

On Call

One of the duties of the Honorary Labourer is to take care of the cattle when Bill is not around. In the kind weather of Summer, I regard this as intensive farming. Sometimes I will stand and gaze intently at the growing grass. At other times I will gaze intently as the cows graze on it. Winter is a different story, and this last Winter was our worst experience yet. With the temperature dropping to -21 Centigrade, we had to break through 4" of ice with a sledge hammer every morning to get enough water for the animals. The digestion system of a cow is radically different to that of a human, and an interruption to their rhythm can have disastrous consequences. In our case, the beasts all made it through so far, including the calf who came into the world on the coldest day of the year. Survival is about as much as anyone could hope for in those conditions.

The weather has now improved considerably but there is still little sign of growth in the fields. Normally, when a beast is due to calf, it is brought into the paddock so that it will be nearby if anything should go wrong. This year, they have remained in their Wintering area to give them the best protection.

Most calving troubles arise through inappropriate crossbreeding. In an attempt to get a better price for their calves, a lot of farmers will use a large breed of bull on a smaller breed of heifer with consequent calving difficulties. The situation is exacerbated by the farming methods promoted by the EU. The majority of beasts spend the greater part of their lives in slatted sheds where the urine and excrement accumulates in huge tanks directly below the cattle pens. Diseases spread like wildfire and the animals are invariably in poor condition since they get no exercise, fresh air, or sunlight. They are constantly exposed to the noxious gases emanating from the slurry beneath them and the shed roofs are a haven for flies. Their hides are matted with dried out excrement.

The upside is that the fields remain neat and tidy for tourists to look at, and the machinery used to operate these systems keeps an entire industry of salesmen, accountants, and bankers lucratively doing very little indeed. Vets also make a lot of money out of the system, as do drug companies, since the animals are in constant need of medication. The parasitic Fascisti of EU administrators and their army of "*Agricultural advisors*" operate from their air conditioned offices, growing ever fatter on the high salaries they are paid for conjuring up increasingly convoluted animal husbandry perversions as part of the Common Agricultural Policy "*Final Solution*". The Agricultural Press appears to be as tightly controlled as the propaganda media of any repressive state. Dissenting opinions cannot find expression. It will be fairly safe to assume that the staff in Agricultural colleges and research establishments are all "*Team Players*" who value their comfort above scientific integrity or basic morality.

The days of the middle 1960s when conflicting opinions could be debated openly, and public protest *might* have had some effect, are long since consigned to history. It is all part of the predictable end-game of unfettered and socially irresponsible capitalism.

For those farmers who adopt these EU sub bestial rearing methods, it can become a daily task dragging dead beasts out from the sheds, with some calves being born, only to drown immediately in the dung of their mothers.

Some years ago a retired professor told me he had served as an adviser to the UK Government during the Foot and Mouth epidemic. He had resigned in disgust because his advice was being ignored and the methods in use by the Government were spreading the disease instead of controlling it.

It would be nice to look forward to a day when farmers could return to farming, the beasts could return to the land, the land could return to production, and the entire EU administrative army would be obliged to serve a minimum 5 year apprenticeship in long term unemployment. Perhaps then, those who have been responsible for the present situation might gain some appreciation of what it feels like to be at the implementation end of their diktats. The general population could also expect to experience real quality in their food.

These are only forlorn dreams, and the plans for "*Farming 2020*" portend increasing corruption of the natural food chain. The high incidence of suicide amongst farmers reflects the sense of despair felt by some in the face of the destruction of the natural order implemented to satisfy unaccountable beaurocrats.

Barbara and I both lack the selfish brutality necessary to farm in the modern context. We would not be farming at all except that we ended up where we are and my job in the College was terminated. The loss of any beast, young or old, affects us emotionally. The animals may be reared for slaughter, but the least we can do is allow them some comfort during their brief existence.

The cows are out on the fields throughout the year. We have a shed with a feeding rail which the animals are free to come to for hay or silage during the Winter months, but the beasts definitely prefer being in the open.

The other day there were still two cows who were due to calf. The cows are normally very quiet. If they complain it is usually for a reason. It was about half past four and I had been lying awake, having been woken by a beast roaring intermittently. The cows might be seeing off a fox, or somebody's dog that ought to be under control. I was hoping that whatever was troubling the animal would be sorted out and that each roar would be the last. Bill would normally deal with nocturnal problems. I knew he was exhausted having spent a dawn to dusk working day on the bog, cutting turf. He could not be expected to go and check on the herd.

Just as I was about to drift off, the sound came again. I dragged myself from bed and listened at the window, hoping the bellowing might emanate from a neighbouring farm. A minute or two passed before the silence was broken once more. It was quite definitely from the direction of the herd. Curses, I thought, as I stumbled around getting dressed and putting on my boiler suit.

The field was about a quarter of a mile away through the blackness. It had been raining earlier and the splashing of my wellingtons kept me company as I made my way along the hedgerow. It was a cloudless night with no wind. The sky was reminiscent of a fairytale movie scene. I could distinguish the navigation lights of one or two aircraft, too high and far off to be heard.

Barbara's beasts are all experienced mothers. When I arrived at the field I scanned the ground with my torch. Goodness knows what it was like in the days of the hurricane lamp. My torch produces half a million candle power, but it still took care to identify who was where. The bright reflection of two pairs of eyes revealed Dawn and Whiting lying peacefully at the left of the field chewing the cud. That's a good start anyway I thought. At least Whiting isn't in trouble.

Aunty Dawn is the eyes and ears of the herd. She has been known to gallop the length of three fields in response to a distress call from one or other of the calves. Weighing in at about $\frac{3}{4}$ ton and with a top speed in excess of 20 mph, one would be well advised to keep out of Dawn's way in such a situation. Other than that she is the gentlest, softest, most biddable beast anyone could wish for. If she is at peace, everything is probably in order.

Whiting, on the other hand, is the herd dolly bird. If she was human you might encounter her in the supermarket pushing a trolley with one offspring of indeterminate gender standing in it. The child's face is obliterated by chocolate. Meanwhile a second child, with snot down to its chin, and gripping the largest bag of sweets it can find in one hand, tugs at its mother with the other, chanting "*Mummy mummy I want these.*" Mummy has a highly developed vacant look in her eyes, cultured in her teen years as part of the "*Cool Dame*" style. She is oblivious to the world as she drifts about in an almost visible cloud of what some people might describe as some kind of "*Perfume*," randomly tossing the finest junk food into a growing heap in the trolley.

Consequently the first child is gradually disappearing from view amongst the accumulation of carbohydrate. The repetitive chanting from her second offspring is rising to a crescendo. Mummy is exhausted from the 3 hours she spent tattering herself up that morning. She is earnestly chattering on her mobile phone, booking her appointment with the beauty salon's body artist while she casually examines various parts of her anatomy trying to decide where the next row of rivet holes should be drilled. If there was ever a case for the introduction of bovine parenthood classes, Whiting is it.

I swung the torch across the field slowly and spotted another two pairs of eyes at the far side. I had to make my way towards them before I recognised Freckles and Friendly, also lying peacefully. Two remained to be checked.

Pitch had given birth that morning. The last time she had been seen she was in the high back corner of the field. I made my way in that direction and was soon rewarded with the reflection of another pair of eyes. As I drew closer I could discern a dark bundle on the ground immediately in front of Pitch. Everything here was in order. I didn't dare go any closer. Pitch is the herd leader and a most protective mother. I didn't fancy becoming a statistic in a report on safe farming practices.

Sooty was the only one I hadn't been able to locate. Her calf was a couple of days old, but seemed a bit frail. It might be she who was having troubles. I turned round from checking Pitch, only to see Sooty's eyes, with those of her calf standing beside her. They were only about 30 yards away, but I was sure they hadn't been there when I first scanned the field.

Having checked all of the beasts and satisfied myself that everything was as it should be, I turned for home, wishing I had just ignored the darn cows and stayed in bed.

My eyes had become more accustomed to the dark by this time and I could make out all the animals without the aid of the torch. I suddenly realised that they were all looking at me as much as to say "*Hello Jim. You're up early. Whatever brings you out at this time? Beautiful starlit sky isn't it?*"

As I started the quarter mile trek back to my bed it occurred to me that the cows don't ask for much. There might have been something wrong, but there wasn't - *this time*. I now knew I could sleep soundly having done right by the herd.

J W Cahill
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