


THE WORLD IS A BUNDLE OF HAY



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‘If we are to enjoy life to the full we must be aware of the beauty and value of the commonplace, and of the interconnectedness of everything.’



It seemed appropriate to use the traditional measures of feet, yards and miles for this story. For readers who are not familiar with these, one inch is twenty-five millimetres, one foot is about thirty centimetres, one yard is about ninety centimetres, and one mile is a little more than one and a half kilometres. An acre is about half a hectare. One pound weight is about half a kilogram and a ton is about one thousand kilograms. A dozen is the number twelve and was a common traditional base used for counting and calculation.



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CONTENTS

1 The Country	9
2 The Grass	24
3 The Ricks	41
4 Self-sufficiency	63
5 Winter	92
6 The Farmhouse	117
7 Winter Work	149
8 Some Winter Jobs	173
9 The Milk Factory	201
10 Boundaries	219
11 Spring	254
Notes	272



1 The Country

Existing precariously between sky and water the Somerset Levels have special qualities. Stamp your foot on the earth in winter or spring and you will feel the ground tremble and hear the water gurgling and undulating all round you, only inches below the surface. Dig a hole – or a grave – more than a foot deep and it will immediately fill with water. The flat land, with few trees other than large hawthorn bushes, may distort your sense of physical proportion so that walking across a twenty acre field with the complete semicircle of sky above, you will sometimes have the curious feeling of being ten feet tall. As the moist air cools on a clear night a vapour grows mysteriously out of the soil, forming a white layer of mist perhaps only two feet deep, obscuring your feet, while above is a bright moon which lights up the surface of the mist with just a hint of the colours of a rainbow; there is a magical feeling that you are walking on a cloud and kicking it away, like autumn leaves, as you walk.¹

Because of the unseen moisture the air has a soft and somnolent quality; it is mixed with scents



of many things: water peppermint, meadowsweet, willow leaves, the chamomile in the stony gateways, the may blossom, the sweet breath of cattle, warm milk; and everywhere the grass and hay. All is lightly salted by the presence of the sea. The senses become confused – that sudden movement of reeds by a breeze: did you hear it or did you smell it? To hear a skylark sing was like a sweet taste on the tongue; working in the fields we would all stop and look up and search for that small speck in the immensity of blue; then someone would shout, ‘There he is,’ and we would each get on with our job. Why we felt compelled to satisfy ourselves of the bodily source of that singing I don’t know, but somehow we felt more contented for it.

My chemistry tutor at university specialised in finding the chemicals that make up the scents of natural things – and, in his spare time, in making a photographic collection of misericords. He told us that behind the principal chemical of a scent there was always another and another, like the harmonies and sub-harmonies of a plucked string, so that he could never reproduce completely a scent in all its subtlety, which is why the scented products that we buy often seem harsh. I wondered what he would make of the smells of



our countryside which formed a whole symphony of scents vibrating on the air – very *pianissimo* of course, for the acrid smells of modern intensive farming were not present then. People look at me very oddly when I complain sometimes that the limestone uplands which constitute so much of southern England are dry and have no smell.

With the beauty came hard work. The Levels are threatened by drainage water from the hills to the north – the North Water – and by the sea. Over many centuries men and women have toiled to dig drainage channels, large and small, with various names: gutters, ditches, rhines, pills, cuts, drains; a collective effort which is said to be equal to that of building the pyramids, but which has been far more useful, and yet is unassuming. As Oscar Wilde might have said, how long can you enjoy the contemplation of a pyramid? But the fascination of those quiet watercourses was sufficient for a lifetime.

To make a living out of that watery and vulnerable land was hard work too. My science master, who came from bustling Hertfordshire, used to tell us that Somerset people were very nice, but they were half asleep most of the time. He blamed the air; but perhaps if he had started work at five-thirty in the morning and worked a

fourteen-hour day, and seventeen or eighteen at haymaking and harvest, he would have been half asleep. But the people were not in fact sleepy in that way; they had merely learned to pace themselves to the rhythm of their work to get through the long day. Certainly they lived by the maxim of putting off till tomorrow what you don't have to do today, but unfortunately there was a great deal that had to be done every day. Yet they still found time and energy to grow their gardens and to set up many village activities.

Kenneth Galbraith, the American economist, grew up on a farm, as did a number of United States intellectuals; he observed that the good thing about growing up on a farm was that nothing else seemed like hard work ever after.² On a Dorsetshire farm where I worked one summer, the cowman started work at four o'clock in the morning; he fed and milked a hundred and twenty cows and sent off the milk by nine o'clock. He had done five hours arduous and continuous work *before breakfast*. He then helped with farm work all morning and did the second milking in the afternoon. At harvest time he helped with the harvesting until maybe ten o'clock at night. Life was a little easier for the rest of us, although not much, since we started work only at six. That

was seven days a week, except that there was no harvesting on Sundays for the farmer belonged to a strict Christian sect.

On the Levels, seventy years ago, it was the best of times and it was not the worst of times. After a century of struggle farm labourers' conditions were fair. Support for agriculture during and after the war gave farmers security and a reasonable prosperity. But at that time our familiar operations and skills had scarcely changed for centuries. Everything was done by muscle power – our own and that of the horses. I still have a rather eccentric idea that to do something by machine and not by hand is somehow unreal. I may not be quite alone, however, in this conceit for there are rich people who will pay large premiums for furniture which is truly handmade. Perhaps we all like to imagine we could survive in a world without machines.

We had two horses: a powerful and temperamental black Shire, called Prince, for heavy work and a smaller and more amenable Bay, Michael, for lighter work. The only external energy we used was the paraffin to light our lamps indoors and our hurricane lamps in the farm buildings, plus some coal for the fire. The grass crop does not suffer much from pests, as arable

crops do, so there was no need for pesticides; weeds were controlled by cultivation or by cutting; and such fertilizers as were used were naturally occurring minerals: lime to control soil acidity and, in case of phosphorous deficiency, basic slag, a by-product of the iron industry.



But this largely self-sufficient life was on the cusp of change under the pressures of wartime and afterwards to increase the nation's supply of home-grown food, and by a desire for improved standards of living. Mechanisation and new materials introduced new and somewhat easier ways of doing things. Of course, self-sufficiency was an illusion anyway – it always is. The milk we produced was hauled off by powerful engines

to help sustain industrial cities and those cities in turn sustained our nation; and they also provided much that we needed. But such places were largely outside our awareness; we existed mostly in a self-contained cycle which had changed little.

I feel very fortunate to have experienced that life just before it was coming to an end and to have been able to acquire many of its necessary skills. Like Hardy's Egdon Heath, it was and is ballast for the mind. If it was not entirely self-sufficient it was, in the modern jargon, sustainable and therefore, for me at any rate, intensely real and satisfying, whereas a modern large city gives me a deep sense of unreality. My uncle had a small farm which my grandmother had set up for him, partly I think – and who can blame her after the waste and slaughter of the Great War – so that he would not have to be a soldier, since agriculture, like mining, was a protected occupation. At first he employed young trainees from London sent by the Young Men's Christian Association or YMCA who fancied – or perhaps their mentors fancied – they might take to farming. But none of them stayed and as I grew to a useful age it suited him and me that I should become a casual worker for him. For me the arrangement provided a welcome small income, since he paid me at full rates, while



giving plenty of time for my studies and a great deal of physical activity and satisfaction and pride in my work as well. For him the advantage was that he gained most of the assistance he needed, but did not have the expense and bother of employing a full-time workman.

The arrangement was flexible, but there were certain obligations, one being that I should always be available for the haymaking each year. I helped with every task from hauling dung onto the fields in winter, and harrowing the pastures in the spring, to mowing, to thatching the ricks and feeding the hay to cattle in the winter. At other times I trimmed field hedges, dug ditches, repaired fencing and renewed gates and gateposts, pollarded the willows, mended farm buildings and carried out basic maintenance on the tractor when my uncle belatedly bought one. I was not so keen on work with the animals, but I could help with a calving or do a milking when he spent a day at the cattle market.

As we worked we often talked, for he was an intelligent man with a deep curiosity.³ Although he had taken to farming well enough, following his mother's persuasion, it was not the career he had wanted for himself; but my grandmother was a strong-willed matriarch who tried to control



all of us by division and by creating mutual and quite unnecessary suspicions. My experience of this has led me to avoid as far as possible all forms of intrigue and situations where intrigue is required. In many ways he was not a typical farmer, although I confess I'm not sure what a typical farmer would be; that acute observer of the countryside, Richard Jeffries, writing in 1880 in *Hodge and his Masters*, argues that: 'In manners, mode of thought, and way of life, there is perhaps no class of the community less uniform than the agricultural. The diversities are so marked as to amount to contradictions.'

Our country had just won a world war and in the process had bankrupted itself, so it was a time of pride combined with austerity; improvisation and the acquisition of second-hand items – greatly assisted by cheap and abundant 'war surplus' – were admirable abilities then and for me still are. Nearly everything manufactured was destined for export; even the rich could not legally buy new cars and when eventually these did become available there was a waiting list of months and no choice of colour. My uncle was especially interested in politics and would often ask me what I thought about this or that thing that the government had done or about the causes

and conduct of the war and of the Cold War. His accounts of the disastrous inflation in Weimar Germany made a particular impression on me and I have had a fear of inflation ever since; I can never respect any politician who talks of it lightly. We did not discuss the frivolous topics that are so much liked in the modern office: there was no television at first and when it did come the most exciting thing was whether a certain Gilbert Harding, dressed in a dinner-jacket of course, might exhibit a little grumpiness on a polite quiz show called *What's My Line*; footballers were modest men who knew how to behave and earned modest wages; the private lives of film stars and royalty were discreetly hidden; there were no pop stars in the modern sense, unless you count the likeable Vera Lynn or Bing Crosby, and the iconoclastic Rock and Roll had not yet arrived. Much more interesting than those sorts of things were developments in farm machinery or techniques, the visitations and obtuseness of agricultural bureaucrats, market prices or the activities of other farmers past and present. Occasionally there were dramatic local events such as rick fires or flooded pastures; and always worth retelling was the calamitous outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the thirties when

funeral pyres dominated the country and which we thought then we should never see again.⁴

Naturally we talked a good deal about farming activities and how they related to the character of the landscape: how, for example, the heavy clay soils – which could change from being a sticky goo to rock-like lumps in a week – were not really suited to the arable farming which we had been compelled to practise during the war, or at least not with the cultivating power then available. I think that experience explained why my uncle and others did not, as a balanced dairy farm should, grow kale or mangolds as supplementary rations, but bought in modest amounts of concentrated supplements to support milk yields. This did not mean that the fields were mere ‘exercising grounds’ for supplement-fed animals, as many old pastures had been before the war. On the contrary: the grass and hay crops were well-managed and formed the entire maintenance ration and part of the production ration for the stock.⁵

On this point my uncle delighted in telling of the cows he had owned in the economically depressed period of the nineteen-thirties: animals which would produce long lactations and good milk yields on few or no supplements and which were well-suited to the traditional practice, which

he favoured, of low-input-low-output farming. The key to survival in the 'thirties was to minimize outgoing expenditure, a principle which persisted with him even in better times. While the Friesian breed, which became popular with progressive farmers and advisers after the war, produced higher yields, they required a corresponding higher level of feeding and he always argued that they would not have been capable of supporting him under those more difficult conditions. I sometimes wondered whether this was a romantic nostalgia on his part, but eighteenth century writers describe breeds – or rather local types – of cow, such as the Suffolk Dun, that were noted for their good production of milk from plain fodder. There was a poignancy in all this for he treated his cows almost as pets – he always called them ladies – and it had been a great blow to him when he had been required to assist as they were killed and incinerated in that outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. In a sense this event represented the end of the heroic stage of his farming career.

He was a good judge of milking cattle and bought whatever he thought would do well, whatever its colour, although he favoured Dairy Shorthorn characteristics and most of his cows were roans or brindles (that is flecked with white

or grey) of various shades from red to blue, purple or black. There were also a couple of black and white Friesians to boost yields, a placid cream-coloured Guernsey to raise the butterfat average, a hardy red and white Ayrshire from Scotland and even a brick-coloured Red Poll, another adaptable but uncommon breed. He liked to observe and compare their qualities. They were all individuals and to a modern eye would have lacked a desirable uniformity, but we rather liked the picturesque variety; they all had horns of course. The cows certainly were not pedigree stock and some were cross-bred; maybe they had the genes of some of those old breeds which unfortunately had been allowed to become extinct. Now, in the twenty-first century, there is a renewed interest in the sustainability qualities of traditional breeds of farm animal as well as a feeling that the pursuit of very high milk yields is a cruel practice.

These cows produced the milk and the calves which together were the sole source of income for the farm and accordingly they were always treated well. They in turn depended for their existence almost entirely on the grass of the fields and on the hay which was made from it, so that the quality and quantity of production were largely controlled by the management of

the grass and its successful conservation as high quality hay. Anyone who has attempted to do a practical job properly or to invent something that works will understand that there are refinements and subtleties – and satisfactions – involved which are not immediately obvious, rather as in the game of cricket. We analysed our tasks: how they were done and why, how they used to be done and how other people did them. Many of these refinements had a practical purpose; others were employed to demonstrate perfect control and neatness and accuracy in what was being done, or to add interest and satisfaction to what would otherwise have been repetitive jobs; and there was always a satisfaction in impressing other farmers.

Because of the curious local pattern of land ownership our work was usually open to public gaze. It was good when someone said, 'That's a neat job,' and not as nice to hear, 'He made a funny job of that'. The tools we used were products of long evolution, in some cases to near perfection. There were right ways and wrong ways to handle them and sharpen them safely and effectively. When some years later I taught myself wood turning there were many books with fine photos and pretty designs, but only one that I know of where the author (F.Pain) seemed to stand beside

me and suggest that I held the chisel just so to sharpen it; or that the fast-revolving timber would react to the chisel in such a way; and above all not to scrape the wood thoughtlessly, but to cut intelligently. Traditional farm work needed to be considered in a similarly intelligent way.

elelele



2 The Grass

‘Make hay while the sun shines,’ advises the old saying – which suggests that it is a good thing to be making hay and that you must do it while you can. Like much traditional wisdom, this proverb has lost its original force and meaning for most of us today, living as we do in a cushioned and opportunistic age. But the great struggle to make and store sufficient hay to feed farm and draft animals throughout the winter months has been a crucial part of sustainable farming and the foundation of national economies in northern Europe for centuries. Hay is only dried grass; yet that word ‘only’ is misleading, for to preserve large quantities of dried grass for many months and perhaps years required traditional skills, many of which are now forgotten.

We may think we live in an iron age, a coal age, a plastics age or even an atomic age, but our civilisation is still based essentially on grass and on the large family of plants which botanists call the grasses, or the *Graminae*. In this group of plants are found all our cereals – wheat, barley, oats and rye – and these have been developed

by selection from natural grass ancestors which grew in the wilds of Asia Minor only a few thousand years ago and which may still be found there as extreme rarities; by analysing the genes of modern varieties these ancestors can be reconstructed. Even the exotic rice plant which forms the basic diet of half the world's population is in this wider sense a grass. So too is the corn or maize plant which supported the ancient civilisations of Central America although in this case, uniquely and strangely, no wild ancestor has ever been found. The bamboo plant which is used for many traditional crafts and constructions in the East is a grass. So also is the sugar cane which was the basis of the economies of the West Indies until the European Union forced us to use French sugar beet instead. Most of the animals which provide our meat, milk, cheese and eggs have traditionally been fed on grass, hay, grain or straw. Bread, pastry, pasta and spaghetti are all made from cereals. The world does indeed seem to be a bundle of grass, if not always of hay.

Lord Byron wrote in a short poem that, 'The world is a bundle of hay, and mankind the asses that pull'. Did he mean 'pull' as when a donkey pulls a cart of hay or some other burden? Or did he picture an animal using its mouth to pull out



its sustenance from a bundle of hay? Perhaps he meant both; for while we must serve the grass for a year, it then, like some ancient Minoan king, is sacrificed for us. The main character of this story is the grass; it is my task to tell it, but it is not my story.



Farming on the Somerset plains seventy years ago was a microcosm of a larger world. It was a pastoral grassland economy where the fortunes of human families ebbed and flowed and ultimately depended on how well the grass grew each spring and summer.

Over his desk our woodwork master had an old carved plaque which, from my memory, read something like: *'O waes hael Somer-saetan'*. We didn't know whether it was good Anglo-Saxon or not, but he told us that it meant 'Oh the green hills of Somerset'. (An expert in Anglo-Saxon tells me it probably was meant to say 'Greetings – or good health – Summer-settlers'.) The master further told us that the name Somerset meant 'land of the summer people' and that many years ago its inhabitants would retreat each winter to live on the surrounding hills – the Mendips, the



Quantocks and the Poldens – when the low-lying central plain experienced its annual flooding. We could understand that, for it still flooded then, although not perhaps as badly, despite hundreds of years of drainage works which had been started by the Abbots of the rich Abbey of Glastonbury and carried on more recently and more prosaically by the Somerset Drainage Board.

When the spring returned and the waters receded and the soft peats and sticky clays were firm enough to bear the weight of their animals' hooves, the summer people would migrate from the hills to spend the summer fattening their small flocks and herds on the free and abundant grasses and herbs under those wide and spacious skies which only flatlands can offer. We can imagine these people finding their old camp-sites from the years before; perhaps they made temporary shelters from the pliant and sweet-smelling white willows and from the reeds which are still used for thatching today. It seems likely that it would have been a happy time with young animals and milk and meat in good supply. The herdsmen, like herdsmen everywhere, would be content to see their animals regaining condition and fattening on the lush grasses after the privations of winter. Such seasonal migrations are what geographers

like to call *transhumance*. The best-known example of this process occurs in the Swiss Alps where animals and people move up to the high mountain pastures each spring once the snows have melted.

Within this winter sea, however, were islands on which settlements developed. Some of these islands were natural outliers of the rocks of the surrounding hills. Some are still locally called 'isles' today – although they are no longer true islands – and official maps used to name them as such. There is the Isle of Wedmore where King Alfred signed his famous treaty with the Dane, Guthrum, and so established Anglo-Saxon rule in what is now southern England, and Christianity everywhere. The less prominent Isle of Athelney was where Alfred had earlier hidden himself throughout one perilous winter as the invading Danes rampaged over the whole country, while Anglo-Saxon control was for a time reduced to these few small acres protected by the flooded reedy marshland. The most famous island among all these is the Isle of Glastonbury with its impressive and evocative ruined abbey. Glastonbury is sometimes named on maps as the Isle of Avalon because of its supposed association with the fabled King Arthur. The Tor of Glastonbury, a medieval church tower without

a church, set on a conical hill, can be seen from miles around in the flat landscape as an evocative symbol of the past.

On the marshes themselves and well over two thousand years ago other, artificial, islands were laboriously constructed, presumably for security: these were the now famous Lake Villages with their associated secret trackways and their punt-shaped boats dug out of solid tree-trunks. Outlines of these villages and their huts can still be seen faintly on the face of the land and their boats and other things in local museums. Perhaps they represented early attempts to live on the marshes all year round, or they may suggest that there were disputes over the land each summer; it is possible that the times were not so idyllic after all. But as the drainage improved and floods became less prolonged, individual farmsteads were set up and life became more settled, though there were still vestiges of transhumance to be found in the farming of seventy years ago.

As well as the major drainage courses, 'pills' and 'rhines' of the strategic schemes, minor ditches were dug to define field boundaries as enclosures took place over the centuries, while in the fields themselves systems of small gutters were also dug out, all forming a networked system in the



continual fight to avoid being overwhelmed by the water, and in total representing an enormous task of manual labour. As bushes and trees established themselves informally along the banks of the drainage channels the familiar and historical landscape of the Somerset Levels was formed. It seems strange to me to write about fields for we always called these enclosed areas 'grounds', whether in specific names such as Home Ground, Moor Ground or Square Ground or as a general term. The word comes from the Old English '*grund*' meaning surface of the earth, especially as distinct from the sky, and perhaps its use reflects a consciousness of that vulnerable and precious surface between air and water.



A farmer or smallholder sitting in church or chapel on a June Sunday seventy years ago, scrubbed and self-conscious, would have his mind on his grass, cut and drying in one of his grounds (or fields), and his eye on the sky outside, wondering whether the weather would stay fine tomorrow. The doings of the ancient Hebrews, with their flocks and herds and pastures, as read out perhaps in the first lesson from the Old



Testament, would seem very real to him. The beautiful poetry of the Authorized Version of The Bible would have great poignancy: 'As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth'.

Why, you may wonder, were those farmers in church while the sun was shining, and not outside making hay? Seventy years ago and for long before that, especially in country areas, there was a strong sabbatarian feeling. 'Six days shalt thou labour...' and on the seventh rest; the ancient Ten Commandments were, even now, written on the chancel wall in front of their eyes.

Some from conviction, most perhaps from social or family pressure, would not like to be seen carrying out unnecessary work on a Sunday. Of course cows had to be milked and animals fed, but only an un-godly fringe would harvest on a Sunday. The convention was strongest among the nonconformists: the Methodists and Baptists; the West Country had long been stoutly nonconformist. But ever since Queen Elizabeth the First had required everyone to attend Church on Sundays, that compulsion was also felt by Anglicans. The larger farmers were the leaders in the local community and a popular vicar could deploy moral and social pressures on them,



and especially on their wives, to attend church although the proscription against actual labour was not as strong among Anglicans.

The custom of church attendance was justified in various ways quite apart from edicts of God or Queen; in true protestant fashion, reasons were sought. It was argued that God looked after the righteous, although a study of that same bible and not least the story of Job did not in truth support this naïve idea. Maybe if the righteous appeared to prosper it was because they were careful about where they spent their money. Then there was the opposite argument of Divine punishment. A man in the village had been knocking down an old wall one Sunday morning; it fell on him and killed him. He left behind a wife and two young children. 'There,' it was whispered, 'he was working on the Sabbath!' It seemed a harsh Old Testament God who would punish a widow and orphans for the supposed sins of their man, yet it was surprising how many apparently kindly people held this view. The idea was reinforced by myth; children were taught that the old man in the moon, whose face we can all see when the moon is full, was banished there because he had gathered sticks for his fire on a Sunday.

There was another side to this argument



of course. In a time when labour was long and hard and holidays few, the restriction on Sunday working was a welcome relief: if not for the farmer worried about his hay, then certainly for his workers. That the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath had a different resonance in harder and simpler times. Some workers, supposedly because of their religious beliefs, would refuse to work on a Sunday, except to provide necessary care for the animals. Some farmers would not employ such a person. Others, however, might prefer someone who shared their beliefs and who would not expect extra overtime on Sundays. Robert Stevenson, grandfather of Robert Louis Stevenson, experienced similar problems among his Calvinistic workmen when building the famous Bell Rock lighthouse, though every day of fine weather and hour of low tide was precious if the work was to be made secure before the next storm.

These arguments, for most people at least, seem arcane today and such a society may appear to have been intolerant. Yet the very fact of these differences existing side by side demonstrates that in a deeper sense the society was tolerant; no one was persecuted for their beliefs and, while birds of the same feather generally flocked together,

in an emergency anyone would be helped. But these differences were important then: they could determine employment; they influenced who mixed with whom; and sometimes they determined when the hay would be 'got in'.

So the farmer of seventy years ago would have mixed feelings, veering from righteousness to rebellion, as he sat in church on a fine day, watching the dancing golden daylight cooled and stilled by the stained glass of the slender windows, vaguely aware that he was part of a tradition that stretched back in time hundreds or maybe thousands of years. Neither he nor anyone could have foreseen that in a generation many of his skills would be obsolete. His mind would be on the more immediate future – would Monday bring a week of fine weather or of bad?

Farming textbooks describe haymaking as an uncertain process although the aims are easily stated. It is to dry the grass quickly so that its nutrient value is preserved and to achieve just that moisture content at which it will neither rot in storage nor, more dramatically, overheat and burst into flames. When the weather is exceptionally fine – as in a period of heat wave or a 'real haymaker' – three days might be sufficient. The grass is mown the first day, starting early in

the morning, and lies under the intense heat of the sun for most of that day so that by the evening the process of drying is well begun. Sometime the next day it will be judged fit for 'turning'; the neat rows of drying grass are turned over, either by hand or by machine, so that the still-green underside is now exposed. Late on the third day it may be ready for 'carrying' to be formed into a rick in a corner of the ground or for 'loading' on to wagons to be transported to the farmyard. This was a laborious and time-consuming process and perhaps would run into a fourth day. Conditions are rarely as ideal as this however. Often damp cloudy weather intervenes, or even days of heavy rain. The green grass fails to 'turn' colour into golden hay and may even begin to rot where it lies. One day's delay before the fine weather breaks up may result in a lost week or even a lost crop. The fickleness of the English summer weather is well-known.

The critical point – the bottleneck – in livestock farming is always the late winter: has enough fodder been stored to feed the animals through this period when grass does not grow because of the cold? Our history books used to say glibly that in the Middle Ages all the animals had to be killed in the autumn because of lack of winter

fodder. No doubt beasts that were in any case to be slaughtered for meat would be best killed at the end of the autumn grazing season and their meat salted down or dried. But when it is remembered that a cow carries her calf in her womb for about as long as a human mother, three-quarters of a year, and that a heifer or young cow would not breed until nearly two years old, and that a cow rarely has more than one calf, then simple arithmetic shows that many cattle needed to be fed through the winter if the herd was to survive. Then there were the highly trained horses of the rich and the shared draught-oxen of the poor, although admittedly the survival of the peasants' more prolific and omnivorous pigs would be less dependent on stored supplies.

Seventy or eighty years ago it was the dried grass, the hay, which provided the major part of the store of winter fodder in the low-input-low-output sustainable farming system that was practised on the Somerset Plain. Agriculture is the wonderful process of the trapping and harnessing of the energy of the sun to make food. This is truly 'solar energy' although we tend to think of that now only in terms of electricity production. It is not of course the energy used to dry the hay that is mainly important, but the capture

and storage of energy during the plant's growth through the natural process of photosynthesis: literally 'building up from light'. In twenty-first century agriculture on the other hand it has been said that more energy is sometimes put in as fuel and chemicals than the energy value of the food which is produced.

In the 1930s, during the agricultural depression following the end of the First World War, the economics of agriculture were marginal. Many farmers turned to dairying precisely because the inputs were low and because the government's Milk Marketing Board ensured a regular market and payment for their product. The watery grasslands of the Somerset Plain where 'the grass always grows'⁶ were ideal for this enterprise, but even so the margins between survival and bankruptcy were thin. A farmer who found he did not have sufficient hay to see him through the winter would be forced either to sell some animals at this time when prices would be low or to buy hay at a high price. He might try to 'take up', that is to borrow, money from a bank or more likely from a solicitor to tide him over, but that would just increase his outgoings and if the spring was late that year and the grass did not grow on time he would be deeper into difficulty.

As I am writing this I have just read that the weather in 2010 has caused a hay and straw shortage; that hay prices are up by twenty to forty per cent; that theft of hay is an increasing problem and that hay prices might increase by fifty per cent by the beginning of 2011. A radio item has recounted how a dairy farmer in Kent has been put out of business because the unusually dry summer meant there was no grass in the fields for his cows and he was forced to use up his store of the silage (another form of conserved grass) intended for the coming winter. With insufficient feed for the winter he sensibly quit before getting deeper into trouble. It would not have been an easy decision to give up a whole way of life.

Having neglected its farmers and relied on imported food, Britain had found itself in a very serious situation during the Second World War when German U-boats were sinking large numbers of merchant ships. After the war the government this time adopted a policy of agricultural support. Farmers used to say the two best things that happened to British agriculture were Adolf Hitler and Tom Williams, the minister who brought in the support policy. Even so, the habits of careful husbandry, parsimony even, persisted. The farmer in church would doubtless

some time have heard the biblical parable of the wise and foolish virgins: those who had made sure they had sufficient oil for their lamps and those who had not. He would want to have sufficient hay.

However, for the milking-cows brought into sheds for the winter, the hay would need to be supplemented in some way. This might be with the more juicy goodness of mangolds or turnips: root crops developed by eighteenth century pioneers of agriculture such as 'Turnip' Townsend, the Earl of Leicester. Alternatively (and more conveniently, since the turnips would have to be cultivated as an arable crop) some 'concentrates' might be bought in the form of pressed 'cake' from oilseed processing; but hay was still the staple feed both in cheapness and quantity. Young animals which were not yet productive were often fed only on hay, together with such vegetation as they could scavenge in the fields where they were pastured through the cold winter months with little shelter.

Our farmer in church may have cut his grass yesterday or the day before and is now thinking he should be turning it today. Or perhaps he turned it yesterday and would like to be loading it now because he fears the weather will be wet

tomorrow. Maybe he is expecting a few days of settled weather and wishes he could gain a day by being out mowing instead of sitting through a church service. But, despite religion and weather, there was always enough determination to make sure the hay was made.

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