



Fifty years have passed since Her Majesty's Agricultural Inspectorate first saw the light of day. This month, we asked **Alan Plom** from the Agriculture and Food Sector to look back over the history of HMAI, and report on how the fiftieth anniversary celebrations went...



Back to their roots

We have to look back to 1878 for the roots of farm safety, when the first legislation on threshers and balers was introduced. And who can forget the quaintly titled Chaff Cutting Machines (Accidents) Act 1897? In those days, the legislation was enforced by policemen, though I'm not sure whether they visited farms on horseback or bicycles (something we might consider reintroducing today to reduce our travel costs, perhaps?).

Despite the industry's horrendous accident record, it was another 55 years before further farm safety legislation came in. Pesticide controls were introduced in 1952, followed by the big one – the Agriculture (Safety, Health and Welfare Provisions) Act 1956. The Act paved the way for a series of specific regulations and led to the

establishment of the Farm Safety and Wages Inspectorate. This in turn evolved into HM Agricultural Inspectorate between 1975 and 1977 following the introduction of the Health and Safety at Work Act, when inspectors transferred to the newly formed HSE from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in Scotland.

Agriculture has always been a high-risk industry, and although deaths these days tend to hover around 45–50 a year, this is a three-fold reduction since the 1950s (the worst year saw 183 fatalities). Although there are now fewer people working in the industry, this is largely due to a real reduction in the incidence rate.

These improvements have mainly been achieved through the Inspectorate targeting specific risks, much as HSE as

a whole does today. The most notable example in agriculture was the Tractor Cab Regulations, first introduced in the late 1960s. Effective publicity and enforcement helped reduce deaths caused by tractors overturning over a 20-year period from 25 a year to just one or two.

But things were very different in the early days. As well as the appointment of the first Machinery Inspectors, 1946 also saw the introduction of the TE20 'Grey Fergie' tractor. Still a farming icon, these machines look like toys alongside today's huge tractors and harvesters. Operators these days are much more than just 'drivers', as their machines are fitted with sophisticated computers and sensors controlling the various processes. Add in GPS/Satnav, and it's now feasible to control these machines remotely. In fact,

soon they'll be able to work the fields without any driver at all.

Despite the tremendous improvements made over the past half century, agriculture's fatal incident rate is still the highest of any major industrial sector. Although only around 1.7% of the British workforce now work in agriculture, it still accounts for around 19% of the fatal injuries. There is significant under-reporting and the self-reported illness rate is significantly higher than the average for all industries.

HSE has used a wide range of approaches to reinforce its key messages and raise awareness in the industry, but the greatest challenge has always been to convert awareness into action among this particularly hard-to-reach group. The 'Ag Sector' and its predecessors, the National Interest Groups, have always been innovative in developing publicity campaigns and new approaches – things like safety and health awareness days (SHADs). These are now widely used across HSE in all kinds of industries, and today form our main method of reaching farmers.

Since joining HSE, the Inspectorate has been absorbed into various divisions. First came FAID (the Factory and Agriculture Inspectorate Division), which metamorphosed into AFQ (Agriculture, Factories and Quarries Division), and finally FOD (Field Operations Division) in 1994. A couple of years ago, the industry Sectors were transferred from FOD into Policy Group and incorporated within the Fit3 programmes, so we're still evolving.

Today, HM Agricultural Inspectorate is no more, having ceased to exist during the restructuring of recent years. But we weren't going to let its golden anniversary pass unnoticed. So we organised a reception at HSE's office at Stoneleigh Park (the National Agriculture Centre) in Warwickshire last December – not just to celebrate



this important milestone, but also the sixtieth anniversary of 'MIDAS', the informal association of ex-agricultural inspectors and others who've supported them over the years.

MIDAS commemorates the very first meeting of the original farm Machinery Inspectors who were appointed in 1946. They were obviously very civilised, as one of the first things they did was establish a 'dinner and social club' (the 'DAS' in 'MIDAS'), which has met every year since.

Nearly 80 people – retired colleagues, serving inspectors and other staff from across HSE, Agricultural Industry Advisory Committee (AIAC) members and industry representatives from across the country – attended the reception.

Three ex-Chief Agricultural Inspectors joined

the celebrations – John Weeks (1969-80), David Matthey (1996-2000) and Linda Williams (2000-03). Each reviewed the highlights from their eras, and David paid a special tribute to John Weeks, as the 'founder' of the original Safety Inspectorate.

It was great to see so many colleagues past and present celebrating this important milestone in our history. What struck me most was the commitment and camaraderie that still exists between retired and serving colleagues. Like so many of us, their job was a vocation. Long may it continue.

► **Elizabeth Gibby** (Chair of AIAC) with ex-Chief Ag Inspectors **David Matthey** (centre) and **John Weeks**



And finally...

Roger Nourish, Head of the Agriculture and Food Sector and the very last acting Chief Agricultural Inspector 2003–04, adds...

This fitting and hugely memorable celebration wouldn't have happened, had it not been for Alan's passion for agriculture, his commitment and enthusiasm for organising and gaining sponsorship for the event, and his willingness to give up his own time to act as Honorary Secretary of MIDAS, keeping ex-Ags in touch. Little wonder, then, that he received a greatly deserved standing ovation on the day.