

Arts and Crafts of the Countryside.

Ernest E. Jones.



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Introduction.

In writing “Arts and Crafts of the Countryside”, perhaps I should explain why there have been many books written over the years on this subject; some I have read with great interest, very often written by academics interviewing men of the soil who have performed these tasks, but as yet not anyone who has worked in my native county of Gwent has written on this subject as far as I am aware.

I will attempt to write as I have actually experienced these crafts at first hand in my native county, Gwent, in the parish of Mathern in particular, this is not to decry the writings of others, much of which I admire, although some are not absolutely accurate in my eyes.

A mistake I made is that the date of writing isn't entered but I would think it was about 1995 or 1996, now that I have read it in November 2005, and even now ten years from page 44 how unfortunately it is still a true fact that the way farming is being treated by the present day politicians is beyond decency.

Ernest E. Jones.

The Hedge.

This can mean many things to many people, and I think we need to go back in history to try and establish the origin. I would imagine most of the countryside was woodland with clearings and man settled near water and began to enlarge the clearings and followed natural boundaries such as streams and rock outcrops, and no doubt these created a boundary between him and his neighbours. Then came the enclosures and an orderly form of farming, and hedges were created and the official line of a field boundary is if there is a ditch then a hedge, then the boundary is the edge of the bank or hedge furthest from the ditch, because the owner of the field would have dug the ditch and banked the earth from the ditch on his boundary and then planted his hedge on the top of the bank. It is unusual but if there is a ditch on both sides of the hedge, the edge of the furthest ditch is the boundary.

Over the years there have been very many quarrels and disputes over boundaries. One of the classic definitions is that you fence to keep your own stock on your own property. If the farmer on adjoining land decides to shut his land up for hay or silage and his neighbour maybe has to graze his land then he has to see that the whole of the boundary is stock proof; having made the whole of the boundary stock proof, his neighbour can then next year stock his land without having to fence, this does happen. But the most satisfactory arrangement is for the boundary to be divided in half and each party to be responsible for their part of the boundary; irrespective of the husbandry each is practising, easy enough to suggest in theory, but human nature being what it is difficulties still arise. So we have established the reason for field boundaries, and if we get on high ground or if we can take an aerial view it can be seen that these boundaries are not very often straight, or indeed constructed of the same material.. In some of the harsher parts of the country stonewalls make up the patterns of the fields and I never fail to admire the men who made these walls, sometimes in fact dividing whole mountain regions. On some of the lower land that has been cultivated, man cleared the rocks and stones and used them as boundary material. Then in some parts of the South man has built earth banks, the reason probably because being near the sea, where it tends to be quite windy, banks would be more durable than hedges. Here in Gwent a very good kind of growing county we rely on hedges. Although nature is remarkable in what it can achieve unaided nature believes in a free for all, with the survival of the fittest, that is all well and fine to a point, and there are a lot of

peculiar people who would like to see this countryside of ours reverting back to nature, that would be possible, but not where over 50,000,000 people choose to live, and they all have to be fed. Some suggest we should import the food, that is all very well but, once our foreign suppliers knew we had to have their food, and then they could hold us to ransom and increase their prices. So far as hedges are concerned we have to work with nature as partners to achieve what is best in this day and age. We have to care for and preserve our hedges, if left to nature the hedge would become a line of the strongest growing trees, in some instances with brambles and scrub growing outwards and upwards. Here in Gwent at least in the south east of the county the natural hedgerows are made up of hazel, whitethorn, blackthorn, elder, ash, with bramble and wild clematis (or old man's beard). These hedges or field boundaries are a very precious part of our heritage and rather like a well planned garden they are not straight regimented lines, but with bends and curves following the natural contours of the land. That is also something that I marvel at, if you walk across a field that has not got a foot path, perhaps when the dew is on the grass and you walk to a gate on the other side of the field, aiming to go in a straight line, and then if you look back behind you when you reach the other side, the path you have taken is not straight at all, it follows the natural contours of the land. So as farmers it is our duty to maintain these hedges in good condition. Now that the mechanical hedge trimmer has come into being, to the lay man that may seem easy, but later on when I get to the trimming of hedges I will deal with the mechanical trimming more fully. To maintain a hedge in a healthy state every so often it needs as we in the profession say to be laid. This can vary widely; in the days when we trimmed by hand it could be never less than 10 years and it could be as much as 15 or even 20 years. For the hedge to be laid it has to be left to grow untrimmed for 8 to 10 years, just left to grow in a natural state, some parts of the hedge would have young sapling type growth and so is ready for laying, which is from the term layering. First the hedge man needs the right type of footwear in particular rubber Wellingtons are really useless as they provide no protection from thorns and the open tops are lethal for debris getting inside, a good stout pair of leather boots, preferably with steel toecaps are much better to work in, they keep cool and they are a lot safer. As the work can be quite strenuous just a pair of overalls will be sufficient but if you are working on a cold exposed site a rough jerkin would be desirable. Hedging can be a rough job so you do not want to wear any decent clothes. Having got the man dressed for the job, we then need to consider the tools he will

need. On the subject of tools I always preferred to buy my own, I would go to the stores and no matter if it is an axe or a dung fork or whatever, and let me have it in my hand and get the feel of it and check that the balance is right for me. See the grain of the wood in the handle runs straight, check the makers name, some tools are made by certain British firms that you can rely upon, a good tool is a friend for many years and you can get very attached to them; that may seem strange in this age of expendability, but it was very true years ago.

So what tools do we require, a long handled hook (a bill hook with a long handle), then a hacker that is what we called it but dropped the "H", this is the most important and most used tool, very difficult to describe, the best I can do is a strong axe handed type of machete, then an axe, not a heavy woodman's type of axe, I used to like a Canadian wedge axe about four pounds in weight, a very strong special pair of hedging gloves made of leather, like mittens with a thumb but no fingers, a crow bar, this is a pointed steel bar about four feet long, a stake biddle, a biddle is usually home made rather like a caveman's club, I found mine growing in the hedge at Court House Farm in Caldicot, this is where I lived when I got married. We had a 12 acre field adjoining the Gas Works, that field is where they built Caldicot school, this biddle was part of a clump of ash growing in the hedge, and the club end was part of the root. After a bit of use an indentation would form which fitted the hedging stakes, and because they were either ash or hazel they would not split, we never used a sledge hammer for driving in these stakes, and no real hedge man would ever use a saw. The reason being that if you cut anything in a hedge with a saw it was a flat but rough surface and would easily rot, whereas if you made a cut with an axe or any sharp edged tool it left a smooth sloping cut that the rainwater would run off. We also need a spade and a small pitch fork, and then we would be ready to start.

To lay the hedge the first job is to get rid of all the dead material in the bottom of the hedge, that is the job for long handled hook, then the brambles have to be cut out, this can cause a lot of work, but what I disliked and all hedge men did was "old man's beard", or what we used to call "devil's guts", if that gets really entwined in a high hedge it is a very hard job to remove it. In the process of getting rid of the unwanted material care must be taken not to damage the bark or the young growth of the growth that will be laid to form the hedge. This unwanted material is then cleared up with the pitch fork.

The next job is to tidy up the ditch, most hedges in Gwent had a ditch on one side, and there was a valid reason for this, it was called the single brush style, very often the field on the ditch side would be ploughed and that would be the back of the hedge without much brush, the other side would be the face of the hedge with most brush to make it stock proof. The reason the ditching was very necessary for the well being of the hedge was that over the period of time since the hedge was last laid, stock and rabbits would erode the bank and expose the crown and roots and this would affect the health of the hedge, so with the spade a narrow trench a spit wide was dug and the earth removed was thrown up to remake the bank.

The hedge is now ready to lay, but first we need hedging stakes, these are usually hazel but any soft wood would do, these stakes would be 3½ to 4 feet in length with 2 inch diameter tips and 3 inch butts, the butt end would be sharpened to a point with three cuts with the axe or the hacker, the tops were cut with the axe and not sawn for the reasons previously stated, these stakes were usually cut out of the wood and at the same time some “heatherings”, about the size of a bean stick and as long as possible would be gathered but not trimmed out.

So we start to lay and the golden rule was always lay up hill, and the whole object of the craft is to construct a live, stock proof barrier and I do emphasise the word live, unless the hedge lives and thrives all the work is in vain. The secret is in the pleaching and for the benefit of the readers who may not know the meaning of the terminology, the object is to drive in the afore mentioned hedging stakes about three feet apart in the middle of the hedge that is the reason for the crow bar, to make a hole for the stakes. The young growth and saplings are bent over and interwoven between the stakes, the pleaching is done with the acker, a cut is made about 6 to 9 inches from the root on the opposite side to the direction the sapling is to be laid about ⅔ of the way through then gradually bend the young growth so that it splits and leaves what we call the tongue for the sap to run from the root to the upper growth. If the tongue is too thin it may break off or be too thin to carry the sap, if it is too thick the pleached plant will not lie in the hedge properly, if it is a fair sized sapling then this is a job for the axe and I have found the wedge type of axe very good for this job.

I remember reading a very interesting book on old country farmers and I a certain part of it on hedging stated that pleaching should be parallel to the ground, but that is not so, they should start upwards at about 45° angle, the sap will then run, and if there is not

sufficient material actually growing a bit of backing that is small pea stick type material to fill up underneath, then when all the growth is laid, the heatherings are woven along the tops of the stakes, and all the loose ends are trimmed off with the acker to leave a neat trimmed hedge.

I enjoyed hedging in the winter, it is a winter job, although if it is an old hedge that has become brittle it is best left until early spring just as the sap is rising, then the pleachers are not so inclined to spawl off. Hedging is very much wedded to the old saying, “you can’t make a silk purse out of a sows ear”, if you have not got enough young healthy material to start with then you can not make a good hedge that will grow and last, any man that knows his job can make it look tidy by putting in dead stuff, but in a few years once the dead stuff rots away then gaps appear and the hedge will not be stock proof. Whitethorn and hazel make the best hedges, elder are worse than useless, it smothers all other plants and cattle will get a craving for eating the leaves in mid summer. There is something magical about elder from a medicinal point of view, our forefathers laid great faith in its powers, and remedies for ailments in cattle made out of elder flowers were much favoured. Winifred my wife and her mother used to make Elder Champagne out of elder flowers and very good it was too, and of course the berries can be used for different remedies. Although hedge laying is an old craft it is not a dying craft, owing to the fact that in this day and age of plenty, the environment is more important than the production of food, in as much as there are ministry grants available for the laying of hedges. I am not fully acquainted with the availability of these grants that is one of the peculiarities of farming at the present time, it can be more financially rewarding studying the system and applying for grants than being out on the farm farming the land. However having said that it is pleasing to see some concern regarding the care of our hedgerows.

Having taken the trouble to lay a hedge it is important that some effort must be made to preserve them, it is most important with a newly laid hedge to keep stock away from it until it gets established, as their browsing will pull it about, this is especially the case with sheep in the spring of the year, young lambs can take a liking to the young shoots of whitethorn. I have noticed thorn hedges on some sheep farms where the sheep have been allowed to get at the hedge where the hedge resembles a line of lollipop sticks, all the young growth having been eaten out of the bottom. After the newly laid hedge has thickened and hardened it will stand a bit of browsing. I feel sure that our hedges were

healthier when we trimmed them with the hook, for one thing just as a good hedge man would not use a saw when laying a hedge, when we use a hook a clean cut is left that will shed the rain and re-growth was better, with the flail mechanical hedge trimmer it leaves a battered butt. I am not suggesting that we should go back to hand trimming, there were certain points to watch in that respect, firstly it was most important to have the right sort of hook, either long or short-handled made by a good British company, Elwell was a very good one which could be kept razor sharp using a whet stone, and to trim the hedges twice a year in early June and in September, if they were trimmed only once per year then the best time was at the end of August, once the sap had gone a hard job was made even harder. One important point was to keep trimming at the same height, not to allow the hedge to creep up. Another reason why hedges were healthier was that as you sided up if there was any brambles or devil's guts these were cut out at ground level, the trimmings were left on the ground for later collection and disposal usually by burning and the hedges were left clean. One fault with the mechanical flail trimmer is that most of the trimmings fall down into the base of the hedge and in time this will stifle the hedge. I laid a piece of hedge back a year or so ago and I was amazed at the amount of rubbish that had built up. I think that perhaps if the hedges were trimmed twice a year the young growth would wither up in the sun. There is of course the problem of nesting birds, in the days of the hook you could look out for them and leave them undisturbed.

As I drive around the countryside I feel that old man's beard is on the increase, for the reason I previously mentioned, the answer may be to trim for say ten years then let the hedge grow up, clean out the rubbish in the base and relay the hedge. Trees in hedgerows are another case in point, in the days of hand trimming an odd tree, not ideal even because the hedge is usually weak under the trees, but it was something to aim for when working alone, one could say I will trim as far as the old oak then go home to milk. But these days I would say that to leave a tree in a hedge is gross stupidity, a few years ago the N.F.U., of all people were supplying farmers with tree tags so that every so often you could leave a sapling in a hedge to grow into a tree, "Tag a Sapling", they called it. These days tractor drivers need to have as few obstacles as possible and to my mind it looks very slovenly to see growth around telephone poles and trees that can not be cut, it is not a mammoth task to go around and tidy up, it is just an attitude of mind it just needs a bit of effort.

Another thing that looks and is disgraceful is a hedge that has been left untrimmed for a number of years and is then lashed down with a flail trimmer, far better to leave it to nature, if one is too ignorant or too tired to do a proper job.

Hedges and their upkeep are a time consuming and expensive part of farming, but the benefits of a well kept hedge are many, it makes a good boundary for stock, it provides shelter in that it breaks the wind and if you have a fifty acre block of grazing land and you divide it into four fields, stock will be a lot happier being rotated around, rather than being in one large windswept field. Hedges also make good habitat for birds and other wild life and they are pleasing to the eye. Of course our arable farmers would not agree with these sentiments, but then that is another story. They have a valid reason for taking out a lot of hedges, but I do believe that the “barley barons”, and there is no doubt with all due respect it is an apt description of quite a few so called arable farmers, they caused quite a lot of anti farming thoughts among urban dwellers and some of it I am sad to say has been justified, although there is a better attitude beginning to filter through. So in this section I have dealt with a few aspects of hedges and their care.

Trees.

There is not very much for me to write from a craft point of view about trees, not that it does not exist, it is rather that I am not qualified to write about the subject constructively. I like woods and I like trees and I have planted some at various times. I have been mainly a stock farmer and that means growing grass, so the first priority when I look at a piece of land is will it grow grass? Now something that I have never been really sure about is the benefit of trees in fields, in arable fields they are a menace and in grassland used for forage conservation they are also a nuisance, but for grazing land I am not sure, they are a benefit in that they provide shade for horses in hot weather and I don't think they harbour any diseases of horses. Oak can be a danger when they shed the acorns, and with all trees it is danger when livestock gather under them during a thunder storm. For pigs I would say they are definitely beneficial for the shade they provide and here again I am not aware of trees or shaded areas harbouring any disease problems, the acorns are a good food for pigs, at one time acorns were gathered and fed to pigs especially by cottagers. In the not too distant past the cottagers pig was a very valuable asset and it

turned a lot of waste material into a very important part of their food supply, it is quite surprising what pigs will eat and thrive on.

Trees for cattle, there is no doubt that they seem to like the shade, but now that the warble fly is a thing of the past, and the modern fly spray seems effective, cattle seem to be able to stand the heat of the sun quite well, especially if there is a bit of high ground and they are healthier lying out in the open, for cattle, trees and high hedges harbour disease especially for cows and heifers in calf, mastitis organisms seem to thrive in damp shady conditions, and of course very many cattle have been struck by lightning while taking shelter under trees.

Sheep are not able to stand the heat as well as cattle, cattle seem to seek shade to avoid the flies rather than to get relief from the heat, but sheep seem to like shade, but here again shade harbours sheep diseases. With a lot of sheep lying under a tree for any length of time the area gets very soiled with sheep dung and one of the biggest problems is foot rot and the blow fly. The flies can largely be overcome with modern fly repellents, but foot rot so far is still a problem. I would say on balance sheep are better without trees, providing they are protected against flies and have access to plenty of clean water and if possible in a field with a bit of high ground. The people in this modern society of ours that I have come to have a low regard for are some politicians and so called experts as seen in the context of farming and the countryside. It is common knowledge that a great deal of our British Isles was covered in scrub and trees, and that is not difficult to understand, because if a piece of land is left and not attended to in any way or if a road or building is left unused, nature will step in and in a few years small trees will begin to grow, weeds will take over and it will soon revert back to a wild state. So mankind has created in the first place open spaces to feed and clothe himself and that is a process that has prevailed since the caveman, and it is only a matter of forty years or so ago that the government of the day (politicians and their experts) were spending taxpayers money, and lets face it these politicians do not have any money, it is the taxpayers money they are so flippant with, these experts were paying farmers and landowners to grub up trees or if very large to fell the trees and blast the stumps out of the ground, and to bring the cleared land into cultivation, and really speaking some of the land was not worth the effort. Now this country has gone tree mad, farmers are being offered money in the form of all sorts of schemes to plant up good lowland arable land with trees, trees are the in thing. They have even closed modern coal mines and put

the miners out of work and on the dole, at the same time paying farmers to grow coppice to provide fuel for power stations, now if that is logical then I have outlived my time. They keep saying we import too much timber, so what is wrong about that, far better to import timber than food, let us produce as much of our own food as this country is suited to produce, surely it is far better to produce our own food in a manner in which we have control over, where it does not have to be transported long distances or get delayed at sea, a boat load of timber if it is held up through bad weather or strikes, will not deteriorate. If only as much time and effort could be spent on providing modern humane points of slaughter for the livestock, there really is not any need to export live animals for slaughter. This passage has had very little to do with “Arts and Crafts”, but it does have to do with trees. I have travelled up through Scotland on a few occasions and they have ruined the scenery with their tree planting, in some parts where there are conifers, it is all the same like driving through a tunnel, gone are the sweeping views, of the sheep on the hills, and it is not only in Scotland, we have the same thing here in Wales. I am not anti woodland but I think it is to the everlasting shame of those people responsible for all this tree planting that after so much effort by generations of farmers and their men, to clear land to produce food. Basically no matter if it is the local idiot, the brilliant professor, the young or the old, they all have one thing in common, within the space of eight hours, perhaps sooner, they all have to eat, and not wood chips either or fancy flowers or butterflies, it is about time these so called experts grew up and let we farmers get down to the basic fact of life, “Full stomachs make empty Heads”.

Stone Walls.

Next to hedges stone walls are the natural means of making the boundary of an area of land and they are probably more permanent and lasting than hedges. The thing that has always occurred to me about nature is that it seems to like to bring everything down to ground level. I do not want to be morbid, I don't think I am a morbid person, a realist maybe, country folk are that way inclined, when at a funeral service of a very upright person, and the vicar says, “Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return”.

Trees no matter how fine and robust they are will be blown down and in time nature will rot them down, stone walls will in the fullness of time crumble and fall down. I own part of the old village of Runston, and when I am there gathering the sheep the outline of

the simple cottages can still be seen, nature has tried over the years to bring them down to ground level. The building of stone walls is probably one of our most ancient crafts, born through necessity as man tilled the land the stones he uncovered were carted and used to set up his boundaries. Although a very old craft, here again as with hedging, not a dying craft, and a craft that can only be done by the skilled hand and eye, and money is being provided to repair and to rebuild the ancient boundaries and people are being trained in the craft and very worth while it is to see. Although I have never been taught the art of stone walling, we do have a length of stone wall here at “Merrylea”, and also at the old farm at Court House, Caldicot we had a length of stone wall and that is where I first got interested in the craft. I have made an effort at rebuilding and I found it very fascinating and very rewarding. I think a well built stone wall a thing of art and beauty as well as serving a useful purpose. In some parts of the country the stonewalls are a feature of the rural scene and I marvel at the walls that divide the mountains, what a task that must have been and it is very sad to see them falling down after so much effort in the first place. If we just stop and consider, those men who built them, they had to gather the stone in the first place whereas now it is just a matter of repairing them.

Here in Mynnyddbach and Shirenewton we have some very good examples of stonewalls, in days past that was the natural boundary for one’s property be it a country house or a cottage. With the natural way of moving all classes of stock on foot, it was in everybody’s interest to protect their own property, these days of open plan all privacy has gone, and whereas years ago if you wanted to move stock, you just drove them on foot, I must have walked hundreds of miles moving stock from one farm to another, we had separate blocks of land on various moors, Caldicot moor in particular was quite a large block of land sandwiched between the railway and the river Severn, some very good fertile land it was. There was only ever one small house built there and I can never remember anyone living in it. All the land was farmed by different farmers from around the district who used it for summer grazing and everyone moved their stock on foot, so different now with all this open plan housing, it would be a brave man indeed who tried to move his stock on foot, all stock has to go in trailers or on livestock lorries. So stone walls in this respect are a thing of the past.

If the true economics were worked out, a well built stone wall could be the most cost effective boundary in the long run. Cattle probably are the biggest threat to the life of

a stone wall, they have the habit of rubbing their necks along the top of the wall and once the stones become loose things go from bad to worse relentlessly. Cattle are notorious for playing with anything that is loose, they will keep at it until it either breaks or falls down.

The Shepherd.

Now that man has enclosed the most worthwhile land, his mind turned to livestock, and sheep must be the oldest form of livestock that man decided to make use of, and we only have to turn to religion to see how long a partnership it has been. The Christmas story depicts the important part shepherds and sheep played and the hymns and psalms also refer to sheep. Man has indeed to be grateful to the sheep, which has provided food and clothing for many generations, and the art of shepherding is indeed very old. In spite of the modern way of life, the ewe still carries the lamb for the allotted time and gives birth as in biblical times. The life of the shepherd is a very varied one and there is no doubt it is a life that has changed, mainly I feel through demand, these days the customers who buy lamb don't want fat, in the days of manual work and no central heating in the home fat within reason was necessary for energy and to keep the body warm. The husbandry was different, on many arable farms most crops were grown in rotation and in that rotation there would be root crops to clean the land and to break the crop disease cycle and it was the job of the shepherd to see to the folding of lambs on roots, this also added fertility to the land. These were the lambs that were not sold fat off the grass by the autumn; also some arable farmers would buy store lambs in the autumn from poorer farms specifically for this purpose. The shepherd would erect the pens of either sheep netting or hurdles and the lambs were moved across the fields of root crops, usually Swedes, with a rack of hay and a little ground cereals in troughs, I always felt sorry for these lambs on an exposed field, especially in the wet, although they would have grown a good fleece by then and they did thrive and the end product was a very mature lamb with a good flavour. It was a tough life for the shepherd, and the field was left perfectly clean and fertilised ready for ploughing. There were certain do's and don'ts about the job which were handed down from the older experienced shepherds to the younger ones; nothing was learned from text books. It is at lambing time that the real skill and art of shepherding becomes apparent. An important part of the equipment was the shepherds hut, which was a wooden affair on wheels, and at lambing

time the shepherd would set up his pens of wattle hurdles on a fresh site each year with as much natural shelter as could be found, his hut would be moved to this site and the hut would be his home during the lambing season. Just recently I was reading an account of a Presentation Dinner of the Chepstow Farmers Club held on November 26th. 1842 where amongst many prizes for ploughing etc, a prize of £2. was awarded to Thos Kilby, shepherd to Mr. Powles of the Grange for rearing 261 lambs from 220 ewes and a second prize of £1. to Thos Parker shepherd to Mr. J.P. Williams of Beachley for rearing 139 lambs from 120 ewes. This would be for lowland type ewes on good land in the Chepstow district. I don't know what the mortality rate would have been, that was 150 years ago, these days lowland farmers would expect to get somewhere near 380 lambs from 200 ewes. It would not have been very creditable if we had not made some progress in 150 years. A lot of ewes are now lambed indoors which has its own problems, but the shepherd still has to know his or her job. At least they are not exposed to the elements, reading accounts of shepherding in days past there was very rarely any mention of women shepherds, although these days women seem to take on the job quite often, especially students and indeed they are very good at it having smaller hands if the ewes need help at lambing and if they have the stamina to match their skills they are very successful.

Lambing indoors means they do not have to face the elements, but the strict attention to hygiene is a must to avoid against the build up of disease. I have a great admiration for womenfolk as far as young animals are concerned, they are much more thorough than men in that they keep things clean and they have more patience and understanding. I have found lambing a great challenge it is an art that you can only really capture by experience and something that if you like the job you get better at as time goes by. The complications are many and varied, the worst of all is when lambs have died in the womb for some reason, and that can be quite horrible to deal with. Shepherds as with all other people looking after livestock have to be very observant, a quiet walk around the ewes with their lambs, it is essential that it is a quiet walk with your eyes open and looking everywhere to really do a good job. If I was to try and write about all the aspects of shepherding it would take a very long time, however there are certain rules to be observed. One example is that the biggest enemy of a sheep is another sheep, very true if they are over stocked at grass, and sheep should not hear the church bells ring twice consecutively in the same field to help prevent a build up of parasites.

One of the arts of course is shearing at one time with hand shears, with shearing the fact that affects the job more than anything is the rise that occurs after a hot sunny spell at the end of May when the natural fat or lanolin that helps to keep the sheep warm and dry is in the wool near the skin, the hot weather causes it to rise into the fleece the shearing either by hand or machine is then that much easier. The main purpose of shearing is to get the wool off the sheep in one piece and to keep it clean, and not to cut into the flesh of the sheep. There are of course shearing competitions whereby the style or cut must be correct and it is an art although I would not say it is a precise art, it is hard work and if you are fairly tall, strong and supple then this is a great help. I enjoyed shearing time but if I had been a little taller then I would have enjoyed it all the more. The work that is a real art is trimming sheep in preparation for the show ring, that is an art form and it can literally transform a sheep into a work of art.

To buy a ram lamb for stock I think it is far better to buy one that has not been trimmed, as on many occasions what looked to be a really good ram trimmed and well turned out; after shearing the following summer it could be a different looking sheep and not carrying the good characteristics it was thought to have had. At the present time the selling of rams for breeding is changing; buyers are looking for eye muscle and they are scanning for back fat and it could result in a more positive approach. I still think the ram will have to have appeal to the eye of the stockman but with the modern aid to breeding the right sort of lamb must be the way to go. There are of course different breeds and cross breeds for different purposes. Some breeds will suit a particular part of the country and the skill of the breeder is an art in itself. Judges at shows being presented with perhaps a dozen sheep all almost identical, then it is a work of art to sort them out, and to the many ringside judges it appears to be a very difficult task. Sheep breeding has become very complex; it is not many years ago that it was not too difficult to be able to say how the majority of sheep were bred. Here in Gwent one of the most popular crossbreeds for breeding ewes was the Suffolk ram crossed with a Welsh mountain ewe, and a very good cross it was, then the progeny from this cross were again put to a Suffolk ram. Now that we have all these continental breeds it is almost impossible to really say how they are bred. After all is said and done I am beginning to think that if they concentrated all the effort and money on improving our native breeds we would have been just as well off. But no matter what breed or cross is kept at the end of the day it is the art of the good shepherd that really affects the

bottom line, or in old terminology whether or not you make any money. I have always thought it strange that when working with sheep especially at lambing time all the effort that goes into the job and that can be considerable, all that one thinks of is the well being of the flock, the question of whether it will be double pay because it is 11pm on a Sunday night is farthest from ones thoughts. This principle applies to all branches of farming, something that the urban dweller finds it hard to understand. There I will leave the art of the shepherd, perhaps I have over simplified the subject but this as with all aspects of farming even if you like sheep can be a hard and difficult job, with the knowledge that they can and do die for no apparent reason, but it is also a rewarding challenge.

In this account of Arts and Crafts I will try and keep it in a sequence, that we enclosed the land to keep stock in then the stock themselves. The art in keeping any class of stock means that you have to be interested in livestock, and if you are not interested then it is far better to take up some other profession. That is why I object to people calling farming a job, it is a profession and a very dedicated one at that. I have been reading a book, very well written obviously by a very talented man, a farmer, but not I feel entirely correct, a certain amount of fiction crept into it and if it is read by someone who does not know the true facts it could give a false impression of farming; of course fiction gives that bit of spice to the story. Maybe one day I will write fiction just for the fun of it in the meantime I will stick to facts as I know them. To go back to the art of keeping stock, it all comes down to one basic fact, you must be observant, the little tell tale signs, like a little lamb that has been lying down if it gets up and stretches itself then there is not much the matter with it, and animals eyes say a great deal.

Cattlemen.

This is a very wide subject, depending on the end product, dairy or beef, but whichever the first year is the most critical and the first month the most vulnerable. The key factors in calves reared by hand and this is an art, is cleanliness, strict attention to detail and punctuality, and to be very observant and to take early action in the case of trouble, as far as the dairy herd is concerned, once the heifer is six months old, basically it means good feeding, regular dosing against internal worms, keeping them growing and adjusting the feeding depending on whether they are to calve down at two years old or later. Once they come into the dairy herd then that is when the men are sorted from the boys. When we

milked by hand, there were milking competitions held each year at Oak Grove Farm, St. Arvans and that was a certain amount of art or skill, in an earlier book I went to some detail of what was required so I will not repeat it here. In these modern times we can not really call it an art, possibly a craft, as I wrote earlier the main requirement for the skilled herdsman or herdsman is to be observant, in many instances women are better than men. When I was working at home and we employed labour, it was difficult to find a man that would keep the dairy utensils clean, and girls were far better at the job and can be better looking after dairy cows and calves, they seem to be more thorough at the job.

This section I write as a postscript on the subject of cattle. It is concerning the rearing of calves, which on most dairy farms the heifer calves which will eventually join the herd as replacements are reared on the bucket which is important for the reason if reared by a suckling cow there is a risk that they will take to suckling each other in adult life. It is also important that they are kept growing but not to get fat, a mistake so often made. The sooner calves can be taught to eat hay and concentrates the better, although most people will put too much hay in the hay racks, just a wisp of the best hay available, they only eat a very small amount, so give them a little fresh hay quite often. Once they get to six months old they will eat quite a lot even then, their rack should be empty once a day, they will let you know if they are hungry. **(End of the postscript).**

In these modern times with herds getting bigger, a herdsman has to be a very special type of individual, with the ever present threat of mastitis which I always think is one of the greatest problems in dairying, and the very high standard milk has to reach, dairying has become a very exact craft. The electronic gadgetry that can be a great help is very far removed from the bucket and stool, but with it all the milk comes out of the cows udder via the teats and basically the cow is still a ruminant with four stomachs. At this point in time, and I have written earlier on the subject, but it is important so I will repeat it; that is robotic milking whereby the herdsman is confined to the office and the robots take over, now I have watched these robots in the motor car factory and they do serve a purpose, but they are dealing with a precise circumstance, a static and uniform set of circumstances, cows are living objects with all sorts of variable size and shapes of teats and udders and temperament, and what does bother me the hygiene, some cows summer or winter keep themselves perfectly clean, others not so and for any robot to wash a dirty cows udder fit for milking is I think asking too much. Even in summer Time I have known cows to lie in

a cow pat and when that dries on that takes some washing off, so I feel that the skill of the herds person will be needed for some time yet. (*Reading this effort of mine 29/11/2005 and the reference to robots; there are herds being milked by robotic machines so perhaps I am being proved wrong; the capital outlay is considerable, so not universal as yet, just wait and see*).

There are very many inventions if you would like to call them that, that are a great help in the modern milking parlour, but with all that I would not like to lose control of the cows. Providing I had good cows and I was able to milk in a way and to a standard of cleanliness and efficiency I enjoyed milking and the good person in close contact can see or hear if there is something amiss, that is why I never had a radio in the parlour. I much preferred to listen to the rhythm of the job and concentrate in doing the job well, it is a skilled job and there are people in the profession that perhaps should not be, although thankfully we have moved on from the days when the idea was, what will not fatten will fill.

The other reason in the U.K., at least, for keeping cattle is for producing beef, and it was always the traditional roast beef of England, but the art of producing beef has changed. Not all that many years ago there were not all that many beef breeds, there were breeds that were particular to certain parts of the country because they probably suited the type of farming, the soil and the local climate, here in Gwent the main beef breed was the Hereford. When I was young the pure bred Hereford steers were quite good but the heifers were inclined to get too fat, and patchy fat at that. Crossed in earlier times with the dairy Shorthorn and in later years with the Friesian they would make good beef. The method of producing beef in those days, there were no suckler herds on arable mixed farms, there were no solely arable farms, this type of farm kept about six cows and either suckled four calves for a couple of months which were then weaned and two or three fresh calves were put to suckle the cow. The method was to house the calves in an adjacent box or shed and let them to the cow morning and evening; in the meantime they had the opportunity to start on hay and dry feed.

Another system on this type of farm, Mathern Mill Farm used it, was that about six cows were kept to be milked by hand, the milk was put to stand and the cream was skimmed off for butter and the calves were reared on the skimmed milk. In their second winter these young beef cattle would be kept in straw yards and fed on Swedes,

ground barley, linseed cake and hay. They would produce a lot of farmyard manure for the arable land and those that were old enough two years plus would go fat out of the yards, otherwise they would fatten on grass the following summer.

Then there were the non arable stock farms who bought surplus beef cross calves from the dairy farms to be reared and instead of being kept in yards in their second winter they would be wintered on dry lying land with a rick of hay, and they would be fed just hay until the following spring, these cattle were very popular with moorland or feeding pastures, because they had been outlying, living on hay and what they could pick up, and when turned out onto better land they would start to thrive even if the weather turned sour as it does in spring, whereas yarded cattle would have a setback, and that is part of the art of keeping cattle to see that they do not have a setback, because it then takes time to get them gaining weight again.

Although the period I am writing about is pre 1939, the beef produced then was never less than two years old, they were mainly Hereford, Aberdeen Angus or Beef Shorthorn crossed fed mainly on home produced feed and fattened on mainly old pasture. Killed in a local slaughter house after being rested, then well hung by a local butcher, that beef was small grained, well marbled beef and had real flavour, but it was an art to produce beef like that, all along the line from the farm to the plate, in those days selling fat cattle in the local market, if you produced good cattle the butchers would have faith to buy. Perhaps in this day and age it would be too slow and too much labour, the days I write of and indeed lived through were quite different. The wages then of an adult farm worker and there were not any categories, a man could have a life time of experience and he would have the same wage of 32 shillings per week (£1.60), of 45 hours. Of course in those days there was no government help, although there was a bit of subsidy on beef cattle in the 1930's.

Now we have large suckler herds and the aim is to get these beef calves finished in less than two years, it should be good but for some reason it is not. For one thing it is too lean and it is not hung long enough, and just at the present time we have this B.S.E., scare which has done an enormous amount of damage to the beef industry through the fault of non other than the ministry, and never once has the government had the courage and decency to explain to the British public the true facts. I am convinced that there is not a link to the Creutzfeld-Yakob disease in human beings, I feel sure it only affects ruminants. Good beef is a very good source of some vital elements in the human diet, humans are not

meant to live on all this silly type of rabbit food (salads). There is not much wrong with a varied diet of fresh British meat, with fresh British vegetables from the garden or greengrocer, far healthier than the food in packets and drink in cans laced up with a cocktail of chemicals to stop it going bad on the shelf. So that is my experience of the art of keeping cattle.

Pigman.

There is not much I can write that was an art or craft at keeping pigs, in fact in these modern times it really is a very precise craft, chiefly because of the numbers involved. In the days of the mixed farm every farm had a couple of sows as most farms had an orchard and the sows were kept mainly to clean up any waste. One of the favourite type or breed was the Essex Saddleback sow crossed with a Large White or Welsh boar and one of the progeny of that cross would be put back to a Large White boar and there is no doubt that there was hybrid vigour in these pigs. We used to get pigs with a bit of blue in them and the sows were hardy and good mothers. The progeny went mostly for pork and we reckoned to get a porker fit to kill at 16 weeks at 3½ score (70 lbs or 32 kg) deadweight and that was good meat. I think they are too big these days the porkers of today we used to call cutters for the hotel trade; of course it is the economics that matter nowadays. If you can put so much extra meat once the pig is in the fattening house that is extra profit. Pigs in my youth were just another sideline, no capital was tied up in special housing and the work just fitted in with the rest of the farmyard jobs. These days it is all so different, now sows are run in hundreds and whereas we always used to wean at eight weeks and the sow would have two litters per year, now they are weaned at so many days and it has become a professional job and an art, and I really think the pigs have lost out, when I was home the sows would be in the decent weather, outside with the pigs scampering about and back inside at night in a bed of straw, pigs do love straw.

Although in those days there was not much art involved there were a few do's and don'ts, when a sow was about to farrow down it was easily spotted as if she would given the chance, she would carry all manner of objects to make a bed, also it was wise not to let them have too much straw as this would increase the chances of the sow lying on the young piglets. Two things that were a great help at that time were farrowing rails against the walls to reduce the risk of the sow lying on the young piglets, and later infra red lamps in winter

to keep the piglets warm. As I wrote earlier pig keeping is now a professional job but there are changes to be made on welfare grounds. Sow tethering is to be phased out, personally I have never worked in one of these large pig units, but I do not think I would be happy to see sows tethered up like that, no animal should be tied up in such a way that it cannot lick itself and get some exercise. How strange human beings can be, breeders have spent years upgrading pigs from the wild, and now there is a trend to keep Wild Boar, the meat is much sought after, it is rather like the butterfat content of milk, when I was breeding pedigree Friesians I went to a lot of trouble trying to breed cows that would give as near to 4% butterfat as possible and after many years I had some success, now they are trying to reduce the fat. So that deals in a way with the art of keeping pigs. There are a few misconceptions concerning pigs, they are said to be dirty animals, but given the chance they keep their sleeping quarters very clean, they also love to wallow in mud in summertime, but that is an intelligent way of preventing sunburn, to keep cool and to suffocate pig lice. It is quite true that they will eat almost anything; I would imagine their stomachs must have a really good filtering system, and they are superb animals to clear scrubland. Something that can be misleading is that sows appear to be very docile placid animals, but they can be very aggressive toward each other, and great care is needed before interfering with a sow with young piglets as they can become quite savage, when protecting their progeny, also some boars can become quite vicious.

Horseman.

Now we have a subject that has been and still is a real art, the keeping and using of horses, a subject that if dealt with fully would take me some time. So as there are still a lot of horses kept mainly to be ridden and for pleasure, I will deal with the horses we worked with on the farm. Although the horse is the largest and strongest of our farm animals, it is not all that good at combating adversity, if they are injured in some way or in the unlikely event of having to help a mare at foaling time, they will succumb quite easily, where as a cow will endure quite horrific ordeals. The young colts are also prone to problems in their first year. The one important aspect of all horses is to teach them to be led from an early age, to get the foal used to being haltered and led. The Shires we used to like to break in at two years old and having got them used to being haltered the next step was mouthing which is the most important part of breaking in. To get the colt used to the bit and we used a

mouthpiece tack, this was a light bridle with adjustable reins, a back band with a crupper which goes under the tail and the back band had a special ring for the reins, the bit on the bridle was special in that it had three loose keys on it. The system my father used and in fairness he was a good horseman and a good rider and he was fearless; the bridle and tack would be put on the colt in a large loose box or safe fold yard and with a slack rein, the colt would play with the keys and slobber a lot which was a good thing, this was done for an hour or so each day for a week, and gradually as the days went by the reins were shortened until the colt would arch its neck and give to the bit, and in that way it got a soft mouth, to prevent what is known as taking hold, doing their own thing.

Next part would be to put on a well fitting collar, not too big and a light plough harness, and just lead them around everyday for a short spell, it was not a job to be hurried, small short lessons, driving them around with one leading and one behind with two plough lines, then after a few times they would be hitched up to a light log in the field. We had a young filly on a log just like that once and she was going quite well, and father said take her in that is enough for today, we got to the gateway going over a few stones and this frightened the filly and she bolted, but she did not come to any harm. The job I did not like was going to Portskewett station, we used to go to the station quite often at one time, we used to send milk in churns by rail, also sugar beet, and bring back stockfeed usually from Bristol, and if you had a young horse that was not used to trains, you had to be there to talk them down and to reassure them. A steam locomotive either going through or indeed stopping was quite frightening to an inexperienced horse.

The young horse having been put on a log a few times was put in between two others on the plough ground pulling a cultivator or drag harrows, one thing to watch for in a young colt was sore shoulders, no matter how well fitting the collar was the skin unlike the skin of a cow is quite thin and we used to bathe them in salt water until the skin got hardened, it is rather like having new shoes. Then gradually they would learn to work in shafts and alone, horses are very intelligent animals, and at one time they were the main source of power on the farm, and the waggoner on the farm was a key person and a craftsman in that those horses had to be properly fed and kept fit for the very important part that they played, and there is no doubt that there was a mutual bond between them. There were certain ailments to watch out for, the old fashioned Shire with a mass of feather or hair on the bottom of the legs were prone to itch mites, and Monday morning leg which

was a laminitis inflammation of the hoof joints. If horses were working hard they have to be well fed with good quality corn etc., and on the weekend they would have to be fed differently because they were not using the energy and the old waggoners had their own concoctions for the weekend to keep troubles at bay. The stable in those days was very much a male domain and womenfolk never dared enter although the hay loft was not unknown to have clandestine visitors of the fairer sex. There are several different sorts or sets of harness for the various jobs that horses did about the farm, and the saddler was an important part of the rural fraternity to keep the collars and harness in good repair, as was the blacksmith, in the horse farming days it was like cogs in a big machine, all the different arts and crafts working together with one eventual purpose, to produce food and to care for the countryside. It was in the main a hard life but most people were content with their lot, the tragedy was that most were very poorly paid, but then so were miners and the mill girls in the Lancashire cotton mills. The working classes were at the bottom end of the prosperity ladder and those higher up saw to it that they stayed that way. As I wrote above horses are a very wide subject, and in these days there are many kept for pleasure, in fact there is a new culture, mainly on the outskirts of new housing developments, to carry on any degree of farming is very difficult because of the vandalism, damage, arson, dogs and trespass, this results in parcels of land being sold to non farming people to graze their horses. Horses are not the best animals in the upkeep of good pasture being too selective in the areas that they graze, some areas are over grazed and other areas are dunged upon and so never grazed, but then that is better than allowing the land to revert to scrub.

The care of horses for pleasure is something similar to the care of working horses on the farm. We used to breed a few hunters and the breaking in is similar, the haltering and the mouthing, but we used to lunge the colts, that is to get them to trot in a circle on a long line clockwise and then change to anti-clockwise and that calls for time and patience.

We have covered some of the art of keeping horses, there is much to be said about the riding aspect, it is still much in evidence and it is not something just belonging to the past. I learned to ride when I was quite young and spent many hours with my pony Meg a Welsh Mountain pony, riding around the lanes and galloping across the fields, I was not interested in pony clubs with hard hats and all the fancy gear, I would put a saddle and bridle on Meg and off to go. Meg could gallop like the wind but could not jump a sixpenny piece. I will leave the art of horses for pleasure for those better qualified in the subject.

There are strange creatures appearing in our countryside these days, ostriches etc, so someone attempting an exercise such as this in fifty years hence may have quite a deal to write about, brought about I feel by events. It seems to me that every so often the human race is subjected to certain problems, during my early youth T.B., in humans was a real threat, which by and large has been controlled apart from being brought into the country by immigrants. The big threat these days is heart disease and cancer and of course aids that are caused by the victims own stupidity as a rule. People have become very diet conscious, especially about fat. My own view is that over-eating particularly packaged foods laced with chemicals, lack of exercise, smoking, too much alcohol and canned drinks, other than pure fruit juice are the causes of many problems. Watch your weight, if it goes up then you should eat less and work harder. It is to try and cater for this trend in diet that these different animals are kept. Ostrich farming is on the increase, it is early days yet to find the pitfalls, and also we have commercial deer farming, and wild boar is becoming a fashionable meat. When folks are well fed or over fed they look for the unattainable, runner beans are a good example, in the early summer when they first appear and are naturally expensive people clamour after them, later on when the beans are equally good, more plentiful and cheaper the demand goes.

Having enclosed the land and dealt briefly with the stock, I turn to the crops on the land and naturally to the very basic art of ploughing. It has been argued, why go to all the trouble of a perfect furrow, only to obliterate the work with the cultivation implements. There is in the main a valid reason for this, the real reason is to bring about a state of soil that whatever the crop to be grown will be able to flourish and bring forth an increase and at the same time to bury any residual trash so that it will rot down and provide plant food. The earliest form of ploughing was by man power pushing a breast plough, and then man devised an implement to be drawn by oxen, and later by horses. Before the invention of the corn drill the ploughing had to be done so that a perfect furrow was left so that the seed corn could be broadcast by hand and the harrows would cover the seed. In those days it was a source of great pride to leave a neat well ploughed field, and there is a certain merit in that. It is like a well dug garden, not only is all the residue well buried, it also keeps the land level and it is easier to work down afterwards. These days of the reversible plough the job of ploughing has been simplified. When I was ploughing we ploughed in lands, on a field that was in grass and the old plough reens were difficult to see, with horses you set up

three marking sticks about five feet in length across the field to guide you to take firstly a very shallow furrow across the field, (this was called a cap) you then turned on the headland you then made a deeper furrow on the return journey, you then turned on the headland and returned and repeated this until the required width of land was ploughed, this was usually a twenty yard width. You then set another cap forty yards from the first land and parallel to the first cap, and ploughed as before a twenty yard land, this would leave a twenty yard width unploughed, this was then ploughed by taking a furrow on each land, the art was to split this land between the two caps, keeping the land parallel at all times and the best ploughmen would end up with a perfect furrow of equal width and straight along the length of the land and they would not be an inch out. Further caps would be set and the land ploughed until the whole field was ploughed. The furrows left would be the guide to ploughing the field the next year and by ploughing into these furrows the field would be kept level.

The same principle was used for tractor ploughing only the distance between the caps was doubled. My father ploughed with horses but he was not an arable farmer, he was much more interested in stock, he was also an avid reader and when he started farming he practised continuous cropping as advocated by Professor Willerby, a leading light on that system. However he sent me up to St. Arvans, to Mr. Will Jeremy, a champion horse ploughman in his day, and one of the first lessons he gave me was, no matter what you are doing always get in the habit of driving straight and I have never forgotten it. I was speaking to someone a while afterwards and Will Jeremy said of me that if I had stayed with him long enough he could have made me a champion ploughman, it is just that I have the gift if you would like to call it that, I had what is known as a good eye. The methods of cultivation are changing and a lot of the old values no longer apply. There are the minimum cultivation people who do not plough at all, then there is the combination tackle where the land is ploughed, worked and drilled all in one operation, but then there are still the ploughing matches where ploughing is still a fine art.

Perhaps I am old fashioned, that indeed would not be surprising at my age, but I still think that to keep the soil in good structural shape it has to be ploughed well, it has to be worked when it is fit to be on not when there is water lying in the furrows, then in the long run the farm and the farmer will be better. In the days when quite a few people rode on horseback or went about their business in a pony and trap, it was a good opportunity to look

over the hedges and see what their neighbours were doing. If there was poor workmanship, perhaps a poorly ploughed field, then when they met up in the pub at a later time remarks like, “when Old Tom put the sticks to plough that field e ad a fly in ims eye”. Nowadays everyone is in such a hurry that they do not have time to notice. Those I feel are the differences between town and country people, town people seem to mind their own business, they do not seem to care what their neighbours are doing, in the country anything that is different is noticed straight away, if the neighbour has a new implement or starts to plough a field it is all noticed, not in an unkind way, that is how we are.

If anything moves in the distance perhaps someone walking, then we have to know what or who it is and I see nothing wrong in that, in fact in these days of rural crime these observations are a very good thing. After the ploughing and the land is ready for sowing the same rules apply in that the drills should be set in a straight line and these straight and true lines are a delight to the eye. With root crops it was a great help to have the drills dead straight to facilitate horse and hand hoeing to control the weeds, this was the method of cleaning the land and keeping it clean before the days of chemicals. With straight drills the horse hoe could be set wide enough to just miss the plants and thereby eradicate most of the weeds without damaging the planted crop, which could be mangolds, swedes, turnips, kale and sugar beet. The growing of root crops was in the main a hard laborious job. When the young plants mostly mangolds and swedes and in later years sugar beet were large enough they had to be singled out so that the roots would grow to be a good size, if left as planted then there would be a large number of very small root plants to harvest. Today this is largely over come by precision drilling where seeds are sown singly at precise distances apart. The singling had to be done when the plants were quite small, if left until they became long and straggly it was a much harder task. To be at the end of a long row with a flat hoe was quite soul destroying and back breaking work, it was better if they were planted on a ridge like potatoes but not quite so high, there was a special root drill for this called a “double tom”, it had two special shaped rollers to run on the top of the ridge. Once the crop had grown to the point where the leaves met in the row then further hoeing was not necessary as any late germinating weeds would be smothered by the crop, so the root crops could then be left until harvest, although they would need regular inspection to check that no disease or pests were causing damage. The harvesting of root crops was a hard manual job. When harvested for the winter they were stored until required and then they were

usually put through a root slicer which was hand powered, they were then carried and fed to the cattle. It is quite extraordinary these days looking back at how hard and laborious farm work was, for instance no one would ever think of storing grain in a ground floor building, it all had to be carried up into the granary, and that was always carried on a man's back up a flight of steps and the grain would be in two hundred weight sacks, (100 kg.), the reason for this was that the ground floors were usually damp, and easier for vermin to cause damage and was more accessible to thieves. I seem to have drifted from the art of ploughing, but then it could be said that this is written as it comes from the mind to the pen, it is not copied from the historical notes of others. Ploughing is I am pleased to say still an art, although in general terms there is no need to try and achieve perfection, but I still feel whether it is match ploughing or otherwise it should be done with pride.

Thatching and Rick Making.

Although a very old craft it is still being carried on in these modern times. Thatching these days is almost a status symbol, in that houses with thatched roofs have a great appeal to some people and if carried out by a craftsman it does indeed look very attractive. The thatching I will write about is the thatching of hay and corn ricks on the farm. To keep things in their right order I will write about rick building which was an art that belongs to the past. The object being to store hay and corn sheaves in an outdoor structure that would withstand the elements and keep dry. There was usually one man on the farm who was recognised as being the rick maker. There were certain rules to be applied; if you wanted a smart looking rick with straight square sides the easiest way was to build it flat, the problem was that it would not keep the rain out. I have seen ricks where the rain has gone in and gone right down to the bottom of the rick. The secret as my father always told me was to keep the middle full, a hay rick needed to be built in the shape of a square knob hill, then when it settled the layers of hay were all sloping to the outside and then they would shed the water off, it was more difficult to build that way but it could be done. When it came to loading hay from the field on a wagon it was opposite to rick building, the middle had to be hollow, the sides were built first and then the middle to tie in the sides and prevent the load from slipping off. The loader was not very popular with the pitchers if the load came off on the way to the rick and had to be reloaded. If it was a fair way from the field to the rick we used to rope the load to prevent losing it. Then the driver

of the horses had to be very accurate to see that the ropes did not catch on the gate posts, because that would mean real trouble. Most gateways in those days were only nine feet wide and never ten feet, that extra foot would have been a great advantage. As I am on the subject of rick and load building, there is also a right and wrong way to build a muck heap. Almost without fail if you allow a novice to build a muck heap they will build it like a hay rick, to keep it tidy you must build the sides first and then fill the middle as you get higher, then it will stay tidy and rot well. The building of corn ricks was much the same as for hay only far more important, if you had a damp patch in a hay rick when cutting it out you could give the damaged hay to outlying stock, but with corn if the damp got in the affected sheaves were a dead loss unless you had pigs and they would sort it out, but it would have lost a lot of its feeding value. Ideally and wherever possible grain sheaves were stored in barns, but during the war when ploughing orders had to be obeyed there was not always enough room. Of course rick building and thatching are relics of the past, and in a way I think I am lucky to be as old as I am and that I grew up and worked in the times when I was able to learn the art of rick building and thatching. I used to be a loader when I was quite young, to pitch hay or corn you did need to be quite fit and strong, making the load was more a case of agility.

The last thing I want in my writings is to be in any way boastful, but I have always found pleasure in doing jobs and leaving it tidy, so in thatching I found great pleasure. It was hard work climbing up and down the ladder carrying straw and pegs. To just explain the basic parts of the craft, thatching a rick is a different proposition to thatching a house or a building, the time scale is vastly different, the thatch on a rick has to last for a year at the most, but the thatch on a house or a building has to last many years. Once a hay rick has settled for three weeks to a month, then the sides are plucked up to the eaves, the pluckings were usually short in length so we kept them for the calves. Then for the thatching you would obtain some clean threshed wheat straw, long straw was the best. In the days before balers came onto the scene, the corn went through the thresher and after going through came out of the back of the machine and there was another simple machine called a trusser, in the early days they were a separate machine towed behind the threshing drum, then in later years they were part of the threshing machine, the loose straw going into the trusser was packed length-ways into what we called boltings and the bolting were tied with two bands of binder twine, in the same way as sheaves in a reaper. If you were buying or

selling straw in boltings it would be by the thrave, a thrave was made up of 25 boltings. Straw for thatching was handled more carefully than bedding straw. If a farmer had a rick of wheat that would be suitable for thatching it was fed into the thresher in a way that saved it from breaking up. Having got some good thatching straw it would be laid out near to the rick to be thatched to allow it to get wet, if it did not rain then it would be damped down with water. It would then be teased out by hand, the objective being to get rid of the short bits and to get the heads and butts lying the same way. If it had been threshed well and it was damp it was a pleasant enough job, and you should end up with bundles of straw appearing similar to the standing growing crop but without any grain in the heads, any weeds or any grass. Then there would be the thatching pegs, these were usually made out of hazel although sometimes willow was used, they would be as thick as a thin walking stick and about 2 to 2½ feet long (60 to 70 cm.), some binder twine would also be needed this would be wound on 10 or 12 thatching pegs up to about 25 feet in length (8 to 10 metres) per peg. Then it was most important to have a good long ladder which was always wooden in those days. The first job was to make the bolster which as the name implies is made of thatching straw about 8 to 10 inches in diameter, the same length as the rick, it was simple to make by joining bundles of straw together and every 12 inches tying it to another to make one long bolster or sausage, on a long rick it would have to be made in two parts, we made it on the ground and then took it up the ladder and laid it right along the apex of the roof and fastened it down with thatching pegs. It was most important to have a good long ladder that would lay flat on the roof from ground to apex to go into all the details would take quite a while.

I always thatched to the right of the ladder with some decent straw and a good supply of pegs. We used to save the pegs when we opened a rick so that they could be reused. On a calm autumn day working away in the peace of the countryside and with a good view of the surrounding countryside was one of the better sides of farming. Furthermore I always felt it was a worthwhile job, if the rick was badly made the rain would get in but on a well made rick as you thatched any small hollows could be filled in as you went along, and what joy when the job was finished. I had an old pair of sheep shears that I used to trim the ends and to make the little skirts on the ends; it was well worth the effort.

On hay ricks that we used a bit at a time we used to cut the hay into a truss about 3 feet square, and we would cut right across the rick in steps. With corn ricks it was questionable if all the work involved in thatching was justified, because when it came to threshing time the whole thatch was taken off, and in any case the outside ricks were always threshed first before the corn stored in the barns was threshed, so these outside ricks did not need protection for any length of time. Corn in the barns was protected from the weather and it all depended on when the threshing contractor came to thresh your corn, this often depended on who you were? In Gwent before the 1939 war there was not much corn grown in the county, some of the larger farmers grew corn and they were the regular customers of the threshing contractor so they took priority. With the outbreak of the 1939 war all farmers were ordered to plough some land to grow crops to save on imports, then the threshing contractor had difficulty in keeping everyone happy.

So the thatching of ricks on the farm is now part of history and although history has a habit of repeating itself I can not see it being revived as things are now. I thatched my last rick at Greenmeadow in 1954.

Haymaking.

Although not an art or craft as applied to thatching or the such like, it may be of interest to chart the way haymaking has changed in my lifetime at least. In my youth hay was the basic roughage for all classes of stock, in some cases it was the only winter food that they had, so it was important to make it as good as the climate in the United Kingdom would allow. In those early years no artificial fertilizer was used and hay was mostly made from permanent pasture, although there were some clover leys as part of the rotation in arable cropping, these leys would be cut in early June whereas the majority of the hay would be cut in July, cut the grass for hay when the seed was in it was the custom years ago. I do not remember men cutting grass by hand although even when I was in the Young Farmers Club in the late 1940's there was a competition for the best use of the scythe. The two horse mower was the main means of cutting the grass for hay in my youth, this job was better done in the early morning or in the evening, during the day the heat and the flies would cause the horse some distress. After cutting the grass would be left for perhaps two days and then turned by a horse drawn swath turner that we had at home, it was made by Bamfords, it was drawn by one horse and turned two rows at a time, it was quite hard work

for the horse, the machine did a good job and it was quite kind to the grass being slow and gentle, because the grass was mature and not heavy it may have to be turned twice, then an extra device was added to the machine and then when it was dry it turned two rows into one, ready to be taken to the rick or the barn.

There were a few methods of getting the hay to the rick or the barn, the most common was for the rows to be gathered using pitchforks into small cocks ready to be pitched onto the hay wagon; the hay wagon would be driven between the rows for the hay to be loaded. Another method involved a machine towed behind the wagon, the wagon and the machine would straddle the row of hay, not cocked, and the machine would pick up the hay and elevate it over the back of the wagon for the loader to make the load, this method did away with the need for pitchforks, but it was hard work that needed two loaders on the wagon. Another method used when the hay was to be put into a rick in the same field was the use of a horse drawn sweep; these were designed for one horse or two horses. We had a one horse sweep, and it was a very simple way of gathering the hay, the horse would walk up the side of the row of hay pulling the sweep which was about eight feet wide with ten wooden teeth each about four feet long, the sweep would be guided into the row to collect the hay and when it was judged to be full it was pulled away from the row and pulled by the horse to the rick site. At the rick the horse would be backed up about a yard, the operator would raise the handles and the horse urged forward, the tines would dig into the ground and the sweep would somersault over the hay and then right itself, and be ready to go to gather another load. The two horse type I never used but they were made with much longer prongs. Leading on from the horse sweep they made a very similar implement to fasten on the front of a motor car, this became popular about the mid thirties and the motor car had been about long enough for some models to be heading for the scrap yard and were getting quite cheap to buy. You needed something with a bit of power, my father had an American car a make called an Essex Super Six, with a powerful six cylinder engine and that on a flat field was a quick way of getting the hay to the rick. Whilst the rick was low in the early stages it worked quite well we did have a pole elevator worked by a horse on a wire cable, it was quite a job erecting it, but it worked quite well on a wagon load of hay but hay that had been swept in was quite loose and it did not work so well. The next development was when during the war the tractor started appearing on farms, the sweep makers made a sweep to suit a tractor, we had one of those which worked very well, the

only snag was that you had to make the rick in the field where the hay grew, that did not make much difference as we always ricked in the field on the moors. After a few years we bought an elevator which was a marvellous help to get the hay onto the rick. The art or skill of making good hay in those days was to be able to predict the weather and to know your fields. Because the land was not fertilized and the grass was not cut until it had come to head (to seed), it was not so difficult to dry. Because a lot of the land was permanent pasture it contained various herbs and weeds. One of the most troublesome weeds we used to call fire leaf, it was in fact a plantain and unless this plant was really dry it would get hot in the rick and the heat generated was enough to cause it to go on fire through spontaneous combustion. Most ricks in those days would warm up a bit, and we used to push a long steel rod into the heart of the rick with a barb on the end of it which when withdrawn would bring out a wisp of hay and we were able to keep a check on the level of heating in the rick by this method. Another bad weed was yellow rattle, it was a parasitic plant with yellow flowers, I have not seen it now for many years, it smothers everything and sheds its seed early and when made into hay it is light in weight and worthless.

Of course in those days good hay depended on the sun, it made well although the yield was not very high, because of the various herbs and because it had been handled gently the stock enjoyed it and they did well. Then times began to change due to the 1939 war and there was the need to produce more food here in the U.K., and if the market had been free the price of food would have shot up. The Ministry of Food was set up to control all aspects of food production and marketing in the U.K., prices were controlled and the price review system was set up for farm produce and also the system of price subsidies. Then the Ministry of Agriculture set up the Advisory Service, to advise farmers on how to increase food production; one of the slogans was, "make two blades of grass grow where only one grew before". This meant the planting of new leys and the use of fertilizer, the call went out and there is no doubt that production went up. Before the advent of the silage age people still made hay, and farmers were advised to cut the grass earlier, and because it was young and had been fertilized it was quite lush and so it was very difficult to dry, so the method changed. The advice was that as soon as the grass was cut to go in with a tedder, that was a machine that would really scatter the cut grass, and it was recommended that the grass was teded two or three times a day, and if it was good weather it did work, I

remember cutting grass on May 28th., and on May 31st., I was able to make into hay and store it.

At about this time the pick-up baler was appearing on farms; the first field of hay that we had baled was I would say about 1948, Ernie Anstey of Manor Farm, Rogiet had a baler and he also did some contract work; he had a young tractor driver, Noel Dartnell working for him who did the baling, Noel later had a farm of his own, Hazel Farm at Llanwern, and we are still friends but unfortunately he has lost his wife. Anyway we had a twelve acre field baled on Caldicot Moor, the bales just dropped back onto the ground, there were no bale sledges to drop the bales in groups in those days, the hay was dropped in neat bundles and we thought what a wonderful thing this was. The bales were collected manually and put into quite tidy stacks, but we would return in a few days to find the bales had slipped into an untidy heap a real mess, we then learnt to stack them like brickwork, the layers were bonded together to keep the bales in place. This bonding technique was also used when loading the bales onto trailers to transport them to the farm buildings. When storing hay, (loose or baled) in a rick or a barn, the grass is never totally dry and the younger the grass the more moisture it is likely to hold, and this moisture will cause the hay to sweat or heat up, a certain amount of heating will not do any harm, it will produce nice brown hay, but too much heat will give poor hay and in extreme cases will cause the hay to catch fire. Damp hay is also likely to go mouldy, and there was always a temptation that when it looked like rain was coming farmers would get it baled and stack in sixes out in the field and leave it to finish drying. This mistake of baling the hay before it was dry enough was a lesson that was learned, but there are still men suffering to this day from farmers lung as a result of handling these bales that looked good on the outside but when cut open the hay would be full of grey mould and would be caked together. If this was later shaken out to be fed to cattle the spores released were one of the main causes of farmer's lung, although like smoking and working with asbestos people were not aware of the dangers at that time, I was lucky that I did not suffer any adverse effects from these dangers.

It was not long before the pick-up baler had taken over and haymaking as we now know it was the custom, then came the bale sledge and one of the popular methods was to drop the bales in groups of six which were then stacked and they could then be loaded onto a wagon with a "Perry", loader on the front of a tractor, thus reducing the hard work of hand loading and it was a good system. We then progressed to a bale elevator at the barn,

we then went one better and changed to the bale collector on the three point linkage of the tractor, the bales were stacked in 21's and one man would haul the bales by himself without leaving the drivers seat, we changed the bale elevator to one that was loaded at ground level with an extension at the other end to carry the bales right into the barn and I thought we had a good system but it still needed a gang of four men who knew how to handle bales, we used to get casual labour for this job, but as time went by it became more difficult to get this casual labour despite transporting them to and from the farm, keeping them supplied with liquid refreshment, paying them cash per hour and giving them supper before returning them to their homes. There is still a place in these days when silage is the main winter feed, for some hay in small bales chiefly for calves. Owing to the climate various methods were tried to aid the drying of hay, one method used by Mr. Heard was to place the cut grass after it had partially dried, onto a tripod frame, a specially made interlocking frame work, the hay was placed on these tripods by hand, the airspace in the middle allowed the hay to finish drying without going mouldy, it was left out in the field for a couple of weeks, the hay was loaded onto the tripods in such a way that any rain would run off and not soak into the hay, it made good hay but the problem was that it needed a lot of manual labour. Mr. Heard kept a small herd of Jersey cows and the system suited him very well.

Silage is now the main winter feed for livestock, either made in a clamp or in big bales, these are mostly round bales and they are handled mechanically. So the pattern of securing enough food for cattle sheep and horses has changed, man is rarely content with the status quo particularly in his early years, in later years ambition is not the same driving force that it was in youth. There is no doubt that the countryside is different, when I was a small boy, my father cut the hay with a two horse Bamford mower, cutting a four and a half foot wide swath and I used to love to ride on the mower by my father's feet and watch the grass being cut, it was a slow steady pace and providing that the reciprocating knife was well sharpened the machine worked very well. Wild life had time to move out of harms way, and there were always butterflies to be seen in the grass, the small very deep red ones, the little blue ones and the white ones with brown dots, they would be after the flowers, the scabious, the margaritas, they were not very productive or valuable but that was how life was then, land was cheap, money was scarce and labour was cheap, it was a case of "cutting your coat according to your cloth".

In a climate such as we have here in the U.K., one would wonder why we stayed with the making of hay. My father first made silage in about 1937. The harvesting of the silage was all done by horse and hand power, the cut grass was brought to the farm and placed in a wooden small tower made by the “Hebditch” company. To feed the silage it had to be cut out by hand and forked out, all in all it was too labour intensive and this system did not last very long. Then in 1953 I made silage in a clamp with a little grey Ferguson tractor to which a buck rake was fitted onto the three point linkage, again the silage had to be cut out by hand for feeding and again this was just too much work so I went back to haymaking. Modern powerful tractors and the mechanisation of the harvesting and the feeding of the silage has changed all this.

How the actual cutting of the grass has changed, in the days of the finger and cutter bar of the horse mower, and the tractor mowers followed the same design, to cut the back swathe some one had to rake back the grass or else it would reeve up on the fingers, also when we got towards the middle of the field and to points on the corners again some one had to rake back or the driver had to stop and do it. Our eldest son Geoffrey was very good at that, he was also good at tidying up the corners for the pick-up baler. Now mowing with the drum mower you can just keep going on the back swath, at the corners and in the middle of the field. Young drivers today do not realise how lucky they are, but the speed they drive at today and the fact that the grass is cut much earlier in the season creates problems for wildlife, the young are not old enough or quick enough to get out of the way of the machinery, also some of the eggs may not have hatched and can be crushed by the machinery. It seems to me that every age brings its own problems, there is no doubt that haymaking in my youth was a worrying time, and the weather was a deciding factor. It was a wonderful feeling when we were making hay in small bales and by sheer effort the bales were tidy in the barn working late into the evening and then to wake next morning to see it raining, a great satisfaction that made the extra effort of the previous day well worthwhile. On the other hand I have been working on a good crop of hay, turning it and having got it almost ready to bale and leaving at night thinking just a couple hours of sun tomorrow and we can get it baled only to wake in the morning to find the rain has arrived and it could be several days before it would be dry again and the quality of the hay would be much lower. Worse still I have actually rowed up a field and started baling when the sky darkened, the thunder is heard and down comes the rain, perhaps for a week. No matter how small the

amount of rain, hay is never the same when it has been wetted and then it dries out again. Then there was always the temptation to bale it too soon and spoil it that way.

There is no doubt that making silage has taken a lot of the worry out of the conservation of winter fodder, there is still an art however in making good silage, it needs some good sunny weather, more important than ever these days, the N.R.A., (National Rivers Authority), are getting very strict about the effluent coming from silage getting into the water courses. Farmers are no different from anyone else, just let it run into the nearest ditch, like an industry pipes the waste into the nearest river. I rented some land at Shirenewton some years ago and the sewerage from the pub was piped into the ditch which ended in the Mounon brook. There is no doubt that rules or lack of them were too lax years ago.

The problem with modern times is where do you stop, economies of scale is a modern phrase and there is no doubt that it can be very true when you apply it to many aspects of business today. The supermarkets and multiple stores, because they can go to the manufacturers or indeed the farmer and they can offer to buy a large quantity, thereby almost demand a discounted price. By the same token the corner shop or small business does not stand a chance of being able to compete. Similar to a small farmer trying to sell a few cattle or a small quantity of lamb, he is at a disadvantage; his only hope is to join a group. In the days when we milked by hand the controlling factor was how many milkers you could get per man sitting on a stool with a bucket, the maximum on a daily basis was about fifteen cows per man, now there are herds of 100 plus and still rising being milked by one man, or woman, and then there is the doubtful robot, and you can almost apply that to the whole of livestock farming. A classic example is the poultry industry, turkey production when dressed turkeys ready for the oven, frozen of course, retail price in the supermarket 29p. per pound which is not far from the cost of production. Where not all that many years ago a 80 hp, tractor was a big machine, now we have monsters of upwards of 200 hp, costing £60,000.

I bought my little Ferguson new in 1953 for £410 and I was offered a 250 acre farm for £25,000. it is not much use looking backwards. The industrious explain why the small fields had to go, they do grow very good crops these days and to be fair that is still not easy, it is still an art, but I do wonder sometimes about the effect of heavy equipment on soil structure. It is indeed sad that some family farms are being sold in lots, where once a

farming family lived and the children grew up and played their games, where Young Farmers Clubs flourished and various rural activities benefited from the trade that a rural community created. I think we have lost a great deal; the fabric of society has changed. The village school has been closed down and with it the laughter of children has gone, the journey to and from school maybe on a cold winters day was not very pleasant, and this has now been replaced by a bus journey but this still leaves much to be desired, then at the end of the day they now return home to an empty house as both parents are now out at work. Many of our village shops have closed, the cottages have been extended and the owners commute to the nearest town, and villages on the path of these travellers are turned into race tracks. It all comes down to the basic element whether we like it or not of money. A basic cottage in a village is put up for sale and there would be local people who would like to buy it but more often than not it is bought by an outsider at an inflated price and it is then completely changed from the original cottage, and the new owners with all due respect have little knowledge or interest in village affairs. It would be nice if there was an answer to this, but it seems that with the march of progress, no one seems able or willing to do anything about it. The mistake as far as the district that I live in is concerned, instead of altering our villages by the modern housing squeezed into every space as infill it would be better to create new towns with roads and services to suit this present age.

Fencing and Gate Hanging.

There is a saying that a good farmer is judged by his gates, there is a certain truth in this but I would not condemn a farmer with poor gates. This saying really only applies to the stock farmer and it is surprising how many gates there can be and how they have changed. There is no doubt that gates have been around a long time, even the cottage garden gate was very important. The cottager would shut his gate and although it was very humble it was his kingdom, with a feeling of security from straying stock, these days on open plan housing privacy no longer applies, in fact even in this village when I drive through in the early morning I see garden gates that have been left open all night. One of the first jobs I did here at Merrylea was to erect a gate at the end of the drive and at night it is always shut. So the art gate hanging is old, the most important part is to have good gate posts set deep enough in the ground. In the olden days they could be wood or stone, the most common woods used were oak or yew, and if they were felled at the right time of the

year then they would last for many years, these days gate posts are more often than not tanalised conifers. When I was a lad in the horse and cart days most all farm gates were nine feet wide and the gates were mostly made of oak, with five bars and an angled strut. There was another design called the diamond braced, which as the name implies was constructed like a diamond. In the part of Gwent where we live, we are in the Curre Hunt District and not all that many years ago Sir Edward Curre owned most of the farms hereabouts, in fact from the study window where I write I can see Itton Court, the Church and the hunt kennels. In fact the 2½ acre field that Merrylea is built on did at one time belong to the Curre Estate as did the house that I can see called “Brookside”, where it is said Sir Edward Curre lived as a young man. In many strategic places as far as hunting was concerned there were erected five foot hunting gates with a fastening that could be opened with a hunting crop, these gates were made in the Itton Court carpenters shop and on the heel of the gate the year of manufacture was burned into the wood together with the initials, A.E.C., and a few of these can still be found. There is something very British about a well hung oak gate with a decent fastening, and although it may be a bit of an effort to bring this about the time saved compared to the cobbled up efforts using wire and string especially if it is used quite often is quite amazing. Then painted steel gates began to appear the M.A.C., was one brand they were cheaper and lighter than wooden gates and easier to hang and created less stress on the gate posts. They more or less coincided with the coming of tractors and wider machines and most were ten feet wide. Another change came about and the painted steel gate was replaced by the galvanized steel gate, many of the steel painted gates were made of tubular steel and although I used to keep them painted they would rust from within the tube, the galvanized gates is now universal on most farms and they can be 10, 12 or 15 feet in length and although it is with a certain sadness that the five barred wooden gate is mostly gone, but the well hung galvanized gate looks and is efficient.

When it comes to the art of fencing this is not as old as gate hanging, I have never seen any precise date when fencing was first used in farming but I would suspect that it came with the industrial revolution, before that farmers relied on stone walls, earth banks, water courses, hedges and wattle hurdles. Then came plain wire, followed by barbed wire and sheep netting and much more recently this has been replaced to a large extent by the “Rylock”, type of what we call pig netting, and this is very popular at the present time. There is a heavy gauge type which if put up well makes a very good fence, it is all

galvanized these days, but during the last year or so one firm has started producing a green wire, it is like a thin film on galvanize. There is a plastic coated wire diamond shaped mostly used by authorities and for gardens, it looks and lasts very well. With fencing wire came fence posts these were made of various materials, on the County Farms they made concrete posts in the estate yard at Crick in the wet weather and when erected these were interspersed with steel stakes every so many yards. Cleft oak stakes were very good, oak trunks were split to make this light weight type of post, cleft sweet chestnut stakes were also very good, both being very durable. But the best posts to last were yew, even the branches were very good; the drawbacks were that the foliage was poisonous to livestock and the wood was very hard and difficult to cut down and it could be too hard to drive a nail into it. Then we had the conifer plantations that were becoming popular, planted by the Forestry Commission and after so many years these plantations had to be thinned out, the thinnings were turned into fence posts and I used a lot of them. Larch was kind to work with and made a good fence, the only fault was that they were not treated in any way and ten years was their maximum life, spruce was a lot less durable. These days all fence posts are treated, no one uses untreated posts, of course the price now is quite different, and I used to buy larch fence posts straight from the wood at 5p. each, now similar treated posts are I think 80p to £1.00 each. The standard fence I used to erect and I must have put up miles of the stuff was made up of treated stakes every ten feet attached to these posts was standard gauge pig netting with two rows of barb wire at the top and sometimes a row of barb wire at the bottom.

This type of fence put up well, it was important that the end or anchor posts were of a good size, set well into the ground with good struts for support, would restrain, pigs, sheep and young cattle, but dairy cows if they fancy something growing on the other side will sometimes force their way through. I have never yet in all the years that I have been fencing been able to erect a fence that cows will respect, they will put their heads over or through it and even barb wire is no match for a 600 kg cow. The best fence for cows is an electric fence and this they will respect. My son David has gone to mains powered electric fencing and he has replaced a lot of the old barb wire and it seems to be a very effective method, and being mains powered it can be laid a long way and still be effective.

The one thing that degrades the countryside apart from old fertilizer bags is when sheep or perhaps cattle find a weak place in the hedge and force their way through and this

soon becomes quite a gap, most unsightly, and this is made worse when to mend the gap old galvanised sheets or an old bedstead are used, far better to erect a few stout posts and attach some strong rails and then plant a few quick thorns and let nature recreate the hedge.

I have written about some of the arts and crafts of our farming here in Gwent not from hearsay or the experiences of others but from my own personal involvement. When as a young man, knowing that I was going to be a farmer, it was my ambition to be able to carry out all the skills to do with farming here in Gwent. Knowing that I could not be an expert craftsman in everything but at least to acquire a fair knowledge of how it should be done, so that I would be in a position in that whenever I employed someone to do a job that I would be able to make a fair assessment of it; besides obtaining the knowledge of the skills was a challenge to aim at.

Now in the early days of 1996 farmers are not looked upon with respect, this in some instances is justified but it is not always a fair criticism to farmers like me. Men like Oliver Walston have done a lot of harm to farming, there is no doubt he is clever, a very capable businessman, but we cannot all be like him, I suppose in a perfect economic world, if the whole of British agriculture was farmed from a purely economic standpoint, then arable farms would be of many thousands of acres, a dairy farm of 200 cows, 1000 head flocks of sheep, herds of perhaps 200 suckler cows and so on across the spectrum, and there would be a lot of redundant farms and farmers. I do not think that would work unless you adopted the communistic style of farming, it would not work in a free democracy. But I really think on a small island like ours where the farmable land is limited then there should be a limit on the amount of land that a company or individual should be allowed to farm. It is also wrong when land becomes a commodity that is required for some purpose other than producing food; then a nominal value, a bit above agricultural value should be placed upon it then I suppose the owner would not be prepared to sell. If the nations need was greater then a C.P.O., (compulsory) purchase order should be enacted, with full compensation to be paid. It is because there is no upper limit to the price of development land that the price of land to farm is and has been artificially high. Because what a lot of landowners do not realise is that the land really belongs to the nation, when you die you have to leave it behind, we are merely custodians. Politicians are very clever in the way that they manipulate taxation as far as land is concerned, there are a number of M.P.'s who own land

or farms but do not know one end of a cow from the other, it is merely a tax haven for their wealth.

Farming is a way of life if you are really honest and that is in spite of the hardships that have to be endured when farming, problems caused by adverse weather, disease in stock or crops the vagaries of the market place, yet there is still a thrill of success when the job comes right. There are many aspects of the profession that has made life easier, a lot of the hard physical effort has been removed with the increased use of machinery, but on the debit side, the rules and regulations of bureaucrats, the red tape that farmers are confronted with and all the parasites that plague farming, Friends of the Earth, the environmental cranks and those who have nothing better to do than to stir up trouble and interfere with the lives of others, merely cause additional problems. Most of us in the farming community do not condone cruelty, but we have to live in a real world, where there is life then there is also death, we plant crops, we nurture them, they come to fruition and they die after forming seed or reaching their maturity, with stock they are born, they grow up and provide food for man to live, and then they die. Take the fishing industry, now I have great respect and admiration for our fishermen, my life has been hard at times but I know I would not have the courage to be a fisherman on the high seas. Yet fish is today the in food, yet I have seen on television a trawler hauling in its nets, the fish spilling into heaps on the deck and left to die, or the lone fisherman with his rod and line with an artificial fly on the barb on the end of it, the fish eats the fly but is caught on the barb on the end of the line which hooks into its mouth and the fish is dragged to its death. As with other in food, poultry meat, the way that these are despatched, if on the ordinary livestock farm we were to treat our animals in a like fashion we would be lynched. I have farmed with livestock all my life over sixty years, I have lived amongst farmers and I can honestly say that they do not ill treat their stock, the chap who lays into a cow with a stick will soon be taught a lesson, anyone who has been kicked by a 600 kg cow will tell you how painful or dangerous it can be. Maybe with a bunch of young cattle a bit of stick is necessary to get them to go in the right direction, sensible stockmen know how far to go. I do not know how true it is but I have seen on film in countries abroad and with vast acreages and cattle on the range where they lasso the young calves castrate, dehorn them and brand them without any local anaesthetic that to me is cruelty. I also think that cattle in markets are sometimes treated too harshly, but then that can be a difficult job, the occasions when a bunch of store cattle

do not want to go into the sale ring, the drovers have to be hard to keep the cattle coming forward for the auctioneers to sell, and as there are often a lot to be sold the drovers have to use a certain amount of force and no one is to blame. Certainly not the cattle, they were in their shed or the fields that they know just the day before and they are frightened by this new and to them hostile environment.

Livestock markets have their place, how else can a value be set, in an ideal world, all stock could be sold without going to market, if there is cruelty then it occurs after the animals have left the farm. The R.S.P.C.A., by their presence in the markets are quite a restraining influence, but here again these people can be more hindrance than help, and very often through lack of experience they get things wrong. At the present time the transportation of livestock is a very emotive subject, the off loading of animals after a certain time and then being reloaded after a period of rest is quite stressful to the animals. The blame is with the government, new modern abattoirs should have been built near to the main areas of animal production and all fat stock should be killed in these slaughter houses in the U.K. and the meat should then in what ever form it is required be delivered in chilled containers to the customers. To transport livestock long distances in lorries is barbaric, unnecessary and quite old fashioned. The people who really get up my nose are the clever dicks who spend vast amounts of money exploring outer space, let us get our act together here on earth for a start and get our priorities right, and these M.P.'s with their big fat salaries, should pay a bit more attention to the realities of life, the likes of Currie and the rest of the immoral bunch, instead of wasting time writing rude books, trim the salaries of gas fat cats and so called high executives that this country could very well get on without.

When I was a schoolboy there was real poverty and there were people with real wealth and there was inequality but at least those with money mostly had dignity and good manners. There is still inequality but a lot of people with money these days have neither morals, manners nor dignity.

It seems I have strayed a little from the arts and crafts but as I have written before, writing after all is just a record of ones thoughts.

Conclusion.

Times are for ever changing, they always have and they always will, and there is not much point in being a modern day Canute, we have to accept it as a fact of life and even

though a lot of the “arts and crafts”, as applied to farming are no longer with us there is no excuse for slip shod methods. There is only one satisfactory way of doing most jobs and that is to do it properly. There is no doubt in my mind that whenever the chips are down it is easier to be thorough and tidy and keep tools clean and in their allotted place and implements after use should be cleaned and put away under cover ready to go back to work when needed.

Then human beings are individuals with many different ways, and heaven forbid if we were all the same. To be perfectionist in farming can be an effort, there are so many parts of it to watch, one instance is to decide if a sick animal needs the vet which can be costly, then a rep calls selling maize seed or bull semen and a decision has to be made on whether to buy or not, or for some reason the tractor will not start, or the neighbour rings up to say that a bunch of heifers are on the road, then the accountant rings up about the accounts from the year before last, and the water tank in the brake field is running over, then on the radio you hear that the animal rights cranks are blocking the export of livestock and the media pour scorn on the farmer.

At a period of my life I was working unpaid for my father, we had two farms and quite a lot of land scattered about and we employed some labour two regular hands and then some casual help when needed, and if there ever was any trouble it was “where is the boss”, the farmer has to take all the responsibility. Quite a lot of farmers if they sold their assets they could lead an easy carefree life without the worry of the tax man, the VAT and the realms of paper work needed today, why do men carry such burdens? it is one of the quirks of nature. The majority of these officials who make life so difficult for the farmers, have no investment, just a ball point pen, they present themselves in a cosy office for 35 hours per week and if they feel rather off colour they take a little paid holiday and they are looked upon as worthy citizens, not scorned as farmers are.

Ernest E. Jones.