

# Harry Ferguson — and Me!

By Ian M. Johnston, The Tractor Historian



In 1951, Ulsterman Harry Ferguson was 67 years of age. By then he had become an icon of British agricultural engineering. His brilliantly conceived Ferguson tractors and the Ferguson System of farming were changing the shape of mechanised agriculture.

No one could have predicted that in 1951 the paths of the great Harry Ferguson and a young Scottish agricultural student, named Ian Johnston, would ever have crossed!

## THE ANTICIPATION

Most of the lads in the class were in fact the teenage sons of the district's farmers. Each Wednesday evening, after working arduously all day in the fields, we were bundled off from our respective farms to attend the three hour agricultural machinery "tech. course".

Our mentor was the local blacksmith and tractor dealer whose name (and I kid you not) was Mr McSpanner! These evenings were a highlight in our young lives, as apart from being informative they were a welcome respite from the demands of the farm.



Harry Ferguson, 1884–1960, pioneer aviator, champion motor cycle and racing car driver, who possibly contributed more to the evolution of mechanised farming than any other single individual. (Photo courtesy Ulster Transport Museum)

On this occasion, during the late summer of 1951, we were told to be sure to scrub the cow dung off our boots, put on

a clean shirt and be in class at least 10 minutes before the normal starting time of 5 pm. The reason for this unusual attention towards our grooming and punctuality was that a great dignitary had promised to honour us with his considerable presence.

Harry Ferguson, the man who had revolutionised the design of the farm tractor, was going to stop off during one of his frequent tours of Scotland and treat us to a specially organised field day, or more accurately — field evening. In this regard it should be remembered that mid-summer evenings, in these northern latitudes, remain daylight well past 10 pm.

Picture the scene. A dozen or so Scottish youths seated at our desks, vibrant with anticipation, uncomfortably self-conscious in our polished boots and starched shirts, but righteously pleased with our punctuality.

## MR FERGUSON — THE ATHLETE

Harry Ferguson was not 10 foot tall after all. Rather he was of medium stature, bespectacled, greying and indeed resembled Mr MacBeth, the village undertaker.

The noticeably overawed Mr McSpanner introduced us to The Great Man. We had previously been warned against raising the fact that he — Mr McSpanner — was the local Fordson tractor agent! So with a threatening reminding glare, Mr McSpanner handed his youthful class over to Mr Ferguson.

Harry Ferguson addressed his somewhat subdued audience with his precise Ulster accent. His spectacles gleamed as he scrutinised each of us with a penetrating eye, which demanded that we sit upright and remain alert.

During a 15 minute introductory pep talk about the future of farm mechanisation, he told us how fortunate we were in 1951 to be young active participants, who would play a part in this future as it unfolded. He then informed us that a field had been set aside for the tractor demonstrations at Kingarth Farm, to which we would adjourn immediately.

With that he turned on his heel and strode out of the building, leaving us to scramble from behind our desks in hot pursuit. I imagined the local Tartan Coach



Harry Ferguson claimed: "A tractor on its own is worthless. A plough on its own is worthless. Put the two together and you have a system of farming." Prior to the introduction of Ferguson's patented weight transfer principle, a two furrow 12 inch mouldboard plough (as pictured) would have required a tractor of twice the weight of a Ferguson to obtain the traction necessary for its operation. (Photo I.M.J. taken at Lake Goldsmith, Victoria)

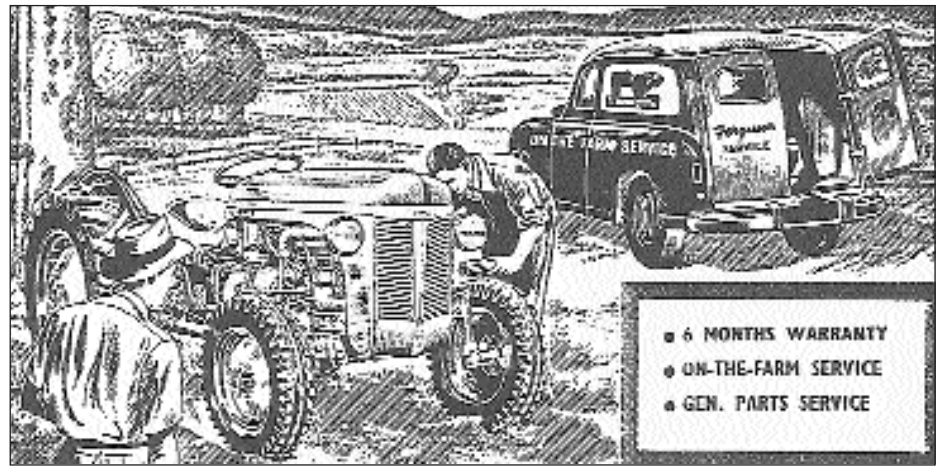
Tours bus would have been waiting outside to transport us to Kingarth Farm. No such thing. In fact, by this time Harry Ferguson, ignoring his parked chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce, was some distance down the road heading out of the village at the fastest walking pace I had ever seen.

The portly Mr McSpanner was doing his best to follow hard on his heels, but to do so was obliged to break into a kind of jog — and this in an era when jogging was considered unseemly and unhealthy! The rest of us hurried along in the rear, fearful of being left behind.

This amazing pace was apparently typical of Harry Ferguson whose mind and body worked only in top gear.

It took around 20 torturous minutes for us cover the distance to Kingarth Farm. Upon arrival, Harry Ferguson looked as fresh and physically under control as when first introduced to us. Mr McSpanner's normal ruddy cheeks were the colour of cooked beetroot and his gasping breath rendered him quite beyond speech. The rest of us were only somewhat less distressed.

Gradually we regained our breath and were able to study the display which had been prepared for the benefit of our young inquiring minds.



Wherever in the world Ferguson tractors were sold, they were backed by the immediate availability of on farm service. In Britain and Australia the various local dealers were given incentives to use Standard Vanguard vans as service vehicles, which were painted in what became the highly identifiable Ferguson livery. This field back-up became a benchmark for all other tractor manufacturers — few of which were able to match the Ferguson in-field service. (Line drawing from Ferguson promotional material)

### THE CRYPTIC QUESTION!

The 20 acre field had been adorned with three Ferguson tractors plus a variety of implements. Also, two Standard Vanguard vans, looking resplendent in their Ferguson livery, were parked beside a long wheelbase Albion lorry. The latter had presumably transported the tractors and implements.

We were told by the Great Man that he would give us a verbal run down on the machines and emphasised the importance of taking written notes. There was an immediate mild panic from the group as we realised to our dismay, that not one of us had thought to bring a pencil and notebook to the event!

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Harry Ferguson was far from pleased. He rendered us a stern lecture about the necessity to always carry a notebook and pencil, as one never knew when an absolutely vital piece of information would come our way, which should be written down. (In later years I was to find out that this notebook and pencil requirement was mandatory for all his senior staff).

Mr McSpanner was as uncomfortable as the rest of us, for he too was unable to produce pen or paper. Rather unfairly I thought, Eck Reekie was nominated as the obvious choice to sprint back to the village to collect an ample supply of the necessary stationery.

He alone boasted legs of such length, that he was able to see over the withers of a fully grown Clydesdale and therefore logically would be the best marathon runner of us all. So he was dispatched accordingly.

Following our general acquaintance with the tractors and implements, Harry Ferguson asked us what appeared to be a senseless question, quite out of keeping with the sharp mind we were learning to respect. He pointed to one of the tractors, to which was fitted a Ferguson two furrow mouldboard plough, and inquired from us "At what am I pointing?"

Snotty Pringle, always anxious to impress, quickly retorted "It's obvious" he smirked, "a Ferguson tractor."

"Wrong! Anyone else?" Mr Ferguson snapped inquiringly, his gaze roving over us as he searched for a raised hand.



Not all Fergies were grey. A special batch of green painted "Shamrock" tractors were built especially for Ireland. This particular example found its way to Australia and is now part of the Dave Coles Collection. (Photo I.M.J.)

Well, this made us wary, albeit happy with Snotty's obvious bewildered discomfort.

Tooshie Stewart ventured hesitatingly "A tractor and a plough?"

"You are getting close boy," in a kinder tone.

I had a reluctant but egotistical feeling that it was up to me, a feeling shared by my peers, as their eyes drifted towards me in expectation. I should explain that I alone in the group had been privileged

with a private education in far off Edinburgh and "appropriately" was afforded a certain respect when it came to worldly affairs. Clearly, this now apparently cryptic question required a college education to supply the likely intellectually complex answer. I was nudged forward.

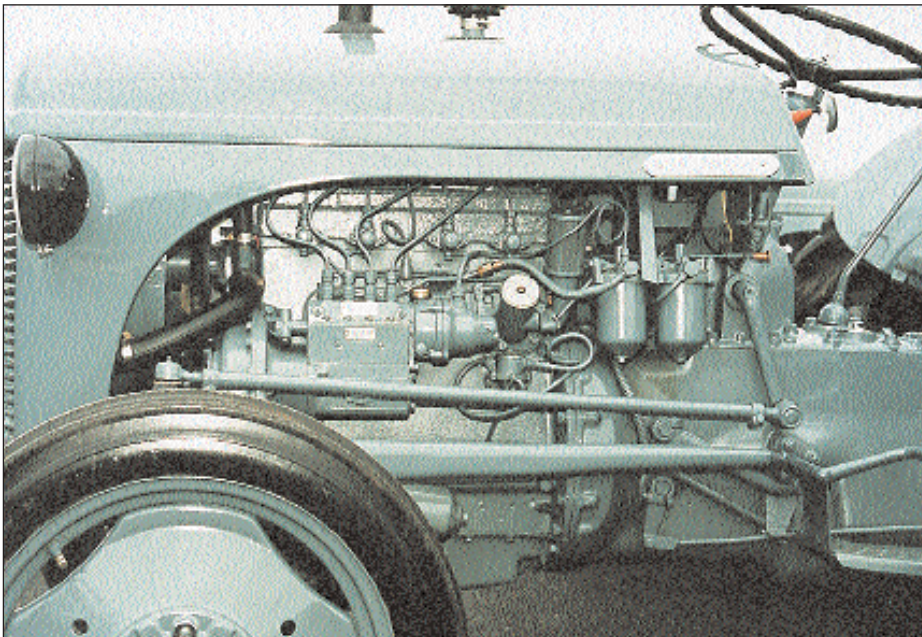
In actual fact, I had been a singularly rebellious and inattentive student who had left school, to the relief of my form master, at age 15. Never-the-less I had devoured the print off all known tractor pamphlets since the age of 10 and was able to practically recite from memory their contents — including those relating to Ferguson tractors. The answer to Mr Ferguson's question was, I hoped, a breeze.

"Mr Ferguson" I began, outwardly confident but inwardly apprehensive, "the answer is — you are pointing at the Ferguson System."

Harry Ferguson gazed benignly upon me whilst Mr McSpanner, quick to note the change in the Ulsterman's demeanour, positively beamed with pride, basking in the aura of having such an "intelligent" student under his guidance, and no doubt thankful that he had not been required to supply the answer.

The philosophy expounded by Harry Ferguson was that a tractor on its own represents no value. Similarly a plough on its own is valueless. Put the two together and you have a system of farming.

The Ferguson System of attaching the



In Australia the majority of Ferguson tractors sold were the petrol fuelled TEA. In Scotland the most popular model was the kero fuelled TED. More rare is the Ferguson TEF (pictured) powered by a Standard 4 cyl. high compression diesel. (Photo I.M.J.)

implement to the tractor with the Ferguson patented hydraulic design and three point linkage, resulted in the plough exerting forces which pulled the tractor on to the ground, thereby creating traction that hitherto had only been available with heavyweight cumbersome tractors.

This breakthrough in tractor implement design was explained and demonstrated to us during the course of the evening.

### A FINE CONCLUSION

Unknown to Harry Ferguson was the fact that, almost to a man, each year the class competed in the East Neuk Annual Junior Ploughing Competition. Consequently, we were no mean hands at ploughing the perfect furrow. Therefore, when volunteers were called to have a go at ploughing with the tractors, Mr Ferguson and his lieutenants were nearly bowled over in the rush.

Never in the history of tractor demonstrations were such excellent straight furrows ploughed! The official Ferguson demonstrator, attired in gleaming white overalls, who had flaunted his prowess to us just previously, stood and gaped — his mouth open to the elements.

He saw his fair attempts at straight furrows being eclipsed by each of the youthful ploughmen. Even young Angus Bull, who was commonly referred to as "The Daft Laddie" (every village has one) tore off nonchalantly in second gear, a wide grin upon his countenance, leaving behind an immaculate furrow that had Mr



This seldom seen Ferguson TEA Hi Clearance unit has been magnificently restored and is a much coveted collector item. (Photo I.M.J. taken at Heyfield, Vic.)

McSpanner's chest all but popping waistcoat buttons.

Harry Ferguson was impressed. He congratulated us on our talent. We three cheered him and gave an unsolicited solemn undertaking that we would persuade those of our fathers, who had not yet so done, to purchase a Ferguson tractor.

Needless to add, Mr McSpanner (whom it should be remembered was the local Fordson dealer) was out of earshot during such generous commitments. He had

instinctively discovered that a supply of Tennant's Lager was available surreptitiously at the rear of one of the service vans.

So ended a glorious historic occasion — for me anyway. One that will always remain a nostalgic memorable experience. And, as I write this epistle, I have come to the final page of my notebook. It will be replaced at once, for never since that distant day in Scotland have I ever been without a notebook and pencil!



## IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

**QUESTION:** This is the rear view of which tractor?

**CLUE:** It is American and it is not an International Farmall B painted green.

**DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY:** Seriously hard!

**ANSWER:** See page 72.

