



Project: Ploughing Up Our Past
 Respondents: Russell McNab
 Year of Birth: 1945
 Connection to project: farmed Garlaff
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Time (from: mins/secs)	FULL TRANSCRIPT
00.00	IM: Were you born on a farm? Was your father a farmer?
00.10	RM: No. My father was a butcher. I was born in Kilmarnock.
00.15	IM: So how did you get into farming?
00.20	RM: With my father being a butcher he eventually bought a wee farm at Stewarton and we lived there for a number of years. That was when I was still at school. I cycled from Stewarton to Kilmarnock every day, summer and winter which you wouldn't get away with nowadays I don't suppose.
00.48	IM: That's a fair distance.
00.50	RM: Kept you fit but when you're that age it doesn't matter too much. So that's was how the farming thing got to be and then I left the school in 1959 and went to work on the farms. My father gave up the butcher shops at that time because he could see that I wasn't going to follow him.
1.11	IM: What farms did you work at? Round Kilmarnock or Stewarton?
1.14	RM: No. When my father sold the farm at Stewarton; it was just a small farm, 32 acres, Draffan you called it. In fact the whole thing was developed. It was right next to

	<p>the village. I see lately the rest of the ground is developed. There's houses getting built there as well now. But that's a long time ago since it's been sold. That was 1959, 1960 and I went and started working on the farms at Ochiltree to begin with. At Finlayston farm. I was there for a wee while. I finished up at Gatehead, at Old Rome farm for quite a time as well and then we bought a wee farm at Ochiltree, Cawhillan, which we had for a wee while and it was eventually sold and I went back to work on the farms. So in later years when I got married to my wife Isobel, she was brought up at Benston Farm in New Cumnock and I got a job as tractorman at Dumfries House Estate. That was in 1966. We were there for a time and then Isobel's father, my father-in-law, asked if I would go to work at Benston. So we did that and unfortunately we weren't there terribly long until Isobel's Dad died. In the interim my father and I had bought Garlaff farm which is where a lot of the history has come from. That was 1968 so that's how it all fell into place.</p>
3.10	IM: What was Garlaff like when you bought it?
3.13	<p>RM: Garlaff was in a terrible state. Garlaff was famous for its poor state. I've already put quite a bit about its condition on the [Cumnock History Group] website. Jake Cook was getting on in years. He'd been there for 42 years. He'd come from the Strathaven district with a sister who died young, not long... I presume a few years after they came to Garlaff. I think when she passed away Jake Cook maybe lost heart a wee bit and it fell into disrepair. It was in a poor, poor state when we bought it. The ground had been hungered and I think it was the goodwill of his neighbours that helped him out from time to time and kept him going as long. He tried to sell the farm a few times before we bought it. We saw the potential in it and in fact Isobel's father went with us to view it to see if there was potential to buy it and do something with it and that was just maybe a few months before he died. So that was quite sad.</p>
4.36	IM: And had it been a beef farm?
4.42	<p>RM: It was a dairy farm. But in these days I suppose you'd maybe get away with things you wouldn't get away with nowadays. The buildings were in poor repair. There was a double byre with double roofs and a gutter valley down the centre of that where the cows were lying and water was pouring in. Oh some of the things I could tell you it's maybe not very kind to Jake Cook's memory but it was in a poor state.</p>
5.16	IM: So you were taking it on virtually from scratch?
5.19	<p>RM: I think it was from minus scratch really [laughs]. I think it was minus scratch. People reading the website would see more detail about it but I mean there wasn't a fence hardly, fields in poor condition. Steading, the farm steading was in very, very poor condition. The house was in terrible condition.</p>
5.48	IM: That must mean that you put in an awfy amount of work before you could actually start farming.
5.55	RM: Oh aye, very much so.
5.56	IM: dealing with fences and buildings.
5.58	<p>RM: The idea was that my mother and father would live there to begin with but the house needed a big, big renovation. I spent all my spare time gutting it and doing a lot of work to it probably for maybe up to a year before they went and started living there. The only sanitation in it was an old fireplace sink ran into a cesspool and that was all there was. There was an outside, dry toilet built out of ammunition boxes from wartime. I remember putting a lot of hay into it and setting fire to it which was quite pleasing I suppose at the time [laughs]. That was a lot of work. And then eventually I built the bungalow at Garlaff myself in the next year or two and we moved there from Benston where we were working at my father-in-law's to Garlaff about 1971 into the bungalow. Eventually...</p>

7.12	IM: But that was a lot done in three years
7.17	RM: It was, but I was young then [laughs]. Aye, I was young then.
7.24	IM: And I suppose Garlaff was next to Changue.
7.30	RM: Yes. Changue was... the way the ground went up to Woodhead way. We were neighbours through a public road if you like. Aye it was just next to Changue.
7.41	IM: So you could see what could be done with a dairy farm.
7.46	RM: Aye, at that time although we never had any dairy on Garlaff. We let out the fields in the early years to other farmers just to try to let the thing get sorted out.
8.00	IM: So it was beef?
8.01	RM: Eventually it was beef cattle and sheep we kept. I remember the only thing we had in the wintertime was sheep-wintering hoggs. And I remember the first year on the 1 st of October when they came on there was about 6 inches of snow and I thought that that was maybe a bit of a sign of things to come but anyway it got better. Aye, so that was just beef cattle and sheep. We ran about 100 cows, 200 ewes, 200 to about 250 ewes and about 100 hoggs and because we didn't have enough work to do [laughs] we used to lamb them. We used to nurse them and kept the best as replacements and sold the rest off as gimmers. It turned a shilling I suppose but it was a lot of work but as I said I was young then.
9.00	IM: And that kept on as beef and sheep farm until the bypass?
9.08	RM: Yes. Until the bypass. In about 1980 there was approaches made to various farms for opencast proposals. Garlaff sat on a situation where maybe there was some coal but the overburden was quite extensive. Too much overburden to move for the amount of coal to get out so it went in fits and starts for a time with nothing happening. I should maybe go back a bit for a time. In 1975 my wife and I and family swapped places with my mother and father who were in the farmhouse. They went into the bungalow.
10.15	IM: At Benston?
10.18	RM: No. This was all at Garlaff. We moved to the bungalow in '71 and lived there for 4 years then my wife and I swapped houses with my mother and father so that I was in the farm at that time so that I could better look after things because I was erecting a lot of buildings and doing a lot of work to the fields trying to build up a stock. So that was a big change as well but by the early 80s opencast was on everybody's lips in the district. This was going to be happening and it did eventually happen right enough. Nothing much was happening at Garlaff. There had been a Skares Road project for coal which had fallen into place later in the 80s and one at Milzeoch Farm on the other side of Garlaff which fell into place and Garlaff was the last one. But there had been a change at Milzeoch and the people who had been involved at Skares Road sort of got pushed to the side there and another company came into Milzeoch which left Garlaff kind of isolated, so nothing happened and in 1990, the end of 1989, 1990, the talk was all about the Cumnock bypass starting at that time. The contract was going to be awarded to Barr and Barr was going to haul the stone and everything to make the bypass from Kirkmichael away out in the country which was an expensive job and I knew at Garlaff there was fields where there was hard whinstone showing on the surface of the fields like mounds. I eventually spoke to Bill Barr and I think he didn't believe me to begin with that there could be such a thing as near the job as he wanted. Eventually he believed me and they started extracting the stone from Garlaff in 1990 and that's when I stopped actively farming. We'd to sell the stock.
13.00	IM: Yes, I was going to ask about that. If they're extracting that amount of whinstone you could hardly run a farm. Or could you?
13.09	RM: Well, I suppose you could but Garlaff lay to the north of the Skares Road and to the south so it was kind of divided and landfill was taking place just off the south side

	<p>of the road. It was kind of in the middle of the farm if you like. It kind of destroyed the entirety of the farm if you like. A deal was struck anyway with a partial or proposed opencast coal deal at the side of it with another company which actually never came to pass but that's another story. So Barr started and took the stone. The entire Cumnock bypass is built on stone out of Garlaff and it continued.. well, it took two years to build so that was to 1992 and the they continued extracting stone and taking it to Killoch and using it for making it into roads materials and so on up until 1995 when they finished and then Barr went over to Sorn and started digging out of there where they've been digging ever since. Then Barr found out they had this big hole in the ground - there had been about a million tons of stone extracted – and that would be suitable for landfill and waste so that was how that began.</p>
14.58	<p>IM: Did that begin to render the house uninhabitable? Or, if not uninhabitable, not a pleasant place to live?</p>
15.20	<p>RM: Well, there was a lot of noise with the quarry but once the landfill started you wouldn't have wanted to live the. Barr... It was sold out on a long-term lease. That's sounds odd but it's how it was done at the time and Barr took use of the farmhouse for offices and so on because it was nearby. But I should come in here a wee bit and go back a couple of years and say that we stopped farming in 1990 at Garlaff but we knew we would have to look for somewhere else to live so by 1993 we had bought Springs and started looking at moving here. So by 1995 the stone extraction was finished and Barr started filling the void the stone had opened there. That lasted a time and eventually another opencast company approached us to look at coal extraction further south at Garlaff but it had the same old problem whereby there was too much overburden to move for not enough coal extracted. Of course one of the biggest costs in that job is removing overburden and reinstating. It was adjacent to where Barr was already landfilling the quarry and there had been opencast on the east and the west side of Garlaff and these had come to be finished more or less but there was voids there. So eventually the opencast company said that if they could do a deal with the contractors who had left the void on either side they could take the overburden off Garlaff and move it to either side, take the coal out and leave a void for the landfill, a future void for the landfill which is where it's still being utilised to this day.</p>
17.32	<p>IM: I believe they're still harnessing the methane off the landfill.</p>
17.42	<p>RM: Aye. Very much so. There was a big powerline put in from Garlaff to the grid and it's been producing electricity on average for about 6,000 homes all that time. People don't believe me when I tell them that. Landfill's a bad word but it can produce clean electricity and still is so it's not all bad.</p>
18.10	<p>IM: You stopped farming Garlaff in 1990 so that was nearly 22 years you farmed it.</p>
18.19	<p>RM: 22 years we farmed it.</p>
18.22	<p>IM: Did you do it all on your own or did you employ anybody?</p>
18.25	<p>RM: Did it all on my own. Isobel helped me as well. We had occasional fellows that helped us at busy times you know but just on my own. We put up goodness knows how many buildings. It just was hard work but it was different days and what you did at the time to try to get on. I don't want to sound boastful but we good success of it. It went from a poor farm to supporting 100 suckler cows, as I say 350 sheep. It was 240-odd acres. It was a fair size you know but it just needed a bit of TLC.</p>
19.15	<p>IM: I think it was very impressive. I don't know much about farming but just the actual rebuilding of the place.</p>
19.27	<p>RM: There was no decisions to be made or no doubt about decisions because any of the buildings that were there were useless. The original barn was kept just for sort of storage and we stored grain in it for a time and we grew some barley in other years.</p>

	The old byres and the old sheds, some of them were built out of old ammunitions boxes. There was no question they had any future use so you didn't need to think you could adapt one or anything like that. They just had to be demolished and start from scratch.
20.06	IM: Given that you didn't employ anybody except maybe casually now and again did you ever feel isolated?
20.15	RM: No. I don't think I did really. I think that once I felt isolated and that was the morning I'd given up working at my father-in-law's farm to come and live at Garlaff. The first morning I went out and started to work about the farm I started to wonder what I had done [laughs]. I don't know if isolated was the word. Strange I suppose because since I left school I'd been employed by other people and this was me starting on my own and if you think I had a family to support and this place was in a terrible mess and we managed to do something but you know...
21.00	IM: It's just that I read that nowadays anyway there's a lot of depression among farmers because they're on their own. There isn't the same..
21.12	RM: Aye. I think since my day in farming farmers have become more isolated. A lot of them, for example the big dairy farms that's constant, 7 days a week and their wives are away out working and they're left on their own all day really. They might have a visit from a sales rep or a neighbour now and again but it is a lonely life. When I got married and worked at Dumfries Estate there was 18 of us and that was like a community and there was no isolation or insular feeling there at all. It was good.
21.59	IM: Were you able to maintain sort of social relations with other farmers?
22.06	RM: Yes. Very much so. Maybe not in the earlier years at Garlaff with a young family we weren't really able to get out but later on there was quite a good bit of that. It was always very satisfying for me that as things went on at Garlaff we had quite a few visits from students from Auchincruive that wanted to see what was happening I suppose. I don't know if they enjoyed the visits but they enjoyed my wife's scones, coffee and tea she took out for them.
22.48	IM: Why were you chosen by Auchincruive. There was no lack of farms around the area.
22.53	RM: I still don't know the answer to that. I don't know.
23.00	IM: Setting any false modesty aside they must have thought there was something there worth looking at.
23.06	RM: Well, they must have. We obviously had visitors from the Department of Agriculture. There was one guy, Ken, that's terrible, I've forgotten his second name. I'm sorry about that. There was another chap, Bob McClelland, on the buildings side, a fine chap; I got on very well with him. He died suddenly that chap which was very sad but I think maybe they got to see a wee bit of what I was trying to achieve. I think it was through some of them that Auchincruive was contacted. I still have the thank you letters yet - I treasure them – that I got after the visits.
23.51	IM: Were there benefits for you in that in maybe advice or even contacts?
24.01	RM: Just on the day I think. I was relatively young at the time and the students were even younger and I was intrigued by their questions. That was good. I enjoyed the sort of challenge of that.
24.19	IM: The other thing I meant to ask; over the twenty-odd years at Garlaff did you find the way you farmed changed in terms of requiring more capital, or machines or...?
24.35	RM: Yes. There was no doubt about that. In the early 70s it must have been we put up a big cubicle building for the cattle because we had increased numbers and we were keeping them in a sort of, what would you say, not in a haphazard way, but we didn't have proper custom-built buildings to keep them in so we built a big cubicle building in

	I think it was 1971 – no it was later – 72 or 73 I think it was, 1972 or 1973 – but things moved on with that as well because eventually I converted that building to low level slats which was a more futuristic way of keeping cattle, easier with under-slats scrapers which did away with pushing slurry about. Just to try to keep the work down as well. But when you think back on it you wonder how you did it I suppose. So it was really from; we started farming at Garlaff in my own right in '71 and stopped in 1990. That's 30 years ago. I don't know where that other 30 years went. I'd always done my own joiner work and building work so I started doing house renovations, joiner work, tiling, you name it.
26.21	IM: You're a man that likes work.
26.23	RM: [laughs] Well, I think it's maybe something that's instilled in you and maybe, if you had the challenge I was faced with it was only work that would make a success and that continues on. I couldn't do with doing nothing. I've a farm here which I don't farm but there's about 156 acres here which needs work of some kind all the time.
27.06	IM: Is it daughters you have?
27.10	RM: We have 3 daughters and we lost a daughter at 29 years old.
27.16	IM: Have your daughters gone into farming?
27.18	RM: No [laughs] Well, my youngest, Christine, she has farming connections. She's an area manager with National Farmers Union Scotland. So there's an agricultural connection there. She's been with them since she left college and she actually ran the Ayr office for a number of years, just down the road here at Ayr and she was dealing with the insurance and investment side but it's a high pressure job – I don't need to tell you that – so she gave that up and she's purely with the Union now, helping farmers out if they have a problem or trying to secure things for them and things like that.
28.12	IM: When you were farming did you use the Union much?
28.17	RM: Aye. I suppose I did in a way but I think using the Union is a different way of putting it. The Union was there to inform you I think and to fight for you as well. I remember going to a big protest in Edinburgh, a coachload of us went in 1974 when things were bad to protest at the main offices up in Edinburgh.
28.49	IM: Chesser House.
28.50	RM: That's it.
28.53	IM: I worked there.
28.54	RM: Did you?
28.57	IM: On the fisheries side, not agriculture.
28.59	RM: Yes. It was Agriculture and Fisheries at one time. But you'll no remember the protest if you were on the fisheries side. You were asking about my daughters. My other daughter had a career in the Royal Air Force. She was 9 years in that. She spent time in the Falklands, not during the troubles, spent time in Germany. She loved it then eventually after 9 years she came out. She worked with MI6 in London for a while so she's had quite a varied and able – no that Christine's not had a very able career as well – but Margaret has seen the world. So she got married and lived in Southampton, 3 sons that we saw 4 weeks ago, not having seen any of them for about 18 months during this terrible crisis. So that's where they are.
30.13	IM: Gregor Caldwell told me that there was quite a strong social thing in that there were agricultural discussion groups. Were they still going through the seventies?
30.30	RM: Oh yes. Very much so. It sounds as if I'm boasting again but I was Chairman of the Cumnock discussion group for a time and we did some visits and had some meetings. I used to go to the National Farmers Union meetings as well. But it got to be, and I'm not going to mention any names at all here, but there was one or two, how

	would I describe them, kind of educated guys with strong opinions who commanded the time at these meetings. You know what I'm saying and I'm an everyday kind of guy and I think everybody should get their turn at speaking and everybody should get their turn at responding to that but it was getting to be that these people sort of hogged the show for the whole evening and beyond and nobody else got the chance to say anything. I can see you know what I'm talking about and I'll never mention a name but it put me off I've got to say. But as far as the Union's concerned I still pay my membership although I've not farmed for 30 years because farmers, local farmers, take my grazing here so if the Union's no fighting to help them then they'll no be able to pay the rent here so that's how I look at it. It's a full circle, isn't it?
32.05	IM: Do you let out this farm?
32.08	RM: Yes. The whole thing's let out.
32.10	IM: You just have the house and live in it?
32.11	RM: It's let out to two separate farmers who are very good. I get on very well with them and don't have a problem.
32.22	IM: The other thing that strikes me is that your wife would have had to have been very adaptable through all the things you did.
32.35	RM: Oh yes. I have a great wife. She would tell you she put up with a lot [laughs]. She's not here but she would tell you herself. No, I'm joking. With Isobel I couldn't have got a better wife.
32.47	IM: Some farms have diversified and in a sense you did with the whinstone and...
32.57	RM: In a sense aye. The opportunity came along I suppose for it and that was how that happened.
33.03	IM: Someone said to me that one diversification is that now all farmers' wives have a job – a job outside the farm.
33.14	RM: Yes. I mentioned that earlier. Leaving the farmer isolated. But Isobel was always there on the farm. Great support there all the time.
33.30	IM: I think that's all the things I particularly wanted to ask you but I don't know if there's anything you wanted to add.
33.40	RM: Not really. It's just how it has all come about and fallen into place sometimes. There's an old saying, "whit's for ye wull no go by ye" and that's been a wee bit the story of my life. I have great memories of leaving school at 14 and carrying a hundredweight and a half sacks of corn at that age up steps into a barn loft which 14 year old boys would not be capable of nowadays. No disrespect to them but they wouldnae have the physical stamina to do it but it's a great learner. My first wage when I left school was £3 a week and you worked from half past five in the morning sometimes till nine o'clock at night. You got a weekend off every – one in every four. And a weekend off you worked to Saturday lunchtime and started again on Monday morning. During the time you were young you maybe didn't think too much about it but when you look back it was a hard life at that time. There was no, what shall I say, there was no pallets to move things about; there was no big tote bags to fill fertiliser spreaders; there was no machinery and good luck to the young guys nowadays but, I say this quite openly, they've got it easy compared to what it was all these years ago.
35.25	IM: It's a different difficulty I would suggest.
35.30	RM: Oh, there's no doubt about that. I'm not saying they don't have problems of a different kind.
35.35	IM: You had to physically strong to lift these things. Theses guys have to have the money to buy the stuff that does the lifting.

35.49	RM: Correct. As I said about isolated farmers, there's no the people on farms nowadays.
35.56	IM: I mean, the other thing was that you must have had a relationship with the bank because you must have had to borrow to invest and that must have changed over time because banks have changed.
36.11	RM: Oh, very much so. Very much so. I was maybe lucky that at the time when we were needing to invest banking hadn't changed so much at that time. It was more recent, the last twenty years I guess, it has changed so much. But the late George Kerr who was the manager in Cumnock, I had a great relationship with him. I was with the Clydesdale Bank originally. I maybe shouldn't say this and I'm not going to mention names here again but I never got on so well with the bank manager there although we did start with them and it came a time when we were needing to invest in machinery I'm sure and I was quite well down the way of procuring a deal on this machinery and I had mentioned it to him and I went and saw him with what was needed and he turned me down flat. We talked about the agricultural club, of which I was chairman at that time and George Kerr was a stalwart, and I'm sure he was secretary and treasurer at that time. I knew George well and as it turned out there was a meeting a day or two after that and I remember pulling George to the side at the end of the meeting and saying "I'm not getting on too well with the banker down the street, would you be willing to have a visit from me". "You come in and see me" he said, so I went in and saw him and got on first class. "No problem" he says, the only thing I'll need to get you is a cheque book printed and you'll have that in a day or two. It's funny how there's landmarks, if you like, in your career and that was one of them because I feel that if I had bowed to the previous banker things may not have turned out the way they have done.
38.09	IM: Yes. The relationship with somebody that knows you and makes a judgement on you is very different from filling in a form on the computer and having it scored by some algorithm somewhere.
38.23	RM: Well, these days it was a personal perception of you if you like. Nowadays if the printout on the screen tells you you're no getting it then you're no getting it. I feel sorry for people who need to invest. Things are so complex. You get involved with the agricultural regime, if you like, of control and farm payments and all these different things, SEPA, health and safety, there's a whole raft of things there and I'm at the time of life and the way I live here I don't really want to be bothered with so I have an extremely good agent, a lassie from through in the Borders, and she does everything for me – agricultural returns to Single Farm Payments to SEPA, does the lot and I don't mind paying her for doing that because it's so complex and you can lose out so much if you're no careful as well. Sometimes I feel a wee bit lazy doing that [laughs]. I don't know what else I can tell you. I spent a good number of years at the joiner work and building work which I thoroughly enjoyed and then I got gto my sixties, early sixties, and my wife Isobel said that "you need to stop running away with that trailer every day and working for other people". It's strange to say that I used to do the work that nobody else wanted or nobody else could see a way to do it. I used to get phone calls from people who said I would like to do this or I would like to do that and I've had a couple of people in who say it can't be done so Muggins got the job to do [laughs]. So that was my career as far as that went and then I say, what year was that now, '95, '96 till 2015 I've been at the vintage tractors for 20 years now.
40.50	IM: You collect vintage tractors?
40.53	RM: Very much so. When my wife said I had to stop working I had to do something and that was how that started so I have about 40 vintage tractors out there. You'll see

	from the photos there. So that's what I do to keep myself amused nowadays. It's just part of life; it just continues.
41.31	IM: Well, thank you very much for sharing all that.
41.35	RM: You're welcome.