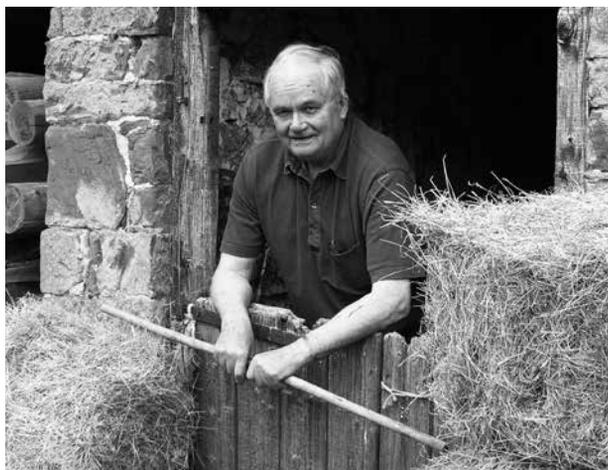


FIFTY BALES OF HAY

Roger Evans

Britain's Favourite Dairy Farmer



MERLIN UNWIN BOOKS

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Ever since a local lady put on Facebook that there were lots of brown hares to be seen off the footpaths that cross my top land, the hares' lives have been in jeopardy. I told her at the time that I was disappointed with what she had done. She replied that other people had as much right to see the hares as I did. Unfortunately, 'other people' includes hare coursers and poachers. There's a group up there quite regularly now. There's eight of them with 11 dogs, rifles and what they call laser lamps. The hares don't stand a chance. The police are not interested, 'If you shot all the hares, they wouldn't come.' What a dreadful response. Such an easy solution for them. If someone were after badgers there would be cars and helicopters everywhere. So who decides that such a lovely inoffensive creature as a brown hare doesn't matter? There's no end to the damage that naive people can do to the countryside.

Ever since before Christmas we've had 40 to 50 what we call big cattle, and dry cows and in calf heifers, outside. They have been outside eating stubble turnips and fodder beet and a big bale of hay a day or, latterly, some silage. They've done really well and thrived. We've got a shed close at hand and we would fetch them in on some of those worst nights of snow and rain, but for most of the time, outside is where they have been. The numbers vary because some have had to come home to calve and other cows have gone into their dry period and gone to join those outside. Now, at the end of February, they are starting to calve on a regular basis so we get them in every night. They come when we call them, keen for a warm dry night on their straw bed, but when we loose them out next morning, they march off up the field, really keen to get to the root crops.

Traditionally, say 40-50 years ago, keeping stock outside in the winter on root crops was the tool for successfully maintaining fertility on this local, high, light land. Of course it was done by

folding sheep on root crops but I like to think we are doing the same thing with cattle.

My son doesn't like sheep. I think that if I went off one day and bought a trailer load of sheep, he wouldn't say anything, he'd help me to unload them, but he'd be gone next morning. I always used to think that those shepherds who had to fold sheep on roots in winter had a hard life. They might travel up there on a tractor but I doubt if it had a heater, in fact it might not have a cab at all or at best a canvas one. They wouldn't have access to the sort of warm, weather-proof clothing that we take for granted today. It was a cold wet life.

The fences that contained the sheep would be wire netting held up with willow stakes that they had fashioned themselves. The shepherds around here didn't use sledgehammers to drive the posts in, because they might split the stakes. They all had what they called, I think, a stake beedle. It was made out of ash, the limb of the ash would be the handle and the sort of club end would come out of a bigger part of the tree that had been hollowed out so that it fitted over the end of the stake as it hit it. It was all a part of a sort of frugal culture they had, the stakes and the way they made things themselves: what you don't buy, you don't pay for.

Sheep are still folded on root crops, swedes and turnips, but it's a lot easier job these days. It's done quickly and fairly easily with electric fencing. Sometimes the electric fencing paraphernalia is mounted onto a quad bike so that it is laid out or reeled in very quickly. I know a farmer who has a lot of sheep on roots at different locations and two or three of the family will go off for the whole day moving electric fences to give the sheep a patch of fresh roots. One of them was telling me the other day, 'We don't take sandwiches when we are moving fences on the turnips, we just take bread and butter.' 'Why is that?' 'We cut a slice of turnip and put it in the bread and butter, it saves using jam or cheese.' It seems frugality lives in their DNA.

I don't have lady friends but there is a group that I call 'carers'. They are all ladies and there's about five of them. They do a lot of the important little things in my life, like going to fetch the drinks when it's my round and holding my hands when I go down some awkward steps. They don't seem to have worked out that I can negotiate life quite well when they are not about, but you'll not hear any complaint from me.

28 MARCH 2015

For years I used to go to a ladies' hairdressers to have my hair cut, I still do, but this previous one was quite posh and quite big. I'm not sure how I came to go here, it could be I had to take my daughter there before she could drive. I used to quite like it. The boss was a man and all his female assistants used to call him Mr ____, which wasn't his real name. I knew what his real name was because he was born in the next village. I used to have the shampoo and cut and if you were lucky, on a good day, you might get a careless bosom pressed into the back of your neck.

Anyway, I was in the town one day and passing the hairdresser I thought I might as well have a trim while I'm in the area, so I popped my head through the door and the boss's wife was on duty, so I called out 'Any chance of a quickie?' and she said 'Would ten minutes be OK?' And I said, 'Fine, but could I have a haircut afterwards?' All the ladies having their hair done thought it was very amusing.

I do have hairdressing experience of my own. For about 12 years we had a local man, and friend, living in a caravan on our yard. He'd nearly fallen through life's net because of his issues with drink. Falling through a net and landing on our yard is not necessarily a good thing. An evening out for him would be ten pints and ten drinks out of the optics on what he called the top shelf. Which makes the rest of us look quite sensible.

Anyway, I used to cut his hair. It wasn't a particularly

challenging style to accomplish, he liked it shaved right off. I used to do it with the cow clippers which had sometimes been used for clipping cows the same day. In fact my biggest problem was often the streaks of cow muck that the clippers would leave on his head. But he couldn't see them could he?

Anyway, one summer evening I'm having my tea and he knocks on the door and asks if I will cut his hair before he goes to the pub. So I ask him if he will hang on for ten minutes until I finish my tea. Five minutes later there's another knock on the door. I open it and there's a salesman there that I don't know, and my man is still hovering in the background. I can see he is getting a bit twitchy about getting to the pub. The salesman is launching into his sales spiel, he looks as if he's a new salesman, and he's wearing a suit, which salesmen around farms don't do. It's as if he has just completed his training and his sales pitch is rehearsed and now he's started he can't stop.

We always treat visitors with courtesy and respect but I can't get a word in, so I beckon him to follow me. The three of us go up the yard and around the corner and to the workshop. I get a 5-gallon drum and Jimmy, who lives up the yard and knows the form, sits on it. Neither Jimmy or I have spoken thus far but we have this background noise of sales patter, I think he was selling minerals. I wrestle the cow clippers out of a box where they are sleeping amongst some spanners, I get the extension lead and plug it all in. I get behind Jimmy, and give the clippers a couple of wipes on my overalls. The salesman is still rattling away but I can see by his eyes that I have his full attention. I switch on. Jimmy has about an inch of hair all over his head. I put the three-inch clipper head at the nape of his neck and take a swipe of hair off all the way up the back right to his forehead. At about the halfway point the salesman stops talking. His eyes are wide open, as is his mouth. Jimmy has a three inch shaved strip from front to back. If you had a Mohican, that's where the strip would be. There's a bit of cow muck in there