

IT'S A QUARTER to four on Sunday morning. We always start just a bit earlier at weekends so we can get the work finished up. I don't want to be working all day at weekends.

The weather forecaster predicted minus five this morning, 'could be colder out in the countryside', which I think is us, and I agree, it *is* colder.

This is the sort of weather my mother warned me about when she tried to persuade me not to be a farmer. 'You get a job in a bank and you'll have a comfortable job for life.' And 'On a farm you'll be out in all weathers, by the time you're getting old, all your joints will be suffering'. And then, as if she knew she was wasting her time, 'You mind you take one of those cod liver oil capsules every day – that'll help'.

Like most mothers, she was right. I am out in all weathers and, yes, my joints are creaking a bit, and, yes, I do take a cod liver oil capsule every day – in a way, it's my way of remembering her and doing what she tells me. I still miss her.

There are two of us on duty this morning, one to milk and me to clean up what has fallen on the floor during the night, what we call slurry, and to do some feeding.

We push the cows into the yard next to the parlour and you can see the breath coming out of all of us. I go to start the small and old tractor we use for this job and it bursts into life instantly. It's 35 years old but we park it in the feed passageway at night and the warmth of the cows keeps the worst excesses of the frost away.

It's not all negatives this morning though, because it is so cold the slurry has the consistency of thick porridge and is much easier to control. I can push it and pull it where I will and it stays nicely together. On wet days it has a mind of its own and will run anywhere – often the little tractor and I have to chase it.

A rat comes by and we chase that instead. I've never run one

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over but you have to try. I have often managed to cover them with a wave of slurry, which I am sure makes them very popular when they get back down their hole.

That's all I can do for now until the last of the cows have gone into the parlour and I get the loader tractor going, which is also parked in the warm feeding passage, and spend 10 minutes pushing silage back towards cows that have spent most of the night nosing about looking for the best bits so that it has ended up out of reach.

I decide to walk across to the chicken sheds to see if they are OK; a sort of fog hangs over them in what light there is, as the fans pump warm air out in to the cold. The computer in the chicken sheds tells me its 25°C in there but outside it is minus eight. Minus eight! Even in my mother's worst-case scenario she didn't mention minus eight.

I ask the chickens if they'd like to be free-range today. They don't bother to answer but I know how many would come outside if I opened up the door.

This is one of the flaws in the concept of 'free-range is best' because it certainly wouldn't work well in the winter months. The birds would rather stay in the shed all day and still be overcrowded. If I were to give my birds a better life, and I'd like to, I would reduce the numbers in the shed by about a third and give them longer to grow.

Most chicken growers would agree but unless the financial returns from this reduced output were the same as with the intensive regime we have now, it quite simply will not happen. The margins we work on are so minimal that people cannot believe it. If we made 10p a bird it would seem like a fortune and it is frequently less than half that sum. But back on my little tractor, the cold is beginning to get to me. The tractor is now white all over, inside and out, as its got a few windows missing.

Winter

When I get into the seat I get a frosty bum.

The parlour is being washed out now and clouds of steam rise off the yard. We use tap water to cool the first few degrees out of the milk and retain that water to wash out, so we are in effect washing out with warm water.

The steam makes it look a bit warmer but it isn't really. Water is cheaper than electricity to start the cooling process, but only just.

I'm not sorry when it's time to start breakfast – there's nothing like beans on toast on a cold morning.

I make myself a cup of tea, open the Rayburn, back up to it slowly and the warmth starts to drive out the cold. It's still not 6.30am, but it's time for my cod liver oil capsule.

My mother was right in her prophecies about the life I would lead as a farmer, but I wouldn't have it another way.



Extract from *Summer*:

.....We were also serving toasted cheese sandwiches made with our own Pembrokeshire cheese (available in a supermarket near you) and he visibly relaxed as he ate his sandwich. Eventually he wiped a bit of melted cheese off his chin and leant forward to share a confidence and I knew we were moving on to segment two.

'There's a man in our village who is a contractor,' he said. He went on to tell me that this man only has one tractor, (contractors these days usually have more tractors than they can count, so having

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one is to put his story into context).

Every month the man has a financial crisis when the HP payment is due on the tractor.

'He comes to me to help him out now and again so at the moment he owes me three months' work that I've not yet identified,' said our co-operative member.

I asked how the hell did he manage with a crisis like that every month.

'You just have to keep your head down and your arse up and work away and hope for the best.'

He paused again, so that I knew we were moving on to segment three. Segments two and three were not unrelated, as I found out.

'There's some people from London bought a bungalow with three acres of land in our village, they were going to live off this land – good-lifers.'

The tone was scornful; he'd seen it all before – three goats and a patch of cabbages are not a living for anyone.

'Anyway, they have a septic tank for the bungalow which is about 200 yards down the field and the pipe between dwelling and tank gets blocked.

'They spend a couple of days with draining rods to no avail, so the contractor said he would clear the pipe for them. When they asked him how much it would cost he told them £500 and they accepted the offer, lavatorial arrangements having become quite difficult by now.'

For the contractor, these were riches beyond belief and would settle a couple of HP payments. So he hired a mini digger and assumed he would find the blockage, dig out a bit of pipe, replace it and be away. A day later he'd still not found the blockage and he could see his £500 ending up in the hands of the owner of the mini digger.

So he went to a farmer in the village and asked him to fill his

Summer

slurry tanker with a load of water out of the river and bring it up to see if they could 'ease' the blockage. Slurry tankers usually fill themselves with vacuum, but what can suck can also blow.

So they took 1,500 gallons of river water up to the bungalow and fitted the discharge pipe to the blocked pipe down the field by the septic tank. The plan was for the contractor to go into the bathroom and for the farmer to send some water up the pipe. As soon as there was some clearance, the contractor was to phone the farmer on his mobile phone to tell him to stop.

So that's what they did.

Just to give you a better feel for this story but without going into too much detail, the water would have been pushing against what was in the blocked pipe already.

The first visible movement of liquid in the bathroom came up through the toilet with such force that it hit the ceiling and removed the polystyrene tiles. The contractor frantically tried to phone the farmer to stop him pumping but he couldn't get a signal on his mobile.

Not without some resource he put the toilet seat down and stood on it, only to be thrown across the bathroom.

He beat a retreat and ran outside to stop the farmer but it was too late – the contents of the pipe and 1,500 gallons of dirty river water went right through the bungalow and were coming out of the kitchen door.

To be fair to them both, they had cleared the blockage pipe.

That seemed like the end of that particular story, but it wasn't. The farmer's wife, who had probably heard the story countless times before, said: 'But you haven't told him who the farmer on the tanker was...'

And our member grinned sheepishly and beat a retreat out into the mud and the rain of the Royal Welsh show. The people in the bungalow went back to London a month later.