

I'm leaning over a worn metal yard gate with a farmer, on a still evening at the end of a summer during which we've become accustomed to heat and dust, watching a blur of swallows diving over our heads, picking insects too small for us to see and wheeling up and away into the blue, over fields burnt almond brown by salty wind and sun.

This farmyard, nestling between the coast and rolling lowlands of The Downs in West Wight, is a mix of machinery sheds brimming with tools and useful (might come in handy one day), pieces of aged metal, a big Atcost barn of the sort ubiquitous in the 1970s and a series of large open cattle barns with outside yards, in which a mix of roan cattle stand around a ring feeder picking at hay and eyeing me with faint suspicion out of the corner of their half closed eyes.

A couple of sheepdogs mill around, ever watchful, looking to be useful - or failing that for attention from anyone willing to offer it and a toddler is parked in a play pen in the outdoor passage between two sheds, chewing contentedly on the end of a riding crop. In the half sheds to the right of the yard, a couple of pigs are standing on their hind legs looking out over the stable door and a collection of mud lambs (lambs which have been hand reared - either because they were rejected by the mother or were considered too small or weak to survive alone) are bleating, impatient for their next bottle.

This is a mixed farm - one in which different species of animals are farmed and crops are grown to feed to the animals. The waste products produced by the animals are used to replace organic matter in the soil and much of the grazing is rotated between arable (plant growth) and grass land, reducing the need for artificial fertiliser and keeping the grazing land clean - that is free of parasites and disease. This system of agriculture was once the dominant way of farming in lowland Britain and many of our Island farms continue to manage their ground this way.

I am here to sort through some animals, brought down from Summer grazing for various reasons - a couple that haven't had a calf this year, a horn to trim, a bad eye. These cows run with the bull - a handsome black Aberdeen Angus, with a penchant for leaping fences to get to the neighbours heifers when he's run out of ladies in his own patch - for much of the year and will normally calve inside during the winter or in fields close to home in early Spring, so that they can be assisted as required - although the bull is chosen specifically to produce small, tough crossbred calves, which generally pop out with little effort and hit the ground running.

These British Shorthorns, are the cows that would have been familiar to Tess the Milkmaid in Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'urbervilles, with coats varying from deep chestnut, through flecked pink roan to almost white. Tough willy beasts, strong willed and fiercely maternal they're well suited to their lives up on the hill ground owned by the National Trust on the South coast of the Island, where they forage amongst the bushes and scrub, competing with the rabbits for grass for most of the year.

The cows - mostly older animals, are well practiced at this routine and with a little persuasion they walk quietly into the crush - a narrow metal framed box with a gate at either end which

holds them relatively still and allows us to examine them with minimal stress to either of us. Vetting hasn't changed much from the days of James Herriot - although as well as my arm length glove, I'm now equipped with an ultrasound scanner which allows me to see pregnancies as early as 28 days when the foetus is the size of the tip of my finger. Most of these ladies are at least 4 months pregnant - and knowing this, the farmer can decide where they will be put to graze - if close to the nine months full term, they will stay on the home farm, if not and if they are quiet enough and unlikely to bother walkers and dogs, they will be turned back out onto the down to make the most of the last flush of Autumn grass. Some of these cows will be carrying their tenth calf or more - they are long lived beasts and will be kept in the herd until the time comes that they are less able to tolerate the winters and like us, become arthritic and struggle to hold their condition.

A few of the older ones are "empty" ie not pregnant - and with these, depending on the condition of the cow, whether her reproductive tract appears normal and her age, a decision is made to either keep her and allow her to breed again next year, or to send her on to slaughter as a cull cow. From both a welfare and an economic perspective, cows who are struggling to hold condition and rear their calves, are best sent on before old age gets the better of them.

The last patient is the aptly named Up Down - who's horns point in opposite directions - the left almost vertically up and the right running tight down the side of her face which requires a trim to prevent injury to her skin which would attract flies and cause her discomfort. She has been through this procedure before and is less than keen to comply, but given some time, eventually she gives in and we put two halters on and tie her head up to the side of the crush. She needs to be relatively still, for her own safety and for ours. Once restrained, I use a long length of wire, strung between two short pieces of wood, fashioned by the farmer from an old broom handle, to carefully saw through the last inch of her horn. The horn grows from the base of the skull as solid bone and is richly supplied with blood vessels and nerves, but the tip we are removing is like a tough nail - so no anaesthetic is required, just some muscle power. Farmers and vets rarely require a gym membership to stay in shape. A minute or two later, the end of the horn is off and UpDown is back out to join her herd mates, shaking her head in disdain. I meet her some months later out on a run on the Western High Down - and wonder if she recognises me

As I wash up, I talk to the farmers - a wiry couple in their 50s who've farmed this ground for decades. They're worried about the winter - the last couple of dry summers have meant that the conserved grass (hay and silage) that they feed the stock over the winter is in short supply and the yield of straw this year (used for bedding) is at an all time low. Fifty years ago, the Island was a patchwork of small farms, with a local abattoir, a market and a thriving and supportive community. Now these people are isolated and there's a sense of that most of the population - dissociated from the land and people that work it - have little understanding of the realities of animal agriculture as we see it on the island, which has continued fundamentally unchanged over the centuries, following the cycle of the seasons, driven by the weather, the needs of the stock.

Seeing, understanding and respecting people in their own landscape is crucial to their being understood and valued - what you don't see, you don't care about. I hope that if Covid has taught us anything, it's brought us back into the countryside and encouraged us to value and nurture the food produced on our doorstep and the communities that produce it.