

Farming under Fire stories

Anne Dunn: 'The Ministry bought the first farms in 1911, but in the early 1950's they bought a lot more, because they realised that it was ideal training area for what the soldiers needed. That was after the Second World War; they trained a lot up here before the Second World War and that. They needed more area so they acquired more farms, and the shepherds' cottages were a way out, actually on the firing area. So, they built a little village just above Alwinton, they always called it The Barrier. Why that? Because there used to be a barrier across the road obviously, and there was a big flat area, and they were like wooden chalet places, wooden huts. Families moved down there during the day from the farms.

Those houses were all built. There was Philhope, two at Blindburn, Barrowburn, two at Shillmoor, two at Quickening and two at Linbriggs. They built ten houses up there in the 1950s for the shepherds to move off the hills. And sometimes they'd go back and there might be damage done to the houses or round about the houses, where there had been shells.

It would be quite difficult for the families, but they all seemed to accept it. You know, you just move from one house to the other. You would have stuff in both but it would be basic, but life was basic in those days. You didn't have all the fancy gadgets and all the televisions and all the stuff like that. As long as there was a fireplace and you could put the kettle on and have a cup of tea, people managed. They didn't know any other.'

Keith Lee: 'I mean, it would have been a fantastic place to live but it would be very inconvenient. There was no decent road then. There was no bridges until the Forestry Commission took it over and put the bridges in. There was seven fords to get there on a dirt road. Every spring my father used to send a wagon up with two or three men, and they would clear the fords of stones and rocks that had got washed down in the winter. I remember him taking a load of hoggin

from Biddlestone Quarry in the back of the wagon to fill up pot holes and the like on the way up.

Each winter, in about September, October, a wagon would go up with flour and sugar and whatever else. I think there was just one family living there. Whatever else they would need to see them through the winter, so they didn't need to, well, they couldn't go to a shop because there wasn't a shop to go to. Nobody could get to them half the time because there used to be a lot of snow in those days. So they got all their supplies in, in the autumn, and that lasted them through.'

Catherine Evans: 'It must have been terribly hard for my mother, all the cooking and the washing – washing days was horrendous – and pig killings and things like that. She was always making jam, always baking.

She was great for sewing. She sewed, and on a Sunday afternoon she would sit down to darn socks for the boys, and this was after she'd cooked dinner for everybody, and she would be sitting darning and then fall asleep. She'd be worn out, bless her. Point is, that was the way you lived. You knew nothing else.'

Clare Packer: 'The storms themselves, yes, they are traumatic, but it's the massive knock on for months later. The difference with Storm Arwen was the ferocity of the wind but, as much as anything, the direction of the wind. So the wind was from the north. Now usually our prevailing wind is from the west, south west, so the trees all lean that way. So when it came from the north, it brought down a lot more trees than we would normally have expected in a wind like that. You know, apart from the house, there's trees down everywhere, there's gateways, there's walls, there's fences.

And it's those things, when you're on your own, it's not even days' work, it's weeks of work. It's months of work.'

Ken Howey: 'Sunbrough Cottage was out on the moors beyond Cartington, yes. It's become very posh, but it was just a little cottage up on the moor which we had for, about 27 years we had it. Yes. No water, no electricity or anything.

We holidayed in it. We didn't actually live in it. We spent all our spare time in it as a family, yes, aye. You had to carry everything up. You parked near Lorbottle and you walk up through two streams, up through the woods, up onto the moors, to that little cottage. We spent all our time there. There was no water, no electricity, or anything like that.

I remember one night, in the dark it was, mind it was way up on the moors. There was a knock on the door. So all six of us went out to the door and just in case, for numbers. There was some soldiers had lost their way actually. About four soldiers. They had lost their way, which was terrible for the army. They're supposed to know what they're doing.

Another day we had a hot air balloon came up over actually, and landed at the cottage as well. That was interesting. We had a chat with them and then they flew off again.'

Don Clegg: 'And we also used to get involved with making what we called proggy mats. It lasted nearly all winter, and you had a big wooden frame and usually you got some hessian sacks from somewhere, from the local farm – can ah have a sack – and you opened it up into a flat sheet. Then you sewed it into this frame and stretched it so that it was nice and tight.

Then, during the weeks and months beforehand, any spare clothing that was past wearing, even passed wearing for work, was cut up into short lengths, maybe. Well, we used to wrap, a strip, cut it into a strip and then wrap it round a match box. Then, as you cut, you got the exact length you needed for ye proggy bits that went into the mat. Then it was usually a piece of, a piece of bone or just a piece of hard wood, that was made into a sort of a pointed stick.

The idea was that you pushed one end of this piece of material, usually flannel cos that was the sort of hard wearing stuff, you pushed it into the hole, pulled it through a little way from underneath and then pushed the second end also into a hole next door, so both of the pieces were hanging down underneath. And that was actually going to be the top of the mat once you'd finished it, turned it over. And you just worked your way through.'