

# I Have Sold My Norfolk Farm

by *Henry Williamson*

Into the calm blue sky of St Martin's Little Summer the smoke of an ancient 15-ton traction engine drifts slowly. So still and gold-hazy is the air that when I get up from my office stool I can hear the far-away chuffs of the steam in the engine; and sometimes a dragging, slower noise, followed by the engine racing, tells me that some of the sheaves are going into the threshing drum uncut.

Italians in brown uniforms are on the corn-stack, forking the sheaves to the old man with the knife tied to his wrist, who slashes the binder twine, while below him on the box, another man with steel-tips to his fingers feeds the endless broken waves of stalks into the roaring drum.

I know, as I return to the high yellow stool, that the old man with the knife — the bond-cutter, as they call him — is trying to slash the string of three sheaves every two seconds of time; he is eighty years old; he misses a sheaf now and then. This sheaf goes around the drum uncut, and acts as a brake on the whirling metal cylinder; and that is when I hear the engine stutter a moment.

I know it all; I can see it clearly as I sit here on one side of the double-desk, an old corn-merchant's desk where clerks in Dickens's time were sitting, shooting ink from their quill pens. I can see it more clearly than if I were there sweating and lifting sheaves, two and three at a time, from the pressed mass of the flat corn-stack.

I have done that and scores of other farming jobs with every nerve and sense of my body; and those nerves and senses are surcharged and, as it were, crying out to express all that has been felt and known and suffered in the past eight years in the only way that I can express myself: through the imagination.

I have been well aware during my farming life that to be a man of action requires one kind of rhythm: and to be a writer needs a quicker, sharper rhythm. You cannot apply the quicker rhythm of the wit to the slower rhythm of the working body. If you are an artist of self-compulsive power you may tend to expect others to share your own sharp views and feelings; and these do not go with bodily labour.

For eight years I have compromised; and now, this Michaelmas, I am going to do what I want to do more than anything else on earth — to write books and plays out of my physical experience.

So in a day or two I shall not feel too keenly that I am a failure when I go with the auctioneer, with notebook and pencil, and make a list of cows, bullocks, calves, horses, geese, ducks and hens, with their wooden houses; the circular saw and the pigs' troughs, the buried paraffin tank, wagons, water carts, harrows, seed-drills, trainers and corn-sacks — all the 'live and dead stock' of a farm being sold at the change of the farming year, Old Michaelmas Day.

There will be the printed notices and bills by the wayside; and on the day itself, lines of cars parked by the hedge — old iron merchants with their trailers, cattle dealers with their 'floats', farmers in search of useful implements — all come there, with the exception of the curious, to increase their substance.

Someone is going to have a farm which in eight years has been raised from a state of near-derelection to an official classification A.

A queen wasp strays in at the open door, flying briskly in the October sun; a tortoise-shell butterfly flaps at the window pane. Soon wasp and butterfly will be sleeping torpidly up in the rafters of this little barn which, a year or two back, was rebuilt with materials left over from the rebuilding of the farm cottages.

The last of the tomatoes ripen on the window sill and the tomtits in the garden have forsaken the empty down-hanging heads of the sunflowers I grew there this year. The harvest of black and grey seeds was not gathered; the tomtits and the greenfinches had what was intended for parrot food this year.

It did not worry me; I was more interested in watching the birds. Last season, on many occasions, I ran out and shouted at them to depart; they were ruining a crop of the farmer, which would send one of his sons to school for a term.

The men who have been working for me, what would become of them? Would I have to give them notice? It had been worrying me, that I was deserting them; but now I may leave with a clear mind and heart, for the new farmer wants them to work on the farm as before.

So *au revoir* to farming this Michaelmas! No, it is not goodbye; one has felt and known and suffered too much in the past to say that.

The swallows fly south, over the deserts of North Africa; but they return again.

**MEMBERS ANNUAL WALK AND PICNIC — SUNDAY 10th JULY 1988**

**KINGLEY VALE NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE  
(Nr Chichester, West Sussex)**

Your President, Richard Williamson, Warden of Kingley Vale National Nature Reserve (the finest yew forest in Europe), and his wife Anne, editor of this Journal, cordially invite members and their families and friends to join them on this already traditional annual event to walk around the woodland and chalk grassland of the reserve.

Good plants, butterflies and conversation.

**Meet:** Approx. 11.30 a.m.    **Venue:** West Stoke Car Park

**Food:** Bring your own picnic/drinks. NO FACILITIES on site

**Clothing:** Ordinary if fine; boots recommended if recent rain

**Dogs:** Permitted on leash

**Directions:** If required a MAP is obtainable from the Secretary, John Homan (address inside Journal cover), enclosing a return SAE