

Editorial

When I was but a lad

Christopher H Knight

BeatheScience, Ayr KA7 2QW, UK

I was tempted to entitle this Editorial “*When I was butter lad*”, but good sense prevailed! The temptation arose through being told, several years ago, of the “Butter Boys”, an Edinburgh based food company with the rather catchy slogan “*Butter to better your food*”. However, a little online research has concluded that entrepreneurial zeal is not always sufficient to guarantee business success: I can find no evidence that the Butter Boys still exist, although I can provide a small plug for the “*Edinburgh Butter Company*”, an apparently unrelated enterprise that produce and supply cultured butters to the catering trade. But I digress. The actual prompt for writing was a letter from my older cousin, or more specifically the diary that he enclosed with that letter. This was written in the early 1960s and is concerned with the day-to-day life of a small county-council smallholding (Roundhill Farm) in Leicestershire. It was where I grew up, and so his diary has triggered a great many memories of my childhood. Besides this entirely personal interest (which may not concern you, the reader), it has also brought home to me just how much dairy farming has changed in the course of the last 60 years (which should perhaps interest you!) In the UK, the origin of the smallholding movement can be traced back to the Small Holdings Act of 1892 but reached its peak in the years after the First and Second World Wars. The Agriculture Act of 1970 reinforced their importance and as recently as 2019 a Parliamentary Report described them in these terms: “*Local authority smallholdings are often known as council farms, or county farms. These council farms are generally capable, when farmed under reasonably skilled management, of providing full-time employment for not more than two people, including the occupier. They provide opportunities for people to be farmers on their own account and are an important route into farming for new entrants.*” My parents were both agriculture degree graduates, so at least in a technical sense should be regarded as “reasonably skilled”. We lived quite frugally (as did most of my peer group if compared to later generations) but the farm could not fully sustain our family, and my mother, reluctantly, spent her days teaching biology to secondary school pupils. If you will allow for one more digression, she often spoke of a practical exercise where raw and pasteurized milks were to be incubated to show the beneficial effects of pasteurization: such was the level of post-pasteurization contamination in those days that the teacher’s notes explicitly recommended pre-incubation of the raw milk sample! My father was entrepreneurial and did many things to maximise profitability. We were the first locally to switch from mixed farming practices to focused dairy production, the first to move from hay to grass silage for winter fodder, the first to change from churns to bulk milk tank and the first to install a milking parlour. The land was well managed and the cows were healthy and, for the time, productive, but none of this could hide the fact that smallholdings were already (in the 60s and 70s) just too small, at least for dairy production. When I was at University studying agriculture we acquired the tenancy of a much larger farm on a private estate (Lubcloud: the name exists in the Magna Carta), and I changed degree to Applied Animal Science. But back to the late 50s. My cousin was working for my father from 1960 (I was five) in order to gain farming experience prior to studying agriculture at the Royal Agricultural College, now University. His plan of the farm as it was at takeover in 1957 describes fields of barley, roots and kale, oats and “seeds” (presumably ryegrass) totalling 22 acres as well as fallow land and 26 acres of permanent grassland. In 1960 there was also wheat and swedes, but much more of the land was now grass leys. This was to feed 10 dairy cows, 1 suckling cow, 10 followers and 8 steers and youngstock, but mention should also be made of

35 sheep, 2 sows with litters of 12 and 8, 180 head of “fowl” (laying hens and guinea fowl chicks) and 6 “Ermine Rex” rabbits. My cousin was quite meticulous! And if you are in any doubt that the rabbits were mere pets, one year later the stock record read 20 New Zealand White rabbits, the Ermine Rex presumably by this time having been sold for their fur. I also have a detailed account of “deadstock” (ie feedstuffs) and “implements”, which included both a Fordson Major tractor and a horse hoe, although I cannot recall any horse apart from our neighbour’s. The diary records the work routines, and I can testify to the fact that everything was manual effort and labour intensive. I can also see, for example, that “Bessie” was only being miked once daily and “Wendy” calved a heifer calf on the 4th September. Our stock were all well known to us as characters, and the farm was mixed in every sense of the word. Being relatively immune to hen fleas, I was actively involved in egg collection and, later, given responsibility for managing the sheep. However, that responsibility came about because, in the mid 1960s, my father had taken the decision to focus on dairy. Soon the sheep had gone. By my late teens we had built up to a milking herd of around 30 and had sufficient replacements to ensure that, when the opportunity of Lubcloud arose, we were quickly able to expand to 100-plus milking cows and a total herd of between 250 and 300. I well remember my mother becoming alarmed at the degree of expansion and imploring my father to cut back, which he agreed to do by establishing a beef suckler herd from the rump of the dairy herd. Needless to say, we soon once again had both the overstocked(?) dairy herd as well as the new suckler herd! Lubcloud was profitable enough for my father to employ full-time staff, something he could never have done before, and my parents were later able to retire from farming comfortably, albeit in significant part through a generous milk-quota settlement from our landlord. The message is rather simple. During the course of my father’s dairy farming career, sustainability in UK dairying came to mean specialisation, intensification and expansion. A great deal is written regarding sustainability these days, and in my view the term is frequently used much too ambiguously. Global environmental sustainability and the economic sustainability of the individual producer are often not immediately compatible. FAO estimate that 80% of the farmland in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia is managed by smallholders, providing a similar proportion of the food supply (FAO, 2023). I have seen smallholder farming displaced within a lifetime. If the same were to occur on that scale in developing countries, what would be the cost, environmentally and geopolitically? But if we are to feed 9 billion, perhaps it does absolutely need to occur. Or, can we find ways of making smallholder farming sufficiently productive, either through better farming practice or more appropriate food security and pricing policies? In closing I should mention that my cousin turned down an opportunity to become a smallholder farmer, seeing better prospects for his family as the manager of two large dairy units. Is there a message in that decision?

References

FAO (2023) Smallholders and family farmers <https://www.fao.org/3/ar588e/ar588e.pdf> accessed April 30th 2023