

Winter chores Jamie Forman

Dad always said that my bedroom window was the first vertical face the east wind hit after leaving the Ural mountains. The curtains twisted in the draught, the chill seeping between the blankets, as the wind swept up the Welland valley from the North sea, rattling my thin window before spitting snowflakes across the rest of middle England.

The bucolic rural idyll of public consciousness, all bountiful apple trees and lambs gambolling in the pasture, seemed a far cry from the 1980's agriculture I was born into. A place of unfenced slurry ponds and knee-deep mud, winter added icy winds that drifted snowflakes far into the barn to melt on the cows' resting backs, frozen water troughs, split pipes, split knuckles, and a skating rink of muck and concrete. So, whilst my school friends whiled away their evening in front of the TV, I was scraping the shit from the milking parlour, attempting to keep it moving before it froze to the floor.

The cows were kept in their sheds from late autumn through until the spring. I remember the cow kennels as low roofed, warm, dark spaces, out of the howling wind and amongst the modest herd. A soundtrack of soft bovine noises, as the cows quietly lay and chewed the cud or stood shifting restlessly, the rhythmic splatter of dung dropping in a wet passageway. Later, the Landlord built a modern cubicle house, a tall building stacked to the roof with countless tonnes of hay and straw above the cows beds, but the same calm warmth pervaded the space.

As the nights drew in, adjusted clocks or not, the various cobwebbed and stained lamps gave a soft, syrupy work light, and those areas not in deep shadows gained only a dim illumination. The vertical ladder up to the top of the silage barn always seemed to be in a dark patch, despite creeping along as the silage face retreated. My job was to cascade a dusty collection of straw bales down to supplement the day's silage ration; the cows' satisfaction at fresh forage expressed by shaken heads, hearty bellowing and more lifting of tails. I don't remember there being many rats, the buckets of bait and a flock of cats presumably earned their keep. But still the dark, welly-boot-grabbing pockets between the straw bales held an unspoken malevolence in the depths of those winter nights; a grim demise for the schoolboy with the vivid imagination earning his pocket money.

The calf shed was perhaps closer to the public's idyllic image; a handful of winter born calves nestled in fresh straw in small pens, the sweet scent of milk prevailing over the sharp tang of scour and piss. Buckets of fresh milk or hot mixed powder were brought across from the dairy, slipping across the uneven yard, the heavy wooden doors rattling in the wind. The older calves, expectant, already stood at the pen gates, heads through the hole and calling loudly for their bucket. Push the head back and jam the full bucket in before it was knocked away by the over-enthusiastic animal. Younger, fresher calves often needed more guidance; waggled fingers dipped in warm milk, lustily sucked, or a rubber teat to be repeatedly collected from the dirty floor. The sense of satisfaction when the calf began to drink unaided was swiftly curtailed by the bucket being tipped over, the last of the milk flowing down the channel through the muck. But soon enough the clatter of the empty buckets and contented sucking were the only sounds.

Sometimes stepping back out of the calf shed would be like entering a winter wonderland; snowfall blanketing the yards and roofs, gentle flakes swirling in the sudden blaze of light. The crunch back to the dairy was enough to give a glaze to a woolly hat pulled tight. Wash up the buckets and my chores ended, I would trudge back round to the house to defrost frozen feet and hands by the warmth of the kitchen range; pools of dirty water collecting round my boots in the porch.