The Miller’s Tale – Episode 2

The Swinging Sixties and Beyond

It is easy to forget how much things have changed since the Sixties. There was no internet. So unless you subscribed to specialist publications or were in a political party or special interest or trade group, your information was limited to what the main newspapers or the BBC and ITV told you. With regard to the European project, the most crucial of the government’s information and intentions were concealed from the public for thirty years by the Official Secrets Act. I will give an account of things as I remember them but will use italic type like this to insert information which was not available until later and also give links to later articles which give a fuller explanation, not available to me at the time.

Whilst the countryside looks picturesque and much of it appears unchanged, that is very deceptive. Farming has been one of the most rapidly modernising industries of all. Whilst there were still small farms in the Sixties which used horses for some of the work, mechanisation went on at a great pace and the number of people required to work the land declined steeply as machines got bigger and better.

I called on such a farm in the mid Sixties and the farmer was in his fields. I had to wait for him to finish his job because he was sowing seed by hand and had to count the paces and keep the rhythm as he broadcast handfuls of seed from the bag round his waist – just as in the bible story “a sower went forth sowing.” That was the last time I saw it done. His descendants now drive machines which are positioned by satellite and controlled by computers.

Most farms were going for bigger and better tractors and machinery – seed drills, fertiliser spreaders, sprayers,

ploughs, combine harvesters, forage harvesters and so on. Cows were being moved out of cow sheds and into covered yards where they could self-feed on silage when not grazing. Milking parlours replaced the cow shed stalls. Bulk milk tanks replaced the man-handled milk churns.

Britain had a unique agricultural policy. Food from abroad was allowed in freely without customs duties and farmers received subsidies to keep up home production and guarantee food security. To the benefit of the less well-off, the tax payer, not the consumer, funded the system. Food was a much bigger proportion of household expense in those days and cheap food also reduced pressure on wages.

Farm land would not be allowed to go derelict, as it had done in the depression between the wars. This system was negotiated annually in the Farm Price Review under parliamentary scrutiny. As the memory of food shortages and rationing faded, politicians naturally scrutinised this expense very carefully. World food prices fell from the late Fifties onwards and this tended to drive up the required subsidies which were gradually restricted. So farming was not as profitable as the increases in production might suggest. (*See attachment for fuller description).*

Attitudes changed in the Sixties. Early on, the satirical TV programme "That Was The Week That Was" mercilessly lampooned the failings of our political class. In doing so it reduced people's confidence in the institutions of government. It was part of the process of rubbishing the hitherto undisputed comfortable feeling that "British is best". No fearless investigator or satirist looked into government deceit about the European project. Our European neighbours were doing better than us economically. Documentary programmes drove this message home relentlessly.

Things were not helped by the fact that our key industries frequently went on strike. *We did not know it at the time but*

the Prime Minister Harold MacMillan (from 1957 to 1963) expressed the view that our country was "ungovernable". He thought that the trade unions would come to their senses if British industry was opened to unrestricted competition from Europe. The unions were so powerful that he dared not alter the laws which gave them almost total immunity from normal legal redress..

At this time, we were installing some new machinery. The engineer, who was supervising the job, picked up a spanner and started to make an adjustment. He put it down very quickly, looking around with a worried expression. "Is this a union shop?" he asked. Fortunately we weren't. In some factories, only members of the right union were allowed to do certain tasks. Shipyards, already months or even years behind with deliveries, were brought to a halt. Drilling a hole which went through a piece of metal and a piece of wood could cause a strike whilst the shop stewards argued whether a woodworker or metal worker should have done the job. Then they would want overtime to make up for lost time. That was the way things were then. Britain's industries were rightly losing the confidence of their overseas customers. The Germans, French, Japanese and others would willingly replace them and make deliveries to quality and to time.

The Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson (1964-1970) wanted to modernise British industry. His catch phrase was "the white heat of the technological revolution" but he couldn't tackle the unions either. As well as being over-mighty, they were the Labour party's paymasters. He did stand up to a Seamen's strike in 1966. He believed that communists were using the strike to take over the union.

He brought in emergency powers and the strikers backed down but not before goods piled up on quaysides and most of the Cunard fleet was out of action. The crew of the Queen Mary stopped work at Southampton. The left wing of Labour supported the union.

By luck rather than by good judgement I did rather well out of this. I had bought a large contract of groundnut cake and two months' shipments arrived together just before the strike. So we were sitting pretty. But I still got a row from my father because we had to hire outside warehouse space.

There were two other disruptive features of trade union conduct in those days – the "sympathy strike" and "blacking". Trade unionists with no grievance against their own employer would strike "in sympathy" with workers involved in another dispute. "Blacking" was the practice of blacklisting lorries from a firm involved in strike action so that trade unionists in other factories would refuse to load or unload them. Dubious tactics could also be used in disputes between trade unions.

I have a copy of the *Sunday Mirror* of July 20th 1969. The front page stories are of the first moon landing, the death of Ted Kennedy's girlfriend in a car which ended underwater and a surprise appearance by the Duke of Edinburgh at a registry office wedding in Cardiff. But inside is a tale of thuggishness between trade unions which I quote here. The TUC was called in as umpire in a dispute between the United Road Transport Union and the much larger Transport & General Transport Workers' Union, who were in competition for recruits. Their Midlands Organiser, Alan Law, had been accused in Parliament of blackmail and extortion. A firm called Stephenson Clark had paid £5,000 into the TGWU convalescent homes fund following negotiations about dismissed drivers. Mr Law intended to share the £5,000 with £400 each to seven drivers and £1,100 each to two shop stewards. I knew several firms which were shaken down by Law. Businesses in the Midlands dreaded the attentions of this man and spoke of "The Rule of Law" which bordered on gangsterism, using the immunities from normal legal redress which the unions continued to enjoy until the days of Margaret Thatcher.

One thing strikes me about the *Sunday Mirror* of those days. It

was very much better written than any tabloid today. A full page article by Roy Jenkins, Chancellor of the Exchequer sang the praises of what her termed “the civilised society” and the beginnings of our present obsession with homosexuality and transgender matters. He was a leading light amongst the group of Labour MPs, working behind the scenes to defy their own party policy and get us into the European Economic Community.

In this, he was at one with the up and coming Conservative, John Selwyn Gummer, now Lord Deben. He and Jenkins both peddled the lie that the Commonwealth countries, grown up and independent, wanted nothing more to do with us – so we must look to Europe. Gummer came to our Corn Trade Association Conference at Buxton to tell us that. I knew it was a lie because our New Zealand friends supplied us with thousands of tons of milk powder and were not at all pleased to be losing one of their best customers. So, I decided that a project which required a lie to promote it must be concealing more and greater evils. The Canadians who supplied excellent quality wheat for flour milling got the same treatment.

In late 1971 I became a member of a MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries & Food) Committee, concerned with bringing in the European Common Agricultural Policy. The others on the committee were a good twenty years older than I . When they heard the details of the policy which I had heard in Holland ten years before (see Episode 1), they were so outraged that they wanted to walk out. We had not yet met Sir Humphrey Appleby of “Yes Minister” but a senior civil servant who greatly resembled him smoothed them down expertly.

“Well gentlemen” he said “We were not founder members of the community, so these arrangements are not what we would have wished. But just give it a few years of British common sense and we’ll soon get it licked into shape”. Tea and biscuits appeared instantly. With hindsight, I guessed that the lady with the trolley was waiting for her cue. “And now gentlemen, the political decision having been made, we want to help you

get the very best out of this”. It was a deceit expertly done but, to give the civil servants their due, they certainly gave us the help we needed to make our living in this strange new world. We had to make radical alterations to the way we ran our business. In the highly regulated Common Agricultural Policy our profitability would depend on being able to claim EEC subsidy for “denaturing” wheat and milk powder – that is, rendering them unfit for human consumption by blending them into animal feed. We needed new record systems, new laboratory equipment and parts of our production lines had to be redesigned. By Autumn or early winter of 1972, we were ready to be up and running with the new system. So everything worked perfectly when we “went into Europe” in January 1973 . The only things we were not prepared for was the new breed of inspector and Harold Wilson’s 1975 “Renegotiation” – of which more anon.