

HEAR ABOUTS

An anthology of two of our most
popular columns

Hayheck

and

Rural View

by **Michael Stafford**

Vol 1: March 2008 - June 2009

If you are reading this following a week of sunshine, then you probably can not remember the first three weeks of April. Well, let me remind you. They were wet. Wet. WET. I remember it raining every day. I remember being backed up with too many lambs in the shed and having to put them out dressed in little plastic raincoats on to sodden fields with no grass. I sometimes wonder if God hates us even more than Defra. I mean, obviously not. But sometimes I do wonder...

Incidentally, how many of you know what it costs for a dinky little plastic raincoat for a lamb, known in the trade as lammac's? A box of 100 from Wooler came in at



£17, making them 17p each. Some natty red numbers from Alnwick cost 21p each. Given that they are basically a supermarket carrier bag without the handles, a corner chopped off for the head to go through and four holes for legs; does that not seem a touch expensive? After all, carrier bags are free. Even the places that charge only ask 5p.

I think there is a job out there for some enterprising youngsters, valiantly recycling their mother's shopping bags into a useful product for us farmers. Just think of all the hours that could be put to good use instead of playing with mobile phones and typing drivel on Facebook. A pair of scissors and into the garage you go. With the added bonus that you are helping to save the live's of thousands of baby lambs. And earn money in to the bargain.

Mind you, I could see a fierce market developing here. After all, who wants to see their lambs marching around the fields in Netto bags? They would have to cost less than say, Sainsbury bags. Really posh places would only have M&S bags ... 'not just any old bag ... the finest carefully designed smooth polypropylene Marks and Spencer comestible carrier bag'.

And what about those who produce pedigree livestock. They would have to have designer bags. Balenciaga for Suffolk's, Prada for Leicester's, Armani for Texel's and so on.

And you know what? They would still be cheaper than my 21p lammac's from Alnwick.

Being the new generation coming into the farming industry it never ceases to amaze me how many activities are regimented to certain calendar dates; Silage fields cleared on father's birthday, clipping starting on my birthday and lambing commencing on April fools day. The latter of which is linked to another event determined by the calendar date and occurs in November, this happens each and every year on Bonfire Night; the tups going out.

The tups in question fall into 2 categories:

- ◆ The lads who have been involved with previous years firework display activities, which for the weeks leading up to November 5th are brought home to meet the chiropodist to cure any lameness, the hygienist to clean up any dirty bits and the optician to make sure they all have the vision ready for their day.
- ◆ The new tups purchased from Kelso tup sale, these gassy, cabbage fed pampered, sparking, handsome lads with expertly crafted and styled wool to make them look better than they actually are, arrive on farm in September. The aim with these boys is to keep the time it takes for them to become deflated bags of wool on 3 legs lying on their own dreaming of a return to cabbage heaven, to the maximum, usually 2 weeks.

This year at Kelso we bought a Texel tup to run along side the other 15 Suffolks. The Texel is a slightly larger and white-faced version of the Suffolk (to keep it simple). “Tex the Tup” was bought really just to add some variation at lambing time, having white and black faced lambs does bring a little more enjoyment to April's work.

On the same day that, years ago, Guy Faulks was trying to remember where he put that box of Swan Vesta matches, we loaded the 16 lads up onto the trailer (all on 4 legs!!!) and off to meet just over 500 waiting lady friends. The next day with the smell of gun powder still hanging in the air I went to make sure the tups still had an average leg count of over 3.5 and were still where they should be. I noticed that rather than the ewes discriminating against Tex and his different appearance they must have been more intrigued as he had a following of approximately half the flock with the remaining “traditional” ladies favouring the Suffolks. With Tex still on 4 legs this morning and still having such an extensive following, the variation and uniqueness of white faced lambs this lambing time may become more of a bore (fingers crossed anyway).



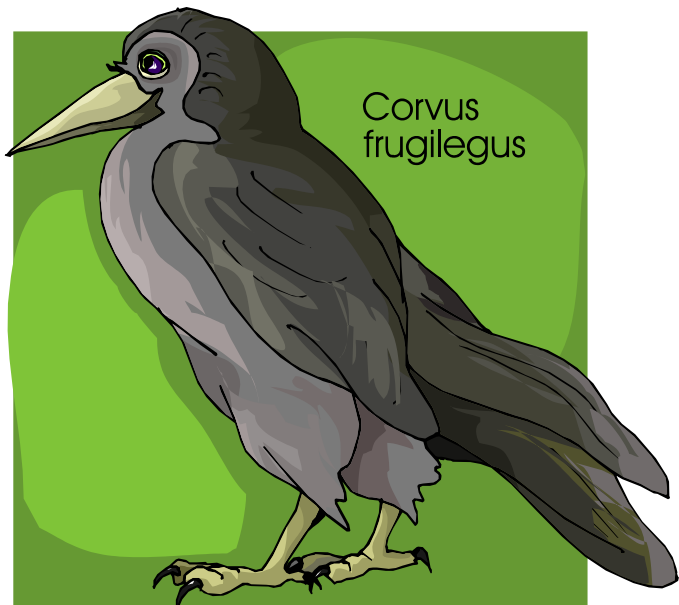
Michael and Holly (and Tex!)

The farming calendar trundles merrily on. We are belatedly staggering in to spring, cattle have finally been turned out, lambing pretty much finished and corn drilled. Presumably spring and summer have joined together and we will have three months where it only rains intermittently before going back to the nine months of cold and wet. Why do we take holidays in the warm bit in the middle of the year? Why not enjoy that and disappear for a couple of weeks to somewhere warm in February?

Anyway. We were sowing spring barley at the end of May, once the field had dried out enough to bear the weight of a tractor. It might be a bit late, but at least it is in. As soon as the tractor was out of the field, approximately ten thousand crows descended, as if a great big rookish dinner gong had been struck. It might not have been quite ten thousand, but it looked that way to me as they gobbled up the seed. And don't try and persuade me that they were doing some good eating wire worms and leather jackets. They were pushing them out of the way to get more seed.

Now there are some things in life that I really do not like. Rats, rabbits and rap music, to name but three. I think you can see where I am coming from. Kappa tracksuits...visits to the dentist...Celine Dion...constant rain...and CROWS.

What is it about Eglingham that we seem to tolerate such enormous numbers? I can not think of another village that has such a population. And they are taking over. About ten years ago I remember them being confined to Tarry and down to Eglingham Hall. But the press for extra living space has pushed them right through the village. Is every one happy with this? We are fast turning into the ideal setting for the inevitable remake of Hitchcock's 'The Birds'. No props required.



So. What to do? Does anybody want to do anything or are we content to sit and watch? The only answer to population reduction that I know of is through the barrel of a 12 bore. Again, about ten years ago, 30 of us took up arms against the sea of crows one night and shot about 500. This was repeated a month later with similar results. It kept the population in check. Is there any appetite for a repeat? I am certainly game. Anybody else?

I do feel as though I should start this edition with a quick catch up, after his starring role in the previous issue, Tex's fame has grown and grown. He has just finished his tour of playing Buttons in panto throughout the North-East's theatres. We had to let him go as his solicitor found a loop hole in his contract stating he only needed to be at our disposal for the months of November and December!

The livestock farmer's winter months are based very much on routine, you provide ample food and water at one end and at the other..... Well let's not go there. The sheep are getting prepared for lambing time by slowly increasing nutrition to give the ewe and her expectants the best start; they are checked, fed and moved continuously onto fresh grass to keep the conditions just right for them. Many or some of you will have seen the most important piece of farming apparatus for this work, it has 4 wheels, an uncomfortable seat and the ability to give a sensation in your right thumb quite similar to the feeling Captain Oats had when he nipped out and “may be gone sometime” time back in Antarctica or wherever it was.

The Quad bike (or ATV - All Terrain Vehicle - (well that's debatable, as it did not like a simple peat bog in the autumn) is without doubt invaluable on a livestock farm. Ours however, apparently has a mechanical or technical problem which only allows me to operate it during the cold, wet, and sleet filled days of the winter months and on those long hot summer days it can apparently only be handled by my father. This is due to a reason which apparently I would not understand, it must be serious one imagines! You could even call it the Brockley Hall weather barometer, if its rubbish weather you can guarantee you will be seeing me driving around on it!!!

The quad is simple to drive and has been expertly developed except for one key feature; this lack in perfection is a reason why I tune into Dragons Den waiting in trepidation for a cure to my numb right thumb! The thumb operated throttle handle will only let you operate the machine with your right thumb placed 90 degrees horizontally to your hand making it exposed to the elements, unprotected, the sensation and any feeling in said digit has normally gone within approximately 2 minutes, this time lapse is decreased in worsening weather conditions. In the warmer months this is not a problem but at this time of year it really is a nightmare..... hold on..... you don't think..... no..... couldn't be..... but..... it is..... the reason why I never see the beloved green machine in the summer..... just you wait Dad you're out on it the next wet morning and I will look after the beasties inside.

Michael





A Knowledge Transfer Manager who clearly knows his onions

I saw the beaming face of one of our ex local councillors in the Journal the other day, now happily working for One North East. He was urging farmers to diversify, and had funds available to help. This diversification malarkey has worked wonders for him. He has diversified out of farming and in to a very well paid job telling farmers to diversify. Doesn't have to deal with sheep at all...

So, given that it is beyond the reach of many to obtain first hand, in depth knowledge of the debateable pleasures of

keeping livestock, we could set up the 'Full Farm Experience Scheme'. Those who fancy a go at keeping sheep (or cattle or pigs for that matter, but mainly sheep) could be dispatched to a participating farm where they can immerse themselves in the subject. Knowledge Transfer Managers, as the farmers would be known by One North East, would be paid a healthy gratuity per participant, plus a compensatory amount for the accidental damage to livestock by the said participant.

Workers would be issued with a crook, a dog and a pair of leggings and pitched straight in to the fray - "What do you mean; the dog doesn't obey your commands. It hasn't obeyed mine for years. Just shout louder until you go red in the face. There you go. You're beginning to look like a farmer already". And it does not matter what time of year you choose to join the scheme, there is always a job to do with sheep. The first one usually involves meeting Walt the Knackerman (or Walt V Knackerman as his calling card says, having told the printer his nom de plume over the phone).

What would you be doing in June? Clipping. Neatly removing last years fleece, allowing the sheep to stay cool over the summer before growing a new coat to keep winter out. Sheep are clipped for welfare purposes these days. Last year it cost 90p per sheep to clip and we received 18p per fleece from the British Wool Disposal Board.

July? Dipping. I must admit to a little pleasure in this one. I have always enjoyed the sight of a barrel fat Suffolk sliding inexorably in to the gloop. Also, much pleasure is to be gained from the knowledge that I am destroying the prospective breeding ground for millions of greenbottles (like bluebottles, except they are green

and like to lay their eggs on live sheep. The eggs become maggots, the maggots eat the sheep and before you know where you are, you are back with Walt the Knackerman).

I think I am very possibly on to something here. More next month

Hayheck

Rural View

“Feeding time”

Mar 2009

With all the white stuff gone and a gentle mild breeze blowing you always seem to achieve more in a day than when you have to have so many layers on that you look like the Michelin man, after he has been thrown out of an all you can eat Chinese restaurant for abusing the privilege. At this time of year the in-lamb ewes are strip grazed on Swedes, this is where an electric fence is moved each and every day across the field allowing fresh Swedes to be eaten. The ewes are also supplementary fed with whole barley and a protein pellet. Every morning twelve 56lb bags (305kg for the metric people) are loaded onto a trailer to head down to the eagerly waiting ewes. The feed is put into troughs, the surrounding ground conditions round the feeding troughs is very weather dependant and falls roughly into 4 categories;

1/ Frozen – This allows you to move round on a hard solid surface, no mud to contend with but a slippery surface which has very little comfort if you slip and land on your nether regions.

2/ Raining – The mud/clarts/glar is at a consistency of thick gravy, its hard work to step through it so often is easier to drag your feet through it in a kind of wading fashion.

3/ Dry – The best type, ditch the wellies, get the boots on move up a gear and fly round the troughs with ease usually whilst whistling a happy tune (see farmers are not grumpy all the time).



4/ The In-Between Stage – This is produced by a chain of snow melting, rain falling followed by a warm sun and dry breeze. The mud/clarts/glar starts to thicken in its consistency, the gravy turns to thick tar, it sticks to your wellies increasing the

mass and weight, your legs ache, the happy whistling tune is nowhere to be heard, you wish you had 4 wheel drive and you envision this is the closest you will get to understand conditions in trench warfare during the Battle of the Somme.

Over the past two weeks I have distributed 4032lbs (1829kgs) of barley in condition 1 (and not slipped over yet!!), 1344 lbs (610kgs) in condition 2, 0lbs in 3 and 4032lbs in Condition 4 (1.83 tonnes!!), and do you think my woolly friends are grateful for these efforts? Well actually, surprise, surprise when they do leave the Swedes to receive their barley breakfast they all tend to have a little smile on their face, it could be because they have just stood and watched the pain and stress I have been through to provide them with the offering or it could just be a bit of wind produced by eating raw root vegetable for the past few weeks!!!!

Well, with the snow drops out and the daffodils eagerly pushing on the last few days really makes you feel the winter may be over once more, or just Mother Nature is retaining her last quota of snow and sleet for lambing time!

Michael

'In the Country...'

Deluge & chickens

Oct 2008

Those of you who have been reading this column for the past few months will know I have a bit of an aversion to rain. From putting out lambs in plastic raincoats on to sodden fields during lambing time, delays in clipping resulting in a fly strike explosion, pour on insecticide and sheep dips getting washed out and sheep generally not thriving because they are sick of being soaking wet. The willingness of this animal to meet its maker is the stuff of legend. It does not need all this help.

As the purpose of the column is to try and get a few of the trials and tribulations of everyday farming across to those who live in the country but do not farm; I think the deluge we suffered on Saturday 6th September gives a general feeling to all of what it is like to battle with the elements. To the non farming amongst you, farming is like a series of non farming 6th of September's, if you see what I mean.

So. Why has it been raining all year?



My theory is that it was brought on over the time that Margaret Becket was in charge of Defra. She made a valiant attempt to drown the agricultural world in a sea of bottomless and pointless bureaucracy and her endless dictat's caused a massive increase in the use of paper, precipitating the era of global raining.



On a brighter note, the free range chicken experiment goes on a pace. At four weeks of age they went into a large outdoor hut, in a pen in a wood. Let out in the morning they were soon grazing like sheep, taking dust baths (on the dry ground in the field shelter), picking fights with each other and generally having a grand time.

Obviously they appeared to me to be a bit happier than a shed full of 100,000 with 74 square inches of space each. Unfortunately for one of them, the sky really did fall down when it was squashed by a branch during the deluge, something that would not have happened if they were kept in their centrally heated shed.

They are currently weighing about 5lb each, so they have slowed down in their weight gain, but I need to more than double this by the end of October as they lose about one third of their weight in that small transition from Farm Fresh Free Range Chicken to Oven Ready Roasting Chicken. And every one that wants one, wants a whopper. A 4lb chicken might do for your average Sunday lunch, but these chickens are expected to grace the Christmas table at 10lb and upwards. As ever, I will keep you informed.



Hayheck

With lambing time fast approaching, the day length increasing and time marching on, this time of year is spent catching up on jobs and trying to get a head of the game before lambing duties take priority. Writing this I am busy re-designing and re-constructing our lamb adopting facilities. This rather depressing barn contains pens which hold a ewe which for some reason has lost her own lambs and is encouraged to adopt a foster pair for her to look after and rear on. In life, farming and especially in the ovine industry, theory and practice are often like chalk and cheese. Sheep are much cleverer than credit is given. When in the process of having lambs “set on” to them the ewe usually seems quite keen on adopting the lambs and acts very mothering towards them, they keep up this charade right up to the day after they have been turned out onto grass with their new foster kids, and at this point they become much less loved and sometimes the adoption papers are well and truly destroyed!

By now you are probably all thinking farming and life at Brockley Hall consists of sheep, well that’s not true apart from the woolly wonders we have suckler cows and a small acreage of arable crops. In addition to these enterprises there is another sector, a kind of non revenue generating, on farm, non farming diversification namely Holly’s horses. Trix her Thoroughbred mare who Holly has owned for the past 10 years lives at Brockley Hall and moved with up with us (kind of like a bad smell but don’t tell Holly I said that) and Alfie the latest addition. He was bought from North Yorkshire last October. He went straight to a local livery yard to make use of the facilities such as an indoor riding arena. This week with day length increasing he is moving to Brockley Hall to double the equine enterprise (or “Money Haemorrhaging Time Expensive Sector”) here. This means “Bob the Builder” or “Bodge it and Scarper” i.e. me, is also building a stable in what was the original farm horse box barn. This barn until now housed the lamb adopters, Hold on connection coming up..... Hence why during the day I am reconstructing the lamb adopting pens and at night I am stable building. I’m sure any one reading this who has dependants, being children or spouse, involved in the horsey world can relate to this and recognise the following pecking order which has been inflicted on me:



1/ HORSE 2/ Horsey Person 3/ Dog 4/ You!

When I find myself using phrases such as “Full sized bridle with grackle head-piece and dressage legal myler bit” or “The horse seems to be stepping short on the near fore whilst commencing an extended trot to a medium walk transition” and using them correctly, I get frightened and try to sneak off to go and drive a tractor or some other more manly task - but nothing to do with sheep I hasten to add! *Michael*

By the time you are reading this, lambing time will be upon us all once again. Best of luck to those of you who will be battling against the elements, recalcitrant sheep, sleep deprivation and work shy dogs in getting through another year unscathed.

I note that as a thank you for bringing the fashion industry to the attention of the gentle folk of Eglingham and South Charlton in last months Hear Abouts, the industry has turned its attention to the freezing I got last year whilst lambing all night in minus five degrees of frost.

Dolce and Gabbana have produced a marvellous pair of quilted trousers, cleverly matched with a brown jacket that has run in the wash and tastefully accessorised with orange binder twine (by Hayheck himself), which takes lambing chic to a new level.



The warmth and cushioning provided by the quilted trousers will be a boon when kneeling on the shed floor, or in stopping the traditional force nine gale whilst out in the field. The recycling of a ruined jacket fits in perfectly with the whole of the 'waste not, want not' lambing ethos. The binder twine is of course, optional, though I find it useful to keep some handy so a ewe can be quickly trussed up if needs be. The real '*pièce de résistance*' of this outfit lies in the fact that there is absolutely nothing you would be bothered about wrecking in the course of a normal lambing time. Perfect.

I think some of the get-ups I have seen around here during lambing could give D&G a pretty good run for their money so, I propose a little competition.

Get your cameras at the ready and photograph people in their best lambing gear. You do not have to be a farmer to enter this competition. The best **designed** set of clothes that looks like a fantastic lambing outfit will win. Get the photographs to any member of the Hear Abouts team, or email to hearabouts@btinternet.com. It will take some going to beat the D&G effort, but I am sure we have got it in us. Hopefully we will bring you a full page of high fashion shots in the next issue.

Hayheck will donate a bottle of his beloved Montepulciano to the winner and the entry will be forwarded to Dolce and Gabbana for possible inclusion in their next collection. Come on Michael, let's see the best effort from the Brocky...

Hayheck

Where has the time gone, with lambing nearing an end and Alfie busy eating us out of house and home it feels as though April has just flown by. With the local kids looking sad to be back to school soon after their Easter break I was thinking back to those days when I was in that position. It's amazing how things change, I always remember counting down the days and looking forward to my Easter fortnight holiday to work on the farm and help with the lambing, I used to dread going back to school as I enjoyed the farm work so much; I don't know how much help I was but I loved it. Now writing this after spending from 2am until 3.45am this morning in the lambing shed wrestling sheep hanging lambs, sorting out mixed up newly delivered ovine families and generally spending most of the time covered in various liquid-like substances which don't smell too good, I am imagining a day of sitting in a class room with my mates just filling in the day until the bell rings and then off home for tea does not sound too bad at all, kids have it easy these days in my opinion. Before I sound too much like a grumpy old man I had better get on with this article!

When I agreed to write these articles I was not sure how easy or difficult it would be, there was one thing I knew though, and that was that April's edition would be by far the easiest. With anecdotes of lambing time, ewes lambing in the wettest part of the field, housing all the lambs until the snow melts so they can be turned out, tending to lambs suffering from frost bite whilst sheltering from the sleet showers myself whilst simultaneously losing my wellies in a muddy gate way. However once again Mother Nature has thrown a spanner in the works! The fields resemble summer conditions, the lambing ewes filled their day in not trying to lamb in the most awkward and annoying place but gently grazed around and sun bathed until the time came to give a few squeezes and produce their little bundle of joy. It really has been a straight forward lambing time, everything and everyone always feels better with sun on their back especially new born lambs. For all those who have been waiting in trepidation from the November issue I can confirm that Tex is a father, and many times over too, he was particularly popular with the older ladies producing more than his fair share but so far out of 120

gimmers (first time lambers which are the youngest sheep) he has only produced 1



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lamb (it is a cracker though).

The next job will be releasing the winter housed suckler cows and calves from their winter den's, you would have thought after spending the past 5 months on straw housing they would take a fair amount of encouragement to exit their winter pad but



it doesn't, with the smell of spring grass and the glare of the sun it is more a case of open door, stand back and hope they head in the right direction, if anyone in the South Charlton area in the next week sees said cattle running up the village you will know we are in trouble, if anyone in the Eglingham area sees them we are in A LOT of trouble!!!

Michael

Hayheck

Life and death in Springtime

May 2009

From the May 2009 edition onwards the column "in the Country" was retitled "Hayheck"

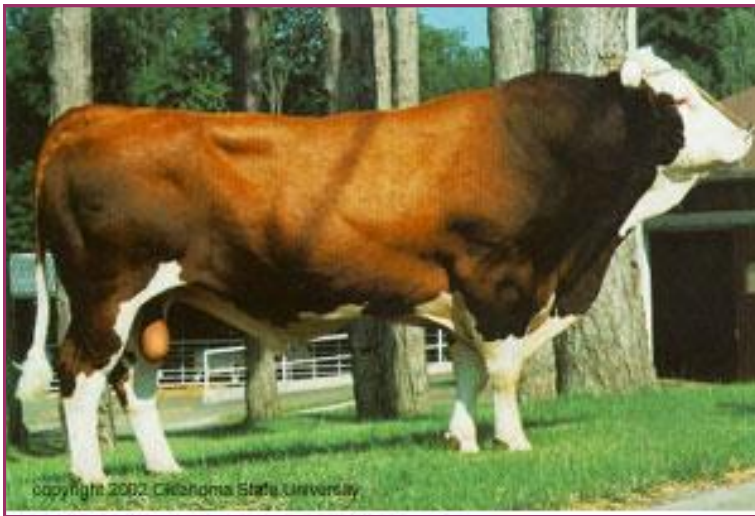
Well. What a treat. Last year I was regaling you with tales of lambs being dressed in plastic bags to keep the wind and rain off as they were being put out on to soaking wet fields. This year, the complete opposite. Couldn't have been better weather. There you go. Something you will hardly ever hear. A farmer NOT complaining about the lambing. I didn't even get to use the quilted pants...

Because this fantastic spell of weather has prevented lambs achieving their desired state of Nirvana (at least in their first few weeks of life), fate gets back at you in a different way. Completely out of the blue, a perfectly good calf was found dead in the field. What to do?

There are three possible options. Easiest of all, do nothing. Keep the cow, bull it again in the summer and try again next year. This means the cow has cost me about £300 to keep for a year and brought nil return. Secondly, I could sell the cow at the Mart, thereby pocketing about £800 and not having to pay for it's upkeep for another year. After all, it may have been a fault of the cow that caused the death of the calf.

Third. Set a foster calf on to the cow, so that the milk it produces is not wasted, a calf gets a mother and at the end of the day I have an animal to sell that will pay for the cow's upkeep and hopefully leave a bit over for beer and fags for me.

You have to reason these things out. If I sell the cow, I will not have one to bull next year. I could buy a replacement, but they cost well over £1000. Over £2000 at Hexham Mart a few weeks ago. As the animal is in good health and capable of many more calvings, the logical thing is to keep her. So if I am going to keep her then she may as well pay for her keep by rearing a calf.



Montbeliard Bull

Northumberland (and I mean few. I can only think of three between Alnwick and the Scottish Border). Fortunately Mr Maxwell at Doddington (producer of the well known cheeses) had one spare calf.

So, we have acquired a Montbeliard bull calf, not brown and white as shown in the picture, but black and white as it has come out of a Holstein cow. Probably not as handsome as the chap in the photo and of course lacking in one other small detail (which I will leave to your imagination).

Only one other thing to mention this month. Could do with a spot or two of rain...

Haybeck

Rural View **“Going to the mart”**

Jun 2009

Farm commodities can be marketed in various ways, farming differs from most businesses as what is produced on farm is often taken by the buyer and then a cheque arrives to the value the buyer is willing to pay, this is however not always the case. It would be great if that concept was taken up by more firms, just imagine pushing your shopping trolley around Morrison's, going to the check out, having your chosen items bagged up and then paying what you think is the fair price – just a thought.

The fat lambs and store cattle from Brockley Hall are sold predominantly through a livestock market. Here the animals are paraded around the ring in front of potential buyers who bid for them; the highest bidder gets the animals, also referred to as a “lot”. There are many characters found at such establishments, the BMW's and top

of the range Audis in the car park with the personalised number plates are owned by the fat lamb buyers, who every week complain they are paying too much and losing money on the lambs they are buying. Next is the mart staff, these men look as though they are very busy and working incredibly hard but are actually



achieving very little. The next personnel present have become more prominent over the past decade, they wear a distinctive uniform and have an aroma of TCP or Jeyes fluid surrounding them. Dressed in olive green waterproof trousers, coat, hat, wellies and matching underpants (well maybe) they keep their eye out for any wrong doing. I will be careful from now on... These very nice people from Trading Standards are present at any sale, their job is an important one not only looking after animal welfare but ready to control and contain any disease passing on. A contagious disease identified and stopped quickly will pose a much more reduced threat to UK farmers. Also found at the mart is the head man, the guy taking the bids and thus doing the selling is the auctioneer, they are sly cocky characters who



not only take bids from buyers but also the light bulb, the gate post and any other item to run up the price, handy if you're selling but not good if you're trying to buy and being out bid by a commercial electrical heating appliance for a lot of store bullocks.

So, apart from the risk of getting kicked by an excited bullock, ripped off by a fat cat in a posh motor, keeping out of the way of the water resistant "Gestapo", working with over energetic

achieving-little assistants and playing a bidding war with electrical goods, what is the positive of going to the mart on a sale day? Well it's not just the chance of selling or buying stock, but for me it's the reason I have to think up an excuse to Holly in the evening why I don't want a big tea, it's the canteen dinner - a welcome change from a stale cheese and pickle sandwich at home!!

Michael

For once, we thought ahead. The bank holiday was coming up, the forecast was good and plenty of people would be out for a walk. Let us prepare in advance.

We rebuilt the fence that was smashed in frustration by the last walkers who failed to follow the map and came upon a padlocked gate (padlocked again from being left open at lambing time and mixing ewes and lambs with last years hogs). We decided to wait until after the holiday to move the heifers in to the field that the footpath crosses. Should be better for both cattle and walkers. Short of putting muckle signs on the gate saying 'THIS IS THE FOOTPATH ON YOUR MAP', I think we prepared quite well. What happened? Nobody went for a walk. At least, not over this bit. Must have all been on the beach.

Geoff (the Editor) was very perceptive (*should that read "used lazy journalistic stereotyping" - Ed*) last month when noting that those in the farming profession weren't moaning about the poor weather at lambing time. It has been a steady lambing, not spectacular but certainly not poor. The good weather kept many a weak lamb alive, resulting in my lowest ever contribution to the upkeep of John Warren's alpine skiing chalet (for those not in the know, John's wagons collect the numerous dead animals from farms and remove them for disposal. At a cost).

This obviously puts one in a good mood. But it got even better when we rounded up the last of the hogs, scrappy looking mules that we have been trying to fatten all winter and took them to Acklington Mart. They made £78. That's seventy eight pounds sterling. Each. I saw a pen of 20 blackies sold for £5 for the whole pen at Hexham Mart once. New season lambs have been making up to £100. I do not know how long it will last, but is it possible that farmers are finally going to be rewarded for the food they produce.

After all, world population is growing at a rate of 2.37 per second. That is an additional 74 million mouths to feed every year, on top of the 6.7 billion of us that already exist. Given these figures, you would expect that something somewhere in



the world has to give. Maybe the improvement in price is the first sign of this. There is only so much land available for food production, and the only place I know where they are still making it is Dubai (where they grow hotels and shops). Perhaps it would be wise to keep a few extra ewes this winter?