

room, smallholders and the man who owned the threshing drum were fed in the kitchen and workers were fed in the scullery. That was the order of things and that was the order in which we were fed. We all had the same food but it was served in that order.

Although there were three rooms in use, they weren't far apart, you could all see each other quite easily, and farm workers in the scullery didn't have to raise their voices that much in order to talk to farmers in the dining room. The Captain clearly didn't like this but there was nothing he could do about it. It was obviously not a term in use in those days but it really used to wind him up. In a way he deserved it, because it was within a rural community which treated everyone the same. So farm workers in the scullery could sit there waiting to be served, knives and forks at the ready, and quite easily ask of the farmers, who had been served, 'What's the beef like today?'

An example of just how ridiculous it all was came along at the next year's threshing. One of the farm workers had managed to get the tenancy of a ten acre holding and as a consequence he was moved up from the scullery to the kitchen. This was a clear example of the futility of it all and caused great merriment amongst the ten or 20 there. 'What's it like in the kitchen?' they would ask. 'Get a bit more land and you could be in the dining room.' Me? I didn't mind at all, the only downside for me was, being served last meant that others finished eating first and they were ready to go before I had finished eating. I used to get up to follow them with a mouthful of apple pie still to get down. The Captain only lasted three years as a farmer.

11 FEBRUARY 2017

I took someone to the doctors the other day. She said 'Are you coming in to wait?' No way. Was there ever a better place to pick up a cough and cold than a doctor's waiting room? If there were an outbreak of coughs, colds and 'bugs' in an area, you couldn't design

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a better medium for spreading the problem throughout the district than at the doctor's. Access to GPs and A&E are headline news at the moment. At the back of all our minds is the suspicion that the whole system is clogged up by a percentage of malingerers. I have great sympathy with the doctors in this. If they turned someone away, by accident, who was genuinely ill, litigation would swiftly follow. There are plenty of adverts on TV from firms who will take such a case on, mostly on 'no win, no fee' sort of offers, so there's nothing to lose. I wonder to what extent the prospect of legal action clogs up the system?

One answer could be for the GP to have a corner of the waiting room to do his work. If you had to tell the doctor what your problem was in full view of those in the waiting room, they would judge whether it merited a visit to the doctors or not. Who is going to tell the doctor he has an ache in his finger with 20 people looking on? Of course there is a downside, there always is. People would find whole the process so interesting that doctors waiting rooms would be packed out.

I'd unclog A&E departments by breathalysing everyone. I'd fine them if they were over the limit for drink driving and I'd ban them from A&E for 12 months. (I once had to go to A&E in an ambulance because I'd been drinking and fell down a steep flight of stairs so I know all about it! But that wasn't recently.) I sat in the car outside the doctors waiting for my friend for 40 minutes. I couldn't get over how many people turned up in that time. Ours is a small town, newcomers call it a village, there's probably four doctors in the partnership and some nurses yet they seem to be very busy. A lot more people went in than came out, wonder what they were doing with them? I should have been a doctor, bet it pays better than milking cows, but then so does everything.

Gomer and me, or as I was taught to write in school, Gomer and I, went in the truck to visit a friend of mine. I left him in the

Gomer locks up

truck because I didn't know if I could catch him again if I let him out. Terriers have a mind of their own and are often described as 'unbiddable'. The only times that Gomer does what you want him to do is when it coincides exactly with what he was going to do anyway. I left him in the truck for about half an hour. On the driver's arm rest in my truck are lots of buttons. There's the button that adjusts the wing mirrors, there's the buttons that operate the electronic windows, there's the button that immobilises the windows, and there's a button that locks all the doors. And unlike most of the things on my truck they all work.

I bet you've guessed the next bit: when I return to the truck he's stood on the button that locks the doors. This would be OK if I hadn't left the keys in there. We spent 20 minutes trying to get the door open. And it was raining heavily. He was so delighted to see me return that I spent the time with my hand at the window and he was jumping up and down trying to lick it and I was hoping he would stand on the button. My friend was trying to feed a wire down inside the window to push the button. 'I'm afraid I might scratch your truck.' As if one more scratch would matter. Just when he got the wire near the button, Gomer would bite it and he would miss, he thought it was a great game. Eventually we got the door open, my friend was well pleased, he thought he'd done it with the wire. I didn't disillusion him, but I'm sure it was the dog jumping on the button again. I take the keys with me now.

18 FEBRUARY 2017

We go away for what they call a three day 'break' next week. We are going to Suffolk, a place I've never been before. I like going to new places. But there is a dilemma, the dog. In the past we could go away and leave the dogs to their own devices. They had access to their beds in a utility room. They were fed every day and in the daytime they roamed the yard at their will. They were always free spirits and that's how they lived their lives. Gomer is too young for

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it comes to getting lost, you can't get more lost than when you've lost the satnav.

Today we turn our attention to the large jar of pickled eggs that sits on the bar at the pub. It's been there for two or three weeks now. The eggs themselves don't look very appetising but two thirds of them have gone, so somebody must be eating them. They are, so rumour has it, double yolk eggs. I'm not sure if this is a plus or a minus. It is customary to eat them by dropping one into an opened packet of crisps. They are reputed to be 80 pence each, which seem plenty of money for one hard-boiled egg sitting in some murky vinegar. As the eggs get lower down the jar, they become more elusive. The ladies that work behind the bar patiently try to catch one with a spoon. The barmen make a half-hearted attempt to catch one with a spoon, invariably give up, and plunge an arm down into the jar. I'm not sure if this is pickled egg best practice, it's more reminiscent of someone trying to catch a goldfish you've won at the fair.

Twenty or so years ago, pickled eggs were a big thing down at the rugby club. All sorts of manly competitions were devised with pickled eggs. One night I saw a man eat over twenty in ten minutes. We didn't see him again for three days. This was a surprise, we didn't expect see him at all.

15 APRIL 2017

As I write here today, I am prepared to concede that there may be something in this global warming after all. Thus far we have not had much real wintry weather. And this is the second consecutive winter the same. I know full well that I'm tempting providence by saying that. There's still plenty of chance of some winter around here in April. In the past we've often had heavy falls of snow in April. It even has a name, this late snow, it's called Lamb Snow. A

Tough welsh cross lambs

sudden fall of late snow can wreak havoc with young lambs that have been turned out to grass.

We have a May fair around here and I can remember lots of times when my children were young enough to want to go, standing there in cold wet rain, hoping that they would soon want to go home, and the hills all around would be white over with snow.

I told you recently about Welsh mountain rams sneaking down at night to mate with type ewes. Years ago a friend had about 50 of these Welsh lambs visited on him. He had a large flock of ewes and most of them were turned out to grass with their lambs. There came one of these late heavy falls of snow. If you have a lot of ewes and lambs outside, it just doesn't work to bring them all back into the sheds. Lambs lose their mothers, ewes lose their lambs, some ewes will take to the wrong lamb, the permutations of what can go wrong are endless. All the farmer could do was go with his family and staff, with pockets stuffed with bottles of warm milk, and search for cold wet lambs in the bottom of hedgerows, where they had gone in search of shelter. Despite their best efforts, the losses were huge.

For the Welsh cross lambs it was a very different story, they were made of much hardier stuff. They weren't tucked into the bottom of the hedge seeking shelter. They were in a pack, out in the middle of the field, cavorting, as only young lambs can, racing up and down the field. As my friend described it at the time, 'They were kicking up so much snow as they raced up and down, it was if they were racing up and down in a blizzard.'

Although there is much to like about a benign winter, there are downsides to it. A few fields away down the road, a neighbour has a field of oilseed rape. It is just showing its first yellow flowers. This is unprecedented around here at this time of year. I know the farmer has been spraying it with what they call growth regulators to retard its growth. If we should have one of those late falls of