

The Harvest Field 2015 by Jim Hall (born 1919)

During the early summer, David and Andrew Gaught, who farm some 200 hundred acres of land at Ashbocking, promised me a ride on their combine harvester, a magnificent machine of which they are justly proud. At the time I was unwell and unable to go and for one reason or another it was almost mid-September and they were harvesting their last crop of the year – a large acreage of field beans – that I was able to join them on a beautiful sunlit evening.

Just as David drove me onto the field, Andrew brought the combine alongside a truck and discharged several tonnes of beans from its large hopper, something that took just two or three minutes. The next exercise was to get me on board! There were several steep and narrow steps with hand-holds and with David behind me and Andrew reaching down from the top step, I slowly made it to the top and into the spare seat of the air-conditioned driving cab. They told me later there was a Plan B just in case I couldn't make it. It involved the use of the bucket on their JCB – the mind boggles!

Seated high above some of the latest, complex and powerful agricultural machinery in use, with a one hundred and eighty panoramic view ahead and a cloudless blue sky above I settled down for a new and exciting experience. It turned out to be very much more than that. Then we were off. Cutting a very wide swathe of blackened stalks and pods ahead and beneath us with vanes bending the stalks to blade and revolving guides gathering them to a central conveyor which took them under us to the complex device which separated the beans from the pods. The beans were discharged into a large hopper behind us and the dead growth ejected at the rear, to be ploughed in during the next few weeks and following that a wheat crop will be sown for next year.

While this was going on, electronic equipment was monitoring the whole operation and an illuminated panel in the cab was showing grain yields, moisture content, air conditions, etc. Indeed everything you needed to know was recorded. Despite the dead and blackened appearance of the crop, the yield was good.

The field was an irregular shape and I noticed a bulge at one edge was left wild and uncultivated. Andrew told me this was deliberate. They had planted selected plants

to provide a habitat for small wildlife, especially honey bees. This was their policy with the management of their banks, verges and hedgerows.

So we continued to and fro, the steady throb of the multi-horse power engine providing the base accompaniment to other mechanical sounds. Then, as the sun was sinking below the horizon it happened, with an unpleasant assortment of noises the combine stopped. Andrew flipped switches and there was an eerie silence. We were in mid-field and in gathering darkness. I thought this is it for today – I was wrong – Andrew climbed out, grabbed a bag of tools and started to remove metal panels and David brought a tractor up and joined him after handing me a flask of hot tea which was very nice indeed. With the aid of light from the tractor they worked away at freeing a blockage of rubbish that had gummed up the works. I wished I could have joined them, if only to see what was going on and something of the complex internal machinery, but knew I was best out of the way, not to mention the thought of those steep, narrow steps!

As I drank my tea, a few household lights appeared and also the red warning lights on the tall communication mast at Mendlesham. Otherwise it was completely dark, save for a bright star-lit sky.

As I sat there, oblivious to the odd noises coming from underneath the combine I realised something wonderful, some of that light had left its source billions of years ago, possibly before our solar system emerged, I was actually looking down into the mists of time and streams of images followed from pre-history onwards.

Cave paintings, followed hunter-gatherers, primitive reaping and sowing practices, the use of crude hand tools, the invention of the wheel and the adaptation of leverage and roller, combined with the domestication of animals This led to further development in the cycle of sowing and reaping up to the methods in use in my early life when my father used horses, (Suffolk Punches) to draw ploughs, drills, harrows, rolls, reapers and binders with gleaners clearing up afterwards. The rest we all know – the tractor followed transforming agriculture and leading up to the current sophisticated technology now in use – but still prone to breakdowns from time to time – witness my isolation while my friends struggled to put things right!

Then the mood changed when, without warning that tragic picture of the lifeless body of a four year old boy washed up on the seashore came vividly to mind and

then thoughts of tens and thousands of people and families fleeing oppression, war, etc.; the frightful prisoner of war camps, concentration camps, killing fields and use of chemical and nuclear weapons, not to mention the destructive power of so-called conventional weapons. I felt something of the grim and cruel harvest resulting from the cultivation of the seeds of evil and wickedness, nurtured by selfish and widespread indifference.

Then I became aware of a change outside, the tractor was moving away, the tools packed up and Andrew was back in the cab, apologising for leaving me on my own. He flicked a few switches, panel lights glowed, the massive engine sprang to life and we were on our way. With bright headlights illuminating the crop we continued harvesting after dark, yet another new experience.

It was getting late when we next had to unload the combine and I reluctantly faced those steep steps down to the ground. It was easier than I thought and David drove me back to Norwood while Andrew continued with the combine for as long as he could before the air became too moist. It had been a once in a lifetime experience in so many ways.

Later on, having settled down in my room and thinking things over, feeling it might be worthwhile to put the evening's events on record, my mind flipped again. Recalling another story from thousands of years ago when a traveller laid down to rest with a stone for a pillow and dreamed of a ladder, angels and a voice. On awakening afraid, he uttered the memorable words,

“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.”

There it is – an exceptional occasion, and with that closing thought and in Pope Francis' recent words,

“Who am I to argue against it?”