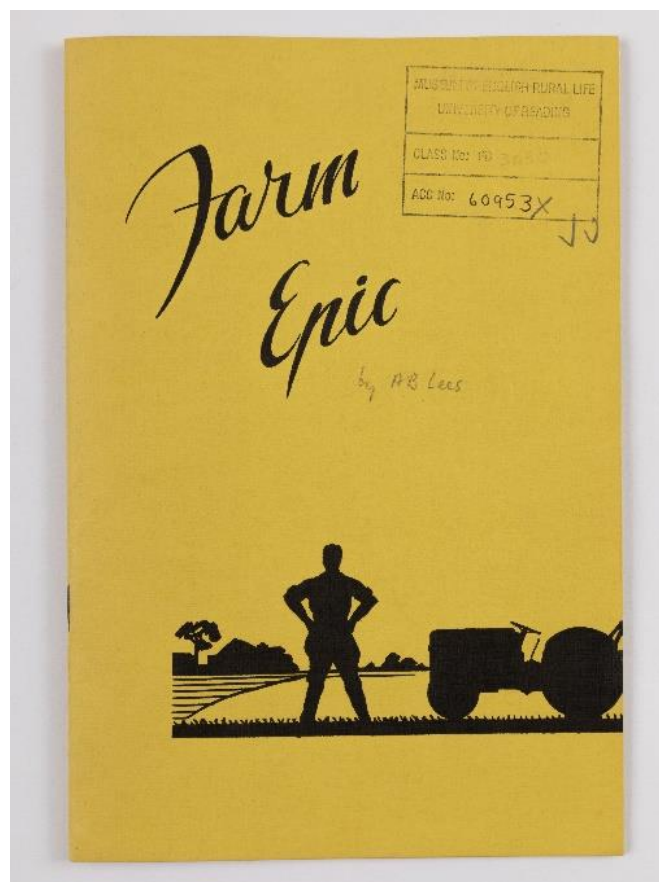


17. Farm Epic

In this response, the actor Tim Bentinck shares with us his lifelong relationship and links with an iconic piece of farm machinery. Reading this 1951 booklet about the Ferguson System stirred memories of his own global connections with the much-loved 'little grey Fergie'. From family life to his leading role in the BBC radio serial The Archers (and even his part in The MERL's 60th anniversary celebrations) the Ferguson tractor forms a common thread.

Main text © Tim Bentinck 2021.

Anthony Bernard Lees, Farm Epic (circa 1951)



In corresponding with Tim about the [response to 51 Voices item 3](#) (and knowing as we did of his enduring love of the TE20 tractor) we sent him a scan of this booklet called Farm Epic and asked for his thoughts (MERL

Fergies and Me

My relationship with the Ferguson TE20 tractor goes back a long way. Sixty-seven years to be precise. Almost the first photograph of me is sitting at the wheel of a grey petrol Fergie, on the sheep station where I was born in Tasmania. My first ever wheeled journey outside of a pram was sitting on my mum's knee in the link box attached to the hydraulics behind the driver, my father Henry.



Driving the tractor, aged 1 (Tim Bentinck © 2021).

After the war, mindful of the threat of Mutually Assured Destruction, my pa had found that the last place on earth to be hit by the ensuing radiation was believed to be Tasmania. So, being the kind of guy who put his money where his mouth was, he packed up the family – wife and two daughters, all his possessions, including furniture, emigrated on the SS Chitral as a ‘ten pound Pom’, and took a job as a farm hand on a sheep station in the central midlands of Tasmania. I was born there in 1953, and had it not been for my mother Pauline, a gregarious, artistic, highly articulate Yorkshire party girl, suddenly finding she only had sheep for company (there were other reasons too!), I’d be an Aussie farmer, and David Archer would have sounded completely different.



Sorrel and Anna in the link box (Tim Bentinck © 2021).

We all came back in 1955 and my parents bought a house outside a village near Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire. My father commuted to work in London; first as a BBC talks producer, then as an ad-man working for J. Walter Thompson, creating and producing such memorable ads as the Nimble balloon campaign; introducing Mother's Pride Bread to the south of England; and writing the line, 'Mr Kipling makes exceedingly good cakes', casting James Hayter as the voice, and being the first person to use high quality tight close-up shots of the product in British TV advertising.

I did casual work on a local farm in a village called Nettleden as I was growing up, and renewed my relationship with what appeared to be the same tractor, twelve years later, on the other side of the world, mucking out with a high lift loader, using the yard scraper, and my first rather hopeless attempts at ploughing. This remains the location in my mind of the yard at Brookfield and gave me the farming experience I still use in my imagination in *The Archers*. It was a traditional family farm, and the cows, the sheep, and the pigs there live on in my mind. There was a big bloke with massive sideboards and a strong old Hertfordshire accent called Jess, and a cheeky, naughty kid called Nobby, who used to take me out poaching – not because we were great pals I don't think, but because my father let me borrow the shotgun. All my *Archers* scenes with Jethro, and later Bert Fry and Eddie Grundy have resonances in those two, and that's where I learned to drive a tractor, muck out a pig sty, build a barbed wire fence (I have the scars to prove it), toss a bale to the top of a haystack, and roll a crafty fag.

In 1970 we went for a holiday with our cousins in Bavaria. They too had a Fergie which they called 'Das tanzende Pferd' - The Prancing Horse - after it's habit (according to them) of rearing up, and sometimes toppling backwards. Maybe it's just the way Germans drive...



With friend Noel in Germany (Tim Bentinck © 2021).

In 1976 Pa went and did it again. This time he foresaw global famine and decided he needed to be self-sufficient; so he sold the house, my stepmother Jenny sold her flat in London (my mum had died in 1967) and together they headed off to live 'The Good Life' in Devon. This time, I was involved with the house hunting, and an extraordinary set of requirements needed to be fulfilled. Firstly it had to have a fast-flowing stream, so that he could use the water to generate electricity. It needed enough land to be able to produce food and to farm sheep, turkeys, pigs, a house cow, chickens and ducks. Finally, and most disturbingly, it needed a 'killing ground' to defend the place from the marauding gangs that would be coming for us once the Great Famine had begun. I'll never forget the look on the estate agent's face when he overheard my father approving the view from an upstairs bedroom as "a perfect spot for the Bren gun."

He could be a terrible wind-up merchant.

It was to be an organic farm, this in the days before organic became fashionable, and farming without pesticides was a forgotten art. We went to the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales to find out about wind turbines, solar panels and the rest, and Pa read countless books on sustainable lifestyles and joined the Soil Association. Finding a hill-top fortress with running water proved impossible and they settled on a beautiful Devon cob and thatch long-house called Wigham that nestled on the side of a hill just outside the village of Morchard Bishop. It had been run as a dog kennels and in the year after university and in our holidays from drama school Judy, then my girlfriend, now my wife of forty years, and I stayed there and helped them turn it into an organic smallholding.



Henry ploughing at Wigham (Tim Bentinck © 2021).

Almost the first thing Pa did after moving in was to buy a Fergie and it was then that I realised what an amazing workhorse the tractor really was. The power take-off at the back meant that it could be turned into almost every agricultural tool you could imagine.

We tilled the fields with a two-furrow plough and harrow, we hand-milked ‘Easy’, the beautiful Jersey cow, and made butter and clotted cream; Pa harvested the wheat with a scythe and piled up stooks which we threshed by hand; we built pigsties and bought in Tamworths that had piglets the same colour as the Labrador, ‘Chumleigh’, who as a result got confused and thought that he was a pig too; we raised, sheared, weighed, dagged and ate lambs; kept hens for their eggs and I learned how to wring a chicken’s neck (it’s much harder than it looks). In order to make some money, Pa and Jenny ran the place as a guest-house. It became enormously popular because together with a kitchen garden, all the food was home-produced and my stepmother was a wonderful cook. Typically they never made it a successful business because they didn’t charge enough, also my father slowly turned into a Fawlty-esque host, hating having to play the part of fawning waiter, having spent the day where he was happiest – out in the fields, working.

When I was asked to open a section of the museum at MERL’s 60th Anniversary in 2011, I remember thinking that half of the old farming implements from history on display were things that my father used on the farm and have since been handed down to me. I then came round a corner of the exhibition and there was a grey Fergie – in much better condition, but yes, the same machine that he used to plough the field, cut up logs with a massive (and incredibly dangerous) circular saw from the PTO, transport wood, stones and animals in the link box, and clear out pig muck with the yard scraper. They took a photo of me there to match the one of my much younger self.



Tim at The MERL in 2011.

The only pic I've got of me on the tractor in Devon is with my 2 year old nephew Warwick – who is now in his forties!



With nephew Warwick at Wigham (Tim Bentinck © 2021).

Happy memories, driving the short wheelbase Land Rover to the abattoir with a pig in the trailer, and coming back with supper; trudging through drifts with our cat in a basket strapped to my back when the house had been completely cut off by snow, and getting to the small railway station just in time for the only train that day, clambering aboard feeling like Scott of the Antarctic, only to be observed with disdain by commuters in their shirt-sleeves; nailing down lethal corrugated iron sheets in a gale that was threatening to blow the whole roof off; plucking ducks until our thumbs were raw; coming down to breakfast wearing a crash helmet to stop getting brain damage from constantly hitting my head on the low beams and doorways; building a bedroom above the workshop with a trapdoor entrance; table tennis in the barn; then down to the pub in the evening with local tales, roaring fires and strong Devon ale. Proper job.

So much of that experience is still in my imagination today in The Archers recording studio, where the straw is tape, the cow is a sound effect, and the physical work is done for us by someone else. It helps though if you can see the reality. It's like mime on stage – if you can see the brick wall in front of you, then so can the audience, but if you just pretend you can see it, they can't. These days the recording studio is a duvet lined studio under our front steps, but we still give the same illusion.



Henry harvesting with a scythe (Tim Bentinck © 2021).

Sadly my father Henry died of cancer in 1997. He had been way ahead of his time on the subject of the environment. In his later years he became great friends with James Lovelock, of 'Gaia' fame. Indeed in his book 'Homage to Gaia' Lovelock says that Henry was one of the few people who really understood what he was talking about. In 1970 Henry stood on the plinth of Nelson's Column and delivered a speech warning the world about pollution, overpopulation, the destruction of the environment and the dangers of global warming. He said that his generation were mostly deaf and blind to the terrible problems that were coming, but that he had great trust in the younger generation, and that a new wave of awareness was coming. How over-optimistic he was. I find it frustrating to hear Greta Thunberg saying that her generation is the first one to shout from the rooftops about the impending disaster when my Pa was screaming this message in the sixties. But there wasn't the internet then, and Devon tends to absorb sound.

Continuing his habit of doing, rather than just saying; when a distant cousin died, he had the opportunity of claiming the title of Earl of Portland. It cost a lot of time and money to do the research, but he did it purely to get a seat in government in order to have a serious political platform to spread his views - the title came with no estate. He only spoke once, his maiden speech, before he became ill. It's a moving statement [which you can see here on YouTube](#), but the emptiness of the House is a sad metaphor of the lack of impact it ultimately had.

They'd left Wigham by that time, and moved to a similar Devon farmhouse, but without the land, near Beaford, where Henry wrote his philosophy of the world in a mediaeval outhouse above the wood store and he and Jenny walked for miles with their Labrador, created a beautiful garden and grew vegetables. His legacy of writing has yet to be published.

I've sometimes thought of 'doing a Henry' and making such a radical change, but I ended up in a fictitious farm, rather than a real one. It's not such hard work and I get to do a whole lot of very different things. My autobiography is called 'Being David Archer – And Other Unusual Ways of Earning a Living' and is about the ups and downs, highs and lows and constant insecurity of being a jobbing actor. I'm not sure I could deal with the early mornings on a farm, it's bad enough when you're doing a movie or a telly, but then it's not for life and you're being paid a silly amount of money. And then you're not. For ever!



Henry on a walk near Little Cudworthy (Tim Bentinck © 2021).

Looking at this photo of my father, I can see a similarity between him and a Ferguson TE20. Both old, both grey, both strong. Well worn and wise, of the country, adaptable, reliable, but also prone to occasional moments of infuriating stubbornness.

Further Information:

For more about Farm Epic see – [MERL LIBRARY PAMPHLET 3680 BOX 1/11](#)

For more about Tim see – <https://www.timbentinck.com/> and <https://www.beingdavidarcher.net/>

For more about Henry see – <http://www.henrybentinck.com/>

For more about The MERL's 60th – <https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/whatson/merl-60thanniversary.aspx>