**Harry Metcalfe Podcast transcript**

Hi, I'm Will Evans. Welcome to Ahead of the Field from NFU Mutual, where we aim to bring you farming stories from around the country, updates on what's happening in the industry, and relevant help and advice. Today, we're going to be talking to Harry Metcalfe, a farmer in West Oxfordshire. He's also a highly successful motoring journalist, founding the Evo car magazine.

Harry, how are you?

Harry: Very good, thank you. And yeah, great to join you.

Will: Perhaps you could start with just telling us a bit about yourself, but also a bit about the farm as well.

Harry: Yes. Well, A slightly odd route into farming at the beginning, but yeah, I went to agricultural college at Shuttleworth, late 70s, came out as a... Got a job as a grain buyer, and toured around the farms in Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, absolute wonderful area. And then, started doing line trading as well, and just wanted to get to the other side of the fence. And started taking little bits of land on as you do, and then fell into a tenancy with the Hambros, near Hardely , 600 acres and it expanded up to 2, 000 acres, and that was sort of how I got into farming.

And then a magazine happened, and I will cover that later, but now, I always wanted to own our own farm. And we bought here this wonderful, it's 280 acres in the Cotswold, and it's mixed farm and it has everything. We have a wonderful valley down to a little brook, steep land with grass, permanent pasture, a little bit of arable that doesn't grow the yields I grew over in Hertfordshire, no matter how hard I try. And so, I still have to do other things to keep everything going.

Will: Yeah. Where did the initial interest in farming come from? Are you from a farming family?

Harry: Slightly, once removed. My grandfather, he was trading horses up in Yorkshire, High Bentham. Metcalfe is quite a Yorkshire name. So, my cousins are up there, and I used to go to them during school holidays, so 13, 14, 15, and other things sort of took over, holidays, and you discover girls and things. And so, my cousin's farm in Yorkshire isn't quite as appealing. And yeah, but my dad was, he was youngest son on the farm, and he was actually into fashion design. And I just always think, how did my dad escape from Yorkshire Dales and become a fashion designer in Liverpool? So, my parents were all into fashion and drawing, and so as far removed from farming as you could possibly get.

Like I said earlier, we did have a cottage in Wales that sort of kept a connection with the country, I suppose. And we were always there. All holidays were spent out there, and my dad being a teacher as well meant he had long holidays. So yeah, that was the connection to farming. I just love the way of life, and watching the seasons go by, I don't think there's a better way to earn a living. And anybody, no one can understand why people milk cows, and then you go milk cows on a dairy, you just get into the animal, the breeding and the individuals. And yeah, it's really very enjoyable.

Will: Okay. So, how did you come to be a motoring journalist, and tell us a bit about that side of your career?

Harry: That was nuts, really. That was just a farm diversification that went crazy. Always been a car person for whatever reason, and yeah, I just started buying odd stuff. I had, something called a Maserati Ghibli Cup, was actually the spark that got me into journalism. Because basically, I knew this thing was coming out in Italy and it wasn't coming to the UK. I ordered one up, I got them to make a right-hand drive one. And then I rang a few journalists and said, " Oh, if you want to try one of these, these are really good." So then, I sort of got to know quite a few of the journalists. I've got letters from Steve Cropley and Jeremy Clarkson and stuff in the file. And then particularly with Performance Car magazine, I started helping them out on road tests. And then we did a group tests around the BMW Z3, and John Barker, one of the guys there said, " You're not going to believe this, but EMAP are folding Performance Car into car magazine. And I just said, " Well, there's never been a better time to launch a car magazine."

So yeah, suddenly I ended up working out how to launch a car magazine. I knew that we all needed a project. I mean, you say I'm the founder, it was a gang of us. There was five of us in the gang, and we knew the magazine we wanted to produce, and we went and did it. But it was a very steep learning curve, and I can remember spraying a field, sitting on this JCB Fastrac spraying a field, and I bought as I was doing it, 45,000 pounds worth of computer equipment in 1998. And I thought, what have done, Metcalfe? What are you doing? Just going in so deep.

Yeah, and then we launch a car mag. I didn't realize quite how much it was going to eat money. Because you have to pay for everything up front, magazine is the least successful business. Bank managers run, they just hate it, because there's nothing physical there. There's no product really, if you don't publish next month, there's nothing there.

Will: So, how has that industry changed? You've also been doing it for a while. How has the rise of video content and social media? It must have just changed it beyond all recognition, really.

Harry: It was wonderful in those late 90s, early noughties, there was great product around at the time. And a magazine, it's just the best thing, because you have a month to recreate whatever you're going to do. I always explain to other farmers, you have to wait a year for the next harvest, what you're going to plant, what you do. Magazine, you have a harvest every month. You're trying to invent what you're going to get, you get the product. And you could think more deeply, and you had proper written stories. Because you go out and test a car, then you have an evening with the engineers and you discuss some of the things you found that day. And then you'd practice those other things you learned on the second day, and then you'd come home and write a story for deadline in a week or so.

Now, well, about 2010 it really started to change. Websites came along, and you then had to do a web story. And then you had to do video, suddenly came as well. And that meant another, suddenly everything became very rushed, and you had to do spur of the moment, you couldn't give it thought. And it was just this churn, and it became less enjoyable. So I know I sort of wanted to get out, about 2011, '12. We'd had a wonderful time, but yeah, it has. Media has changed out of all recognition, and it's just the number of places you have to place a story, rather than just one magazine. It's very hard now.

Will: Okay. So, how have you been able to combine the journalism with the farming? And maybe tell us about some of the farming videos that you do as well.

Harry: Just the farming videos, they're a recent thing by accident. We were on the farm, I did a combine video, how a combine works, on my car channel, and got a lot of comments. And that sort of triggered, well, maybe I ought to do a few more farm videos. And I did one of the tractors and stuff like that, and they're very popular. And I thought, well, I'll just do Harry's Farm, now I can do proper ones if anybody wants to follow it. But the videos just came about really from the magazine. I was getting invited to drive fantastic cars, and as the owner of the magazine, I just couldn't make it pay. Because it was at the time, it was a separate film gang had to come out.

And I remember doing the Inventador in Rome, and it really wound me up, that I went out there to write the story, stood by this Lamborghini Inventador, and he says, " Do a piece to camera, please." I said, "Well, I haven't even got in there, I don't know anything about the car," and it was this instantaneous bit. So I said, no, I'm not doing like this, we can't make money with it. But if I sucker a camera in the car, and yabber on, then there is no cost. Because there's no film crew, there's no editing, you edit it down. And therefore, if it costs nothing to create the video, then if we do get any revenue from it, it's profit. So it was just, that was the idea.

So I've kept with the wobbly cam sort of idea, because I remember watching a documentary of this guy who's going to feed grizzly bears out in the bush. And he was just going to take the berries and he said, " They eat out of our hands." And he said, "No, that's not what happened." And you had a GoPro on your shoulder, and you went with him and then a grizzly came out of a bush, and you wanted to run. But because you were utterly gripped, it didn't actually matter that the camera was a bit wobbly. You were there in that moment, and that's what seemed to be that people enjoyed. If I did a video on a Zonda or the Inventador, you saw it as I saw it, and suddenly that wonderful production you get from Top Gear and Grand Tour, but it doesn't actually deliver more views. It's actually the content that's critical. For magazines, covers, stories, get the content right, and the audience come with you.

Will: Yeah. So, what are you hoping to achieve with the farming videos? What's the audience?

Harry: It's just, unfortunately the downside of video content and social media, is access to an audience has never been easier. To produce a magazine, you have to get the gang together, have to get experienced writers. They wouldn't give you access to the car unless you had that experience. You then have to print it, and there was 40 odd tons of magazines you then had to distribute around the globe, and you do in repeat every month. Now, I can just press a button and it's globally, instantly. And what really winds me up, is those barriers to broadcast mean that the standards of media has dropped. If I did a story as Evo, it had to go through the sub editor, you had to fact check it. There was an editor wondering if it was right. There was a publisher thinking, is that going to cause any issues? And so you had all these barriers, so you had better quality at the end of it. It was all fact- checked.

Your editorial integrity is absolutely critical today. So, I suppose the video, the farm videos, getting back to that, I just wanted to use that journalism background of getting the facts right, and just presenting the facts. And then the audience can make up their minds from the factual, whether they believe it or not. But if you get the facts right, it's hard to argue. Either you do or you don't.

Will: Yeah. There has been a perception gap between the reality of farming in this country, and what can be portrayed in the media as you've just touched upon. Do you find that frustrating?

Harry: I think we all do as farmers, don't we? The last one I tried to describe being a farmer is a bit like saying, " I own a boat." It's either a row boat, or it's a 100-meter boat off Monaco, it's still a boat. And as soon as you say you're a farmer, there's something that you get pigeonholed. And we know, just the variation, your experience of farming in the valley is very different to the Yorkshire moor guys, or up in Lake district, tending sheep in blizzards, et cetera, to the bloke in (inaudible) playing in his giant fields and a 30-foot combine. It's an utterly different way of life. And you can't, just calling them a farmer or is just nonsensical.

So, I just think we've got a lot of explaining to do. We haven't had to explain, but I think with the number of stories, climate change isn't going to go away, veganism, et cetera. It just needs lots of us actually talking, it's not going to be just one person who solves this. You just got to educate, and get people to realize that this is a way bigger subject than can be covered off in one article in the Sunday Times.

Will: So, one of the things I like about your videos is that they are very, very accessible to non- farmers, which is something that a lot of us who do try and open the farm gates as it were, and communicate what we're doing on farms we, can struggle with. Because in farming, we tend to use a lot of jargon, and we perhaps take it for granted that people understand what we mean. And it is quite hard to find that balance, isn't it? But you seem to really bridge that gap, and be doing it really, really well. Is that something that you actively have tried to do?

Harry: I desperately try not to do it for a farming audience. And the great test is Patricia, who's doing the filming for me, my wife, says, " I don't understand that," so I have to redo it. And then she'll say, " Oh, I see what you're on about now." So, that's my sub editor in the background if you like, to say, present this in a way that is understandable, don't use two big of words and don't go too technical. So, I'm coming back to that level. Farmers will, they probably will watch it because we all love seeing what's going over the other side of their hedge, don't we? So, it's addictive from that point of view. But yeah, I'm hoping the audience, I can keep it growing from the automotive way, and just help get the message across at what we're up to. Because we are going to have to justify our existence increasingly, and there's the misunderstanding that we're not all farming like they are the cattle lots in America.

Will: So, how much responsibility is there on us as farmers in this country, to communicate the reality and promote the good stuff? Because I think we've got a lot better at it over the last few years. Perhaps we've got a way to go, but we have improved I think. And there's some really good communicators, such as yourself in farming.

Harry: Yeah, no, I completely agree. Because some people find it easier than others, and some of the ways you can... I feel really sorry for like Prince Charles, because he passionately cares, and he's done extraordinary things, but again, he gets pigeonholed, and talks like that. That's why you need the multitude of voices. And I think there's some really good... I'm trying to think, who's the shepherdess?

Will: Helen (crosstalk) .

Harry: Yeah, that sort of thing, that gives suddenly, an experience to people who follow her, had no idea. So, I'm sure she's got a great following beyond farming. This spotlight on how it is to farm up there, and it's tough. And the great thing with the Instagram and Twitters, you can do little tiny bite- size, and you see it cycle. And we're lucky because we have the seasons, we don't know what it's going to throw at us. We didn't know those floods were coming in the last couple of weeks. So, you can expose the good and the bad and how you battle on through it. So, I think that's really going to help our cause.

Will: Okay. So, how have things changed on your farm in the last few years? And what's the last 12 months been like with COVID there?

Harry: Well, it's funny this COVID, we're least affected, aren't we, of most industries? It's very lucky. I've only really taken it back in hand, 2017 was a trigger, because I was sort of busy out away from the farm. I always sold the grain, and did the grain trade and bought the seed, because it's second nature, but I had someone doing all the work. And then we had a couple of bad years, and he was coming up for retirement, he retired. And I had said to my son, who had driven the combine for the contractor, I said, " Why don't we get," he's just a kid. " We'll just get a combine, and we'll do the harvest, the fun bits. I will get someone else to do the drilling and stuff. I might do a little bit of scratch cultivation, rolling, cope with that. And then someone else sprays it all, and then we'll go and combine again?"

And I said, "We'll have a go at that." I was offered one of those Land Rover Defenders out of Spectre, the Bond movie, I thought that'll be good. We'll go rabbiting and muck about. It had these great big off-road tires, massive great lights on it. And maybe I'll like this Defender, because it was a bit silly. And then one sold at RM auction, and it fetched 200, 000 pounds, which was a lot more than I paid for it. And I said to Charlie, " We're not going to use it for rabbits anymore."

So, I sold that, and bought a combine and a tractor, and we're set to roll. So, we're completely a oversized combine, and I just thought, I can't... I've got a garage of classic cars, a hundred thousand pound classic car. Would I actually get more pleasure by having this combine? So, we've got a big Case 7088. It's not that big, but it's big. The only combine that's like, it's 280 arable. That's all it's doing, it did it in 55 hours I think it was, this year. It's just madness, but it actually makes it fun. So, I am a different sort of farm from that point of view. I am very much playing at it, and I term this place, the Allotment. When I was farming 2, 000 acres, just over, it was busy, proper, proper busy. So yeah, we enjoy it really.

Will: Well, fun's important at the moment, isn't it? You've got to get your fun where you can get it. The industry is obviously going through a lot of change at that moment. A lot more focus on the environment, and producing food in a nature friendly way. What are your future farming plans, and how are you going to be adjusting to that?

Harry: We're still going to... I think food isn't going to go out of fashion, and there's more of us to eat it. I just think we've got to be clever how we produce it. And yeah, because this land isn't particularly good, I did look at doing solar panels. Because I thought, well, I'm actually going to provide what the community wants. That is a job of a farm. And it used to want food, I think it's going to want energy. And I do wonder about (inaudible) grass, and whether I'm going to be growing different crops well beyond the normal rotations. Because we haven't got a real good yield in land, so I'm looking at alternative, perhaps more specialist crops in my particular case. That's not for everyone, I think a lot of farms will, they have to produce the wheat, the corn, the whatever. But I'm going to look more, I might go more grass. My neighbour is actually looking at going back into dairy, see if we can bring grass into the rotation. I'd be quite keen to look at that as well.

Will: It’s exciting. And then thinking about the industry more widely, how do you see that changing and developing over the next 10, 20 years?

Harry: I think what we've got to do, is make farming fashionable again, and get the youngsters thinking that this is a great way of life, and we don't all want to dive into the city. And COVID has actually done quite a good job there. People are realizing the countryside isn't such a bad place, they can still communicate via these ways, it's very easy now. So, I think we just got to make it sexy again. I'm not trying to make farmers sexy, but everyone had a connection to farming if you go back to 1900. And I can't, I was looking at the beef numbers. I didn't realize that we are now at same number of cattle we had in, I think it's 1896, when the first survey, start of the century. And also I think with Brexit, good or bad, I think people might start eating more local. Because of the issues they've got of bringing things in from Europe, it's suddenly got a whole lot trickier. I think we're going to see real change in the next couple of years.

Will: Exciting time to be in the industry. Before we start to wrap this up, you do own quite a few cars as we might expect. What's A, your favourite, and B, what's your everyday run around car that you use?

Harry: It varies. I know Gordon Murray, so I'm a complete fan of his, the McLaren F1 is just the most extraordinary. I would love to have one in the garage. But that is sadly gone on the... They're 25 million- ish now, so I can't have that. A Countach, I have a Countach because I just love the madness of the Italians, and Ferruccio Lamborghini setting up Lamborghini to better Ferrari. And I'm very lucky to know the personalities behind the company, and so I enjoy that for both reasons. It's actually a bit of a rubbish car, it's very heavy, it's got no brakes. Goes like the wind, looks crazy, so you have a, I call it a tango moment. I'll go out and every... In the Countach.

So, I enjoy that, but then I like Lotus as well. I just love the lightness, the touch, and how this little tiny 1600 CC car can do crazy things. I used to race one back in the early 90s, so I'm a particular fan of Lotus. But yeah, everyday car, I've been a serial Range Rover buyer since 1990, I used to buy ex- police ones, so they're always white, and they're plod one, plod two. And they used to have that giant roof, and the roof on that age of Range Rover was self- tapered, so you used to be able to take the roof off and put it on the next one, and carry on rabbiting, and have a nice shiny roof for the car you're just selling. So yeah, Range Rover and the Fiat Panda 4x4, because the Range Rover started to get a bit too big. We had to have a little Panda as a tender, to go park in the little places.

Will: Okay. Well, I'm glad you said that. Because you're putting my seven-year-old Ford S Max People Carrier to shame. I'm feeling distinctly uncool. So anyway, thank you so much for your time, Harry. You've been fantastic, and yeah, I'm sure you're a busy man, so I'm really appreciate you speaking to us.

That's it from this edition of Ahead of the Field. From me, Will Evans, and everyone at NFU Mutual, it's goodbye until the next episode.