**OAKLEY Nigel**

**Introduction for the recording and the transcript.**

This recording is part of the oral history project carried out by the Suffolk Horse Society in 2013 with advice from Cambridge Community Heritage, and a generous grant from the Heritage Lotteries Fund.

In the recording you will hear the voice of Nigel Oakley describing his memories of the Suffolk Punch heavy horse.

Nigel is a retired agricultural engineer, breeder, trainer and horseman

The recording was made by Lesley Dolphin, the well known presenter from BBC Radio Suffolk.

The date of the recording was 30th August 2013 and it was carried out at BBC Radio Suffolk.

The duration of the first recording is about 32 minutes.

Lesley We will do the first bit. So if you could just give me your name, address, date of birth.

Nigel Yeah.

Lesley Inside leg measurement.

Nigel Nigel Oakley. Reed Hall Farm, Reed, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk. IP29 4UG. I was born the 30th June 1944.

Lesley And you came to Suffolk as a four day old boy, was that right.

Nigel Yes.

Lesley So you have lived in Suffolk Pretty much all your life. Take me back to the first time you saw Suffolks being worked and things.

Nigel The earliest recollection of being impressed by what they did, I was seven years old, and they were working on a binder cutting wheat. I stood as a kid with a stick waiting for rabbits, and I thought crikey... because at that time... It was quite strange really, because there was a combine, an old Massy Harris 726, or something bagger, in the field as well as the binder. Then they had a horse drawn tumbrel picking the sacks up from the combine. So it was the transition period at that time between mechanisation and the horse. Obviously at seven years old I didn’t work horses, my mother and that kept cattle and so on, and they had a horse. But I was too young to actually do anything with them then, and unfortunately I then went and did what people have to do – got myself educated and then went out to work. But I never actually forgot those childhood days, I don’t suppose, even subconsciously. And I always had a longing to buy and keep Suffolk horses, and I don’t know where that came from, if I told the truth. But I had this big ambition to do it. Anyway after I had got sufficient funds to keep the horses, because it is not the buy of the horse that’s the expensive part, it is all the [?trunklements] that go with it. I bought two initially which we have spoke about earlier ‘Watfield Dorcas’ and ‘Cherrytrees May’, both mares. Fortunately I got both mares in foal and that’s where the dreaded scheme started really. I sort of went from two to now sixteen on the farm.

Lesley Can you remember which farm was it you saw them working on, or [overlapping dialogue 2.48].

Nigel Yeah I can actually, it was er... Simper, down near Ramsholt.

Lesley Robert Simper’s farm, or/

Nigel Well whoever/

Lesley His dad, whoever it is. Yes.

Nigel His son was at school with us at that time, and Kings farmed at Ramsholt then as well.

Lesley Can you remember the first time you said you wanted a Suffolk horse?

Nigel No I don’t suppose I can, because when you are that age... I mean, I suppose it was the size of them and their emotive power, unknowing you are awe inspired. But I just thought what a lovely thing they were. I’ve always loved the countryside anyway, so I’ve always had an interest in wildlife and the countryside, and they just to me looked like something I would like to do.

Lesley And over those years, because you went into civil engineering and you made enough money to in the end think that you could get yourself some Suffolk Punch horses. But did you go and visit shows? Did you get to know people who owned Suffolks through those years.

Nigel Yeah I did. The Suffolk Show was obviously the place to see Suffolk horses in the late 60s, and there were some very good Suffolk horse people. In fact, it was in the 60s that they were at their low ebb, when there were only something like 6 foals born one year. So the people that are around today ensured that the likes I, have got the ability to keep them, because they had the foresight to see that, once they are gone, they are gone forever. And they were down to very very low numbers. I mean when I bought my first ones, I think there were less than 240 live Suffolks on the stud book. I mean there’s only just over 500 now, and that’s 30 odd years afterwards. So it is a slow progression, you know the gestation period for a horse is 11 months, so with the best will in the world, you are not going from zero to right up overnight. But the Suffolk Horse Society has done a magnificent job in my opinion, and people like... in the old days, Coulsons and Charlie Saunders, all those sort of people who had the foresight to keep the horse going is wonderful, in my opinion. I mean we talk about it being the living heritage of Suffolk, which it is, but it is also how Suffolk looks today, is on the back of agriculture really. And agriculture in those days was purely by horse power.

Lesley So it wasn’t a business thing that they kept their horses on, it was just because they loved them probably.

Nigel Yes I think probably they were looked at as being odd, because when tractors came in, you could do ten times the work, with one tractor that you could with a pair of horses. I mean the standard sort of thing was two horses for every 50 acres of land, but you had to keep going, I mean it weren’t a matter of... like now they take a tractor out. As soon as harvest is done, the fields are ploughed and then, that’s the job is done. But in those days, I mean because I’ve done some of it myself, I mean I ran my farm for five years just with horses, ploughing and cutting the corn and everything while we were... No ten years while we were open to the public, we did it for the public, but it were being done, and there’s a lot of work to it. You don’t sort of start and knock off and think oh I will finish that tomorrow, you have got to keep at it, and there’s a lot of off-shoots from that. The land, they say, is now getting over compacted because of the weight of machinery and so on, and there are people who think that horse power will come back because of petrochemical shortages in the future. Whether that is going to happen I don’t honestly know, but I think it is imperative that the Suffolk Horse Society does what it does, and that’s keep the Suffolk horse alive... not in anticipation of a disaster like fuel running out. But why should we lose something of such magnificence, do you know what I mean. Whether you are a lover of the Suffolk horse or not... I mean I’ve seen Bengal Tigers, I’ve never seen one in India, but I would hate to think they were extinct in India, and it is not going to influence my life one way or another. But I think it is going to influence someone’s life, and the Suffolk horse is something I am dear to, so I spend... at the moment, a good proportion of my life for the Suffolk Horse Society. But/

Lesley Just...

Nigel No... you go.

Lesley I was going to say through those years, before you had your first two horses, and even when you did, you must have met old Suffolk horsemen... Tell me about some of the skills that you have built up over the years, and who has taught you them? Because they must have been amazing lessons to have?

Nigel Yeah well... there are even people of my generation... In fact a good... I consider him a good friend of mine, Roger Clark, who is slightly younger than I in fact, but he has got a wealth of knowledge which he is prepared to share. And he is not on his own, there were people like Bob Peacock, who unfortunately has now died, that gave me a lot of tips and inspiration. And there was an old gentleman, Harold in Haverhill, who was an original horseman and he gave me all his old horse books, horse remedies and so on and so forth, and he was in his nineties when he used to come down with us. And we used to cut the corn with a binder and... take the sheaves off with a horse, and make a stack and so on. And even in his 90s he had to go on top of the stack and help stack it, and I learnt an awful lot from that man, and I was then in my late 40s, early 50s. So you never stop learning if you are, as I said earlier, either dead or an idiot. And I felt it was wonderful that at 50 I was learning something from a man of 90, because that interested me, and what knowledge he had got in his head was going to be gone, and gone forever. He taught me to thatch, to thatch a stack and so on. I must admit I am not quite as good at it as he was, but I can do most of the jobs on the farm with a horse, through the kindness of other people, initially. Although I seem to have an ability myself to adapt to things like that, because if you are interested I think you do.

Lesley The horsemen they were quite secretive weren’t they... I’ve heard that they had all... as you said, their own remedies, and the head horseman was a really prestigious position wasn’t it.

Nigel It was. If horses went out of the stable and he wasn’t in the lead there was going to be a lot of trouble. He led out of the stable, and he decided what was going to be done that day, and what the horses were having for feed bait, baiting up time. He ran that yard. Next to the farmer he was the most senior man in the farm, and in my opinion, rightly so really. But it’s... I still think there’s an air of that with the Suffolk horse people now... I don’t think that’s totally gone. I still think there is an air of secrecy... what did you get that coat up together with? Those feet... how did you... And I can remember, and there is a very good friend of mine Cherry Grover, who... she will tell... I mean she is, without question, a bloody good horsewoman. She is sound as a pound, and she braids the ribbons and the bass into the manes of horses very well. But she will tell you, when she first started, and she had been in the game a long while, people used to turn their back, if she was watching them, so she couldn’t see how they were doing it. Now Cherry and I run the Suffolk Horse training days, for the Suffolk Horse Society, and Cherry will give her knowledge to anyone now, which thank goodness she will, and so do I. I mean I have been doing it 30 odd years, and there’s people come on the course, and they are all... I mean last year some people were older than I am, and only just been in the position to buy a Suffolk horse, so I don’t see any harm in telling people... Not only the safe way of doing things, but the preferable way of doing things. I mean the safe way is normally the way that is good for the welfare of the horse as well as for you, and obviously if the horse is comfortable, he will make sure you are comfortable. If you upset the horse, it will soon upset you. So it is all logical stuff really, or once you know it, it is anyway. But erm... anything to do with animals, I think you have got to have an aptitude for anyway, not everyone has got that.

Lesley Can you remember the first time you ploughed behind a horse?

Nigel I can... We had a little go at hoeing and I think it is best forgotten, it didn’t go at all well. But I’ve done a lot of it since. It is a think I really really enjoy, I love ploughing with horses, and I hate ploughing matches. I don’t like the fiddling about you have got to do, to win a ploughing match. I like to get out and just plough. I have got a dear friend Bill Smith, who comes over to mine and he is a good ploughman, but he loves the competition. He is the exact opposite of me. He wears more spanners out than he does ploughs, and he just loves doing it. The two jobs I like are ploughing, but best of all I like cutting corn with a binder. I just like the way the horses perform when they are at harvest, and the speed of it all, and the magic of a binder. Because the man that dreamt that up, must have had some sort of er... [?13.12]. McCormack I believe invented the knotter... well I don’t consider myself clever, but I don’t see myself dumb either, but I have looked at it, and thought however did a brain think of that. And to sit there and watch it happen at horse walk speed, is phenomenal. For BBC television I have done three Countryfile programmes, one of them cutting corn and so on, and er... When people ask you questions it makes you think of it yourself and that’s the beauty of it all I think, is that... other people’s interest stimulates your own interest. I get up every morning and look forward to the day, and I thank the Suffolk horse for some of that, to be truthful, because I absolutely love what I do now. And at the age of 70, I think that’s marvellous really to get the pleasure I do from it.

Lesley And it is because of the two horses that you bought that you ended up buying Reed Hall Farm as well, so that you would have room for them and more horses as well.

Nigel [laughs] Yeah I must have been mad. Yeah erm... It is a lovely spot, a beautiful spot and the way we have planted trees and so on, it is even nicer now. I have been putting in a thousand snowdrops, a thousand bluebells and a thousand primroses every year, for 30 years, and the wood is carpeted now... And I get immense pleasure from that, and I work the woodland with the horses, we pull out... I mean it is quite decent size timber now, so I have generated horse drawn work within my own piece of land. Primarily now, most of my time is taken up teaching other people to drive, or breaking or schooling horses that have got a problem for someone else. But I get a lot of satisfaction from that.

Lesley So tell me about the time that you ran the farm, as a farm with the horses then.

Nigel We I first came out of civil engineering... Well, we had an Open Day... A friend of ours lorry caught fire and burnt his horses harness and everything, so we had an Open Day at home to raise some money for him to buy some more horses. And the Open Day was, not only was it good fun, but it made a reasonable amount of money, so we decided we would have an open farm park, similar to Easton Farm park, but on a smaller scale. But I wanted to do it purely on the back of the Suffolk horse, so we set out to plant, to drill corn with the horses, to plough with the horses, to harvest with the horses, to even thresh... I bought a threshing drum and all this... and we had ten years where we did exactly that, everything on the farm was done with the horse. It was hard work, and you know... Or have heard of Paul Hiney, he came several times, and I sort of went around his and he was a good... well he still is a good man, and a very capable man with horses. I had some equipment off him and so on, and we farmed the whole farm from winter through summer back into winter again purely with horse power, we didn’t use a tractor... only a steam engine for threshing, at threshing time which is what happened anyway. And I really did enjoy it, BUT... and there is a but, it was a lot of hard work, and as you get older... The good thing at that time was there was a lot of people, perhaps five years older than I am, but at that time, ten years ago, they were sort of younger than I am at the moment, they came and helped. So there were people that had the knowledge and the skills to do the job, so I learnt an awful lot from them. They enjoyed reliving their youth... their working life, in a traditional way, and unfortunately they have gone to the big plough in the sky. So one I hadn’t got the help and I was getting older as well, and I found it was just more than I could keep going, although I still do some ploughing at home and we do grow a bit of corn, just to cut with the horses, just for the sheer joy of doing it. The horsemen, I suppose that’s why Jeff instigated this series of recordings... are rapidly going... That generation of people and you can see it in the... We have ploughing matches and so on, there used to be a lot of people come to ploughing matches, but they were all of that generation, and now – there’s still people come, don’t get me wrong – there’s still an interest, but youngsters don’t remember horses ploughing. They don’t remember horses doing very much. So what you never see you never miss, that’s my opinion, I mean I might be totally wrong. So that is why I have tried to, with the Spectacular, get FEI carts doing obstacle driving and so on, which has got a lot more interest for youngsters. There’s a bit more razz ma tazz to it. Quite honestly, I don’t think it matters what you do with the Suffolk horse, as long as it keeps the Suffolk horse in front of people. They are even riding Suffolk horses now, I mean I had never heard of that... 30 years ago you never heard of anybody riding, other than back from ploughing or something, but there are competitions and riding. A lot of people, or several people anyway that I know, think it is terrible. I don’t think the Suffolk horse was bred to ride, it certainly wasn’t bred to ride. If you ride on one you will find out why, they are most [?comfortable] thing to ride, but if it sells them to young people and gets young people interested, as they get older they will want to drive them. Then they might want to go ploughing with them, and the cycle starts all over again. But if we lose the Suffolk horse, I mean I don’t miss a do do, never seen one, so never miss one. And if you never see a Suffolk horse, you are not going to miss a Suffolk horse. So the idea; what the Suffolk Horse Society do with this Spectacular and everything else is to have a multitude of events hoping that some of it appeals to somebody, and I honestly believe it works.

Lesley When you did your spell, your ten years on the farm did it make you understand the horseman, the Suffolk horseman, maybe respect them even more than you did.

Nigel You are exactly right and when you read some of the old accounts in some of their personal... I’ve still got some handwritten books that horseman wrote, of their... They had a diary of their day of events, and the same things went wrong for them, that were going wrong for me. If you... If you think, to work out how many beans, bushels of beans you need to the acre and so on, and then you set up a Smythe drill and then a cog goes, and all of a sudden you have got two... or a culter blocks up or something, and you have got two rows with no beans in, you don’t know until they start to come up. You read these in the diary and you think blow me that’s happened to me this year. So the same problems were perpetuated really because of the design... I mean, now I suppose in the tractor, some red light would flash to tell you that it was blocked off, but with the horse drawn... the big thing, they used to have a walk around on a Sunday and have a look at everybody else’s crop, trying to find something wrong so they could say ‘Silly old fool!’ They weren’t looking to see how good it was, they were trying to find a fault really. And we are all like that really, if we tell the truth. We all like to think we are doing a marvellous job. What interested me was that I could make mistakes, that had been made 200 years ago, and they weren’t any better, and there was no way... I suppose there is a way if you applied technology to it, but if you use conventional horse drawn equipment in today’s atmosphere, you are going to make exactly the same mistakes as they made, because nothing has changed. The land hasn’t changed. The machinery hasn’t changed. So mechanisation is the thing that’s changed agriculture, not erm... time. It sounds a daft thing to say, I suppose, but to me I used traditional equipment that was made in the horse era. There’s a man... There was a man called Charlie Pinney who invented horse drawn equipment that brought it into the modern... it had a three point linkage and that sort of thing, which is good if you want to be a sort of modern farmer under horse power. Which I suppose, some people want to be. But I was doing it traditionally as Suffolk was, because we were purporting to be a 1940s Suffolk farm, so we had 1940s equipment as well as the horses. I mean like all... I read those old country books sort of; What happened in Suffolk in 18... whatever, and you relate to that. It is not really... If you are doing it that way, it is exactly the same for you, as it is, or was for them, and that’s the thing that I find amazing really. We think, everything has changed, but in reality it hasn’t.

Lesley And the horses haven’t either/

Nigel No.

Lesley /so I imagine the same problems... because I’ve heard people say... I’ve had horsemen tell me that, that the horses would know when it was time to come home, and they would regardless... Did you have that sort of thing?

Nigel Yeah. If you look at the Volume 1 of the Suffolk Stud Book, there are plates in there... pencil drawings of Suffolk horses and so on, and the conformation of the Suffolk horse is in the first of the stud books, to what I have got on the farm today, it could be the same horse. I mean the people who have kept the Suffolk horse, have kept it true to form and it is still capable of doing exactly the same work as it was developed for initially, which I think is absolutely remarkable. And I think its... One of the breeds that has stayed true to form... I don’t want to talk about other breeds, because you know, I’ve got several friends who have got Shires. But the show Shire is a lot bigger than the Shire I remember as a child, and the Suffolks have got something bigger for the brewery drays and that sort of turnout classes. But in general terms, the Suffolk horse today is exactly the same as the Suffolk horse in the Volume I of the Stud Books.

Lesley Take me through some of your horses... Let’s find out a bit about some of your horses. Tell me about the first two you got.

Nigel The first two... One was an oldish mare ‘Watfield Dorcas’ who had a wonderful pedigree and she had done very well in county shows. However, she was extremely difficult to get in foal. She only ever had one foal, and they sold her thinking she was a barren... thought to be a barren mare. I luckily had good vets who did whatever they had to do, and I got a filly foal out of her, only the one. And as I said earlier all my horses are on that same bloodline. And she was a proper old Suffolk, big boned, good neck, a good conformation Suffolk. A Suffolk should stand so you can get your bowler hat, when you are judging, in between the legs. She had a... in my opinion anyway, a classic Suffolk horse, and she has left... Actually I am on my seventh generation now I think, of that line, and you can see her in them. I’ve got paintings of her that were done when she was alive, bless her, and I’ve got paintings of me ploughing with horses, that I have bred, and you can see that stamp of horse in her... or in my future horses I should say. So I am... I have got erm... She was ‘Watfield Dorcas’, my line is Withersfield. So I have got Pride and Ruby now, is in foal again. She has had four filly foals I think, and they’ve all been good breeding mares. I’ve had geld... well colt foals which I have gelded and I have done brewery dray turnouts with them and sold some on, who have done exceptionally well, and I have done well at show... I’ve been champion at the Royal Show with my own bred horses. And when the royal show was going, which it sadly no longer is, that is quite a thing to have done with a gelding. So I’ve had some low times, but I’ve had some exceedingly good times. I get... quite a lot of promotional work. I do Greene Kings High Days and Holidays in Bury. I’ve done quite a lot of film work for BBC television, sort of period films, ploughing and messing about. A whole multitude of things I did... I did the vehicle at Sandringham for the Queen Mother’s 100th Birthday, and all sorts of different jobs with Suffolks, that have been interesting as well as nice to do. That’s another thing you see, you go, to somewhere like Sandringham, which had a big stud of Sufolk horses, and you get up there, and you get the opportunity to speak to their horseman, and they aren’t duffers, and you can pick up a lot of... I don’t say er... information, but stories and little anecdotes, and it is lovely really. I mean er... Martin Goymour a pal of mine, he and I went to Ireland ploughing with horses, and we had a really good time, and it was totally totally different. They had never seen Suffolks there, previously, although there are some in Ireland now, and I did a little television programme about the Suffolks over there, which stimulated thoughts, and some people have bought Suffolks... Now there are studs of Suffolks in Northern Ireland, and so it all does... although you don’t think at the time, it does good. And although this particular thing you are doing at the moment, is about old horseman, and you should never forget your history, because if you don’t know your history you ain’t got much of a future. But I think we have got to look forward as well as backward, and I don’t know if petrochemicals fail, will horse power come back, who knows. I don’t think it will be in my life time, perhaps near the next generation from what you read. But I don’t think the skills should go, because there are, SSSI sites, forestry work, that horses can do, viably, economic wise, and are doing. You know there are areas... I planted trees in Kew Gardens with a horse operated tree planter for the millennium. All right it was a... it was trees that were given by the Italian government and we did one side of an avenue, and the most up to date hydraulic tree planters planted the other side. They got stuck and planted three and we had to plant the rest of them with the horse, and we planted seven. So the day of the horse hasn’t gone, and in forestry and SSSI work – I mean even the drilling industry is in... I did a job for BP in some woodland in Dorset that couldn’t have er petrochemical spillages and I pulled the drilling rigs in with horses, which gave them a hell of a kudos. So there are... All right, it is only a one off, but it is there, and that is happening all the time. And if you watch.. I mean I have done this Countryfile three times, you watch the programmes on Adam’s Farm and so on, there is a big interest in our heritage and our past, which should become our future. And if we let it all dwindle away we are letting the next generation down.

Lesley I love the story about the bowler hat between the front legs for the Suffolk Punch, tell me about judging and what a Suffolk Punch should be like.

Nigel Well conformation is obviously a big thing, they should be deep through the heart, because obviously the heart is where their stamina comes from. They should be good in the shoulder where the neck taper into the head, because that is where the collar goes on, that they push into, to push. The canon bone, which is the bone between the fetlock joint and the knee, on a draught horse should be short, but with plenty of girth, because a horse when it puts its foot down, puts the heel down and then the toe, and there is a lot of pressure on that bone when you are ploughing or pulling good loads. And then the birchen, the bit round the backside of the horse, where the birchen strap goes, which allows the horse to help break a vehicle, or if you reverse a horse up, his backside goes into that and pushes the load back, so he has got to be good in his birchen. His hocks, the back joints, when he goes, they shouldn’t screw the hocks, because obviously if you are hoeing sugar beet or something you don’t want to push most of them out. It is a fault in the horse, a weak joint in the horse. And a Suffolk horse tail should be presented high on his rump. It should have a good rump, not... like a Clydesdale, nothing wrong with Clydesdale, but they have got more of a goose shape back, whereas Suffolks shouldn’t be goose..[?32.34]. It was shortish coupled... so your point of draught from the shoulder to the ground for ploughing, because they were an agricultural horse, not from the shoulder to the dray, although they will pull a dray obviously. The Suffolk was designed to work at the walk, his feet, you know the angle of his paston joint is shallow, so his power is in the walk, and that’s... a shortish real clunchy, what they say in Suffolk, a clunchy horse. An altogether powerful shortish... Suffolks normally grow up to about 17.5 hands, so if you take a straight line from the shoulder to the ground they have got a wonderful line of draught. And a pair of Suffolks on a single furrow plough are ideally suited for it. I mean they should be about to move 1.5 times their own weight on wheels, which they can easily. They are a powerful piece of machinery really.

Lesley And you have met loads over the years, because you break them in don’t you, and train them.

Nigel Yeah I break in other breeds, but predominantly Suffolks. I have got a horse there now that had a behavioural problem, they call it these days. There is a word for it, but it is rude. And it ran off with the people, it knew its own strength, and now it is like a dog... The thing is... it is people that underestimate of them, and once they get their own way, then they are like children really, they know they can get their own way and they will work on that. But this horse, luckily, has come round and he is sound as a pound, he is lovely. And what I have suggested is the lady that looks after the horse for them, comes home and sees what we do with it, to make sure she handles it in the right way. Because that’s half the battle, it is like reversing a trailer or anything, once you learn the right way it is not that difficult.

Lesley Can you generalise with the Suffolk horse about training it?

Nigel In a way you can, because... I don’t know how many I have broke in, but I’ve only had two that had to be put down, because they were dangerous. But apart from that most Suffolks come to it reasonably readily, as long as you do... If I have a horse to break in at home I have it at home for a fortnight before I do very much at all, accept feed it, talk to it, walk it about a bit, so it feels at home and is at ease with you, and it is not all the time wondering what is going to happen next. Then they... In my opinion anyway, they take a little more breaking in than some of the other breeds, or schooling, or whatever you want to call it. But once it is in the head it stays there, they don’t ever seem to forget. I mean I’ve had horses of my own at home, and I am as bad as anyone else. If you have got two really good horses that you don’t have to think too much about, they are the ones you get out, because it is less trouble. I have got a horse at home, he is 18.5 hands, he is a big horse, and he will have an awkward day sometimes. He just thinks, I don’t really want to do this, and he is too big to argue, so I put him away and get another two out. But on... If I left him for three months and then get him out, on a good day he will do it as though he did the day before, so it is not... anything else, it is an attitude. He is not nasty or anything he just... You have to keep on at him all the time... You old devil, like you know. And there’s days where you don’t feel like you want to be doing that, so rather than fall out with him, I put him away and just get another two out. But in general, they are... I mean their temperament in my mind is excellent, and their ability to do... I mean they have been bred to do that job anyway, it is like second nature to them really. It is like a Labrador will retrieve where something else won’t, that’s what they were bred to do for generations, and it is instinct almost to them. I don’t think I’ve ever had one that won’t have a collar put over its head. Some people say they have had a devil of a job getting a collar onto a horse, and I’ve never had trouble. I had an interesting thing, because Martin Goymour had a mule, a Quatto donkey, a French donkey cross a Melissu carthorse, a French carthorse, and that was a 17.5 hand mule, with earholes like there was no tomorrow. And my vet is a Swiss, and he erm... he had been in the Swiss cavalry and he said ‘You will never get a collar on that donkey’. Well it took longer to teach it English than it did manners, because it had been brought up in France and its English and my French weren’t any good to either of us. So I persevered pulling its ears about, messing about, and he bet me fifty quid that I wouldn’t get a collar on. And I broke it both to work and to ride, and I am still waiting for me fifty quid. But that mule was unbelievable, he was... He was as intelligent as they come.

Lesley Have you had a favourite Suffolk Punch, I know it is not fair to ask in a way, but I bet you have haven’t you.

Nigel Yeah, everybody has. I had a horse ‘Charlie’, the first foal I ever bred and he wouldn’t drive for anyone else. Bruce Smith, who you know, we were at er... a charity day, and I was going to have some lunch and he said ‘Well I will take over and drive’, I said ‘He won’t go for you mate’. And he got up on the seat, come on Charlie, he wouldn’t go. And Bruce said ‘What have you done to him?’ I said ‘I haven’t done anything to it’, so he said ‘Well don’t touch the horse, you get up and drive it’. So I got up, ‘Come on Charlie’, off he went, but he wouldn’t go for anyone else at all. And if I was showing him in the show ring, he would shuffle his old feet and stand up. I mean I’ve got photos of him, and I don’t remember ever showing him to square up and show himself, he seemed to want to do it. He was er... a fantastic horse. I mean I did ever so well with him at shows, and I did all sorts of driving jobs through Bury and shopping... I did Ipswich Football Club with thousands of people around him, and he stood there like it was no problem. And yet, it is like everything else, they only live for a certain time. I’ve had some very very good horses to be honest. Thomas was a big horse and I won a lot of classes with him turnout, he floated across the ground. But then I took him up to Edinburgh to the Royal Highland Show, and he got bit with a tick, and ended up with Lymes disease, and it is not common... or it wasn’t then anyway, common down here, and it wasn’t diagnosed and we lost him. It ceased all his joints up, it was terribly sad, because he was only eight years old when I lost him, and he was 19.2 hands, he was massive. I mean he wasn’t a good example of a Suffolk, but he was a very good dray horse.

Lesley Like friends though to lose them.

Nigel Yeah, I mean if you don’t like them like that you shouldn’t be keeping them to be honest, because it is a labour of love. I mean there is a lot of work, and monetary wise, no. I mean you can do a show and win whatever, but to be honest there’s no real money in it. And even if you breed them to sell them, you have got to be an idiot... You buy a foal cheap and you can breed one, but the satisfaction is in doing it, and there’s either a lot in it, or there’s a lot of idiots out there, because there’s a lot of us doing it. I think a lot of the pleasure is doing what you enjoy anyway isn’t it.

Lesley If I had to pick one moment, one best moment with your Suffolks... What is the one moment?

Nigel Erm... I’ve had a lot of them, so it is hard to... When I won the Championship at the Royal, which I didn’t even dream we would do, I wasn’t totally sober for three days, and I got offered an awful lot of money for the horse – that was Charlie – and I wouldn’t have sold him if they have given me ten times the amount. That was phenomenal. When this mare had the foal, that the other one took over that was...

Lesley You need to tell that story, because we probably haven’t got that on the audio for... So take me through that story, because it is a brilliant story.

Nigel My neighbour whose horses I look after had a mare, and unfortunately this mare broke a leg on the last stages of foaling, she was only about two or three days away from foaling. So our vets plastered her up and kept her comfortable, pain wise, until we got the foal, because the foal was very close to being born. So the mare was absolutely phenomenal, she was marvellous, absolutely marvellous. We got the foal alive, the mare let it suckle whilst she was still laid down, so it had the first drink with the colostrum, so it got its antibodies, and then two or three days we fed it on mare supplement milk, you can get hold of. And then I said to our vets that we would put an old mare, I had got, who was a kind old mare, to keep it, as an equine so it didn’t get humanised. I tied the mare up and we brought the foal in and she had a sniff of it and took to it straightaway, there was not one bad moment, it was quite heart rendering stuff really. Then we put them out in the paddock because it was nice days, and the exercise they get the better for both, and the foal started to suckle the mare, which the vets thought could end up with the mare getting anxious and kicking it, because she hadn’t got any bag attached to her. But it went on, and after three days it was obvious from the noises and the sucking that the foal was getting something. So our vets... I held the horse and the vet milked it a bit and took some back to the lab, and they tested it, and it was about half strength protein wise, and then after a week it was at full strength, and we gave it no supplementary feed whatsoever, apart from, as it got a little older, some course feed, with some milk pellets in it, in case. And it reared it to a... well until it was a yearling. We had it down at the Animal Health Trust, where the Spectacular is going to be, because they thought it was quite unique, and the television people got hold of it, and they made a little documentary about it, which was nice. Unfortunately the foal came back home, slipped over in the mud and broke a leg, and we had to shoot it anyway, so it was... It seemed as though that was to be. But it is terrible really, you think you have won, and well....

Lesley But that’s the whole thing isn’t it, it is sort of heartache but also/

Nigel Yes.

Lesley /the positives of it.

Nigel There’s both sides. I mean the girls at the Animal Health were heartbroken when they heard we had to put the foal down, because it came down, galloping around the meadow and enjoying itself and slipped over and broke its shoulder.

Lesley That’s awful. That’s such a wonderful story though, that old mare looked after it.

Nigel I mean she hadn’t had a foal for five years and she came into milk and everything. So... I mean I had never heard of it before... I mean probably somebody out there has, no doubt... But quite a unique thing I think.

Lesley Have you got any regrets?

Nigel No. None at all really. What with regard to horses?

Lesley Yes.

Nigel No. No. No I mean I’ve had horses that I think... you little devil [laughs] but they normally come round in the end. And I’ve had what I call cheeky horses, that know they are getting away with things, but then I’ve had dogs like that. And I’ve certainly have had children like it. So... No, I think if you always want to... there’s something wrong with you, I mean there have got to be some bits that you think I wish that hadn’t happened. But after saying that, we would have a funny old life if it was all pleasure wouldn’t we.

Lesley Well it has made a huge difference to your life, I mean they’ve dominated your life haven’t they, Suffolks?

Nigel Yeah. Especially now because... I will tell you the one thing left out what you said is... I suffered a... Because I worked in seven countries in one year, when I was in civil engineering and I just, you think you are invulnerable you know, and I suffered a heart attack at 41, and quite a severe one. I was in intensive care for six weeks, and it was a bit dodgy and when I came out of hospital I was lucky, I had Michael Petch, who is a very good heart man, and it took me 18 months to get where I could do anything really. I couldn’t even lift a watering... My wife bought me a little watering can, I would sit in the greenhouse, I was 41. I thought that was going to the rest of my life, and I had got these two Suffolks then, and my sons used to run me up on a quad bike, sitting on a bale of straw in a trailer to look at the horses. I couldn’t even get off the trailer, it was terrible. I put it down to the horses that I got better, because I walked miles behind them, long reining and ploughing, and I used to phone Michael Petch up – I think he thought I was an idiot – but I used to say ‘I am ploughing with horses, is it all right if I do this?’ And he would say ‘Does it hurt?’ So I said ‘No’. So he said ‘Well do it then’. And I put my health down to the horses, and I still do... I mean I walk miles every day, and like... I can’t do a somersault or something, but at 70 I consider myself very lucky, because I get up in the morning and do nearly anything I want to do. And I do think the horses, or my love of the horses keep me relatively fit. I might be wrong but... without them what would I do. What would make me walk. I mean if you plough a field with horses in a day, you walk eleven miles. To plough an acre of land you walk eleven miles, and so do the horses come to that, so it has got to be good for you hasn’t it.

Lesley We will finish on that, I think that’s perfect.