



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

The world has a lot to thank farming for, says Jules, not least the cultivation of grain without which we wouldn't have beer – the catalyst for many a great invention

In 1978 at Lavagnone near lake Garda in Italy, a discovery was made in a peat bog which revealed the world's oldest surviving plough. It dates to around 2000 BC, and its shape ties in nicely with older rock art images of early ploughman. This simple implement describes one of the most fundamental stages in mankind's development: the advent of farming, and the cultivation of crops. Of them, grain was perhaps the most important, not only because of its use in bread and animal feed, but because without it you can't make beer, for which our ancestors got a taste thousands of years ago.

Farming is today one of those things we all take for granted, and for all of our recorded human history it's formed the background to the narrative of our country. It's virtually impossible to imagine a world without it; a world without seasonal toil, without land being valued, without the struggle for the control of land upon which to fight, and for the victorious to flourish. The transition from simple hunter gatherers to farmers marked such a huge turning point in the evolution of our society, I'm surprised we don't have a national holiday dedicated to it. But we do have many a craven image to follow and to worship. To many they are just set dressing the countryside, but to those of us former hunter gatherers who can sense their place in history, they will always get a second look. I'm talking of course about Messrs Ferguson, Massey, Claas, and Deer. I'm talking about the tractor, which next to the plough was another rural game changer.

Since it first appeared during the First World War, the tractor has revolutionised the agricultural landscape. These days many of the oldest examples are still to be seen, having been lovingly restored at ploughing matches up and down the country.

My boorish fascination for all things rural and mechanical was instilled in me by my father, himself a mechanical engineer and a fellow of the Royal Society. He spent years developing and designing grain dryers and the like after learning his craft, pulling huge engines in and out of battleships and submarines. As a kid I'd love to go with him on farm visits and to shows, where I'd usually get into trouble for climbing over the latest Ford 3000 or combine.

At this time of year, our farmers and

ploughmen are covering thousands of miles daily as they prepare the ground and sow next year's crops. You might think this an onerous task, but I've always respected a chore that can transform itself into a sport. And so it is with ploughing.

Thanks to my lovely producers on *Escape to the Country*, who know how to give a boy like me a good time, I was lucky enough to spend a few hours up in Yorkshire with David Tomlinson, past champion of the six nations ploughing trophy, and a legend in the sport of Match Ploughing.

Over the course of a few short hours, David shared his passion for the plough and demonstrated with consummate ease how to get the best out of its passage through the ground. Turning furrows a consistent 17cm deep, his 40-year-old match plough produced a beautifully consistent finish; under his expert eye my later efforts sat respectably alongside his, to my surprise. It was a wonderful day, and I couldn't have been happier as I'm sure you'll see when the show finally comes out. What's more, I don't think it'll be my last time as a ploughman; many of those involved in match ploughing aren't actually farmers. Drawn from all backgrounds, they're united in an ardour for this age-old tradition.

So next time you see someone ploughing a field, try and stop a while and soak up the atmosphere. Think of the history that's bound up in all that they're doing. Ploughing may not quite be the oldest profession in the world, but without it the world would most certainly be a very different place.

I'd like to think that the ancient ploughman who worked under the sun near Lavagnone ended his day with an evening in the pub, enjoying a beaker of pre-historic beer. Let's face it, over the centuries many a good idea has been born in the boozier, and who knows what he and his mates might have come up with next. The wheel, perhaps? 🍷

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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