The miller’s tale – a series of reminiscences

EPISODE 1 – Early intimations.

“Shades of the prison house begin to close upon the growing boy” – Ode on intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood by William Wordsworth.

We moved into the countryside from the house next to the mill in 1950 and our old home became offices and a laboratory for our family business.. Going into the business made my later close acquaintance with the European project inevitable.

That was all in the far, unsuspected future when I went on a school visit to Germany in 1958. The German boy I stayed with asked me “Have you heard about our *Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft*? It will guarantee our living standard”. Neither his English nor my German was up to translating the word. So an answer had to wait until we got home. As soon as I asked our teacher, several other boys said

“My chap said exactly the same thing”. So it was obviously something they had been taught in school.

Our teacher, Mr Rhodes, explained that the word meant “Economic Community” and it had been started by a new treaty the previous year between France, Italy, Germany and the Benelux countries.

We discussed it for a while and thought it was a very good idea that these continental countries were co-operating with each other. “But remember,” said Mr. Rhodes, “This shows a difference in tradition between our countries. You would not be taught a political opinion like that as a fact in a British school.” How times have changed since!

This was the first time I remember people talking about what was called “The Common Market” and, whilst we wished the neighbouring countries well, I don’t recall many people being keen on the idea of our joining it ourselves. Matron was an exception but she was a Liberal – then a very small parliamentary party. One prominent member was a Lady Violet Bonham Carter who was so extremely enthusiastic that a radio comedian dubbed her “Lady Violent Common Barter” !

Interest moved up a notch around 1960. By then I was a pupil in a firm of corn merchants at Banbury, called Lamprey & Son Ltd. Their office was next to the town hall and had a high sloping desk with stools – no lounging in executive chairs! The accounts were still kept in hand-written ledgers upstairs. On my arrival, the manager, an austere man, passed me a weighbridge ticket – 5 tons 2 hundredweights three quarters and one stone. “There you are boy. Twenty five pounds twelve shillings and six pence per ton. What does it come to?” When I asked for a piece of paper to do the calculation “Lord love you, lad. What have they been teaching you all these years?”

Farmers came into the office on market days to order what they needed, to pay their bills and to be paid for grain which we had bought from them. It was a busy cheerful place and I clearly remember one nice old boy, a smallholder who had lost a leg in the First World War, asking the manager. “Well, Mr Humphries, be you goin’ to join this ‘ere common market?”. It didn’t rank very high in our concerns amongst the general bustle of a busy office. I did many jobs in that firm from bagging coal to really responsible tasks. Our boss, Roger Bradshaw, was only about ten years older than I. His father had died quite recently. So it was very different from working for my father. He would give a task, such as taking over the running of the retail shop without any detailed instructions and his favourite exhortation was “It won’t take you five minutes to get hold of it”.

Sometimes it took me much longer but I was allowed to make

mistakes as long as I owned up. His son phoned me a few days ago to say he had been asking after me and this put me in mind to write these reminiscences.

After two happy years I went back home. Our most profitable product was a milk powder food for baby calves which my father had developed. He knew that technical advances were taking place in Holland and we eventually came to an arrangement with a large Dutch firm to use their formulations and made several visits to their mill to effect the technology transfer.

It was on one of these visits in 1962 or 1963 that I first came across the European Common Agricultural Policy. I was watching wheat come down a conveyor and suddenly saw purple grains. Now the only reason I knew for purple grains was ergot – a very nasty fungus which causes abortion in cattle amongst other things and there seemed to be an awful lot of it. The director who was looking after me said he would explain it all that evening. I learned that the grain had been dyed because it had been subsidised for use in animal feed. The dye ensured that the wheat could not be diverted back into human food. He explained the whole complicated system which also subsidised the use of milk powder in calf food.

I had never come across anything quite so odd in my life. We then had free trade in food and feed at home. How on earth could a common sense people like the Dutch have come to use such a complicated (and frankly barmy) system? “Little Holland is neighbour of big Germany,” my host said “and the Germans wanted it”. It was then that I remembered that he was very senior and I was very junior and a guest in his house. So I thought I had probably spoken out of turn.. His speech was quite matter-of-fact, as if describing the weather. I also knew that he had flown with the RAF during the war. So I shut up but remembered.

It would be ten years before we entered this system. In the meantime, many people were quite well-disposed to the idea of

joining the “Common Market”. Mainland Europe was doing much better than us economically. We always seemed to be strikebound in major industries and things were rather shabby here in comparison to their rapid progress. There were also people I respected greatly, who had done great things in the war. “This will be marvellous for you and your generation Edward. It means you will never have to suffer the sort of things we did.” You had to take notice of people like that. But nobody could explain to me why they had such a crazy agricultural policy.