XI
FARMING AFTER WORLD WAR II

By the C21st Grasby had only three full time farmers resident in the parish (excluding Clixby). The number of farmers gradually declined in the second part of the C20th and land was sold, sometimes to resident farmers, but more often to others living in neighbouring parishes, usually to increase the size of their existing holdings. Some land was sold for housing within the village. The small holder has disappeared and the only pasture land remaining is used for grazing horses and/or making hay and haylage. The changes in farming practice have been dramatic, particularly with the increase in mechanisation and almost complete disappearance of the agricultural labourer.

Combine harvesters trebled in number across the country between 1942 and 1950. Sprayers and fertiliser spreaders had been available since before the World War II. Harry Ferguson had taken out a patent on hydraulics in 1925 which has influenced tractor design ever since, including the universal 3-point linkage system. Tractors had become the dominant form of power in 1934 and overtook horses in number after 1946. The decline in horse numbers freed ¾ million acres of oats grown for fodder and pasture for grazing for other uses. In the late 1950s diesel replaced petrol engines in tractors and in the late 1960s tractor safety became a key issue. Cabs were introduced, followed by improvements in comfort such as sprung seats, air conditioning, radios etc. By the 1990s tractors accounted for one third of the valuation of machinery on farms, although the actual numbers sold had declined since the 1970s with the introduction of ever larger models.

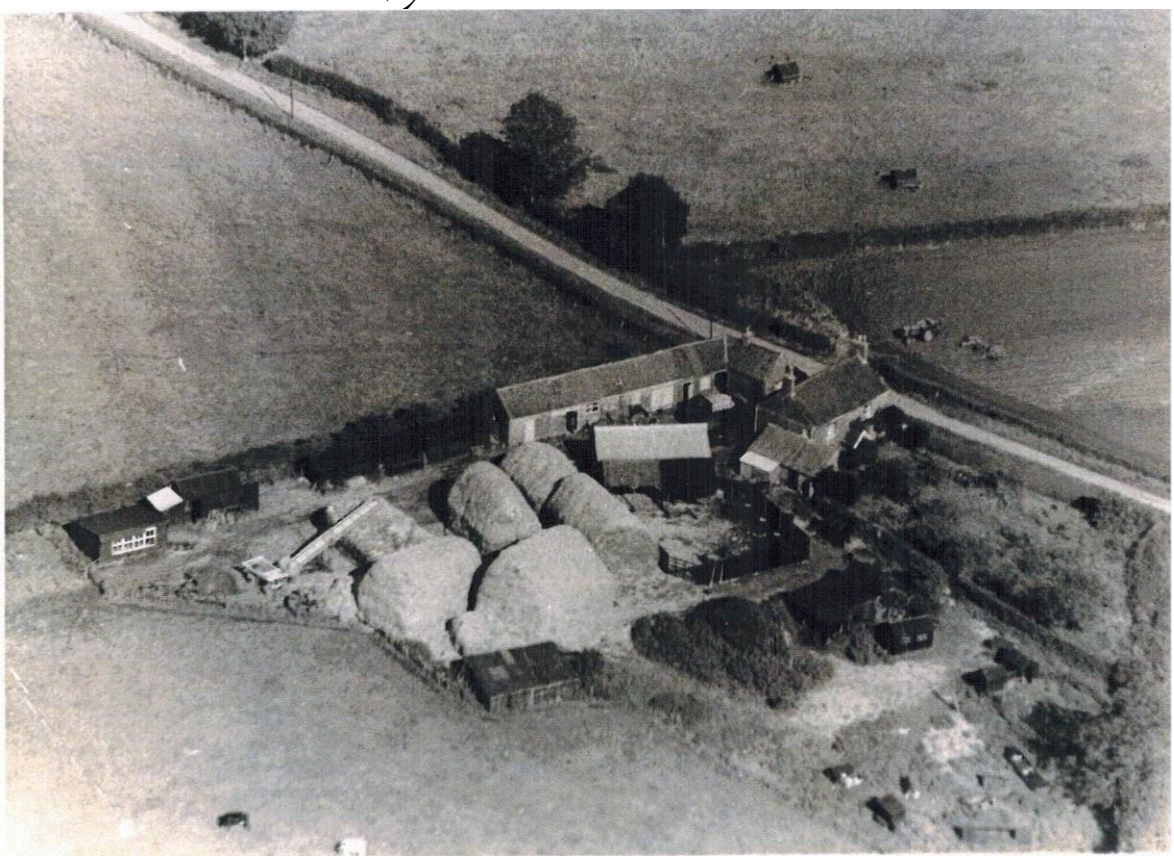
Other developments include harvesters of all descriptions e.g. for sugar beet and potatoes, which have reduced the need for hand labour by up to 90%; precision seed drills and herbicides have eliminated the need for singling and hoeing, which amounted in the past to about 65 man hours per acre. By 1980 80% of ploughs were reversible; zero tillage with the use of the tine and disc approach has become common practice. Sprayers have become extremely sophisticated, often self-propelled with electronic controls. "*It could be that the greatest invention relating to accurate spraying, however, was the simplest one: the tramlines seen in every cereal field today*" (Brian Finney). Combines continually increase in size with grain drying and storage systems which can take the crop in as fast as it is harvested. There are machines available to apply fertilisers and sprays at variable rates on the basis of yield map information.

Contract sugar beet harvester at work in Grasby 2014

For hay and silage making finger bar mowers have been replaced by drum and disc cutters. Baled and plastic-wrapped silage came into use from 1980 onwards. Balers for hay and straw developed from producing 20 kg "*square bales*", to 250kg round bales to 500kg rectangular bales today.
The story of these changes in Grasby, however, is best told in terms of the history of individual farms.

Grasby House Farm
After Willie Dann Wilmore died in 1947 his son, Rowland, took over the running of Grasby House Farm, but lived with his family in the Old Vicarage. His mother continued to live at Grasby House Farm, with his sister and her husband, Leslie Reed. In 1966 the farm was split between Rowland's son Arthur and Leslie's daughter Mary. By then Mary had married George Thompson and the two of them had been living and working on George's father's farm on North Kelsey Carrs. Mary and George moved back to Grasby House Farm; Leslie bought Glebe House from Mrs E Kirkby and moved there in 1967. Leslie worked on the farm, but also kept some of his own beasts there and at Glebe Farm, as well as growing some mangolds on land along Clixby Lane.

Grasby House Farm in the 1950s

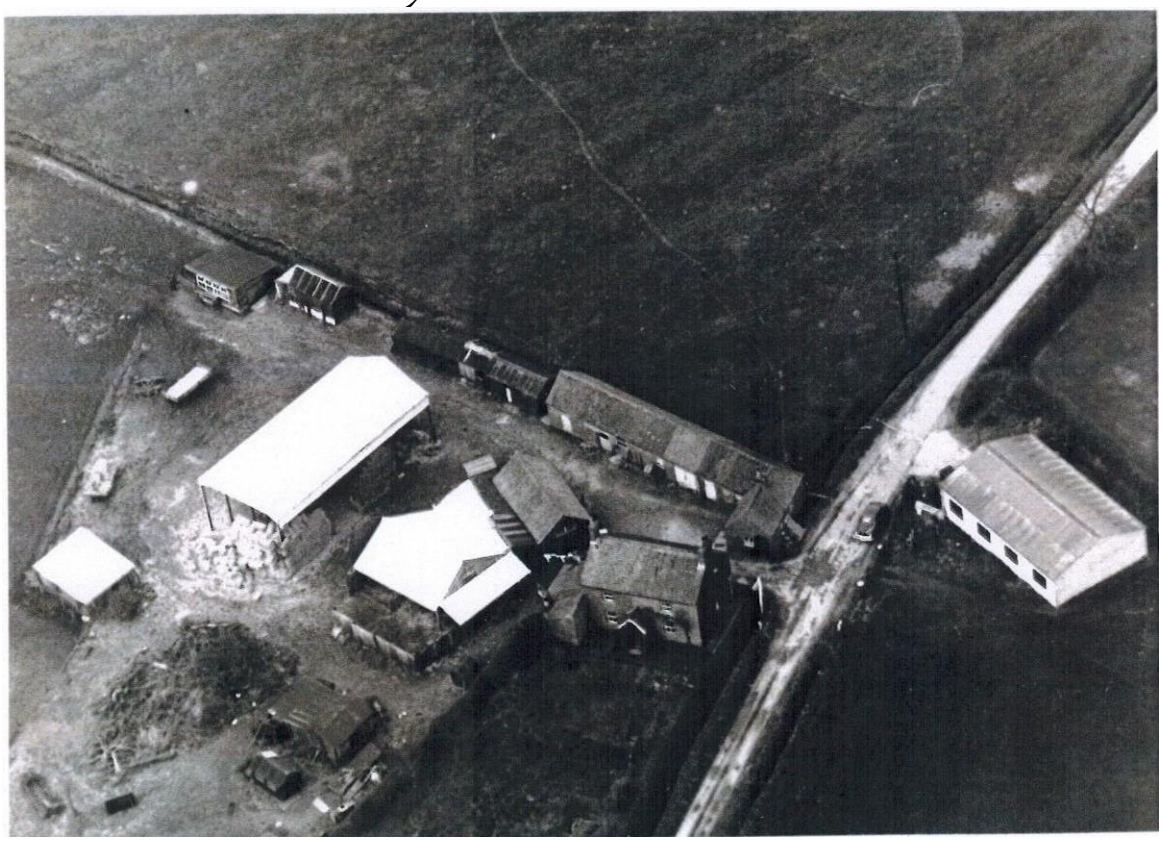


In the 1960s George and Mary grew sugar beet, taking it to Brigg using a family lorry, potatoes, mangolds (sold for fodder) spring barley (for malting) and wheat on about 90 acres of land. As a young inexperienced farmer, George faced his first challenge when his women potato pickers went on strike for more money. Fortunately, Maurice Wells, from Twelve Month Hill Farm who used the same workers, helped him to broker a deal by which the pickers received an increase in kind i.e. potatoes to take home. He bought his first new tractor after their first harvest.

Some hedges were removed in their first year, but only a couple more have been taken out since. Sugar beet production increased from 200 to 700 tons a year and a further 25 acres were put down to potatoes. When, however, the sugar beet factory closed in Brigg and the crop had to go first to Newark and then to York in the 1990s, the farm came out of the scheme when it started to make a loss on the crop. Rape then replaced beet and borage was grown for the chemical industry for a while, until the company concerned went into liquidation.

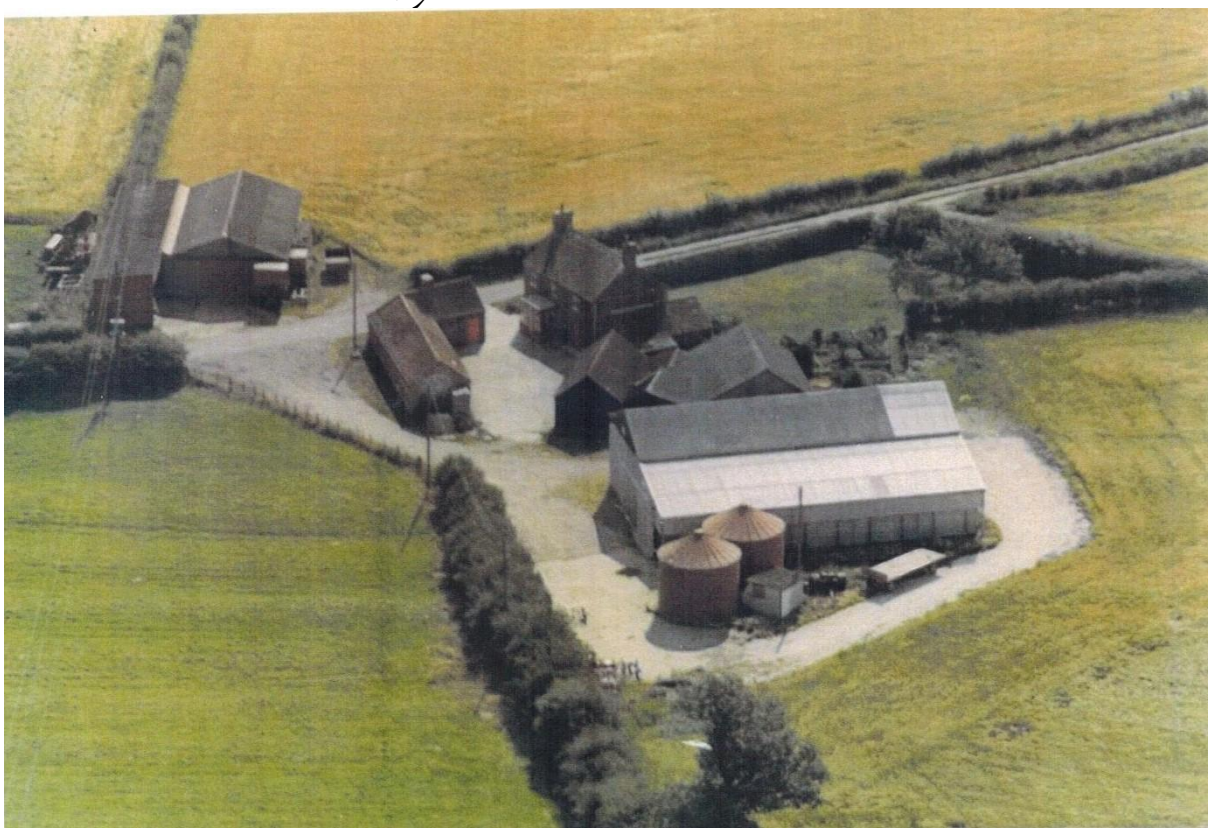
Over the years the farm has grown from 90 to 200 acres as George and Mary purchased additional land in various parts of the parish and has found a niche market growing crops for seed. Peas, winter beans and barley are all grown for this purpose. Wheat has also been grown for seed in the past, but not today. The harvested crops are collected direct from the farm by the seed merchants.

Grasby House Farm in the 1960s



More recently peas have replaced rape on the farm. They are nitrogen fixers and so are less expensive to produce. Less use of nitrates also makes life easier as nitrate plans for farms are extremely stringent.
Straw was burnt in the past, which had its dangers and filled the air with smoke and soot, but it did rid the soil of a number of pests. There are now various markets for baled straw – the farm used to supply Cherry Valley and currently it is all contracted to go to JSR of Driffield (a large boar farm and producer of semen for AI).
Although the farm has a pond and also an extraction licence for North Kelsey Beck, neither is required for irrigation as George pioneered locally, around the year 2000, a drip irrigation system using land drains as a water source which, fed from the chalk, run all year. Irrigation is used only for potatoes and as production in the area as a whole has declined, so has the use of irrigation – ponds and reservoirs are increasingly being left for wildlife or recreational use instead.
Most of the farm needed replacement or new under-drainage which was carried out over a number of years, greatly assisted by government grants which met 50-60% of the cost before the year 2000. Plastic has replaced clay pipe drains.

Grasby House Farm in the C21st

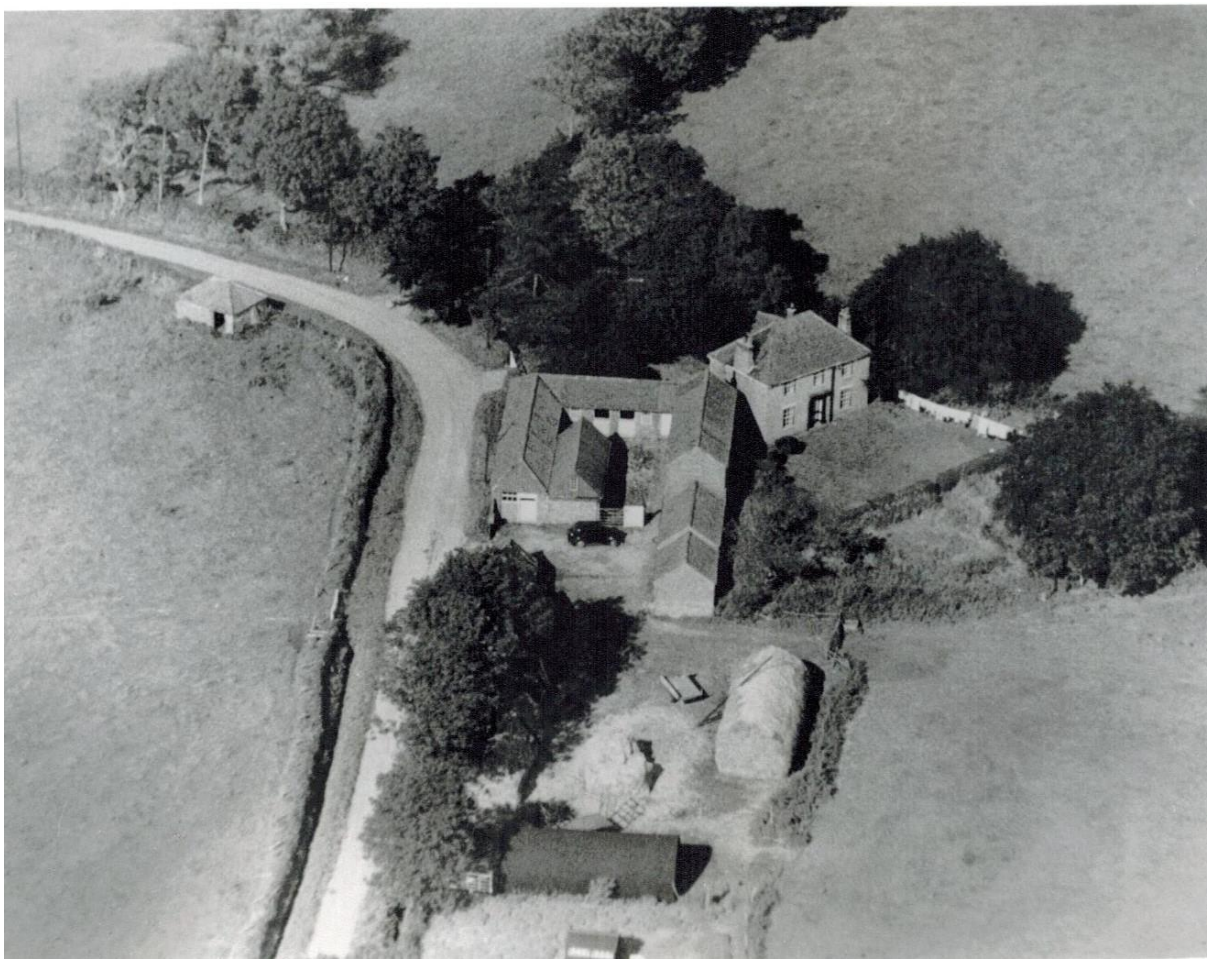


George considers that the introduction of the combine harvester has had the greatest single impact on farming since the 1950s. All forms of mechanisation, however, have developed beyond recognition in terms of size, sophistication and efficiency. The complexity of farm machinery today also means that, in most cases, individual farmers are no longer able to do their own repairs. The need for manual labour on the farm has all but disappeared – at one time George would have employed a gang of 8 women for potato picking. Now, it can be achieved with just two people. Some work is contracted out e.g. straw baling, although unless absolutely essential, George would rather do without having to rely on contract working.

There have been over the years an array of grants and subsidies but, currently, farmers are in receipt of per ha. payments from the Rural Payments Agency (RPA).

Bentley House Farm

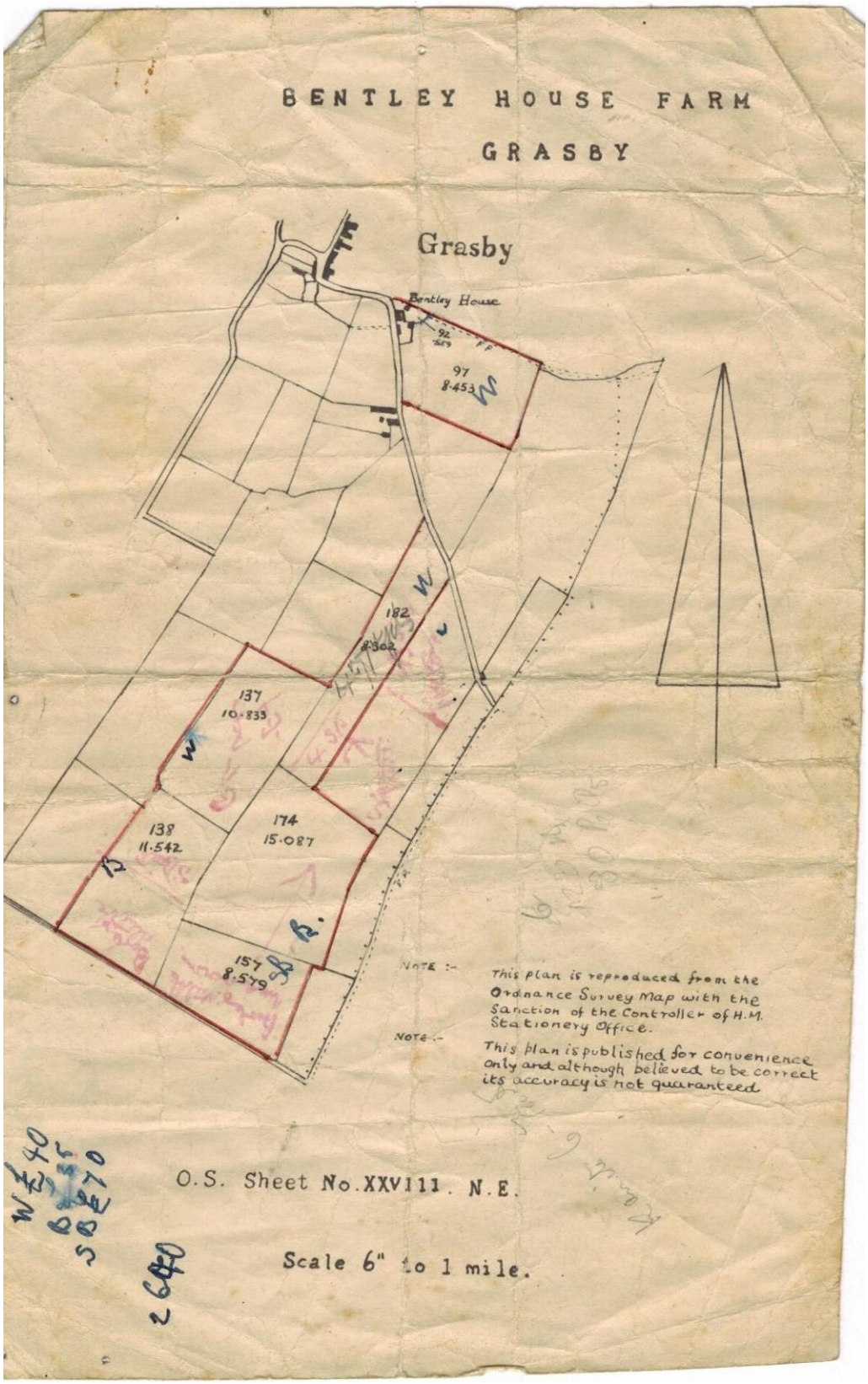
Bentley House Farm –post war, date unknown but probably 1950s



Bentley House Farm provides an interesting contrast to the history of most farms in the parish during the C20th in that it became a smaller rather than larger enterprise after 1923, at least in terms of acreage. Philip Markham was farming 127 acres at the turn of the century, but CW Harriman had only 63 acres in 1941. This acreage was unchanged when George Ferguson bought the farm in 1942.

George Ferguson appears to have come late to farming and is thought previously to have been a teacher. When Keith Lowery bought the farm in 1960 it was in a somewhat rundown state. The cropping at the time was 4 acres of potatoes, 4 acres of sugar beet, spring barley, short rotation seeds (cocksfoot/red clover) and permanent pasture. The stocking was chickens

for egg production, kept in arks and a deep litter house in Bentley Close, and several milking cows.
The farm buildings comprised a small Nissen hut, a dilapidated timber building with a pantile roof on the roadside, a small crew yard with a cowshed on one side, two loose boxes and a harness/tack room on the north side, a two stall stable and feed store with granary and pigeon loft above. Leading on from these buildings was a loose box dairy, tractor shed and two more loose boxes.
The land was heavily infested with twitch and rats. The hedges were up to 4 metres high, the dykes and drainage in need of attention and the ph. levels low. Rats were so numerous in 1960 that they were seen during daylight from the tractor, running along the hedge bottoms and dykes. Keith brought a 28 lb bag of bait from Elsham, already rejected by their more worldly wise rats, which was placed in heaps in the (unoccupied) deep litter house. All 28 lbs were consumed in just three days, along with the paper sack which had contained the bait! It seemed to have the desired effect as the results were scattered all around! The move away over time from sacks to silos and rat proof grain stores did much to reduce the local population. The problems with twitch were largely overcome by the availability of better herbicides, drainage improvements and a switch to winter sown crops
Keith Lowery was brought up in the Wakefield area and, although not from a farming family, his interest in farming stemmed from his boyhood experience of helping out on a small holding run, despite carrying a war time injury, by a World War I Veteran. As well as learning the basics, Keith even assumed responsibility for the small holding when his "boss" attended reunions of his regiment, the Grimsby Pals.
Keith's father was an engineer, but steered Keith away from this as a career at a time when industry was still struggling coming out of the 1930s depression. Despite this, Keith has retained a lifelong passion for engineering which has stood him in good stead for a life in farming.
After attending an agricultural college, and gaining experience on several farms around the country, Keith, then a foreman in Elsham, took the plunge to buy his own place. He bid for Bentley House Farm in an auction held at the Angel in Brigg. Although not initially successful, stopping when he found himself bidding against the auctioneer, his last bid was later accepted by the vendor. He took advice from other farmers, including his employer, and his parents before making the deal in 1960. He didn't move in, though, until 1961 and found, on top of everything else, he had immediately to redeem the Land Tax, £2.3s.1d, a not inconsiderable sum at the time. Keith still has the certificate and, even today, the memory still elicits from him a grimace.



Plan of Bentley House Farm *(provided in the sales particulars 1960)*

In their first year on the farm, Bentley Close (the home close) was let to another farmer in Bigby for summer grazing. The fields were tested for lime requirement and ground chalk from Grasby quarry was applied to 20

acres. The hedges were cut down to 45cm by a contractor, using a frightening looking circular saw mounted on a tractor, the minimum height from which they could regenerate without being overwhelmed by weeds.
The first cropping system used was a three year ley: three years grass grazed by breeding ewes, one year sugar beet and then two years cereals. Potatoes were abandoned as the quota from the Potato Marketing Board was too small for the crop to be viable, which allowed for an increase to 8 acres of sugar beet, the tops from which could be fed to the sheep. The harvested beet went to Brigg, initially by tractor and trailer, but later by truck mostly driven by Dick Clark from Beck House. (When Brigg closed the beet went to Bardney or Newark and sometimes even to York. The extra transport cost was born at the time by the British Sugar Corporation).
The farm enrolled in the Government Small Farmers Scheme, which paid farmers money over a three year period based on an approved plan. The cropping above was agreed as part of the plan.
All the equipment needed to cultivate the land and sow the first year's crops was loaned to Keith by his erstwhile employer, Mr Arnold Mollett. A trailer chassis was made for the farm by the local blacksmith, Eric Hasnip, with wheels from Hambleton Bros., motor dismantlers, and the body built by Keith himself. A used Ford tractor and loader was bought from the Lincolnshire Motor Co., Caistor, and several other items from the regular Caenby Corner Sale. A Ransome trailer combine was also purchased from Platts, Brigg, with a 56" cutter width and was designed to have an operator, separate from the driver, bagging the corn from a platform. This was problematic because Keith was harvesting by himself. As with everything in these early days, Keith had be to resourceful and inventive to make things work within a restrictive budget. In this case, he sheeted the side of the platform making it into a tank and stopped to bag the corn himself when it was full. In the evenings, when it was too damp to continue harvesting, he loaded the sacks onto a trailer and brought them back to the yard. Each sack held 17 stone (108kg) of barley or 19 stone (120kg) of wheat. The sacks were hired at 1d per sack per week, so they were filled as full as possible!
The ewe flock was based on Scotch Halfbred Border (Leicester x Cheviot) and a home bred cross with a Suffolk producing the then popular Speckled Faced Sheep. The flock comprised up to 100 ewes, the progeny from which were sold either fat at around 80lbs live weight for further finishing, or for breeding. Some lambs and old ewes were sold through the auction markets of Barnetby and Brigg sheep fair and the Fatstock Marketing Corporation (FMC). The sheep were grazed in 5 acre paddocks fenced with temporary netting and fed in winter on silage, hay, marrow stem kale, sugar beet tops and barley.

As well as the sheep Keith acquired two Large White breeding gilts from Mr Geoff Booth, a quality pig breeder of Thornton Curtis, which became the foundation of the farm's future pig herd. In addition to sheep and pigs, in the early days the farm also had a poultry flock. Dick Clark, as well as being a lorry driver, had his own smallholding at Beck House. Here he kept a "travelling boar", which he transported from farm to farm in an old small van, which also served as the family car! Keith recounts an occasion on which the boar, having served his sow, and no doubt feeling then that he had done his duty and deserved a well-earned treat, threw himself into a cesspool in the middle of the yard for a wallow. Such was its depth he all but disappeared from sight and when he emerged was plastered from nose to tail. Dick then simply opened the back door of the van, the boar obediently hopped in, dripping slime, and off they went to their next appointment!

Drainage of the land was a major problem in the early 1960s, which was severely hindered by the level of North Kelsey Beck, which in turn was limited by the depth of water under the bridge on Station Road. After much lobbying of the authorities, the work needed was approved and funded from the proceeds of the General Land Drainage Charge introduced in 1963. This may have been the first major work undertaken on the Beck since it was straightened and deepened in the early C19th, following the enclosure of Caistor Moor. The Beck was culverted under Station Road. With respect to land belonging to Bentley farm, all the trees were removed from the side of the Beck adjoining field OS 157 (all fields have been renumbered in recent years) and a small brick bridge was removed. Originally, this bridge would have linked OS 157 with OS 158 and OS 156, which both belonged to Bentley Farm in 1923. In the interest of balance it was requested and agreed that the next stretch, OS 138, be worked from the opposite bank. Once the Beck had been lowered Bentley Farm's dykes were dug out with a dragline excavator, lowering them by up to 80cm. What drains (suffs) were revealed were cleaned out and any remaining wet patches were dealt with by hand drainage work. Later, in 1971, Braders of Louth mechanically drained OS 182 and parts of OS 137 and OS 138 and the opportunity was taken at the same time to amalgamate the latter as well OS 174 and OS 157.

Around this time Keith took additional employment off the farm, working for a variety of industries, often farm related such as handling the logistics of the Birds Eye harvesting programme, as well as becoming an agricultural training officer. With the improved drainage completed, and with Keith's increasing time away from the farm, the sheep and poultry went and more cereals were grown to help feed the expanding pig unit. When Keith was away the farm was run by Rosemary and one full-time employee, but with plenty of help from young people from the village.

From the two gilts purchased from Thornton Curtis the herd was expanded to about 60 home bred Large White and Landrace sows. The

farm's target for pig production was 14 young per litter. They were all bedded on straw and the manure produced was spread onto the fields. At first weaners were sold at eight weeks, but as capital allowed these were kept and fattened to heavy pork (75kg live weight) for a farmers' cooperative based in Suffolk. Rosemary became highly skilled in all aspects of the enterprise, including most of the "veterinary" work required. While all the children were at home a house cow was kept and the resultant calves were raised to beef weight for home use, along with the home produced pork. In the early days the animals were slaughtered and butchered on the farm by a licenced slaughterman, Mr Jack King, who lived in Reading Room Cottage. Later, animals were sent to Market Rasen to be slaughtered and butchered.

Bentley House Farm 1975

The inventiveness and resourcefulness displayed with respect to farm machinery was also in evidence with farm buildings. The sow house was a deep litter house bought at auction from Goxhill. The large barn was formerly the old 'bus garage from Scunthorpe, originally sited where the Co-operative supermarket was built. The barn extensions were originally part of Peter Dixon's paper mill in Grimsby. The current workshop was a large Nissen hut bought from Eagres of Scunthorpe, which was re-clad with ex-admiralty corrugated sheets from Suffolk. All these buildings were dismantled by Keith himself, helped by whoever was working for him at the time, and then reassembled on site. All the original brick and tile

buildings have also been renovated, with the assistance of a professional bricklayer. The well-equipped workshop enabled Keith to do all his own maintenance and repairs, as well as make most of the equipment required to operate the pig unit.

Keith's lifelong interest in engineering and making things led to an unexpected diversification of the business. By chance he made a work stand to assist Rosemary with her passion for embroidery. Her teacher in the class she attended was so impressed with the stand that she asked if Keith could make one for her. From this was born "Lowery Workstands", a new business venture supplying a worldwide niche market, which continues to thrive. The business owns the copyright and every part is manufactured, finished and distributed from Bentley House.
In 1991 Keith retired from farming and sold 54.31 acres of his land, but retained the house, workshops and Bentley Close. Although not originally bought by George Thompson, these fields have since been acquired by and are now part of Grasby House Farm. The two fields across the Beck belonged by this time to Maurice Wells, from Twelve Month Farm. Effectively, this sale ended the history of farms smaller than 100 acres operating successfully in the parish.

Hillside Farm, Owmby

Although Hillside Farm is in the adjacent parish of Searby-cum- Owmby, it has been in the ownership of the Lyle family since 1964 and provides an excellent history of farming development in the second half of the C20th on heavy land just below the chalk scarp and extending as far as North Kelsey Beck.
David Lyle's family sold its business in London and David had the opportunity to buy two farms, adjacent to each other, in April 1964 – Hillside, which incorporated Owmby Vale Farm, and Bull House Farms, comprising 302 acres. In 1974 David also managed to buy an additional field of 18 acres to form an extremely compact farm of 320 acres. The size of the holding remains unchanged to this day.
Although not from a farming background, David attended an agricultural college as a young man and had 10 years' experience, including 18 months on a farm in South Lincolnshire, before coming to Owmby.
David spent the first 10-15 years tile draining, changing field sizes and shapes, cleaning out the ditches and increasing their depths from 18 inches to 30 or 36 inches, helped by 60% government grants. He took out some hedges but, where their presence didn't affect field boundaries, he let the hedges regrow after cutting new drainage channels through them. At first he had no livestock except for approximately 100 weaner pigs, kept in pens

for 3 to 4 months before being sold. Initially the grassland he inherited was let out to others to make hay.
During the 1960s David focussed on spring cropping – wheat, barley and sugar beet. The heavy land was ploughed in winter by contractors using crawler tractors. A quota for sugar beet came with the purchase of the farm, which was taken by the farm to the Brigg sugar factory. At this time he had three full time workers, one of whom had been born at Owmby Vale (in a house since demolished). Despite the struggle, David managed to buy three 65-70 hp tractors, two Internationals and one Massey Fergusson. He also bought a Massey Fergusson 780 combine harvester with an 8 foot cut.
In 1969 David made a pioneering move in this area of Lincolnshire by introducing a new spring crop – oilseed rape, becoming a member of the Wessex Oilseeds Co-operative (base in Hampshire). Even from the early days, he undertook contract work for other farmers, still a part of the business today. As the oil seed rape acreage increased in the area he undertook swathing the crops before combining. He also land sprayed sugar beet to control weeds, removing the need for the traditional hand hoeing.
The two original farms came with three dwellings -the house at Owmby Vale, later demolished as mentioned above, and two farmhouses. David and his family lived at Hillside Farm and Bull Farm was let. From the 1970s until the 1980s David took students on work placement from Riseholme Agricultural College during their middle year and students from schools before they went on to agricultural college.
There were a number of significant changes made during the 1970s. David exchanged his Massey Fergusson Combine for a Clayson and sold all his pigs to afford a crawler tractor to tackle the heavy land. He then sold the original Hillside Farmhouse in 1974 (now named Tithe House) and built a replacement in the old orchard next door at a cost of £12,500. He also put more of Owmby Vale down to grass and started to buy in store cattle to overwinter and fatten – using the grass for grazing when mild and dry enough. Over this time he was a member of various co-operative societies, including one that would source cattle from as far away as Wales before, when "finished", selling them back to the society. Some cattle, however, were sold through Brigg Market; he remained a strong supporter of Brigg Livestock Market until it closed in 1991, to be replaced by the present Tesco store.
It was during the 1970s that continental breeds of beef cattle were introduced, with better conformations than the British breeds, and the farm moved into breeding in the 1980s, using its own bulls. The herd normally numbered 35-40 breeding cows and followers. It was also during the 1970s that David sold Bull House, for £5,000, in order to afford to build a cattle shed for overwintering his herd.
David stopped growing sugar beet in the 1980s when it became no longer profitable to do so. Currently wheat, some winter barley and oilseed rape

are the main crops grown on the farm. Blackgrass and slugs remain the most troublesome weed and pest. Interestingly straw burning used to solve both these problems before it was banned in the late 1980s. Ten acres of land are still fertilised using muck from the cattle. Silage is grown and baled today – the silage clamp has disappeared. In the more recent past barn-dried hay has been produced and winter beans grown for animal feed. At present some land is being rented from the farm by Birds' Eye to grow vining peas.

Overall, David believes that the farm benefitted from the Common Agricultural Policy, but legislation and paperwork on all fronts has become a real burden for farmers to deal with. Neither Foot &Mouth nor BSE has ever affected the farm directly, but it suffered the consequences of a depressed market at the time. The farm's herds have also not been troubled by TB to date and David told me that local badgers are also clear of the disease. He said that TB is more of a problem in dairy herds in the south west and west of the country.

In 1994 David's daughter, Wendy took over the management of the farm in her own right. David retained the house, the yard in Owmby and 5 acres of grass to continue breeding a few cattle and hiring out machines to other farms.

If villagers from 100 years or more ago returned today one (among many!) of the things that would strike them would be the eerie quiet of the farmyard and the fields. Although the population of the parish has returned to its C19th high and the roads are busy with cars, lorries, vans, cyclists, joggers and dog walkers, the fields are empty save for the lone tractor every now and again. The peace of the countryside may be broken by the incessant drone of heavy diesel engines at certain times of the year, but the fields are empty of the sights and sounds of people who would have been there year round, spending endless days doing jobs that are, for the most part, carried out today by one person and a machine in a matter of hours.