

Lord Plumb: A farmer's life



Lord Henry Plumb has been described as probably the most important person in agriculture of the last one hundred years. Alongside a farming career spanning almost eight decades he served as Vice President and President of the National Farmers' Union and as the only British President of the European Parliament. In November 2017, aged 92, he retired from the House of Lords.

Country Way editor Louise Davis went to meet him on his farm in Warwickshire.

The event that set the trajectory of his life is still vivid in Lord Plumb's memory, even at a distance of almost eighty years. It happened on 24 March 1940 when Henry, a reluctant student, found himself summoned to the headmaster's office where he discovered that he was to leave school immediately. Henry's father had recently acquired Southfields Farm in Coleshill and wanted his son to run it for him, believing that World War 2 would only last a few months.

'We had no men at that stage,' he recalls, apart from two men 'we'd sort of inherited. The place was in an awful mess; it just hadn't been farmed.'

'At 15, I was a boss. I was in touch with Father every night; he'd say, "What we should do?" and then I had to tell the men. We'd finish milking in the morning, stand in the dairy and I'd say, "This is what I think we should do today. What do you think?" They'd start arguing and I'd say, "Well, go have your breakfast and come back and tell me", and they always came back and told me what I told them, but it was their idea, it wasn't mine.'

Farming in wartime

Lord Plumb may not have seen active service during World War 2 – farming was a reserved occupation and he was too young to be called up for most of the conflict – but the war was an ever-present reality during those early years at Coleshill.

'Coleshill was really bombed,' he remembers, the result of its proximity not only to both Coventry and Birmingham but to Hams Hall power station. One of his men lost two sisters-in-law: 'They were in their beds and a bomb dropped straight on top of them.'

But the war proved to be a formative time in Lord Plumb's life, not least because it required him to hone his leadership skills. Half a mile from Coleshill was a prisoner of war camp and much of the farm's labour during the war came courtesy of some of its German and Italian inhabitants.

'The German men were so good, so helpful; a lot of them were from rural areas and were farm workers anyway. We had them six at a time, chopping sugar beet.'

It wasn't all plain sailing, but Lord Plumb seems genuinely grateful for all his unconventional workforce contributed to the life of the farm.

'We got on well, we relied on their support; our chaps had gone to war and we'd got no young people around. When war broke out and I was still on my father's farm, all six of his men went to the war straight away. There was just no choice.'

Family life

During the course of our conversation it becomes clear that Lord Plumb felt both great affection for both his parents and a deep admiration for the way in which they faced all kinds of challenges, exercising the kind of leadership that can make a transformative difference to both people and situations in difficult times.

Describing his mother, Louise, as 'that dear girl', he recalls the way in which she cared for the POW who worked on the farms.

'We weren't supposed to feed them when they came; they had to bring their rations. But my mother would have a bucketful of potatoes and they all had lunch. She was severely reprimanded by the commander at the camp. She said, "Well, I shall still do it." They couldn't stop her. She was a formidable woman.'

Lord Plumb's son, John, a trustee of Germinate: The Arthur Rank Centre, now farms at Coleshill. They took the decision to cease dairy farming a few years ago and now John spends a lot of his time on farming education.

'I think what he's doing is fantastic. I think he's had 200 children at the farm this year so far. If we're going to try to encourage consumption of the right food, then now's the time to educate children. He loves it! I don't know how he does it but he'll have four bus-loads in a day.'

'He's a great boy.'

Lessons in leadership

One of the themes that emerges from our conversation is just how much Lord Plumb has valued the working relationships he's had with others, from his father and mother and those early lessons in leadership with older men and prisoners of war, to his desire to work collaboratively in the European Parliament and his attempts, not always successful, at reconciling different factions within the UK farming community.

Lord Plumb credits his unusual early life experiences with shaping the leader he would become, as President first of the NFU and then of the European Parliament, where his daily meetings with his farm workers back at Coleshill in 1940 set the pattern for his presidency.

'I had my six key men in for a croissant and coffee meeting every morning at 8am if I was in Brussels and I would say exactly the same to them as I said to my farm workers: "What do you think?" And they would come back with the answers.'

And while Lord Plumb is clearly a man who knows his own mind and is unafraid to set direction, he describes himself as fortunate to have been a team leader.

'I can't work without a team: I need to consult with them, I need their advice, I need their help.'

When I ask him what the key leadership lessons are that he's learned from the various spheres in which he's worked, he doesn't hesitate.

'Listen. Listen. Never try to dictate. Listen.'

It's a lesson in leadership which many current leaders, particularly political ones, would do well to heed.

To my astonishment, at one point in our conversation, Lord Plumb describes himself as lazy. It's not a word I'd use to describe a man with more energy and drive than a lot of people twenty or even thirty years his junior, and the fact that he mentions a forthcoming meeting with a high-ranking government minister suggests that his advice and opinions are still as eagerly sought as ever.

And yet, Lord Plumb remains a man deeply rooted in farming. He recounts with pride an occasion in the House of Lords when with chants of 'The farmer, the farmer!' he was called to speak in a debate.

'I think living on the land is the best life you can ever imagine. Even though I've been round the world a few times and I've been involved in so many other things, I'm still a farmer.'

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