

SECTION 4

LECTURER

I hope that this first session, which I've called A1 Introduction to British Agriculture, will provide a helpful background to the farm visits you'll be doing next week.

I think I should start by emphasising that agriculture still accounts for a very important part of this country's economy. We are used to hearing the UK's society and economy described as being 'industrial' or even 'post-industrial', but we mustn't let this blind us to the fact that agriculture and its supporting industries still account for around 20% of our Gross National Product.

This figure is especially impressive, I think, when you bear in mind how very small a percentage of the UK workforce is employed in agriculture. This is not a recent development—you would have to go back to 1750 or so to find a majority of the workforce in this country working in agriculture. By the middle of the next century, in 1850 that is, it had fallen sharply to 10%, and then to 3% by the middle of the twentieth century. Q31

And now just 2% of the workforce contribute 20% of GNP. How is this efficiency achieved? Well, my own view is that it owes a great deal to a history, over the last 50 or 60 years, of intelligent support by the state, mainly taking the form of helping farmers to plan ahead. Then the two other factors I should mention, both very important, are the high level of training amongst the agricultural workforce. And secondly, the recognition by farmers of the value of investing in technology. Q32 Q33

Now, although the UK is a fairly small country, the geology and climate vary a good deal from region to region. For our purposes today we can divide the country broadly into three—I've marked them on the map here (*indicates map*).

The region you'll get to know best, of course, is the north, where we are at present. The land here is generally hilly, and the soils thin. The climate up here, and

you've already had evidence of this, is generally cool and wet. As you will see next week, the typical farm here in the North is a small, family-run concern, producing mainly wool and timber for the market.

If we contrast that with the Eastern region, over here (*indicating on map*), the east is flatter and more low-lying, with fertile soils and a mixed climate. Average farm-size is much bigger in the east; and farms are likely to be managed strictly on commercial lines. As for crops, well, the east is the UK's great cereal-producing region. However, increasingly significant areas are now also given over to high quality vegetables for supply direct to the supermarkets.

The third broad region is the west, where it's a different story again. The climate is warmer than in the north and much wetter than in the east. The resulting rich soils in the west provide excellent pasture, and the farms there are quite large, typically around 800 hectares. The main products are milk, cheese and meat.

So, clearly, there are marked differences between regions. But this does not prevent quite a strong sense of solidarity amongst the farming community as a whole, right across the country. This solidarity comes in part from the need to present a united front in dealing with other powerful interest-groups, such as government or the media. It also owes something to the close co-operation between all the agricultural training colleges, through which the great majority of farmers pass at the beginning of their careers. And a third factor making for solidarity is the national structure of the Farmers' Union, of which virtually all farmers are members.

Finally in this short talk, I would like to say a little about the challenges facing farmers in the next...