



Old Rants and Letters

April 2009

Dear Customer,

An Incident.

We have had an environmental disaster. A farmer on the hill above us went out into his yard a couple of Mondays ago and was greeted by the smell of oil – the valve on his red diesel tank had failed and several hundred litres of oil had escaped. Unfortunately it made its way straight into the stream that eventually flows into our dam. The first I knew about it was when I spotted two strangers from the Environment Agency clambering over one of my gates. For reasons I won't bore you with, I assumed they were from the Electricity, and was about to fetch my shotgun. Luckily, a potentially embarrassing incident was avoided when they produced ID cards. It turned out that they had been summoned from their beds at the scraque of dawn by my luckless neighbour. I must confess I was surprised at the speed with which they reacted and the efficiency with which they applied first aid – booms across the entrances and exits to the dam. But that's all they do, passing the responsibility back to the farmer who caused the problem with a list of 'clean-up' contractors one of whom he must contact. Naturally he also contacts his insurance company who also send out a team of experts. The first team to arrive – the next day – footered about for some hours preparing an estimate of costs. When the insurance team arrived, they were visibly impatient and clearly felt that the priority was to stop any more oil coming down and remove the existing oil. Meanwhile, very little was done. Only when it rained heavily on Wednesday night and I pointed out to all concerned that if they did not act immediately the oil would soon be in the Six Mile Water which is a salmon and trout river. This concentrated minds wonderfully and within hours, many more booms were being laid all the way back up the stream, and men dressed in white overalls were cruising about on the dam in kayaks, sucking up the oil.

Though the initial response from the environment agency was impressive, simply passing the problem back to the farmer who is obviously ill-equipped to manage this kind of disaster is unacceptable. In the meantime we know a lot of young brown trout have died, all the many water fowl have disappeared from our dam, and the water voles and the otter may or may not still be with us.

Optimism

It is difficult not to feel a certain amount of optimism at this time of year – there is nothing like a record breaking litter of piglets (for this farm at least) to put me in a good mood, and Trixie has had twelve, all of which she has so far managed to keep alive and well. I think we should possibly re-name her

Sweetie Feet' in view of her ability to raise her 250kg weight from the horizontal to the vertical without (so far and touch wood) squashing any of her offspring. Trixie had a difficult, some would say wild and rebellious phase in her teenage years and became a mother unexpectedly, I certainly wasn't expecting it and I don't imagine she was. However, it has to be said that the responsibilities of motherhood settled her and she is now of exemplary character and a credit to her breed. Which is Tamworth. And I have to say that once again, there is not the least evidence of her beautiful red hair in the progeny, something I find deeply upsetting. (Well, slightly upsetting).

Nature – red in tooth and claw.

As well as the birth of the piglets we have been enjoying a certain amount of lambing. Half the flock has delivered itself, though not without incident. About ten days before lambing one of the ewes went over on her back and was unable to stand up. This is quite common in sheep that are heavily pregnant or carrying a lot of wool in wet weather. Unfortunately, this girl was not discovered for some hours, by which time the rooks, crows or magpies had taken advantage of her parlous situation to start pecking her eyes out. At first we thought the damage was only superficial, but the eyes became infected and now, despite veterinary intervention, she will almost certainly become blind. She is just about managing to raise the twin lambs she produced thereafter.

A couple of mornings after this I was checking the sheep when I spotted a ewe with her new lamb, and something was clearly amiss. One of the new arrival's ears was missing, as was its entire body from below the ribs. This was the work of the fox, who has subsequently lifted at least one other lamb. Sometimes it is difficult to be enthusiastic about wildlife. (The other half of the flock is scheduled to pop in May – I hope they have a better time of it.) That all said, br'er fox has not had it all his own way. There is a hunter in these parts who has shot eight foxes within three quarters of mile from here in the last couple of months. And still they come.

And it gets worse – we recently put a batch of chunky chicks from the indoor rearing pens out to the field. For the first few days they are reluctant to go out, but with a bit of encouragement the whole lot of them were slowly learning to enjoy the great outdoors. The next evening I went down to find the remains of one of these birds lying in the grass – plucked and partially eaten. I assumed the fox had yet again done his work and the next day spent some time erecting a mesh electric fence round the poultry houses – to no avail – another corpse appeared that evening. Only on the following day did I realize that the fox on this occasion was probably innocent when I saw what I thought then to be a huge grey back crow, but now rather suspect may have been a raven, slowly walking round the enclosure in pursuit of an unfortunate chicken. Ravens can be up to 68cm in length and will attack other birds on the ground. In fact I've just googled ravens and there is a article in today's Mail (so it must be true) headlined 'Attack of the Killer Ravens' which describes one farmer losing 40 lambs to flocks of ravens and many other farmers with similar experiences.

I was speaking to a man involved in farming about this and having never seen a raven he said would I let him know when I had shot one so as he could come and have a look. 'William, ravens are supposed to be rare – it's a hanging offense to shoot them.' William pondered this with that slightly

quizzical look that farmers reserve for news of the re- introduction of wolves and lynxes into sheep farming areas of Scotland. 'Well, when you've shot one by accident, give us a ring then.'

(I put a banger in the field and the ravens have gone elsewhere.)

I can't write a letter without making some reference to the current economic climate – there are two schools of thought as to how it will affect the organic sector in the long run. School one is that organic food and related things such as green energy were always a luxury for the few, and are now a luxury that simply nobody can afford. Saving the planet will have to take a poor second place to saving the world economy. The other school suggests that the current world crisis is the work of the angels, who are trying to nudge mankind into the paths of righteousness so as the planet can be saved from our depredations and we can be saved from ourselves. Thousands of jobs will be created in green energy production and in a wholesale return to organic farming methods, with thousands of people necessarily returning to the land to provide a truly sustainable agriculture.

We shall see.

In the meantime the arguments that originally persuaded us all to 'go organic' retain their logic no matter what the economic circumstances. Having been in agricultural production now for some twenty years, I am more than ever aware of chemical methods and am quite sure that I would give up most things long before I gave up on the quality of the food I eat. The credit crunch dominates our thinking at the moment, but it doesn't make other problems disappear. There are many – myself included – who suspect that the imminent 'food crunch' will be even more troublesome.

On that cheerful note, I will go and feed some cattle.

November 2008

Dear Customer,

About 3 weeks ago our swans returned to the dam with their two teenage children. For a couple of days all seemed sweetness and light, until one morning we saw a large number of white feathers lying on the water surface and only one of the young signets remaining. It did not look good. Two days later the remaining signet was also gone. Last Friday as I was digging some artichokes I heard the unmistakable 'whir-whir, whir-whir,' of incoming swans and looking up saw three swans doing their final approach to the dam. They're big birds and it is a small and relatively busy dam – more like Heathrow than Aldergrove for incoming large birds. The swans never just fly straight in, they always circle a few times before their final descent. It is a magnificent sight to behold and I always feel strangely privileged to witness it.

When I went to have a look, the two adults were on the dam bank and the youth was on the drive. Every time he attempted to get on the bank, one of the adults would ruffle its feathers and with neck extended flat to the ground, would charge at the unfortunate creature. I walked away, but was shortly thereafter accosted by one of our livery customers who had also witnessed some of this cruelty to children and was demanding that I do something about it. I got straight on the phone.

The RSPB were very re-assuring, indeed, so much so that I was almost reduced to tears. This was quite normal behaviour – beyond a certain age, swans expect their progeny to leave the nest, go and find their own territory and presumably a nice young lady or man. The RSPB woman understood how upsetting this could be to watch (it was at this point I thought I might cry) but I was to brace up and understand that this was Nature taking her course and it was all for the good.

And talking of crying, - it became clear after my last letter that several of you felt that I might need talking back from the ledge. Not so, but I thank you for your concern. I was speaking to the man who makes our silage and telling him of my friend in Omagh who during a wet week in August had told me that he was no longer depressed or down hearted, because you never get two years as bad as this in a row. Therefore 2009 was going to be a good year. This piece of rural wisdom from an older and more experienced farmer had cheered me up too, until I repeated it. The silage man listened to this story with deepening incredulity – ‘Has he forgotten about last year already?’ he snorted. Good point.

If the long term weather pattern has changed so that from July on it is going to be unrelentingly wet, I’m not sure how we will conserve good quality grass in sufficient quantity to make money. As the silage man said to me (and he has dairy and beef enterprises as well as his contract work) – ‘I don’t care what any expert says, *no farmer makes money in wet summers.*’

We have been waiting with a keen sense of anticipation for Rita, our senior Tamworth to produce her first litter fathered by the new Saddleback boar – hoping that the youngsters might turn out more colourful than the previous batch of crossbreds produced by her daughter. Not a bit of it! Once again they were all black and white, and what is more, once sows reach a certain age, some of them seem to become a little careless with their new-borns. Seven out of ten survived the birthing, but she had squashed another two within 24 hours. In her earlier litters, I would have expected a 90% survival. As it happens, we have so many young pigs coming on, this attrition does not really concern me, but I’m afraid it should concern Rita.

It seems impossible these days to have a conversation without some allusion to the increasingly dire economic meltdown that seems about to engulf us. The only benefit of the recent dramatic events in the financial world has been with my 96 year old father who has a new interest in life. He of course is old enough to have lived through the great slump, which, as he gloomily reminds me, we only emerged from after the Second War. He also snorts derisively when I tell him how the government is acting to contain the disaster – ‘governments can do nothing, -the thing will take its course’. On the bright side he did say that most people in the thirties weren’t actually very much affected, as most people remained in work and carried on much as normal.

The reason I bring this up is that at a time when most of us are looking for ways of spending less money, food should be the last thing we cut corners with. It is one thing to stop eating sirloin and start eating boeuf bourgignon, which will require extra time in the kitchen, but no diminution in the quality of one’s life. It is quite another to give up eating organic food and resort to buying cheap food that is inevitably to a greater or lesser extent contaminated with man made chemicals, while at the same time being

deficient in the minerals and trace elements that are essential to our well-being. If I may quote Helen Browning, writing in Living Earth – ‘Organic food is an easy target at times like this. It is often more expensive in terms of the pound in your purse. However, intensively farmed food is only cheap if you ignore what the economists call ‘externalities’: the costs borne by the animals in their confinement; the environment and its degradation; and the health of the general population as the efficacy of antibiotics is reduced through their overuse in keeping stressed animals healthy. Pretty expensive cheap food.’

Enough said.

One of the signets returned today. Maybe it has got rid of its Mum and Dad!

September 2008

Dear Customer,

As I write this, I am glowing slightly, for unusually for this August, the sun has come out. Hello stranger!, I greet it. Overcome with shyness it slips behind a cloud. But what a view I behold as I gaze down at our orchard, some of whose trees must now be more than nine feet high and a few of which are burdened with apples. Having now individually fenced each tree, we are able to let the sheep graze amongst the trees – and a very pleasing sight it is.

Everywhere I look these days, from The Daily Telegraph to Living Earth, the self-righteous are railing against the immorality of eating meat. How can we justify using the land to feed animals, when the same land could be devoted to grain production and feed ten times as many people? I abhor this argument and its fake ethics. To me, the real debate is on how we can possibly justify despoiling planet earth just to gratify our lust for an ever increasing population. Of course we could stop eating beef, lamb and pork, and for another hundred years perhaps we could feed a few more of the teeming millions. But what do we do then, when we have exhausted the land’s fertility, modified the last gene, felled the last tree....?

Unashamedly, I say I want to continue eating meat, meat that is reared in harmony with nature; meat that helps return fertility to the land, meat that enhances my pleasure in life and retains its place in the scheme of things. I don’t want to live in a landscape bereft of livestock, to see farm animals only in zoos. I don’t want to see the world’s population continue to grow exponentially, merely to create even bigger disasters and more crises for our children and grandchildren.

From time to time I have a slight bottleneck in my production of beef and there comes a stage at which I have to off load a surplus onto the market. Now, whereas I am convinced the quality of my beef is second to none, this does not mean the supermarkets agree with me. What they look for is high meat to bone ratio, which is achieved by using continental breeds that are fast growing and respond well to intensive systems. These breeds grade well at the abattoir and achieve the best prices. All the meat you buy at the big supermarkets will be Farm Quality Assured under which government inspired scheme the public are re-assured that the meat has been produced in an acceptable way. I always remember speaking to the Livestock and

Meat Commission who told me that under the Farm Quality Assurance scheme, you could feed your cattle and sheep anything, including GM, 'as long as it's legal'. Not terribly re-assuring when you remember that until quite recently the FQAS encouraged the feeding to cattle of scrapie infected sheep brains. The same organisation *exactly* that permitted BSE to become a reality still runs the FQAS. It is unbelievable.

Just a few years ago, the Department made a serious effort to encourage farmers to convert to organic. I was invited to seminars hosted by Tesco or Sainsbury in which (I am told, for I did not attend) a rosy picture was painted of rising demand and a glowing future for organic beef production was promised, if local farmers would just convert as quickly as possible. I was speaking to one such farmer no later than last month, who expressed satisfaction with the way things were working for him.

What a difference a credit crunch makes – a month later the local abattoir has almost completely stopped the purchase of organic beef as the demand in GB has plummeted.

The good news to emerge from all this (and finally I get to the point) is that I am in a position to do a deal over the next few months in order to shift some surplus beef. My beef animals are not huge, being Dexter Angus crosses. They do not have a particularly good meat to bone ratio (this does not really affect the customer, as almost all the beef is de-boned) and they do not lend themselves to pre-packs. I flatter myself however that they taste rather good. I would expect a half an animal to weigh about 60-70 kg [approximately 3 to 4 largish cardboard boxes of meat]. I would like to sell you either a whole or half a beast priced at less than the price of the stewing beef – that is at £7.50 a kilo. You could have it butchered to your own instructions and depending on who you are you might for the first time get an idea of the proportions of each cut that there are on a beast – it's quite interesting. The joy of it is that you end up experimenting with new dishes to use up the less familiar cuts – and if you need any help with recipes, I'm your man. If you would like to see it on the hoof, this could be arranged.

We will also be slaughtering new season lamb, so if you are interested in a whole lamb (usually about twenty kilos) please let me know.

The last two years have not been easy at Ballylagan, and like many things in life, many of the problems are of my own making. Someone asked me recently when I described to him all the various enterprises on the farm – how do you manage? I suddenly realized that that was precisely the problem. Recently I have been so busy, that I simply have not had time to manage. For example:

we had planned to have home bred geese for Christmas this year, but by the time we realized the gander was infertile, it was too late to buy in any substitutes. In the past we have bought in turkeys from another producer, but this has become unprofitable and as a result we are not selling either turkeys or geese this year for Christmas. We will however be taking orders for gammons and also, if anyone is interested, for whole young pigs for a spectacular Christmas feast. Depending on the size of your oven, we should be able to accommodate most orders.

We have also suffered quite serious poultry losses to the fox, and the weather has made the weed problem on many of the vegetables almost

insuperable. The raspberry crop was no sooner on the vine than it was eliminated by the rain.

The cattle and adult pigs have had to be housed because their pastures were waterlogged. In the case of the cattle this means they are eating winter fodder, while at the same time we are unable to harvest our second cut of silage which in turn means that there is no aftergrass growing to feed the cattle in the autumn. On a brighter note, we appear to have one of the best potato crops that we have had for years, though now the ground is so wet that we cannot get in with machinery to flail off the tops before the blight gets it.

Many of these problems must appear outwith my control, but particularly the problems with the vegetables could be mitigated with better management.

Now on top of all this we have the credit crunch and oil prices which though as I write are back a bit, nevertheless are on an upward spiral. For the first time since we opened the shop, our sales have been shrinking rather than growing. We are no different to any other farm shop, and all that I have spoken too have described trading as at best poor. However, we are in this for the long haul. Though I may be for the moment glad that we didn't go ahead with the butchery, we have no intention of giving up. My sole plan, and it will take time, is to get better at everything we do and grow the business. If for example customers are finding the cost of the drive out to Ballylagan to expensive, would you make use of a home delivery? Would you be prepared to pay for it? At this time of year, would some of you be interested in picking your own peas? Most years we can grow substantial amounts of peas and it is a vegetable that responds particularly well to freezing. As time goes on, we will have tonnes of apples – would people be interested in picking their own? Would you like to dig your own spuds? Would you be interested in a working weekend on the farm –bearing in mind that I wouldn't pay you, you would pay me! We are considering providing accommodation in due course. I throw these ideas out and depending on the response, our plans for the future will be formulated.

You may have noticed that this year we bought a saddleback boar and two saddleback sows, while retaining two of our Tamworth sows. Riccardo, the boar, performed magnificently with Trixie, one of the Tamworths, and three months, three weeks and three days later Trixie popped. Saddlebacks are black and white and Tamworths are red so we had rather hoped that the issue would be technicoloured. As I gazed over the door at the piglets, everyone of them black and white, I had a mixture of emotions. Joy that the mother and all nine children were well, but a bit disappointed nevertheless. I think I know how Henry VIII might have felt on the birth of his first daughter. If you would like to see the piglets, just ask.

April 2008

Dear Customer,

As I recall, by this time last year spring was sprunging and we had a period of many weeks with scarcely a drop of rain. This year is rather different. We have not been able to get any machinery onto the land and it looks like being a last minute panic as usual. You may remember me telling you how badly all our re-seeds did last year, though I did mention that they looked well set

to thrive this year. So far so good, and indeed it is amazing how vigorous new grass is when compared with old pasture. Quite simply the new grass is several inches longer than the old pastures, and the growth is much more uniform throughout the field. My one worry is that the clover is not as well established as I would have liked.

Patricia and I visited one of the pioneering organic gardens in England last month as part of an organized tour. Iain Tolhurst is one of the leading lights in the organic fraternity and has been for years. He grows about 15 acres of vegetables for his box scheme and he does it without the use of any imported fertility – in other words he doesn't use any farm yard manure (FYM) but only compost free from animal manures and nitrogen fixing intercropping. He has a seven year rotation, two of which years are fertility building where no actual cropping is done. It was very interesting, though some of it obviously irrelevant to us as we have FYM available by the cartload. Nevertheless, he has proved that it is possible to farm sustainably without animals. He almost never buys in vegetables for his box scheme, which means he only supplies seasonal vegetables. I would wager that less than 5% of the population has anything like an accurate idea what seasonal vegetables are. I have often thought that we should only offer seasonal homegrown vegetables. For at least eight to ten months of the year this would mean no broccoli, no celery, no courgette, no red peppers, no tomatoes and no squash. Even potatoes run out or become inedible in May and June.

There are vegetables that just about grow during the winter, but mostly they are things like Chinese leaves, Mizuna and other oriental leaves. Apart from that we rely on vegetables that are not really growing, but are continuing to exist in the ground because they are frost resistant – leeks, savoy cabbages, root vegetables. As for fruit, there simply would not be *any* from now until the first strawberries. At this time of year the European apples and pears are at an end and the southern hemisphere produce is just coming on stream. Years ago we would have survived on preserved fruit. Now we freight in apples from New Zealand and frankly I have no idea if this leaves a bigger or smaller carbon footprint than preserving homegrown fruit. Part of me hankers after the re-introduction of all those old skills that used to see us through the lean times.

Many years ago, when we were students, Patricia and I drove through Rome during what was obviously the tomato harvest season. The streets were lined with vendors selling *tonnes* of tomatoes, all for home preserving. This was in 1975, but you simply wouldn't see the like of it now. You certainly wouldn't see it here. Yet every year, every small scale grower dumps significant quantities of vegetables because when his production peaks, so has everybody else's, his customer base doesn't obligingly grow to take up the slack and if he doesn't have a pig, the compost heap gets it. It seems a pity.

Over the last few months the cost of organic poultry feed has gone up by about 50%. Cereal prices generally are at record highs. 30% of the U.S. cereal crop is being used for bio-fuels. There are only nine days world reserve of wheat in store. China and India are eating red meat in record quantities as their people become richer. In the meantime the Northern Ireland red meat farmers are losing so much money that even if you gave them back all the profit made by the abattoirs and the supermarkets, it wouldn't make any significant difference to the farmer. So what?

I rather suspect that using agricultural land to grow bio-fuels is a very bad idea. We are running so close to the wire in the amount of food in reserve that shortages seem inevitable. Some people might think that it is unjustifiable to grow food for our cars while people in poorer countries go hungry. I also rather suspect, that just as night follows day, there are good times ahead for western farmers. As world food shortages become more real, every acre of farm land will be made productive and farmers are going to say that if we are to feed the nation, you must pay us as much as office workers. Of course, it's also possible that the government may decide that small farms must be made into co-operatives and that we must all grow genetically modified super-crops. On reflection, since collectivisation was such a disaster under communism, this seems much the most likely route to be chosen by our leaders.

Despite restricting ourselves to loyalty card customers only, we ran out of chickens for a period after the Hugh and Jamie revelations about poultry production. We were inundated with new customers who wanted only to buy chickens, and much to my regret I ended up turning many of them away. I rather suspect that most of them will now have convinced themselves that the government must have 'done something' to improve the lot of intensively reared birds and will feel justified in going back to their old purchasing habits. It never ceases to amaze me, the expectation that food should be cheap. The very basis of our health as a nation should reflect all the cost of production and provide a standard of living to the producer which encourages him or her to take a pride in their work. Agricultural labourer is not currently a job title to which many aspire.

The late Alan Clarke remarked in his diaries that you couldn't get a decent bottle of Claret for less than £100 – and that was in the eighties. Half the point of this remark is that if you do pay that sort of money for a bottle of wine, you will take care over what you choose, and how you drink it. At the moment we seem to take a perverse attitude to food in that overwhelmingly so long as it's cheap and nicely presented, then it ticks the boxes. People don't seem to make the connection between the food they eat and their own health and so long as the bottomless pit for tax payers money which we call the NHS exists to clean up after us, why should we worry? Years ago, I felt evangelical urges about this. Now I rather feel that if people can't be bothered, why should I care.

In any case, maybe I've got it all wrong and the Food Standards Agency is right.

In the meantime, we have increased the numbers of broilers we keep in anticipation of future demand. You can see some of them in the front field as you come up the lane. Mind you, the weather has been so grim, they have been spending a lot of time indoors. It's their choice. We had the lambing sheep in the same field until a few days ago, (an arrangement I rather suspect the broilers frowned upon) but the ground got so wet that even the sheep were starting to damage the ground, so we had to move them somewhere drier. Nevertheless, if you are interested in seeing the lambs, they are still quite close to the yard and I can point you in the right direction.

And on that subject, we have started hatching some ducks with a view to putting them back on the menu. If you are interested in duck, it takes about three months after hatching to get them to killing weight. If you would like one reared for you, let me know and we can start hatching accordingly.

I haven't seen any of Delia Smith's latest programmes, but I have read some pretty damning reviews. I also read an interview with her in the Daily Telegraph, in which she said that she would happily choose the cosmetically more pleasing chemically grown vegetable over the organic alternative. Years ago, before I became involved in this industry, I too was seduced by the cosmetic perfection of the M&S offering. But when I became aware of how this cosmetic perfection is achieved, I put those things behind me. In a moment of insight. I suddenly understood why Islam takes such a dim view of apostasy – if you have accepted a revealed truth, there can be no recantation. How can you one day accept that the produce of intensive poultry farming and vegetable production is too grim to eat, and the next say that provided it looks nice on the shelf, you can overcome your misgivings.

For me, the greatest joy in farming is watching new life come into existence. It doesn't matter, whether it's a sow farrowing, a ewe lambing, an egg hatching, or a seed germinating, - they all delight me. To then eat something that has had a good life on this farm is the fulfilment of that joy – and it matters not whether it is animal or vegetable.

I have just been in to inspect the ducks hatching. In theory ducks hatch out at a slightly different temperature than chicks and in my efforts to stabilize the temperature of the incubators at the correct level, I have both par-boiled and also frozen the unfortunate ducklings. It's a miracle that any have survived. But they have and are laboriously pecking their way out of their shells and into the world.

What fun!

October 2008

Dear Customer,

A dog, a woman and a walnut tree,
The harder you beat them , the better they be.

Some years ago, my mother planted two walnut trees, which ever since have produced leaves, but no fruit. This lack of nuts merely confirmed what all the wiseacres had smugly assured my mother. The exceptionally bad summer which led to bumper apple crops made me wonder how the old walnuts might be doing – and there they were, positively groaning under the weight of the crop - twelve nuts. (not each, between the two of them.) This sort of thing pleases me enormously. I'm ashamed to say that hitherto, I had assumed the nut appeared on the tree as it does in the packet and thus wasted several minutes looking for round brown shells in amongst the leaves. Fortunately one of the small apple like fruits had split open to reveal the shell within.

Needless to say, I totally dissociate myself from the sentiments expressed in the old adage quoted above.

My niece from London stayed with us for a couple of days. Patricia, Jennifer and I took her for a walk in search of mushrooms – a fruitless search this year, the weather has been too dry. (Having written this, I went out to check the stock, and en route found a penny bun!) We did however almost trip over a brace of pheasant and a buzzard. The buzzard in particular delighted and surprised us, as it lumbered imperiously into the air. To my niece it seemed as uninteresting as a cow or horse. This was the country, why should one be surprised or delighted that ‘things’ live there?

Talking of which, this has been the most fantastic autumn weather that I can remember. Those of you who have been on the mailing list for any length of time will know that Autumn is my least favourite season. I am a fickle fellow. If it were always like this it would rapidly become my favourite time of the year.

For breakfast this morning (Sunday 28th) I had mixed fresh soft fruits topped with yogurt and honey. This was followed by bacon, egg and fried bread. In order to make fried bread, you need a good amount of bacon fat, which with my bacon is not a problem. And I do mean bacon *fat*, not that hideous scummy liquid driven off by processed bacon. As I speared my egg yolk, spilling its contents over the crisply fried bread, it occurred to me that this is the sort of treat that is likely to be outlawed by the government before very long. It also occurred to me to wonder how many of my customers deny themselves such simple pleasures on the government induced assumption that it is bad for you.

We are all by now familiar with the *dictat* that forbids us from drinking more than 21 units of alcohol a week (for men) and 14 units (for women). To have 5 or more units of alcohol in one day also constitutes binge drinking. To find the number of units in a bottle of wine or beer, or any other beverage, you simply multiply the %age alcohol by the volume. Thus a half litre bottle of ale at 5% is 2.5 units of alcohol. Drink two of those at a sitting and you are officially a binge drinker. A bottle of wine at 13% is 9.75 units, or if it's 15% as very many wines are these days, that's 11.25 units per bottle. Share a bottle of wine at a meal with your spouse and you're both binge drinkers.

The whole thing is clearly nonsense, a fact (and I use the word advisedly) that was recently admitted by the government advisor who suggested the limits. Asked how he arrived at the figures, he said that under intense pressure from the government, he had merely plucked them out of the air.

You may think that this story is apocryphal, or an exception to normally sound government advice on food. Not a bit of it. For years the Environmental Health department waged war against wooden butchers blocks and chopping boards, insisting they should all be replaced by plastic. This on the grounds that ‘common sense’ proved that plastic must be more hygienic than wood. It has since been pointed out that plastic scratches easily, the scratches harbour all sorts of germ infested gunge that it is impossible to remove, and indeed it's lucky we all aren't dead. Wood on the other hand, has natural anti-bacterial properties and is actually much safer than plastic. The campaign against wooden blocks was quietly dropped.

The most notorious example of bad advice from government remains of course the advice that it was a good idea to feed scrapie infected sheep remains to cattle, thus causing the BSE crisis and costing the tax payer £billions.

And yet, incredibly people still feel that they should heed government advice - intimidated into joyless diets or else endless guilt when they have that extra glass of wine or spread the butter a little too thickly on their bread. (You can't spread the butter too thickly on the bread.)

As Clement Freud once observed, 'If you give up smoking, drinking and sex, you don't actually live longer, it just seems longer'.

Above I used the expression 'common sense'. Real common sense, is what I believe to be common sense. If in doubt, ask me.

At the beginning of the month, The Red Meat Task Force presented its report to the assembly. Not only does it describe the present beef and lamb situation as universally bleak, but it sees no profitable future for their production in Northern Ireland. This applies as much to organic beef and lamb as to chemically produced meats. I hear every day of farmers de-stocking, calves being brought back from market unsold, farmers leaving the business. This is against a backdrop of slowly increasing red meat consumption in the UK.

Whether the collapse of traditional farming is a good thing or a bad thing is not for me to say. Should we mourn the collapse of an industry that has only survived by government intervention, and that introduced us to terms like BSE and CJD.

Land is the basic asset of all farming and its price has climbed inexorably for as long as I can remember. At one time there was some sort of connection between the price of land and the profits to be made there from. On this sort of calculation land should probably be worth no more than £500 per acre. In fact, it routinely goes for ten to fifty times this price, frequently because of the 'hope value' that some of it, usually with road frontage, will be sold on as building sites. This hope value was recently dented by the last Westminster administration that said it was going to rigorously enforce regulations to prevent ribbon development and bungalow blight. Now that the Assembly is back in charge, it seems ever more likely that in order to ease the financial crisis in the farming industry, more and more farmers will be allowed to sell off a few sites, to keep them going. I don't know if any of you have ever visited Guernsey - it has no proper countryside and resembles nothing so much as a huge, largely prosperous suburb. I fear that what is left of our countryside is going to be sacrificed on the altar of short term expediency. That any part of this country should end up like Guernsey is the stuff of nightmares. This of course is only my opinion.

I was talking to a builder recently, who was eyeing up a piece of my land and encouraging me to go for planning permission on it. Now, my initial reaction was a visceral 'no' - no green field on my farm will ever be sullied by housing. But it does make you think - the only people who can afford land these days are either farmers who have sold a field for development, or businessmen who are burying their gains from other enterprises. There is simply no way that a farm of say up to 500 acres could possibly have

generated enough profit in the last ten years to buy in additional land. At the same time, the only way farms can gain the efficiency of large scale, is by buying in land.

There are three farms that march with ours, any one of which could come on the market in the next couple of years. Would I be justified in selling off two acres of land for building in order to purchase an additional forty or fifty to convert to organic production? (Answers on a postcard only please.)

August 2007

Dear Customer,

Mum and Dad have disappeared off to Sicily leaving Matthew and I to look after things at home. The week before last, Dad casually mentioned the letter and perhaps how I would like to do it. It was only when Fiona said the letter was sent out every two months that I realised this was Dad's way of handing the responsibility over to me!

As many of you know I am about to embark on another year at university studying Veterinary Medicine. The subject has a nasty habit of taking over your life, much to the dismay of my non-vetty friends. This means, when it comes to conversation I have nothing much to chat about but veterinary. Hence the following letter...

I went to Australia at the end of June as a small treat for all my hard work. It was fantastic! A friend and I managed to cover a good deal of the East coast in just four weeks. However, the undisputed highlight of my trip was a short stay on a station (otherwise known as a farm) in the outback.

This 100,000acre farm comprising approximately 5500 cattle was run by just one man and his family. The farm was so vast they had a small plane to oversee the herd and several jeeps for getting from A to B. At one point during the stay we watched the ear notching, castration, dehorning and administration of growth hormone to some of the youngstock. Growth hormone is administered as a small implant into the ear and coming from far away lands, it was this management practice which particularly interested me.

Unlike in Australia and America, the use of growth hormone is illegal in the UK, this includes it's presence in any imported meats. It's prohibition is due to reported adverse effects experienced by consumers including breast development in men and prostate cancer. Screening processes endeavour to keep supermarket shelves free of contaminated meat ensuring the customer's peace of mind.

Last week I was in the Agri Food and Biosciences Institute at Stormont during which I was oddly reminded of my trip. I spent most of the time in the post mortem room, but during quieter periods I was shown round the different labs making up the veterinary sciences division. The labs included the residues department where they receive and screen samples sent from abattoirs for miniscule amounts of illegal and legal drugs found in animals slaughtered before the stated withdrawal period is up. Meat inspectors at the slaughter house are trained to look for injection sites in the muscle and spot animals which look too 'beefy' for their age. Samples are taken from muscle, liver and any other area in which a drug becomes localised. Though

it's unusual to eat them, the eyes are also screened. In this case to test specifically for residues of the drug clenbuterol.

Clenbuterol hydrochloride is the main ingredient in the drug Ventipulmin used to treat respiratory problems in horses. It is available in the UK and is used illegally as a growth promoter in cattle. Effects noted in consumers of such meat are increased pulse rate, palpitations and flu like symptoms. It is for this reason that cattle eyes are screened, but only if the meat inspector suspects some wrong doing.

It is therefore possible for contaminated carcasses to enter the food chain.

I guess it's a matter of trust. For legal drug use withdrawal periods are tried and tested. Residues can be detected in minute amounts. But what happens if one slips through the gaps? And what of other regularly used drugs such as parasite treatments and antibiotics. Many people don't realise that a lot of the antibiotics used in animals are the same as those for humans. Their prophylactic use in farm animal medicine is hastening the development of bacterial resistance in us, the consumer. Next time you need antibiotics they may not be just as effective.

(The Soil Association standards stipulate that all drug withdrawal periods are trebled before the animal can be slaughtered and the use of antibiotics is only as a last resort to protect the animal's welfare).

In Glasgow where I study I shop organically at a small shop on Great Western Road. From there I buy all my vegetables and groceries. I am convinced that I am the best customer they have! Despite this, I do not buy any meat. I'm not a vegetarian (21 years of living with Dad ensures that) and I certainly do not abstain during term time! I simply take vast quantities of meat from home over with me at the beginning of each term. You see, the important thing for me is that the meat is not just up to organic standards but that I know where the animal has come from, that it led a happy life and that I trust the farmer who reared it.

We look forward to seeing you,

Jennifer Gilbert

June 2007

He thinks I don't know about pheromones. But I do and they're doing my head in. He has me in this field with Doris. Just me and Doris and a lot of dozy sheep. You wouldn't believe what sheep eat. Puts me right off lamb. Anyway. Doris. Don't get me wrong, she's a lovely girl. Lovely figure, when she isn't pregnant, and petite – small for an Angus, but flesh in all the right places. The trouble is, she is pregnant. No sex please, I am a pregnant cow. Two days of passion once a year and then forget about it.

I can't forget about it. It's the pheromones. Wafting down the hill and along the road, like some great cloud of gorse scent. I can't actually smell it, but it puts me in the mood for love. What's this? A small, but in the circumstances, not insignificant gap in this otherwise impenetrable hedge.

Just a minute, some barbed wire blocking the way. Worth a try. And with one leap he was free. Superbull or what? Now, where are those cows? What's this? Nine o'clock on a Saturday night, you don't expect to meet some maniac in a jeep. He's slowing. Act casual. As a matter of fact, I do own the road. Evening, lovely night. Just out for a stroll. Nosey git, let's hope he doesn't report me.

Getting out of a field is one thing. Getting back in to another one with all those lovely girls is a different and more difficult challenge. I'll try further along the road. There's that jeep again. Act casual, let it pass. What's going on. Oh bother. It's the bossy man getting out with that German. Just when things might have got interesting. OK,OK. I'm gong I'm going. Back to porridge. No offence Doris. Hold on a minute, look at those toothsome young lovelies in McMinns fields. And old Billy doesn't usually bother much about fences. Bound to be a gap here somewhere. There. You could get a coach and four through there. Piece of cake. Well hello girls!!!! Goodbye bossy man. You will never get me out of here. Heh heh heh! Life can be so good. Now girls, you probably haven't seen a real Man before. I am a small, but I think you will agree, perfectly formed Dexter Bull, with horns and a complete set of wedding tackle. Hitherto, you may have thought a male cow was a bullock. NOT SO. We have the whole night and indeed many days for me to expand on this point.

What's going on? What is that horrible noise? It's coming in the gate. Oh no. I don't believe it! It's a blinking quad. Where did that come from. Bossy man's quad was stolen. Oh no. I haven't even got a sniff of these heifers and this blinking quad is going to pursue me round this field until he gets me out. OK OK !!! I'll come quietly.

Now you see it, now you don't. If I had got out ten minutes earlier, I would have got away with it. Now it's back to the divine Doris. So near yet so far. Hold on a minute, he's opening the gate to the hill field. And there they all are. MY girls. All shapes and sizes. Fourteen calves. That means potentially fourteen cows all pheromoning a way, nineteen to the dozen. Happy, happy days.

Bossy man:

As a matter of fact, it was just one happy night. I dared not put him back in the field whence he came – I had thought it was hermetically sealed and even when I saw from where he must have escaped, I could scarcely believe it. I had to put him somewhere from where he would have no desire to escape. Bear in mind, this was quite late on a Saturday evening. My family were all elsewhere and I had been enjoying a meal lubricated with alcohol when the man in the jeep informed me of the problem. By good fortune he had his son with him and their quad on a trailer – without their help, I shudder to think what might have happened. As a matter of fact, they were out looking for sheep of theirs that had escaped.

The bull was quite right in thinking he could have his wicked way with up to fourteen cows, but the sheer effort involved makes this unlikely, and also it is unlikely that all the cows will be receptive on the same night. I would be surprised if we had more than a couple of early calves, and hopefully we will have none. Even in a small herd such as ours, it is not unheard of to have 15% of the cows calve in one day. It should be said in fairness to the males

of the species, that a cow on heat is not just 'receptive' but usually outrageous. It is just as likely for a cow to break out of a field in search of a bull as vice versa. Heifers with no calf at foot are particularly prone to go walkabout in search of a bull. In these circumstances, fences become meaningless.

We normally try to keep the bull from the cows until the middle of July, which means we start calving nine month and nine days later in late April. This allows us to avoid calving indoors, which is far less hygienic than outdoor calving, and with an easy calving bull, very seldom gives any problems. The only problem calf this year was one born in February which became infected in the cattle house. I have not had to physically intervene (i.e. haul one out) in a calving for some years.

I didn't see the Tonight programme which exposed bad practice on some 'organic' farms which supply poultry to the supermarkets. I did however hear about it. As I understand it, none of the farms involved were Soil Association licencees. The Soil Association does not allow flock sizes anywhere near as big as those shown on the programme. The maximum number of broilers we keep at Ballylagan in any one flock is about forty five birds. Even with the SA one is permitted five hundred or in special circumstances one thousand. Inevitably there is a conflict between the supermarkets desire to provide huge numbers of 'organic' birds and the organic regulations which try to ensure animals are kept in something approaching natural conditions.

I choose to belong to the Soil Association because they remain the most principled certification body, and seem less likely to cow-tow to the whims of the supermarkets. When you sup with the devil, you need a long spoon and this is true whether your supping is by way of being a supplier to, or customer of the supermarkets. I opened the shop originally because I saw no future being just another supplier to the big chains. I hope customers keep coming to us, because they know that we will do nothing in the production of food of which we might be ashamed, and will do nothing which might make us reluctant to eat the food ourselves. Believe me, I am fussy about what I eat – I will not, for example, eat non organic pork or chicken, nor will I eat farmed fish. Restaurants can be tricky.

That said, there are things I would rather you didn't see just at the moment. Our potatoes are almost completely submerged under a carpet of red shank and chickweed. There is a chicken that has been attacked by its mates and is now in isolation. Generally however, the cattle, sheep, and pigs are looking pretty good and since the bull's escape, all but one of the cows has now calved.

You may have been aware of the black cat and two tabby kittens. We have lost about twenty five birds to the attentions of these predators. FREE TO A GOOD HOME – the above mentioned cats.

May 2007

The Mannistrie of Fear .

Those of you who know me, know also how I feel about the Mannistrie o Fairms an Kintra Forderin, for unbelievably this is one of the many multilingual names under which DARD labours.

On Friday of last week, I spent two and a half hours showing the farm to two inspectors from the Countryside Management Scheme, ensuring that I had fulfilled my obligations under the scheme and that I was not defrauding the taxpayer, by for example claiming for 50 metres of new hedge that I hadn't actually planted. As a matter of fact, both inspectors were extremely pleasant and very complimentary about the farm. In one of my letters last year I explained how I had inadvertently contravened part of the scheme and been fined £400 for accidentally ploughing up 0.2 Ha of rushy ground and putting it into wild bird cover. I have been protesting the amount of this fine since but am informed that the Department has no option under the rules of the scheme. I was not altogether surprised to get a second inspection - having kicked up a fuss about the severity of my treatment, I feel my card has been marked. Two and a half hours of my life wasted.

On Monday of this week I had to assist while my pigs were tested for the Department. More time. Yesterday I also had to go into Ballyclare to leave in my IACS/SFP form - and that's a torment in itself. Today I was called by the abattoir asking for information about the vet we use - they need the information for The Department.

I also got a call from the vet where our chickens are slaughtered - I had failed to provide details of the birds life history and it was more than his job's worth to let them through for slaughter unless I could fax through the relevant information.

There is a relentless drip drip drip of demand from the Department, - phone calls, testing, letters, form filling and it is inescapable, especially in a multi-function farm such as this. And of course, these civil servants have the power of life or death over a farm. I have actually had a civil servant pointing to a pig poo in my yard asking what I was going to do about it, as it was a potential threat to the waterways of the countryside. And they hold the whip-hand. No matter how big or small the farm, and no matter how innocent the mistake, in any dealings with The Department it is at the back of your mind that if they want, they can clobber you. For example, if you failed to pick up from the reams of DARD paperwork that cattle over a certain age must be sent to abattoir A rather than abattoir B, the Department can legally slaughter the animals and 'skip' them, that is, put them in a skip, without any compensation.

I have said it before and I say it again - they serve no useful purpose. There are ever more civil servants tormenting ever fewer farmers, pursuing policies that leave the country incapable of producing sufficient food to feed the nation and with much of that food produced in circumstances that were the general public to know of them they probably wouldn't want to eat it anyway. We are paid to be park-keepers, trying to take the countryside to where it was pre-1950. This is clearly madness. Who chose this date? Why not take the countryside back to how it looked before the Plantation? Or before Christ for that matter? Nobody ever seems to question the folly that we are involved in. But then we are dealing with Talmhaidh agus Forbartha Tuaithe, aren't we. Should we expect reason from an organisation that publishes documents in three languages, two of which nobody actually speaks except to annoy someone. (At the risk of being controversial).

It makes me cross.

April 2007

After nearly 5 months my time working at Ballylagan Farm has come to an end. It does not seem long since I arrived on my first day of work, nervous and eager to make a good impression! I have thoroughly enjoyed working here, who could not enjoy working in such a beautiful location. It has also been a pleasure getting to know all those customers who faithfully make the trip up to the farm every week. I hope many more will join them in supporting the farm.

I just want to thank Tom for the opportunity to work for him. His passion for the farm is an inspiration and I want to wish him and the business all the best for the future.

Best Wishes

Catherine

March 2007

Recently we asked customers to fill in a questionnaire for us to allow us to find out what you as customers want and expect from us at Ballylagan Organic Farm. Everyone who completed one was entered into a prize draw to win a bottle of organic wine! At the end of last week the winner was selected. Congratulations to Mrs Greenwood from Whitehead, we hope you enjoyed your bottle of wine. Below is a photo of Tom presenting Mrs Greenwood with her prize in the shop.

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to complete a questionnaire as we received some very useful feedback, and some lovely comments!

February 2007

Dear Customer,

Since I last wrote, one or two events have taken place, the most significant of which is our move to the new shop premises. It's been a long time in the happening, but we and I hope you are pleased with the almost finished product. I say 'almost finished,' but there is still an enormous amount of work to do.

We still have the butchery to finish, serve-over chillers to install, additional shelving to build, a butcher to find, additional organic farmers to locate who are not already contracted to one of the big supermarket chains - and a few minor details like that. The new shop continues to be work in progress - bear with us. (As a matter of fact, I hope it will always be work in progress - if ever you finish developing your business, you're probably finished in business.)

Secondly, those of you who are electronically enabled may well have noticed the relaunch of our website - I hope you like it and if you think there are ways of improving it, let us know.

Thirdly, you may have noticed Catherine working in the shop. Catherine is with us as part of a management training course and regrettably will only be with us for the short term - she is contributing an enormous amount to the business and I am not quite sure how we will survive without her.

Yesterday we had our annual inspection by the Soil Association - speak to anybody in the business, and they will inevitably tell you of how traumatic this is. As the day approaches, you become more and more neurotic about forgetting to enter some detail in your record sheets - did I remember to record the number of times I spread slurry on field 21, did I remember to record which vegetables sold in week 28 were home-grown and which bought in from the wholesaler? Have they changed the rules about the number of centimetres perching space each hen requires in the laying house? Did I remember to get a derogation to buy in day old chicks from a non-organic supplier (yes to most batches, but I forgot one) and was it OK for me to run some pigs I bought from a customer who keeps rare breed pigs (and feeds them organic feed), with my own home reared pigs - a very big no to this. This it turns out is a major non-compliance and may result in the land the pigs are running on being de-scheduled and I may have to re-convert it. I am hoping this will not happen. (There is only one hectare involved but it would be a pain.)

Now whereas, I find this sort of application of the rules annoying, it is after all why I am in the Soil Association - because they do set a high standard and they police it thoroughly.

(More) Events, dear boy, events.

February 2007

An incident this morning.

We were having our breakfast when Matt came in. He glanced out the window and started muttering incoherently. Nothing inherently odd about that, but when he persisted I followed the direction of his gaze. An overturned car was lying in the sheugh behind the hedge that marches with the Ballylagan Road .

For over two years this section of road has been prone to flooding. I have harassed the DOE until I have almost lost the will to live - they respond by from time to time sending people out to look at it. Sometimes they poke a high pressure hose along the culvert under the road; sometimes they photograph it. Once they even diverted the stream to enable them to take better photos. Then they go away again. Exhausted.

A car travelling the road this morning, travelling at what speed I have no idea, hit the water and lost control. Fortunately, miraculously, the driver was unhurt. The photo on the left shows you the extent of the accident and on the right the flood which caused it!

On a more 'farmy' note, our sheep have virtually finished lambing. The lambing itself was mercifully uneventful, but the number of lambs was very disappointing with the fewest number of twins we have ever had. For what reason I do not know. You can see them all in the field on the left as you come from the village.

We have had just one calf so far and it unfortunately would not suck - despite our efforts with stomach tubes and drips, we couldn't rectify it and it died a week after it was born. I have sent it for post mortem to see if there was something inherently wrong.

The pigs are all thriving, and the two sows are now looking well pregnant again - the boar, as ever looks put upon. He gazes at me reproachfully sometimes and I wonder if polygamy is all its cracked up to be.

In the vegetable garden we are approaching the end of last years crops - the carrots, parsnips, cabbages are nearly all done. Purple sprouting broccoli is just starting and the May cauliflowers are looking good. These small harbinger of Spring do not fill the hungry gap, they merely serve to remind how tough things must have been before we were able to ship food in from southern Europe . It always annoys me when so called experts drone on about food miles and then recommend eating locally grown broccoli and courgette in winter. In the Archers the other day Ruth made 'seasonal winter soup' with tomatoes!

I had to go and lie down for half an hour.

January 2007

The Folly of TB Testing Those of you who are regulars at the shop will know the enthusiasm with which I embrace all things to do with our revered Department of Agriculture. At executive level, that is at local or coalface level, the Department is peopled by the most decent and helpful people that one could hope to meet. Apparently under pressure themselves, they are invariably anxious to help farmers wade through the never ending paperwork with which their superiors at Stormont level never tire of bombarding the hapless farmer.

Tomorrow and Friday of this week, I will be undergoing the compulsory TB testing that all beef farms undergo - listeners to the Archers will be familiar with the TB breakdowns that they seem to have regularly at Brookfield. The testing on a small herd such as mine takes up a full day at least once a year, and so far as I am aware, it is a complete waste of tax payer's money.

The reason I say this is because no matter how long or how often they test, it never has any impact at all on the actual rate of TB occurrence. The Department has been carrying out these tests for the last forty years and yet we are regularly advised that TB is on the increase and must therefore think seriously of shooting all badgers, or build double fences two metres apart around the perimeters of our farms. (This to prevent nose to nose contact between beasts on neighbouring farms.)

Like everything else connected with DARD, you, most of whom I assume are tax payers, may rest assured that the testing does not come cheap. The vet

comes out on day one and injects two small doses of serum into the neck of every cow on the farm. Three days later he comes back and using a gauge tests to see if there has been any abnormal reaction. This is all done by private vets under contract to the Department and with all due respect to the vets, it doesn't require much skill. Most of the vets quite enjoy doing it and find it quite relaxing. They are getting paid for it by the government at a guess between £50 and £75 per hour. You and I, the tax payers are funding this grotesque waste of money. It must amount to millions and millions over the years - never mind the massive inconvenience to farmers.

I am reminded of the story of some humans being taken by sharks off the coast of South Africa in the 1950s. The South African Air Force bombed the sea - not because it did any good, but it made people feel better.

Only in the Department of Agriculture could a system of testing designed to eradicate a specific disease, which has failed for over forty years in its only purpose, be pursued with the same grim enthusiasm with which it started.

It makes me cross.

(Since writing the above I have spoken to my daughter Jennifer. As many of you know she is a third year veterinary student and in due course may derive a substantial income from TB testing. I retract all of the above.)

October 2006

Dear Customer,

The wind is in the North. And indeed there is a prodigious amount of it making its way South via Ballylagan just at the moment. I have just returned from outdoors where I have been observing this phenomenon and I can't help feeling that the trees are all looking somewhat surprised at the turn of events. They still hold an astonishing burden of leaves, most of which are still unseasonably green. These of course enhance the sail effect of the canopy and that, coupled with the strength of the wind from a relatively unusual direction make them look a bit stretched. Stretched trees can look a bit scary.

That said, it is the most glorious day, with the sun if not blazing, at least shining in adversity and as I look out from where I write this letter, I am once again inspired by the sheer intensity of the greens in sunlight. My Spanish master at school told us of how he listened to an elderly Spaniard, sitting in a village bar in the midst of the baking Spanish desert. Over and over he muttered one word - 'verde, verde, verde...' Green, green, green.

Thus I fall to contemplating our apple trees, which are only a few metres from the window. When we planted them, I thought it would be an easy enough task to keep the grass between them short by mowing, and in due course as they became established, we would let sheep and even pigs graze amongst them. Of course, the temptation to graze the sheep in amongst the trees rapidly became too great and so we rigged up protective cages to ensure the sheep would do no harm.

This worked up to a point. For a long period during this summer's drought, apple tree and sheep lived in harmony. And then one day it rained, and the

weight of water on the tender young branches inclined them just enough to come within the reach of the voracious maws of the sheep.

It's funny how you can go off sheep.

I won't bore you with the other disasters that have befallen the apple trees, but amazingly, I think they are all going to survive.

As I wrote this, a little robin appeared on the wall beside me, within touching distance. Winter's coming, he said.

The more observant of you may have noticed the new shop is structurally complete - more or less. Inevitably people assume the delay in moving in is caused by some shortcoming on behalf of our builder. Not so. In fact our builder in this department anyway is without sin and I would unhesitatingly recommend him. What is causing delay is largely due to me not getting the i's dotted and the t's crossed as quickly as I should. Though this has been exacerbated by the indifference and arrogance of Northern Ireland Electricity and various shopfitting companies that are too busy to return calls or keep appointments.

Meantime on the farm. Both our sows did finally produce piglets. The gilt (a young female pig who has not hitherto given birth) astonished all by keeping her figure more or less right up to the moment of delivery. Thus she had her litter while still to some extent sharing a bed with her young man. The boar was rapidly removed, though whether he would have done any harm in fact, I simply don't know. In the meantime, the slightly older sow became every day more enormous and her udder more pendulous. She held on for another couple of weeks. The gilt has eight piglets and the sow six. Pigs are my favourite farm animal, the elite beast. I like them because they are clean, by and large less inclined to get ill than any other, they taste fantastic and they make me laugh.

I would remind you that the pigs we keep here are without exception rare old British breeds, and the only way such breeds will be able to continue is by people like you continuing to buy and eat them. If you weren't eating them, I wouldn't keep them. When I take them up to the slaughterhouse, it is with considerable pride that I unload them from the trailer. Compared with the miserable, excrement smeared, sometimes invalid creatures delivered in lorries containing maybe two hundred pigs, my pigs, the pigs you eat when you buy Ballylagan pork and bacon, are a joy to behold.

By the time you read this, the few remaining cattle still out in the fields will be probably tucked up in their winter quarters. Some people are under the misapprehension that we bring them indoors because they don't like the cold. This is not true. They are brought in to protect the land, which at this time of year gets very soft and prone to poaching. As a matter of fact, the cattle are delighted to be brought in, and in the days leading up to their internment will roar hopefully at any passing human, begging to be brought in. (By next April, they will be begging to get out again.) We had a good crop of calves this year, including a rather surprising red Dexter - mother and father are both black as your boot, so red is a bit of a surprise. It's in the genes.

There has also been a good crop of lambs, another batch of which are going to slaughter this week. Some of these will be available as whole lambs at the special price of £6.50/kg. this is less than the price of minced lamb and is a bargain. A whole lamb fits in a box no bigger than a case of wine, and would fit easily in your freezer.

We finally got all the grass cut and despite the poor crop in the middle of the year (too much sun, not enough rain!), we should have enough to see us through.

We have ten acres of land in conversion at the moment, and this is sown down in kale and quinoa. This is not for human consumption, but is intended to offer food and cover to wild birds and believe it or not is funded by the Countryside Management Scheme. We also used this scheme over the last winter to plant several hundred more trees and about 150 metres of new hedge. By and large, it's all looking pretty good.

This has been our best year in the vegetable garden. The onions, carrots, spuds, leeks, parsnips and cabbage have all done exceptionally well - I defy you to buy better tasting vegetables anywhere. We are picking the last of the courgette and cucumbers this week, but we have still to start the Jerusalem artichoke. Unusually, we have mouli, or Chinese radish and later on we will have black Spanish radish. If you ever have the misfortune to watch that dreadful McKeith woman on the TV, you will maybe have observed the sheer variety of foods she forces on her unfortunate victims. As someone once said, you should try everything once, except I believe incest and clog dancing. The point being, that it is by eating a variety of foods that we are most likely to provide the body with what it needs.

Until recently, we have had all our chickens processed by a small, local processor in Ballyeaston. Recently he had his water rates re-assessed and was advised as of next year, his bill would increase by £20,000. Needless to say he shut up the slaughtering side of his business. A victory I guess for the environment, but another nail in the coffin of the small scale food producer.

Until we get our own poultry slaughtering operation underway, we will have to take our birds about 40 miles to Dunloy. We then go back again two days later to collect the birds. We only slaughter a maximum of forty birds at a time, so it doesn't take a genius to work out that this is not economically sustainable. By the way, the Dunloy operation is an excellent little family run business - also being squeezed relentlessly by the ever increasing burden of red tape and government regulation. It seems only a matter of time before they too give up and get jobs in a more efficient large scale plant.

On a happier note, the chap who owns the business told me that when the government veterinary inspector saw our first batch of birds, she forbade their slaughter. A Spanish vet, she exclaimed 'You cannot slaughter those birds, they are too beautiful!'

We look forward to seeing you,

Tom Gilbert

November 2005

While I am on the subject of Salt:

Am I the only one who gets fed up with the constant criminalization of salt? Possibly there is a doctor out there who can put me right on this, but is it not true that the overwhelming majority of people can eat salt until it comes out of their ears without any ill effects whatever - with most people excess salt simply passes through their bodies harmlessly? Yet because a minority of people have a genuine intolerance, all of us are threatened with dire consequences if we eat more than the government recommended ration a day. I quote from Jeffrey Steingarten's 'The Man Who Ate Everything':

Some people are extremely sensitive to salt; their blood pressure goes way up when they eat it and way down when they don't. Of the 20% of Americans who develop hypertension, about one-third of them are salt sensitive - about 8% of the population. They should avoid it, as should people with congestive heart failure, liver disease or kidney disease. If you have high blood pressure, you probably know it already; ask your doctor to help you find out whether you are salt sensitive.

But the other 92% of us can handle just about all the salt we feel like eating. Why public-health officials would want the entire population to act as if we were allergic to salt is beyond me, especially since nobody has ever been able to demonstrate that moderate salt restriction makes much of a difference to anyone. It's like making everyone wear eyeglasses just because a few of us need them.

By the way, I'm very fond of mono-sodium-glutamate as well, and suspect that it also has been needlessly vilified.

While I am on the subject of the nanny state - what right has the government to restrict the amount of paracetamol and or aspirin I buy. It drives me insane that it is illegal for the pharmacist to sell more than sixteen tablets at a time - that's two days supply if you are taking the recommended dosage. If you have a genuine dose of the 'flu, with a temperature of 103, your muscles aching and your bones feeling like they've been recycled from a Roman tomb, you don't need a two day supply of aspirin, you need a week's.

As a matter of fact I buy paracetamol every week for my ancient old Mum and it would be a lot easier to buy a month's supply at a time. Currently this would seem to require written permission from Tony Blair.