

# Reuben ploughs an intriguing tale of mischief



**Long before I ever got to know Reuben Abbott, I saw him and his bother, Paul, re-laying a hedge on the road into Godshill. It was craftsmanship of the highest order and it took them several weeks.**

Now Reuben is also known for his work at the Island's Lavender Farm and being a five-times Island ploughing champion. He is also one of only three men, in over 100 years, to win the title for three consecutive years.

Island characters are, sadly, a dwindling breed. Reuben Abbott is an exception and there's nothing better than listening to his stories of life at Staplers Farm, now the home of Isle of Wight Lavender, which has been in his family for 90 years. Reuben, on his own admission, actually looks older than he is, but even he was not around in 1927 - but his great grandfather certainly was.

"I've been blessed with a really good family and I had such a great childhood. I was driving a tractor on the farm as a 10 year old and could milk the cows when I was quite young. I learnt hedge laying and hurdle making when I was around 12," he reflected.

He loved taking up the cold tea and tomato sandwiches in a red leather bag to his grandfather, who was driving the tractor for the finger mower, and watch the swallows dive for the insects in the grass. In a cold winter, he and other

youngsters would skate on the farm's pond and try and jump over an old tree and stay upright.

When Reuben starting ploughing there was no air-cooled tractor cabs, with music and all mod cons. He had to sit on an ex-wartime tractor, which was open to the elements.

What was his secret for winning the Island's top award on five occasions? He said: "You have to be as stubborn as you possibly can. It's a battle between you and the soil. Don't worry about the other people in the competition, just keep your eye on the soil, which can change so quickly."

Staplers was primarily a dairy farm but they also had pigs. They also had show poultry and it was no surprise to see chickens being bathed in the kitchen sink. They were lathered all over and had olive oil rubbed on their combs and legs - a makeover!

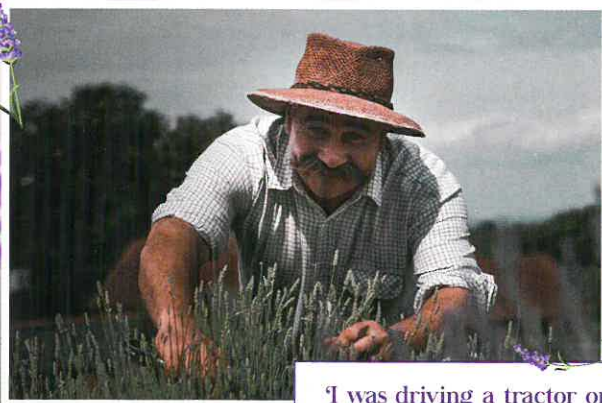
I waited for a funny line and was not disappointed. "I certainly wouldn't want a makeover. With a face like mine, half of it's covered by a moustache," he smiled.

Reuben has lost two close friends in recent years. He loved meeting up with

Fred Price from Havenstreet, who kept his tractor on the farm. Geoffrey Hughes was another mate and he even went to mainland flower shows with them. The public sometimes thought it was a look-a-like for the famous actor. Geoff actually instilled Reuben with a lot more confidence.

I've never been able to find out exactly what happened at the regular Monday 'boys only' nights at Compton Farm, run by Den Phillips. Reuben was a regular and, apparently there were plenty of cakes, buns, stories and mischief.

On one of my visits to the Lavender Farm, the Abbott family produced a rare 1962 tape of an Archers-type radio soap, performed by local characters. It was even played on my IW Radio chat show. As ever, on my recent visit, Reuben, known as 'Dick Strawbridge' to some of his mates, was a perfect host - and I even got one of their rather unique lavender shortbreads with my coffee.



'I was driving a tractor on the farm as a 10 year old and could milk the cows when I was quite young'