

The Four Seasons
of
The Countryside.

by

Ernest E. Jones.



Edited and printed by Peter Bartlett.

Four Seasons.

Spring.

Having retired as a working farmer, with time to think of other things, other than the day to day running of a farm, why do people like me write books and such like, it is I suppose a way of putting one's thoughts into print. The human brain that masterpiece of cells, must be for everlastingly occupied, even in sleep the brain will dream. The main reason I think boxing, as a sport is so infantile is that the object is to render your opponent incapable of standing up, to remain senseless on the floor with sometimes, untold damage to the great gift of an active brain. So I as a farmer and countryman will endeavour to put into print my thoughts of the "Four Seasons", of the year.

Spring as we know it is March, April and May, which is convenient as far as the calendar is concerned but in actual fact there isn't a dividing line. When we wake on March 1st. it isn't suddenly spring. To the countryman and the gardener it is quite early when the shoots of the snowdrops first appear as early as January.



The dairy farmer in spring. Spring is on its way when we change the clocks to British Summer Time, putting the clocks on one hour usually on the last Saturday in March. There has been much talk of doing away with the practice and leaving the clocks alone. I have mixed feelings about it, the lighter evenings are something to look forward to but then we have darker mornings. Dairy cows don't like it, the morning after the clocks are put on one hour to the cows that means nothing, being creatures of habit and with more intelligence than they are credited with, to arrive as we do in these days to open the parlour door there are those cows that normally are first in, on this morning most are still resting in their sleeping quarters with a look of disdain at being awakened an

hour early. So to the dairy farmer at least as far as this county of Gwent is concerned March is just another winter month, with the earnest hope that feed, silage mostly will last out, but towards the end of the month with the warmth of the sun getting stronger, thoughts of spring grass begin to stir the mind. A practice that has crept into farming these days of the early nineties is the T sum 20, these modern people stick thermometers in the fields to be grazed by the cows and when the temperature reaches twenty degrees you get the nitrogen fertilizer sown, to me perhaps because I am getting old, quite childish I think. If you watch nature, as the grass starts to move and the daffodils are pushing up from their sleep usually the end of March early April you don't need to poke about with thermometers, second nature will tell you when the time is right, one of those quirks of farming that only time and experience can teach. One of the sure signs that spring is not far away is the sight of the first swallow, to see that herald of the spring usually just one gliding through the air is one of great joy to me, and I never fail to marvel that year after year that little bird finds it's way back to it's home from the African Continent, ever since I can remember they still come back to their old haunts and rebuild their nests with such enthusiasm as they have for years. Ever since the days when we milked the cows by hand the swallows never fail to come, and they seem to like human company.

So April comes and to the great relief to dairy farmers they are able to turn the cows out to grass, at least until that has been the case in the past, (we have not always managed it in these 1990's), usually from late March to early April, with cows housed night and day they do get restless. I'm sure they can smell the grass growing, and what a wonderful sight to see a herd of cows out on spring grass, and as the month goes on the young stock are turned out and what a relief after five or six months of stock being housed with the daily grind of bedding down, cleaning out and feeding, and although April can be very unkind weather wise, the sun is getting stronger.

Then we are into May and one of my early joys was milking cows by hand on a spring morning and as the milk was milked from the cows the unforgettable smell as it hit the bucket and the lovely white froth which all good hand milkers were keen to get as it stopped the splashing as the bucket filled up, a pleasure, that in these modern times with milking machines has been lost. Another aspect of the modern dairy farmer that didn't apply when I was young is the fact that May is when most of the early silage is made, these days about the middle of the month, which really speaking is sound sense, the object of silage, at least grass silage is to preserve feed for the dairy stock for winter use and as far as cows are concerned they will produce more milk and better quality milk if grass is conserved at it's most nutritious stage, although times are ever changing and that may not hold good in ten years time. So that is spring in the eyes of the dairy farmer.

The sheep farmer in spring, here again I will restrict my writing to, as it is and has been in my part of Gwent and the parish of Mathern, because there is a big difference between where I have kept sheep and to keep sheep in say Abergavenny. To me as a sheep farmer I have always had a great affection for sheep, although numerically and economically sheep were never the main source of income on my farm, although we always kept sheep, and although these days a lot of lambs are born in winter months of January and February, we usually lamb down about mid March and a sure sign of spring is to have the first lamb. Something with science and all the modern inventions I still marvel at the fact that the ewe still gives birth to her lamb as in days past. If nature were allowed a free hand after a period of time lambs would be born in April and in the north probably May to coincide with the spring growth of grass to stimulate the mother's milk production. As was stated earlier a lot of lambs are born in January and February and are lambed down indoors, which for the shepherd is a lot easier although there can be problems.



The Shepherd tends his Sheep at Night by the Light of a Lantern.

The March lambs are usually born outside and lambing is a critical time, a hard life, long hours and there can be many problems, but with daylight hours getting longer and the faith and hope that spring is on it's way, you feel confident that the little lambs will prosper, and how ewes love the taste of spring grass. In some parts and indeed our own farm the fox can be a problem, and some are worse than others, it is a big mistake to leave dead lambs about, as they provide a meal for a hungry fox, and once the fox has tasted lamb they are then very tempted when they are hungry or perhaps they have cubs they can and do take live lambs and that can be very annoying. Dead lambs should be taken back to the farm where they should be buried or otherwise disposed of.

To a lot of town people young lambs skipping about in the warm spring sunshine must seem an idyllic scene. There is a move afoot to try and stop the docking of lambs tails, most winter born

lambs are not docked, they are usually sold at about twelve weeks of age. The reason why March and later lambs are docked is for husbandry reasons and for anyone taking the trouble to read these notes of mine especially those not acquainted with keeping sheep in the spring and indeed at other times of the year, grass can be very laxative, and this and also internal sheep worms can cause the rear end of sheep to get very dirty, and they have to be dagged. Dagging of sheep is the job of cutting off this soiled wool around their rear ends, and if the tails are left on it makes an unpleasant job a good deal worse, and no matter how well you farm your sheep, and even when ewes have been docked as lambs there are always some to be dagged, usually in May.

May is usually a happy month with sheep, lambing is over and ewes with their lambs are out at grass and a great joy it is to see ewes and lambs in the fields on a warm spring evening. Here in Gwent shearing time is usually in the third or fourth week of May and how that has changed, the method of getting the wool off the back of the sheep was for many years with the hand shears, but now we have the shearing machine.



Sheep Shearing at Green Meadow, May 1986.

How the price of wool fluctuated, in the days when wool merchants grew fat on profit from wool, to these days of man made fibre, when woollen garments in shops are quite expensive, and yet the price to the farmer is very low costing as much to shear the sheep as the wool is worth. So why shear the sheep? Here again for husbandry reasons, as spring gives way to summer and the weather gets hotter sheep can suffer in a full fleece and again with warmer days the blow fly can get busy and will lay their eggs in the fleece of a sheep and it is not a pleasant sight to see a sheep being eaten alive with maggots and that can and does happen and long tails are one of the main culprits.

So with shearing over we will leave the sheep for the time being, only to say as a young man I enjoyed shearing on a warm day in May, but you need to be strong and fit and have a liking for the job.

The Arable farmer in spring, how the meaning of the term arable farming has changed even in the space of my lifetime, and as always a lot depends on the part of the country we are speaking about. The arable farm I knew as a boy here in Gwent really meant that the main production was grain, wheat, oats or barley and usually some of each, although there was usually some stock. The livestock would produce F.Y.M. (farm yard manure) and this was a very essential part of the whole enterprise, to maintain the fertility of the soil. The spring was a very busy time of year; March did mean spring for the arable man. In the days of the horse those men worked with and relied on nature, any land not sown with autumn corn was ploughed before Christmas, ploughed well with the furrows edged up to catch the frost, as frost would break down the lumps of soil and help to prepare a good tilth into which to plant the seeds.

Then as the March wind started to blow, as it always seemed to do, this would dry the soil and the dust would blow (a peck of March dust is worth a king's ransom). The autumn corn was rolled after the frost to firm the roots into the soil. Then get the land that had been fallowed worked down and after some good winter frost how well it worked, a pleasant enough job with a good team of horses and the warm spring sun on your back. Plodding along very near to nature with the scavenging rooks the merry jingle of the harrows or the plough harness and the smell of the ever honest earth that was something that stirred the souls of men, the modern arable farmer reading these few notes would dismiss these remarks as the romantic ramblings of a rustic mind, and on today's terms very uneconomic. Those days we were poor, but that was the only way we knew how to farm, but we did get great satisfaction from what we were doing. In this modern age of power harrows and other modern equipment, powered by high tech very powerful tractors, it is much easier to work the soil into a good tilth as a seedbed for spring-sown crops even without the help of frosts.

After a day following horses, then it was a journey home to see them stabled and fed before you went home to your meal; the animals were looked after before the humans. Poor no doubt and tired for sure but content and satisfied with a day well spent. A lot of people of my age say the seasons have changed and the weather has changed compared to years ago and maybe it has although the memory of man is not the most reliable of sources, I looked at things differently as a lad sixty years ago, than I did in later years with some maturity and experience to guide me. Years

ago we always had wind in March and we always seemed to have April showers, and the order of weather so suited the farming programme.



High-Cut Crested Furrows.



Rectangular Furrows.



Broken Furrows.

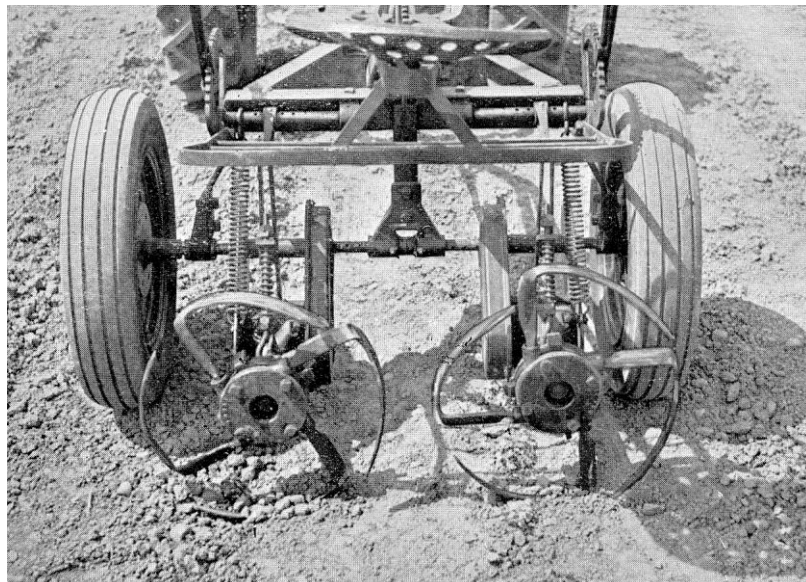


Inverted Furrows.

Differing Furrow Styles to suit various needs.

March was dry and dusty to get the corn planted, and then the April showers to get the crops growing. April was a busy month to get the (F.Y.M.) muck on to the root ground for Mangolds and Potatoes and other root crops, we used to like to haul the muck with a special dung cart and two horses, unload it in heaps of about two to three hundredweight about five yards apart, all of the loading, unloading and spreading was done by hand with a dung fork, it was very heavy work. We liked to get it ploughed in straight away before the goodness dried out of it. For potatoes we would

drop it in heaps to be spread in the rows that had been bouted out, and the seed was planted on the manure, the bouts were then split back covering the seeds and the manure. Swedes and turnips were planted later usually during the month of June. The growing of roots was especially important to the arable farm before the days of chemicals, it was the only way to build up fertility and to combat weeds, and by crop rotation keep pests and diseases at bay. Looking back it was a labour of love and not very profitable, but a system very friendly towards nature, we worked very close to nature in that we were in actual contact with the soil in almost everything we did, we got to know nature very well and her moods are many. When the job of sowing was completed there was a brief respite until the hoeing of the root crops. To flat hoe a field of roots as we did before the days of the precision drill, we had to leave single plants by cutting out surplus plants with a hoe; it was a back breaking and soul-destroying job.



Gapping Machine (Dixie).

An Early Machine to Mechanically Single Plants to save Hand Hoeing.

At the end of the day you were glad of a rest, but if you didn't keep up with the growing crops and got behind with the work you could never catch up, there is a time limit set by nature to get the work done. Today the arable men ride over the soil on their tractors with modern equipment, and they have lost direct contact with the soil, they don't hear nature only the radio in their air conditioned tractor cabs, they can't smell nature only their own after shave, but the toil is gone, the poverty is gone they are men of machines and power and to their credit most of them are very good at the job, but how different, it is hard to credit that arable farming could have changed so much in the space of sixty years.

School, schoolchildren and spring, as I have already written it is never suddenly spring it is a very gradual process changing from winter to spring. Looking back weather has a profound effect on the life of country folk of all ages. Children of today just haven't a clue how even getting to school could be an ordeal in itself; to get to our school at Mathern (now sadly closed) we had to walk across the fields one and three quarter miles, and we carried our few sandwiches and a piece of cake for dinner and water to drink too much of a hassle to carry anything different. At one stage Mr Eddie Williams when he was our headmaster, he did organise Horlicks for mid morning, made by some of the older girl pupils. So although March is spring it can be a cruel month with winter's icy fingers very loathe to let go. April and Easter holidays, why do school children long for holidays and leaving school? There is something rebellious in human nature that makes us want to do our own thing and not conform to the wishes of others. Not that at home there was much luxury I remember the first radio my father bought. Just a basic set of works no cabinet and the speaker was hung up on the wall, with batteries made of glass and full of acid that had to be taken to the local town to be recharged. We did have a gramophone which we wound up by hand these luxuries belonged to my father we children didn't own anything of our own, just a few basic toys. Away from school there were jobs to be done on the farm at home, feeding the chickens and collecting the eggs, and plucking chickens etc. I spent my time in spring making bows and arrows, at one stage I had an air gun for shooting sparrows, when I was about eleven years my father bought a pony that I used to ride, although she was bought to take the milk churns in a little cart to the main road. Then April came and with it the primroses started to come up in the banks of the lane leading past the farm and violets appeared, always the deep blue ones in the same place every year



Movable General-Purpose Poultry House.



Folging Unit.

Poultry Housing from circa 1940.

May arrives and the sun is getting stronger, mares have their foals this month, born very quickly, hopefully without assistance, because although the most powerful of all farm animals except the bull, if you had to help a mare to foal in those days it was likely that the foal and possibly

the mare would be lost. Foals like all young animals that are allowed to feed from the mother are very attractive.

In the days before incubators the hens would have been sitting on about twelve eggs for three weeks and then the chicks would be hatched, we had a shed we used to call the duck house it had an earth floor, which was the best place for hatching because being an earth floor it was slightly damp and more natural, hens were also used to sit on and hatch duck eggs. The hens and young ducklings and chicks were put in little coops on the lawn, the hens were confined but the young ones could run in and out through bars in the front. After a couple of weeks they were allowed to run around the farmyard together. May is when the bird song is at it's best the cuckoo is back and the swallows are busy, to the country lad bird nesting was part and parcel of the country life although I never saved bird's eggs, I was keen to find a nest but left the bird to do her job. The skylark to me was the most difficult nest to find, very well hidden usually in the hoof print of a cow or horse and very well camouflaged. A source of great interest to country boys was the different types of nest built by different birds, made of whatever material was available some of these nests are a work of art; the little wren makes one such amazing little nest. How I admire the enthusiasm of birds, and how busy they are and how without instruction books natural instinct, enables them to use their beaks to collect the material and build their nests. For generations robins will always build in the same place every year, in contrast to the intricate nature of some nests, the lazy pigeon uses just a few twigs to build its nest.

In spring the unforgettable smell after a warm shower of rain, and that smell like that of a fox in early morning I can't describe it but I know it so well. School like all things in this life is a mixture of good and bad, the village school in this day and age is becoming a relic of the past, but I often wonder how right the so called experts are to close the village schools and lump all the children together in much larger numbers. Of course they don't have to walk in all winds and weather, carrying their few sandwiches to arrive in a classroom that was cold if you sat at the back, with a master teaching four classes in the same room with just a partition between the classes. Today all country children have transport to a new centrally heated school with a hot cooked dinner available, but with the local schools closed the parents mainly driving off to town or factory to work the village is dead, children have lost touch with nature.

As a young lad from the farm all that was deemed necessary was to read and write and to know simple arithmetic farmers in general reckoned it was of far greater benefit to be at home and learn the arts and crafts of the countryside and to learn the ability to buy and sell at market than to

be at school after the basics had been taught, and I honestly think they weren't very far wrong. Times are changing as they always have and to be successful in farming today not only do you still need a basic education, but you also need that instinct to know when animals are sick, because unlike humans they can't say where the pain is, and to know when the time is right for the many different jobs that the farmer is called upon to do and to decide the priority to give to each job.



Mathern School circa 1933, Ernest Jones is in the second row, 7th. pupil from the right.

Today to deal with the technology, the rules and regulations, the vulture like staff from the Government Departments including the Inland Revenue then the farmers of today have to have an active brain and above average intelligence, there is no place in agriculture for the straw chewing yokel of days past. At the village school we played games, and cigarette cards known to us, as fag cards were something all boys collected and we used them for various games in the playgrounds. Girls played hopscotch and skipping, in Mathern school village children started and finished in the same school. Miss Pemberton taught the infants and class 1, Miss Dunn class 2 & 3, Mr Watkins class 3 & 4 and the headmaster Mr Eddie Williams class 5,6 and 7. and you left at fourteen years of age. The girls had a separate playground to the boys. Other games we played at different times were marbles, conkers and whip and top. In the dinner hour we played cricket in the Hut field, so called because the Village Hall was built there, which in fact was an ex army wooden hut from the first world war, in the winter we played football never rugby that was too posh for us.



Mathern Village Hut.

Also attached to our school we had a school garden, and there were about twelve or so plots and a head master plot and the older boys had their own plot that they had to cultivate and plant with vegetables, all this was done with tools belonging to the school. A lecturer a Mr Chambers came about once a month to lecture us and teach us how to garden. Some of the girls also had smaller plots in which they grew flowers. We enjoyed our gardening and the vegetables we grew we could take home, sadly now the gardens are built on and school gardens are just a memory. It is hard to say if we were the better for our school days compared with the children today, possibly the education given then and given now is appropriate to the conditions existing at the time. We lived in a community, and although our farm was almost two miles around the roads to Mathern we all knew each other, we knew their families and what the father did, we lived close to nature we knew what Spring meant to us, we lived in a real world.



Green Meadow Farm July 1971.

Children today I would imagine by the experience of my own grandchildren have wider horizons are very much more worldly wise, they understand computers, work is something to be automated if you can, the aim is to spend as little time as necessary on work and get as much on leisure and pleasure as possible. In our school days, "Drugs", were something used by doctors in hospitals, "Violence ", was something that gangsters did in America. Schoolgirls could walk home from school up country lanes and pick primroses and violets without any fear of any harm coming to them. The gypsies used to camp on the side of the lane, real gypsies that is, the families that travelled the lanes and made clothes pegs out of hazel and pursued other country crafts. We weren't afraid of them they were part of life staying for one or two days then moving on, all that they would leave behind was a few wood ashes where their fire had been. I am biased maybe but our school days in spring were better days than those experienced by children today and I for one am very grateful that I was part of it.

The gardener in spring, perhaps I am not qualified to write on such a wide subject, because like the term farmers, gardeners too can describe many different people, from the person male or female that makes a crude indentation in a patch of soil and sows a few lettuce seeds and then forgets all about them to the Head Gardener of a large stately home. My gardener is a person who loves gardening, grows good ordinary vegetables for the table and flowers for his wife to adorn the furniture, and to be admired where they grow, a person who loves soil for its honest goodness if treated correctly. Spring to the gardener is when nature stirs out of sleep, and she never fails us, the snowdrops are one of the first plants to stir usually in December followed in January by daffodils, crocus and later tulips these of course just send up their shoots as if to test if Spring is on its way, very often remaining just visible for a couple of months and although it is still winter the gardener is always thrilled to see this envoy of spring, winter aconites are usually the first to bloom, their dash of yellow tucked under the pyracantha here at Merrylea. There is colour on some of the shrubs Viburnum Bodnontia is the first and the winter flowering jasmine soon follows. But the gardeners work doesn't really start until the sun warms and dries in March, it is warmth that is the prime mover, even if the ground is dry seeds need warmth to germinate there is a saying we used when growing corn that bears this out, "long in bed slow to head". There is real magic in gardening when the soil is right and the warm rays of the sun on your back, to be at peace working with the soil and although weeds pests and diseases will do their best to defeat your efforts the true gardener accepts these things as part of life. Having prepared the soil, drawn his drills planted his seed he forgets them for a while. Some varieties of plants like old tried friends he trusts and grows every year knowing they can be trusted, then he will try perhaps a few of the new variety just to see how they

perform. Then in a week or so the first shoots appear and so will the pests, and battle lines are drawn, and as the garden seeds start to grow so to do the weeds to share in nature's bounty.



The garden at Merrylea Early Summer 2000.

The wonderful thing about a garden it can be very simple just a few salad vegetables mature shrubs, ground cover plants large patio area and the owners quite happy to avail themselves of all that the modern supermarket has to offer. Simplicity itself, and of course very easy, and to the aged, the infirm and to those who are without the will and appetite to grow their own fruit and vegetables it is a satisfactory solution. But the true gardener could not accept this, as it gives no sense of achievement and no satisfaction. The freshness of vegetables straight from the garden to cooking pot is something very real, a few examples, for salad the spring onions, lettuce and radish on the table within the hour of growing in the garden, cauliflower from garden to pot in a few minutes, peas and beans gathered fresh, but for a real treat tomatoes still warm from the greenhouse or new potatoes fresh dug from soil fertilized with good old farmyard manure, these are the just reward for those prepared to make the effort.

Of course the growing of flowers and shrubs is another dimension and it has become very popular even with people living in town and very rewarding too, what a dull world it would be without flowers. For the true country man and gardener one of life's greatest pleasures is to walk down a British country lane in early May with the birds singing, the flowers blooming on the banks and that beautiful freshness in the air, simple may be, but that is life at it's best. So we leave Spring and the gardener, being a country man I have often wondered how do town dwellers think of spring,

there are I have noticed some beautiful houses with lovely gardens obviously cared for and loved by their owners these are usually on the suburbs or outskirts, I am thinking of the masses in the depth of our large cities, it must be a strange life, but for them perhaps they are happier than having to face the rigours of country life.

The weather in spring, it would not I feel be right and proper not to dwell for a while on this all important subject, the weather in spring, the most important ingredient of which is warmth from the sun, now the sun is always there and at Green Meadow Farm, Hayes Gate I have seen the sun rise many times in the last sixty odd years and in mid December it rises due S - S E, over St. Pierre park at about 8.30 am. but as the earth turns on its axis by mid June it rises due east at about 5 am. and it never alters from one year to the next, yet we have early springs and the late springs and that is explained by several reasons. If in the preceding months of the winter we have severe frost and cold winds, then the land and the surrounding sea gets very cold, and it will take the sun longer to warm the soil and the atmosphere and it will be a late spring. Now if the preceding winter months are wet and mild and a predominant southwest wind then we can have an early spring and the effect of the sun has a much quicker effect. Weather in Britain can be very unpredictable being a small island the wind direction has a great effect, predominantly from the west and it is mostly mild and wet, if the east wind dominates it is cold and dry, north can bring cold rain sleet and snow, we rarely have a southerly wind, when we do this is usually quite warm and often moist. Weather in March can be very treacherous and unkind, but it can also be warm and pleasant. Then April can revert back to winter, this then checks any early growth that has taken place. May used to be my favourite month, the weather usually being very kind, but perhaps our seasons are changing or have changed because I have seen some horrid weather in May.

For many years I have kept a record of the weather and rainfall for the month of May in 1990 was only 8.25 mm., in May of 1993 54 mm., of rain fell; having produced a summary of rainfall over twenty years I regard 50 mm., of rain as ideal in May. Annual rainfall figures for 1987 to 2005 will be found inside the back cover. Yet with it all the good and the bad the effect is not often catastrophic, not like earthquakes and the like as experienced in other countries.

To me one of the greatest pleasures is to fetch the cows for milking on an early April morning with the birds singing and the air fresh and unspoilt by man. But then again in early April thinking winter is past the cows are turned out to spring grass and then the weather turns back to winter being wet and cold. When this happens beautiful spring grass disappears under a sea of mud. When walking along the edge of Lavant wood on April 25th. one year I remember seeing bluebells blooming in about three inches of snow, and then there was the time in May when the

trees had come into leaf we had snow that broke the branches down, but in spite of set backs such as this as farmers and countrymen we have the undying faith, that seed time and harvest will not fail, and it is that faith that enables us to survive, nature can be both kind and very cruel but we accept that as part of our calling, we are willing and ready take on the challenge.

It is the inspector of taxes, the little men in cosy offices with big salaries, the nosey parkers from our over crowded cities who drive out on warm sunny days and try and tell us how we should run our farms and they forget we the farmers and fishermen were here first, and what we do is based on many years of our experience and the experience of our ancestors, not gained from a few text books often not taking the vagaries of animals and the weather into account. They and their life style are the imposters and we find it hard to tolerate them.

Come out into the country and share it with us by all means but respect our way of life, keep to the paths and treat us and our beautiful countryside and our way of life with the respect it deserves. Unfortunately there are farmers who are not worthy of their profession and I abhor them, as much as the interfering bureaucrats and disrespectful townfolk, but that is human nature it happens in all walks of life, and here I will leave the spring as seen through the eyes of a countryman.

Summer.

Summer naturally follows spring and here again there is no preset time of change, one season merging into the next, but by the calendar June, July and August are regarded as the summer months.

The dairy farm in summer, this is to me the best time of the year, and in the days of hand milking, morning milking was quite a pleasant job once your muscles were attuned to the work, to any one not used to regular hand milking of dairy cows, arms would ache something awful, afternoon milking on a hot afternoon could be unpleasantly warm work indeed. Hand milking was a wonderful opportunity to think, once you got to know your cows it was almost automatic with the quiet docile ones, the temperamental cows were a different matter; many times I've been kicked off the stool, milk and all. As a member of Chepstow Young Farmers I did some public speaking and have thought up lines for speeches whilst sitting on the milking stool. Today in the modern milking parlour it is a very different job, in the days of hand milking on average one person, depending in the amount of milk the cows produced would milk between six and eight cows an hour and about fifteen cows in total, milking them twice each day. Today some dairymen are expected to milk one hundred cows or more, this does not give much time for idle thought. In my youth cows would

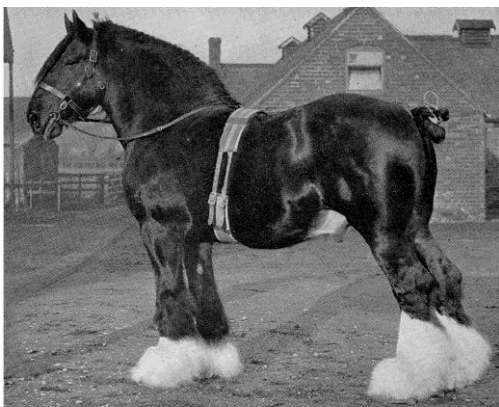
graze the fields near the building free range, strip grazing and electric fences didn't come into general use until about mid 1940's after the war. No artificial fertilizer was applied to the fields, you just used what grew naturally, this compared to today was a very leisurely way of life, a period when you carried on as your father had, because it was a tried and tested and you were confident that it was the right way to proceed.

As in all things in life there was the down side. The selling of milk was a haphazard business, the farmer often being held to ransom by the buyers, this was before the days of the MMB (Milk Marketing Board). The M.M.B. was established to give the dairy producers stable prices. Most milk except that sold direct to the public went by rail in seventeen gallon churns, before the days of refrigeration bulk tanks, in hot summer weather it was difficult to get milk to keep and dairies would send it back sour. It was one of my jobs to get the horse in the float, a light type of two-wheel cart and to take the milk to the nearest railway station at Portskewett. The establishment of the M.M.B. (Milk Marketing Board) brought some stability to milk prices and the milk was collected by lorry from the farm originally in churns, but now by refrigerated bulk tanker lorries, that collect the milk by suction from the refrigerated farm tank. Although looking back it was a placid way of life sat on a milking stool milking away, swallows darting in and out, no great rush, there was poverty, T.B. of the cattle was a hazard, abortion if it came was a disaster, and the warble fly was a curse, in hot thundery weather cows and young cattle would stampede and jump through fences to try and get away from the buzz of the warble fly. Nowadays there are products to control many of these problems, but not the thunder weather.

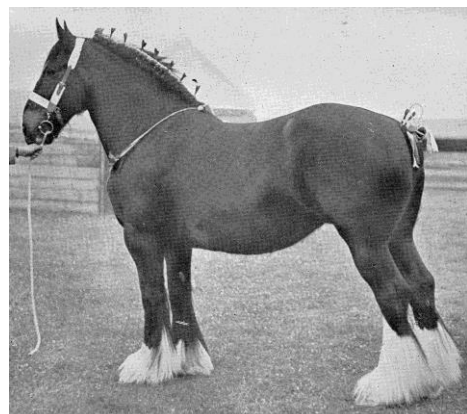
The sheep farmer in summer, perhaps it would be better to say summer and the sheep, sheep farmers covers so many versions, in Australia a sheep farmer counts his sheep in thousands, here in the U.K. flocks are getting bigger and indeed some of the mountain flocks run into thousands, but here in Gwent the flocks I write about were probably from twenty to one hundred head. To me the sheep have always been part of the stock of the general mixed farm. An easier way to manage sheep in some respects is in smaller numbers, sheep like horses need to rotate from field to field to keep free of internal parasites and if a part of a general farm that can be done, although the fences on the whole farm need to be good, a big mistake folk make with sheep, put them in a fresh field and when they get out put the fence right, if the fences are good they will settle and not look to roam out. In the heat of summer sheep like shade especially trees and I have never been able to say truthfully whether trees are good or bad as under trees it gets very foul and harbours flies and foot rot. A very pleasing sight after a hot day is the cool of the evening to see the sheep out grazing and to hear the ewes and lambs calling to each other. A sheep farmer must not get sentimental because

at lambing time a large amount of devotion and effort is needed to see the lambs survive and then in between twelve and twenty weeks those very lambs are sent off to the market to be killed. That is the order of things in the countryside, it is just not practical to keep them longer and providing they have had a good life and are dealt with humanely that is as much as can be done. On the general mixed farm during the summer the shepherd should see that there are not any lame animals, where possible to have a fresh field once week, spray or dip them to keep flies at bay and to dose regularly against internal parasites. Of course sheep like many aspects of the farming world are changing; the British breeds that roamed our fields for generations are being interbred mainly with breeds from the continent of Europe, the main reason being people who eat lamb do not want fat so farmers are having to breed much leaner sheep. So we take our leave of sheep in the summer.

The horse in summer, this could mean many different things to many people, to many it could mean riding horses and ponies grazing in odd fields on the outskirts of many towns, farms that have been sold off in lots, much of the land built on, split up by roads and through the actions of dogs and vandals too difficult to farm and so they end up as horse paddocks. To some, horses mean show jumping at Agricultural shows and horse events and of course the ever popular horse racing. But here I will write about the farm horse of my youth on the general farm, on these farms the horse did not have a bad life, the summer time was the hardest work with haymaking a very important part of the farming scene, the hay harvest was very important as on most stock farms it was the basic feed for all the livestock during the winter months. In the days of the early 1930's most general mixed farms grew a bit of corn in rotation so that there was usually a young ley containing red clover, this was first to be cut about the first week of June and kept mainly for the horses being a bit coarse and good for cutting into chaff. It was the end of June or July when the meadow hay was cut. My father used a two horse machine to cut a 4' 6" swath that today would be just under 1.5 metres, for the horses two good shires would manage quite well, not very good in the heat of the day, flies tormented the horses a lot, evening time when the sun went down or early morning were the best times to cut the hay.



Shire Stallion.



Shire Mare.

As a young lad on a summer evening if father went mowing I enjoyed sitting on the mower between fathers legs. Those days were very good for wild life in the country, grass for hay was cut in July, by July all the birds would have finished nesting, young wild animals would be large enough to escape the mower, and wild flowers would have dispersed their seeds ready for next years growth. Farmers used to say the hay needs a bit of seed in it, not that the seed was all that beneficial but because grass had stopped growing in fact it was literally dying, in those days hay was treated very gently, sometimes turned by hand or with a horse drawn swath turner that just turned the swaths, depending on the weather the mown hay was turned each day for three or four days then two swaths were put into one row, then it would be cocked up, women would very often make these small heaps (known as cocks), every two or three yards in rows three yards apart ready for hauling.



Bill Mapps of Oak Grove Farm, Crick mowing with a horse drawn mowing machine.

The most popular method for hauling the hay was a horse and four wheeled hay wagon with three men, they would drive up these rows, one man either side of the wagon loading to the third man would make the load, this job of making the load required a skill acquired with experience. This was a job I performed many times; the load of loose hay would be twelve feet high and had to be taken back to the farmyard, which may be some way across fields, through gateways or up lanes. If the journey was rough we would rope the load, one of the ensuing dangers was a rope snagging on a gatepost, so the waggoner or driver had to know his job. One horse was used to move up the rows to load the hay, but it was sometimes necessary to harness a second trace horse in front of the shaft horse if the journey to the farmyard was difficult.

One of the things I looked forward to before I was big enough to use a pitchfork or pike to load the hay was to ride home on top of a load of hay. Back at the farm the load was taken to the rick yard where the load had to be unloaded either into a Dutch Barn, or to make a rick of hay.



A Rickyard on a Farm In Kent during August.

A Dutch barn was a metal structure usually with metal upright stanchions and a corrugated sheeted roof, and often one end was sheeted and also part or all of one side was sheeted against the prevailing wet weather, the other end and sides were left open to allow air to circulate around the hay to finish the drying and making process. All this work was done by hand, both loading and unloading; later elevators were introduced to lift the hay to the top of the ricks or the Dutch barn. If the hay was stored in a stone barn, the hay at the edges would often be mouldy because of the lack of air circulation, but stone barns (also known as threshing barns), were ideal for the storage of sheaves of corn, the straw being coarser and this allowed some air to circulate to prevent the formation of mould. Hay making was a task needing men with a variety of skills and with strength, as it was quite demanding and arduous work. In the depression of the 1930's we did have men sent to help on the farm from the, "dole office", but these men had no experience of this work and their lack of skill and the right strength showed how skilled and strong the farm men were. Hay making was kind to wild life, by the time the hay was cut in July, most of the meadow flowers had bloomed and shed their seed ready for the next year's new plants, also all the chicks of ground nesting birds would have fledged, and would have fed on the seeds of the meadow flowers. Also because of the relatively slow speed of the working horses, young birds and young animals such as leverets would have time to get to safety. One disadvantage of this type of farming was that it encouraged the growth of a parasitic plant, "yellow rattle", it lived on other plants and would shed it's seeds in July,

and there was a real likelihood that it would choke out the beneficial plants and you could end up with a very light and sparse crop of hay. If for a few years the hay was cut just as this plant came into flower, it would die out, as no viable seeds would be produced. I have not seen any "yellow rattle", for many years. In the 1930's there were no artificial fertilizers, if any farmyard manure could be spared a light dressing would be applied to the hay fields. Hay making had been carried on in this way for many years, the only real change I can remember is that the scythe had given way to the horse drawn mowing machine.

The Second World War came and things were never the same again, tractors replaced horses and speed of work and machinery were the order of the day. "Experts", from the ministry preached to farmers on the need to change away from the old tried and tested ways, artificial fertilizers were needed to boost the yields which were too low, and more food had to be home produced, farmers were encouraged to plough the old pastures and plant new more productive species of grass, cut the grass earlier in the year when it contained more food value, and spray the pastures with chemicals to kill any weeds that were using soil nutrients and moisture that was needed by the grass. In due course farmers did change as they were requested to, and now fifty years later farmers are being blamed for ruining the countryside when in fact they had been told to change their methods.

The change to a much harsher economic climate has meant that farmers, to meet the rising cost of land (either to buy or to rent), the higher cost of labour and all other inputs into farming, have had to increase their production per acre and per man hour to survive. To do this modern techniques have had to be adopted, and sadly these are to some extent detrimental to the countryside environment.

Politicians as so often in the past are to blame for high land prices, by manipulating taxation, and this has resulted in a false land value caused by people outside farming wanting to invest in land, as it has always been regarded as a safe investment. This has resulted in some of the best agricultural land in Gwent be sold at around £3,000 per acre, where the real value to a farmer is £800 to £900 per acre.

I seem to have wandered some way from the idyllic picture I wrote of earlier of summer in the hay field. From the sweet smell of hay that I remember in my youth, to the modern farmer that I had to become, silage does not have that same appealing smell that I remember from well-made hay.

I remember once cutting a field of hay exceptionally early one year, it was cut on my birthday May 31st. and baling it on June 3rd. but that was very unusual. However I adopted the system of cutting the grass young and then we kept the grass moving with tedders and turners so that it would make (dry) more speedily. By the late 1970's we had mechanised the task of

haymaking and providing we had a spell of good weather we would make good hay, but no matter how good the equipment and how hard you tried we could never make good hay without sunshine. Of course the introduction of the tractor drawn baler made it easier to mechanise the collection of any hay, these bales could be handled by one man, but now we have big square and round bales that are moved by tractor loaders.

Then the pattern changed and in came silage making, and this change transformed farming and the conservation of animal fodder for the winter. I intend to deal with this later when I discuss weather.

So with these changes we leave the horse with a few observations. Horses did need to be replaced from time to time; a young horse would be broken in, i.e., trained to work at two years of age and would continue working for about twenty years. On most farms a mare or two would be kept, and these would be mated with a travelling Shire stallion, and the foals would usually be born in May. The birth of a foal was the cause of much excitement, after a few weeks rest the mare would return to light work at first and by autumn she would be back to do her normal work. At haymaking time the foal would be shut in a shed at the farm and the mare would be taken to work in the fields. All would be well for a few hours but then the mare would want to get back to her foal, and you had to be careful with her or she would just take off in response to her natural instincts, as a rule we would be compassionate and would take her home after a few hours work. The geldings (castrated male horses) would be worked on the farm until they were about six years of age and then they would go to work in the town, this I found a bit sad but in general they had a good life, breweries used a lot of these geldings to deliver the beer. At home we bred large Shire horses and light hunters, summer was a good time of the year for schooling young horses, it was time consuming and not without excitement and an element of danger. These memories of my lifetime are written in the hope that some people will find them interesting enough to read; it is a way of life that will not return.

Arable farming in summer, was a time to pause for a moment, once the roots were hoed and started to meet in the rows they had to be left to nature, if the crop had grown well, the growth would suppress any further weed growth and this would prevent any weed seed being shed, this seed would have been ready to germinate and spoil the succeeding corn crop, as in the early days chemical sprays were not available. In spite of these efforts weeds could be a problem, fields red with poppies were a beautiful sight but the crop would not be very profitable, yellow charlock and thistles were also particular problems. Thistles in sheaves of corn were a real nuisance and made handling them very unpleasant, both at harvest time and when they were fed into the threshing

machine. The really good farmers went through their growing corn in spring with a special thistle-spudding hoe; this was a very tedious and laborious job. I never wonder at farmers spraying their corn, the alternative is not very appealing to the eye or profitable. I have never been engaged in a purely arable farm, but I would think there are periods of frantic activity and times when there would be no great pressure to get jobs done. However there is always work to be done on a farm no matter what type of business is carried on, if you have the aptitude and the will to look for these non-essential jobs that help to preserve the countryside. One of the great attractions about farming to me is that you succeed or fail by your own efforts. Strange that it may seem money in itself has never held much attraction for me, only that at one stage of my life I was quite poor, and to run a farm when short of money is a worry and great disadvantage, as you lose discounts and your buying power is reduced, therefore you are not able to trade in the most effective manner, but the advantage of having money is that it enables you to buy what you need where and when you want to at the most advantageous price. Buying stocks and shares has never appealed to me, but buying and using and looking after good modern equipment gave me a great deal of pleasure, and I never could quite understand people who purchased good equipment but would not look after it, leaving it outside in all weathers.

Summer weather, like the weather at any time of the year in the United Kingdom summer weather is quite unpredictable, bad weather in the summer when the farmer is trying to harvest his crops is very disappointing. One thing is quite certain and that is that on a mainly livestock farm there has never been much profit made in a drought. I can still remember very vividly the summer of 1976, this was a very worrying time with no grass for the animals to graze and no fodder to conserve for winterfeed, and all the farm looking like a parched desert, I took some photographs at that time and when I look at them now I find it hard to believe that this was the U.K.



Green Meadow in the Drought of 1976.

On a farm it is not very likely that a farmer can say that there are no problems, if there is not something amiss with the animals then the chances are that there is a problem with the crops, and this happens despite all the farmers efforts to do things correctly, probably it is natures way of showing that she is still in charge. I found that it paid handsomely to walk around the farm regularly, I would then see things that would not be noticed in the general course of the work day farming operations, such as a crop in need of some special treatment or an animal in need of that little bit of extra attention. Also I would see how pleasant this county of Gwent is to live in, and I would realise that every cloud has a silver lining.

As a youth I can remember the saying that three days hot weather would be followed by a thunderstorm, and I can remember that this was often the case. The sequence would be three hot cloudless days and then the clouds would gather, the air would become very still and oppressive and the weather would break. In recent years the weather seems to stay settled for longer periods without breaking with thunderstorms.

I have kept records of the weather over the last twenty years and I have noticed that the weather in the autumn is more settled than it is in other seasons. For the farmer especially the livestock farmer good weather for haymaking was essential, because the hay harvest was the major food for all the livestock in winter. To try to make hay in poor weather was a nightmare, and it was always much harder work making poor hay than making good hay. When hay was made in good weather the satisfaction from the nice "rattle" of the drying grass gave confidence for the following winter.

These days silage has taken over from haymaking as it is a more efficient way of conserving the grass as winter feed and to an extent, the making of silage is not quite so dependent on the weather as haymaking, but sunshine always enables the farmer to make better quality silage.



Cutting Grass for Silage at Green Meadow June 1979.

The making and feeding of silage is now in nearly all cases totally mechanised, and this is very necessary with the dwindling labour force on farms, many people have left farms to go and find the higher financial rewards and more sociable hours available elsewhere, and this has resulted in the remaining work force having to look after more livestock per man. Unfortunately silage making is not so friendly to the wild life, ground-nesting birds could still be hatching their eggs and young animals may not be able to get away from the fast moving machinery. Another problem that arises with silage making is that because the grass is harvested much younger it is more succulent and therefore contains more moisture, and although much of this moisture is dried off in the fields the grass when put into the silage pit or clamp does produce an effluent, and it is essential that this effluent is not allowed to enter water courses as it will de-oxygenate the water and result in the death of fish. The National Rivers Authority (N.R.A), are very vigilant in checking the condition of the water and if they find a farmer has been responsible for polluting a watercourse they can impose very heavy fines on that farmer.

We live in changing times, the production of food was at one time the paramount consideration, now it seems that care of the environment is the pacemaker. My idea of a perfect summer would be ten days hot dry weather (not above 70°), followed by two days gentle rain, but I know we just have to manage with what is sent and make the most of it.

In spite of the unpredictability of the U.K. weather I think we have a lot to be thankful for, and for me there is no better place to live than great Britain.

Summer and schooldays should really have been idyllic days for me, living in the country, on a farm with no responsibility; but mine were not quite as I would have liked them to be, mainly because my mother died before I knew her and I was never really able to accept my stepmother, nor her relatives or my step brothers and step sisters. However I should be grateful that I was brought up in the family home, and not in an orphanage. In spite of this I loved the summer, getting to school was so much more pleasant on summer mornings, being able to observe nature which most of the children of today are not able to do, as they are taken to school in various modes of transport. We usually walked to school across the fields but sometimes we had the luxury of going on our bicycles if we were lucky, we often went to school in groups and all our schooling was at the same school; it was only a very few clever pupils who got to the grammar school.

Holidays were spent at home, we never went to stay away from home on holiday, but we did go on a Sunday school outing to Barry Island, but this was only a day visit. Holidays at home were never dull, there was always plenty to do and there were always jobs to be done. We had to make

our own pleasure, there was no television, the farm was a safe place to play as was the countryside in general, and one of the highlights was the village fete and carnival.



Mathern Fete, with the Village "Hut" in the background.

Summer and the gardener means that the efforts of the winter and spring are now rapidly coming to maturity, but not that this is a time with little to be done in the garden. Weeds are always appearing and have to be pulled out or cut off with a hoe, there are also pests and diseases ready to try and undo the results of all the work we have done with the help of nature. The aspect of the weather that can be most damaging in the garden during the summer is wind and drought.

If I did not have a garden I would be very sad indeed, to walk around the garden on a summer evening to enjoy the beautiful colours and the scents of the flowers and the maturing vegetables is a real joy especially when these are the results of your own efforts. The garden here at Merrylea is very beautiful, the shrubs, the vegetables and the gentle sound of the brook under the hedge and the good soil, a sandy loam in a peaceful setting is a source of much pleasure.

The garden at Green Meadow our old family home was very good, the soil was heavier but not so hungry, but the element that spoilt Green Meadow was the M4 motorway. The noise destroyed the peace and calm that I knew as a young boy growing up on the farm; where we had horses and life was peaceful, and this made up for the poverty we experienced. You could even hear the neighbour's ewes and lambs at the next farm, Broadwell, calling to each other at dusk; also we used to hear the corncrake, these natural sounds and the peace made up for the poverty and hardships of our lives. Now there is the motorway, with the constant, day and night traffic noise destroying the peace and quiet of that piece of the countryside.

In the summer time when work with tractors was finished and the cows had been milked and were back grazing the pastures and peace descends on the farm, then it is time to potter in the garden and ponder on tomorrow. This peace is now adulterated by the noise, fumes and dust of the traffic on the motorway; farmers are often blamed for polluting and damaging the countryside, but

modern industry and transport are also very much at fault, and people should refer to the "Good Book", "cast the moat out of your own eye before your brothers eye".

As in all aspects of life there are two sides to every argument, we as farmers should remember that we are but custodians of the countryside just passing through, we come with nothing and we leave older it is true and we should be wiser, but still with nothing, the non farming community should respect that which belongs to others, and have the same regard for the countryside.

Summer and townsfolk, this for me is un-chartered water, never having lived in a town and no desire to ever do so. I would imagine they would prefer the sun to shine all day every day, to have short working days, long holidays and a plentiful supply of money to carry out this type of life style, all very nice I suppose if devoid of ambition, myself I would feel guilty not knowing where my food was coming from. I wonder in my moments of reflection are we as farmers the real fools for living as we do. Today February 14th. 1994 as I write the weather outside is horrid a wind chill of about minus twelve degrees Centigrade with flurries of snow, making conditions very unpleasant for those who have to work outside. In these conditions cows still have to be milked fed and bedded down, and although I have retired I still like to help on the farm and I worked in these conditions for three hours this morning and will do three hours again this evening, David my son will work in these conditions for about ten hours every day. Why do we do it? Both our sons David and Geoff are fit men able to apply themselves to a way of life much less arduous than dairy or fruit farming; yet they choose like myself that this is the life for them.



Haymaking at Green Meadow Farm.

The attraction for me was the independence, you are the boss and you make the running, the challenge is there and you rise or fall by your own efforts, and your determination to succeed. The farm is your little empire and if someone walks onto the farm and you do not like them then you can quite easily ask them to leave. I have always lived on a small family farm where the farmer is not only the boss but also the main worker, and on a livestock farm there is very little respite from the daily toil. On larger farms with a bigger workforce there is the possibility to share the work and to have some time off, thereby reducing the pressure under which you have to work, but of course there can be problems with employing people, life is never simple and straightforward.

I feel sure that if we farmers were to swallow our pride, sell all our assets, and invest the money and live on the proceeds, then the public in general would soon realise the contribution made by farming families in the U.K. to the well being of the country as a whole. It is not generally realised how much work is done by farmers wives and farmers children, they often share in the work of the farm especially at busy times.



Honeysuckle at Merrylea early summer 2003.

Autumn.

The Dairy Farm in autumn, if nature were left alone the cow would give birth to her calf in the spring, probably at the end of April, to coincide with the rapidly increasing growth of grass, and as a result her milk production would satisfy the appetite of the growing calf, a calf would normally consume about three gallons of milk per day.



St. Pierre Great Wood viewed from Runston Autumn 2003.

Towards autumn when there would be less grass the milk supply would dry up and the calf would graze sufficient for its own needs, and hopefully the cow would be in calf again ready to produce another calf the following spring. However man grew to like cow's milk, and so he took the calf away from the cow, fed the calf a restricted amount of milk but introduced concentrated feeds to provide the calf's nutritional requirements and he could then sell the surplus milk, then he bred cows to produce more than three gallons of milk per day, and he could then sell even more milk. Because milk became scarce in the autumn it commanded a higher price, so he managed the cows so that they calved in the autumn and he could sell milk more profitably. But he did however have some increased costs; he had to feed more concentrates, as there would not be enough fresh grass available so this increased the farmer's costs.

This led to the production of too much milk in the winter, and so the M.M.B., the buyers of the milk adjusted the price to try and even out the production throughout the year. Most of my cows calved from August through to November, and then a few through the winter months, and if they were looked after properly the flush of spring grass in April would stimulate an increase in milk production, following which they would be "dried off", to give the cows a short rest before they calved again. Producing milk in winter is hard work, however you choose to operate, and there are many pitfalls. In winter all the food has to be taken to the cows and all the manure has to be carried away. I have been tempted many times to go for spring calving to reduce the cost of milk production, the cows grazing during the spring and summer months, and at the same time the manure is returned direct to the fields, and when the winter comes you could dry off all the cows and shut down for a few months, but as with all things this would have its snags and anyway I have retired now so it is purely an academic question.



At Green Meadow Autumn 1983.

I liked the autumn with the cows calving in good shape after the spring and summer grass, the calves would be strong and healthy, and in a good autumn if it did not become wet the cows would milk well, and would stay outside until the end of October. The cows would be brought in to their winter quarters as soon as weather and ground conditions necessitated this move. One of the biggest mistakes with autumn calving cows is to put too much value on the grass, there is a value but it is a lower feed value than spring and summer grass, the secret is knowing how much value to put on it.

Autumn and the sheep farmer, this is a critical time of year for the sheep farmer, a lot depends on when the sheep are expected to lamb, whatever the system nature has decided that there will be five months between mating and lambing, the rams are usually put with the ewes from August onwards so that lambing starts in January. This enables the lambs to be sold fat in twelve to sixteen weeks, when they will have had the benefit of the spring flush of grass, stimulating the ewes to produce more milk, and also they would graze this grass themselves, the lambs would be sold before the high risk period of internal parasites and flies giving rise to maggots.

Not so many years ago most ewes lambed outside, but now as lambing on specialist sheep farms is planned earlier in the year most lambing is done in special lambing houses, and with modern aids such as infra red lamps, farmers are getting good at operating this early lambing.

I always lambed my ewes in mid March, with spring just around the corner. With a dairy herd their demands in January were enough without adding to the work the problems of lambing at

this time. One of the problems with ewes on good land once the lambs are sold is that the ewes can get too fat, which is bad for breeding, so by penning on a restricted area their feed intake is reduced so that they stay leaner. Autumn on the sheep farm is the time of sorting out, there are always those lambs that have not done so well, perhaps the mother had triplets and did not have enough milk, or may be she had lost a quarter which reduced the milk available, or the mother could have died when the lamb was quite young. These lambs may now have enough meat on them to be sold for slaughter, if their condition is not good enough for killing at this time they could be sold as store lambs for someone else to keep and fatten through the winter or this could be done on the farm where they were bred. Then some of the ewes have to be culled for all manner of reasons, lost a quarter, prone to foot-rot, or just old age which is often indicated by a loss of teeth making it difficult for the ewe to graze properly. It is these old faithful ewes that I am always sorry to see go.

Something I have always felt sorry about is that when animals are young and in their prime, be it, cow, sheep, horse or pig and their value is high they are treated with respect, but when old and their value is gone they are not treated by all people with the respect that they deserve. I know one should never draw comparisons between animals and the human race, but there is a stage when they could be said to be in their prime of youth, for young girls I would say between seventeen and twenty years, not I would hasten to add that they decline after twenty, in fact most girls retain their attractions all through their lives, they just mature. Farm stock are in their prime at different ages, a heifer at two years, a filly at three years, a pig or gilt at one year and a sheep at one year, is when I believe they are at their best.

One of the most pleasant events to my mind is an autumn ewe sale at Kington in Herefordshire, where they sell stock ewes in their hundreds. Sheep farmers on the hills produce stock ewes for buyers far and wide, usually bred from mountain ewes crossed with either, Border Leicester, or Blue Faced Leicester rams to produce the half-bred or mule ewes. When I was buying the Kerry type ewe was much in evidence. These ewes were penned in bunches of twenties or forties mostly yearlings or two year olds, drawn in very even bunches, and on an autumn day it is a real sight to see and to appreciate the characteristic smell of sheep and sheep dip. There would be a mixture of vendors, buyers, hauliers, drovers and auctioneers, all talking and thinking sheep. I would usually go with some friends; we would try and buy a few pens between us, then the haulage would usually work out cheaper per head if you could make up a hundred or more. I was always anxious next morning to see if the judgement at the sale was correct, and that they looked as good at home as they did in the sale ring.

Although the autumn can be a bad time of the year for fly strike, unless the sheep have been dipped, the blow fly seem to strike on the shoulder and the shepherd must be ever so watchful.

Providing the ewes have been dipped, dosed for worms and vaccinated if necessary and tails clipped or crutched, then the risk of fly strike and the resulting maggots is much reduced. It has always been a very pleasing sight in autumn to turn the rams in with a good bunch of ewes, and apart from the ever present threat of foot-rot, autumn is a time of year when the sheep farmer can relax for a while, such a difference compared with the daily routine of milking cows, but the difference as far as finance is concerned is that the sheep farmer does not have a monthly milk cheque.

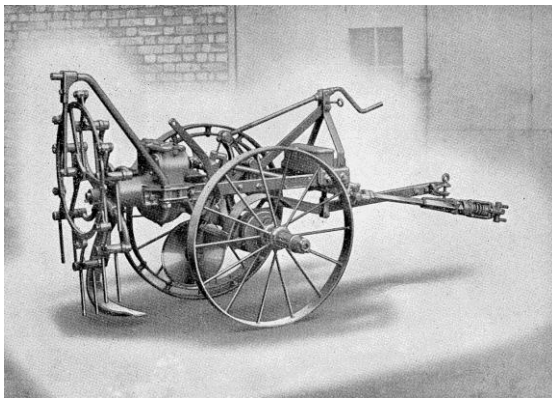
Autumn and the arable farmer, this can be a busy time for the arable farmer. He could be farming one thousand acres plus in the Eastern Counties, growing a lot of cereals and also a big acreage of sugar beet and a host of other crops. These men known as barley barons, have I think given farming a bad image, simply because in a manner of speaking they are just too efficient, or maybe perhaps they are just too greedy. The main criticism is that hedges have been taken out to make fields bigger to take advantage of the large tractors and equipment that they use. Also with continuous cropping and no livestock even the roadside hedges have gone. This lack of hedgerows means that the natural habitat for wild life, animals, birds and insects is now very scarce in that part of the country. To grow weed-free and healthy crops free from parasitic insects means the use of large quantities of chemicals; this again is detrimental to the whole pattern of natural wildlife, the balance of which is so easily upset.

The large scale arable farmers to do them credit are experts in producing high yields of the crops they grow. So much so that in 1994 all sorts of schemes were devised to restrict production, although that being so the farming year has to go on, and as I have written earlier, autumn is a busy time. Early autumn hopefully sees the end of the cereal harvest including the harvesting of non-food crops like oilseed rape, linseed and sunflower, and then there is sugar beet, potatoes and maize to harvest. Whatever the crop when it is harvested work has to start to prepare the land for the planting of the next crop, stubbles are cultivated to encourage the growth of weed seed and shed cereal seeds, so that these can be killed either by further cultivations and ploughing or by the use of chemical weed killers. This has to be done before the wet weather prevents any further work being carried out on the land.

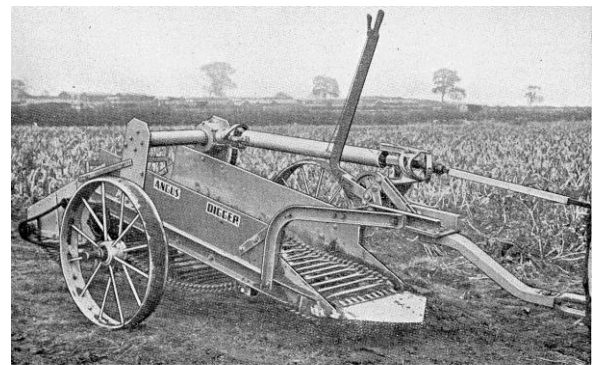
Couch grass control could be quite a problem especially on the lighter sandy soil where the rhizomes (underground roots) could spread easily. The practice that was employed years ago, is no longer seen, it is replaced by chemical spraying. Years ago after the cereals were harvested, the land would be shallow ploughed and then worked with cultivators and drag harrows to bring the couch grass roots (rhizomes) to the surface, disc harrows were not used as they would just chop the

roots into small pieces each of which would grow so the problem would get worse. When the couch grass was worked to the surface, then chain harrows would be used to roll it up into large sausage type rolls, and on a dry autumn morning this would be picked up with a four pronged dung fork given a good shaking to remove the soil and then placed into heaps which would be burnt. The land we had at Court House Caldicot was a beautiful light sandy loam soil, but it was very prone to couch grass as the roots could spread easily. This did not get rid of all the couch grass but it did stop it taking over and spoiling the cereal crops by taking all the plant nutrients. This land at Caldicot is now all built on with residential properties so couch grass is not the problem it was.

On the arable and livestock farms here in Gwent it was usual to harvest winter-sown oats first followed by winter-sown barley then spring sown oats and spring-sown barley, wheat was the last cereal crop to be harvested. The stubbles would then be ploughed for the next crop, a seedbed would be prepared and then the cereal seeds would be sown. Once this planting was done then it was time to harvest the root crops. Potatoes if grown would be harvested; mangolds would be pulled in November and stored in a clamp near the buildings to be fed to the animals during the winter. Other root crops might also be harvested and stored or they could be eaten direct by animals in the field or they could be lifted and fed as required.



Fork-Action Potato Digger (Ransomes).



Elevator Type Potato Digger (L.O. Tractors).

Early model Potato Diggers.

Autumn and the gardener, this is the time of the year when the efforts made in spring and summer are rewarded, and there can be a great joy in digging up a crop of potatoes, carrots and beetroot to be stored for use during the winter.

Main crop onions will be drying out in the autumn sunshine, other vegetables are best left until they have been mellowed by a touch of autumn frost, sprouts, savoy cabbage, leeks, parsnips and broccoli are left in the garden until they are required. Although these vegetables can be bought at any time of the year from supermarkets, I prefer to eat each vegetable at it's natural time of

maturity in their normal season fresh from the garden, and it is possible to have vegetables fresh or out of the store all through the year. Personally I would not want salad in the winter; I much prefer my roast meat and homegrown vegetables in the colder weather. In the flower garden it is a time of out with the old and in with the new, summer bedding plants may still be in bloom and it seems a shame to pull them up and discard them, but it has to be done to give the spring flowering plants like wallflower, polyanthus and winter pansies time to establish before winter sets in, and in the ornamental shrub garden a time for a general tidy up and pruning before the onset of winter.

Autumn and the townsman, this I can only imagine, as I do not have experience of living in the town, however I would imagine that the street lights would come on earlier, the trips to the seaside are over for another year, and town dwellers probably look for indoor pursuits, and start turning up the central heating. Their attitude must be so different to the true countryman, providing the townsman has plenty of money he seems content to rely on others to keep the supermarket shelves full and to supply him with all his other daily food requirements. Whereas the true countryman and farmer is a provider who lays up food for his stock, fuel for his fire and food for his family, although times are changing and some country folk are giving up the old ways and rely on others for much of the necessities of life. I am still old fashioned, last week mid January I felled three trees and put them in a heap to season for the fires in the winters of 1995/6. I still grow and store our onions hanging them up in a cool dry place, I store carrots in a drum of peat, and beetroot are also stored in a drum of peat. Sadly I feel vegetable gardening is not very popular, most people and this includes some country folk and farmers prefer to rely on the fruit and vegetable shops and the supermarkets for fruit and vegetables saying it is cheaper than growing and without doubt a lot easier.

As a lad in the village school we had our own plots and we were taught the theory and practical aspects of gardening, and very good it was. Now that the village schools are mostly gone it would not be very practical with the numbers involved to have individual plots, however the pupils could still be taught how the crops are grown, and maybe gain some idea of the effort that has to be made to supply their daily needs and where all their food comes from.

Winter.

Winter and the Dairy Farmer, the innocent layman believes that the farm closes down in winter until the following spring, how very different reality is. Ever since I can remember winter is a hard time on the dairy farm in the days of hand milking, not one of the worst jobs, the cowshed was warm after the cows had been there all night, but your feet got very cold on the concrete floor,

and after milking there were many jobs to be done outside in all the elements of the weather. These days the modern milking parlour first thing in the morning is a very cold place, mostly a concrete floor and steel fittings, some are now fitted with heaters and that helps not only the workers but it also prevents pipes from freezing up.

Milk produced in this day and age is by and large better in many ways than it was sixty years ago. Its nutritional value and freedom from germs is much better. Two diseases of dairy cows that have been greatly reduced or eliminated, except for the stupid people who will import stock we could well do without are T.B (Tuberculosis) and abortion. When cows were kept in a humid cowshed, if one cow had T.B. it could easily spread to other animals, this was no direct risk to humans unless the udder was infected and this was then dangerous as the germ could be passed through the milk to humans. Nowadays all the cattle on the farms are tested annually for T.B., and as a result bovine T.B., has been virtually eliminated. Abortion could be devastating for the farmer, the calf would be lost, milk production would suffer, infection could follow if the cleansing was retained, the animal could be difficult to get back in calf, and the infection could spread to other animals in the herd, it was also a danger to humans as it could lead to undulant fever. Luckily I never caught it although we had serious abortion at home, which at one time nearly put my father out of business. S 19 vaccine was developed and what a godsend this proved to be in eradicating contagious abortion.

In the modern milking parlour with the job done properly milk is of very good germ free quality, although there are greedy people about who expect one person to do too much and then standards fall. You can have the latest and best facilities that the modern age can devise but if you have a sloppy person in charge the result will be poor quality milk. If care is not taken in washing the cow's udders before milking, this is of particular importance when the cows are housed in the winter, contamination of the milk can occur. It is important that after washing, the cow's udders are dried. In days gone by it was said that "what won't fatten will fill", but this was a dangerous attitude in milk production.

At the present time a lot of money is being spent trying to make robotic milking a success. With robotic milking the cows enter the stalls on their own and a robot washes the udder and puts the milking cups onto the teats. I say here and now and I may be proved wrong but I do not think this can ever be a commercial success, knowing cows for what they are, the variable udder shapes and the varying temperaments will prove to be too great a problem. We have in our own parlour many modern aids including automatic cluster removers, which with a keen person in charge work very well, but complete robotic milking will never be a success. I just wonder if some person reading these few pages in the years to come will say, "ah well", the old man was wrong!!

The worst weather in winter is snow, how I hate it, it really gums up the work, everything gets late and if the lane gets blocked the milk just piles up, as it cannot be collected. In 1947 we could not get out of Green Meadow for three days, we had two farms running at that time and we used an ex army four wheel drive Chevrolet three ton lorry, and with this we eventually got out by going over the fields, that winter was one of the roughest periods of my life. 1963 was also very grim, I was farming on my own account at Green Meadow and the lane was blocked, again we had to go across the fields with the tractor to get the milk out, it was also the year that our youngest son was born on January 22nd. and that was a test of human endurance.



Green Meadow 1963.

In 1982 the lane was blocked again but our neighbour John Reece had a good machine and that was a boon. That year Winifred and I had a very hard time as David our son who had helped on the farm was away at college and the other children had gone their separate ways, getting married etc.

Life as I have known it on a family dairy farm can be very hard, so why did we do it then, well like the fishermen who brave all weathers to catch fish in the North Sea, I suppose because it is in our blood.

I do wonder how long these family dairy farms will survive, the day could come when herds will be large, two hundred cows or more housed in modern buildings all under one roof, and looked after by people working a shift system, with a share of the profits as part of their income, there could be a lot to commend it not least the possibility of having some time off instead of the seven days a week all through the year as worked by many small dairy farmers, and I think it could work. It is a hard life on a one man dairy farm, living just yards from the cow yard, all very nice to walk just a few yards and start earning money, but you are always on call, if a cow starts bellowing in the

night maybe having difficulty calving, then up you get to see to it, that is your privilege, even if you have already done a twelve hour day, and you still have to get up to start again next day by 6 am.

I found it hard to relax if there were jobs waiting to be done, you have to have a strong will just to sit down and forget it, if you live away from the farm then it becomes a lot easier. The reason why many dairy farmers get very anxious for the spring, is that from early winter when the cows are calving and hopefully milking well, and worries of summer drought are just a memory, but now as winter grinds on relentlessly, the slurry pit is getting near to over flowing, the silage pit is nearly empty, the calves are getting bigger with increasing appetites, and you start worrying will it all work out, will there be enough feed for my animals, and then one day in March and the first swallow skims over the rooftops, the tomtit is singing and so spring cannot be far away, the daffodils are almost in bud, time to get the nitrogen on the fields to produce some early grass, and suddenly you are excited about the coming spring which cannot be far away.

This for what it is worth are my thoughts on how the four seasons affected me as a dairy farmer.

The sheep farmer in winter. This can mean different things to different types of farmer. Winter to sheep farmers on the hills must be quite different to winter for sheep farmers in the lowlands. Not having farmed on the hills I cannot speak from experience but I would think snow is the biggest problem, problem enough anywhere but trying to recover sheep that have been buried in the snow in isolated locations must be very hard.



Sheep at Green Meadow, February 1985.

As I have written earlier we lambed down in March as that meant on a dairy farm ewes had had the run of the farm as the cows were still in their winter housing, the sheep would have cleared up all the old grass ready for the spring growth, they would be moved out of the silage fields and those fields that were planned for early grazing by the dairy herd. The sheep would be provided with hay in racks if the weather was hard, and some ewe nuts, a concentrated feed would be started

about six weeks before lambing was due to start. Lambing would take place in a field thought to be most suitable for the sheep, offering some protection from the worst weather. If this field was some way from the farm then this could mean a lot of walking for the shepherd but this did not seem to be a problem when you were young. There is a lot in favour of lambing outside, you do not get the build up of diseases such as watery mouth, which can be a problem when lambing inside. There are though problems when lambing out of doors, if a ewe has difficulty lambing, you might inspect the sheep at say 10.30 pm. and decide to leave things to nature for a while so you walk back to the farm and return to the field an hour later to see what progress has been made, help is required so back to the house to get Winifred to come and help with the lambing and when all is then done it is possibly midnight or later, it is back to the farm for some sleep, but knowing you have to be up to start milking again at 6.00 am. next morning or earlier if you think the sheep should be checked before morning milking is started. We did later change to lambing indoors, there were still problems but they were much easier to manage, and led to a much better way of life. Some of the large flocks house their ewes in January, they shear them, all feed is taken to the sheep, in a special house that is designed for lambing, they have students working in shifts to look after the sheep, giving twenty four hour attention at lambing time.

I wonder if the small family flock is going to disappear and be replaced by big flocks and big business; the world is a changing place, is it a question of change or be left behind. Economics of scale is very real, brought about mainly by the increased cost of labour, a shepherd years ago would be paid £1.50 per week for unspecified hours, at that time fat lambs were 75p. to 100p. each, so you would need to sell seventy eight to one hundred and four fat lambs to pay his wages each year. Nowadays a shepherd is paid £200.00 per week and fat lambs are sold on average for £40.00, so you would need to sell two hundred and sixty fat lambs to pay the shepherds wages each year.

I thought myself very fortunate when I ran a dairy herd single-handed and also had a small flock of about sixty ewes, lambing usually about March 20th. when the clocks were being put on one hour, in that my wife is a farmers daughter, and her father kept sheep and I had to rely on my wife to keep an eye on the sheep at lambing time, which she was quite capable of doing, when I was busy with the cows, and she used to work very hard with ewes lambing up the field in bad weather, and sometimes having to carry the lambs home to shelter. We had five children and as soon as they were old enough, they also had to help, in reward they each had a ewe of their own and when the lambs of these ewes were sold the children had the money.

That brings to mind another job for not only the sheep farmer but the grassland farmer in general, that job is mole catching and I used to pay our eldest son Geoff when he was a school boy one shilling (five pence nowadays) per dead mole and he was quite good at it. I have always been

keen to catch moles as they can be a nuisance and a hidden expense, especially now with silage making, when the earth from the mounds they create gets mixed with the silage affecting fermentation and its feed value and palatability. In the days of hay making the earth would dry and would be shaken off the grass, but the stones in these mole hills would blunt the knives on a cutter bar mower and when this job was done with horses a blunt cutter blade made it very hard work for the horses. I have used strychnine (poison) to control moles and it is very efficient, however I never really liked using the stuff, I was always very careful and fortunately we never had a mishap. I still catch moles using the old spring trap, which if laid properly is very good. So that briefly is sheep farming through the seasons, as I have known it.

The arable farm in winter, the arable farms that I have known mainly in the days before the war were not the arable farms, as we know them today. Today many arable farms just grow corn crops continuously, without livestock of any kind; this is far removed from the type of farm that I will describe. The arable enterprise was part of a general farm, usually with beef cattle and a flock of sheep, although during the war the government issued ploughing up orders, and this could mean that up to 40% of the farm had to be ploughed to grow food crops. One farmer refused to plough any of his farm, and barricaded himself in his farmhouse and the police eventually shot and killed him. Now when I see the antics of "set-aside", that poor chap had rough justice, it is a pity we cannot do without politicians they can and do make a real mess of things at times.

On the type of farm I refer to, perhaps about two hundred acres the farmer would usually employ two or three regular men and the farmer did his best to see that they were gainfully employed throughout the year. With the autumn corn planted and the rest of the stubble ploughed by the new year there was little work in the fields. One winter job was threshing the corn that had been harvested in sheaves, (bundles tied together) and stored in barns or in ricks, before my time and I have never seen it done but threshing would be done by beating the sheaves with a flail, in the open doorway of the threshing barn, the wind blowing away the chaff. Many of these old threshing barns have been sold for conversion into dwellings they can fetch upwards of £100,000, to which has to be added the costs of conversion into a dwelling house. These threshing barns and we had one at Court House Caldicot would have double doors each side in the middle, the wagons would be brought from the fields loaded with sheaves of corn and driven into the barn. The sheaves were unloaded and stored each side until threshing time, when they would be placed on the floor and beaten by men wielding long poles with leather thongs on the end, some chaff would be blown away but the final separation would be done with a winnowing machine. This method gave way to the threshing machine and this was still a job for the winter, it could be done in the threshing barn

or alongside ricks in the rickyard. A contractor would own the threshing machine, and he would move the equipment from farm to farm. The threshing machine would be manoeuvred into place in the threshing barn or rickyard and powered by a steam engine or later a tractor, the sheaves were fed in on the top of the machine, it passed through a threshing drum and then over sieves and the straw, chaff and grain came out in different places.



Threshing with a Steam Engine.

Another winter job was hedge laying, where tall hedges were cut and laid down to be kept regularly trimmed. I hope to describe this in more detail in another set of notes I have in mind to write on "Country Crafts". Hedge laying was a practice that had a lot of merit, hedges kept regularly trimmed would remain stock proof, but if they became thin they would be allowed to grow up for five or six years, they were then ditched and laid. It was sound husbandry to lay a hedge around a field that was lying fallow as the material cut out could be burnt in the field without damaging a crop.

Dung carting was another winter job, the dung or F.Y.M. (farm yard manure), would be placed in the fields to be sown with root crops, mangolds, swedes, turnips that would be pulled for winter feed for fattening cattle kept in open yards and of course most of these types of farm grew swedes for sheep feed, mainly for those lambs that were born the previous spring and folded on swedes with some hay in racks. I always felt sorry for these lambs, they did have a full fleece but in wet weather in an open field it did not seem right, that they should have to endure such harsh conditions, but never the less they did fatten and produced some very good mutton, it had a very good flavour as did the beef from yarded cattle, usually Hereford crosses. This type of farming

would be very popular today if it could be done, it was very environmentally friendly. Farmers did not like their fields to be too big, big fields were very bleak for livestock, and the system of growing roots to clean the land instead of using chemicals, and the fertility added to the soil by the animals, before the advent of artificial fertilizers, the straw used in cattle yards would be spread back onto the fields with the cattle manure, all enriching the land naturally. This system also created the right natural habitat for wildlife. So what went wrong? Mainly I think this type of farming was practised during the early part of this century, then after the first great war 1914 to 1918 the government repealed the corn laws in 1920 and cheap imports of grain from the U.S.A. and cheap beef from the Argentine, sheep and lamb from New Zealand and Australia led to the agricultural depression of the 1930's. It was the forming of the M.M.B. in 1933 that brought farming out of bankruptcy. Then came the 1947 Agricultural Act that started the deficiency payments system, where farmers were guaranteed a price fixed by the government and the farming leaders, the N.F.U., and these prices were reviewed annually. There were many forms of subsidy, the small farmer had a subsidy and subsidies were paid to purchase fertilizers, lime, to plough land, to reclaim land, for drainage and to construct new buildings. This enabled farmers to have a period of prosperity when they were able to produce sufficient extra food to enable food rationing to be discontinued. The Minister of Food, Lord Woolton said what the British public wanted was plenty of good red meat. The old War Agricultural Committees became A.D.A.S. (Agricultural Development and Advisory Service), A.D.A.S. had specialists of many types to advise farmers on how they could increase output, a popular slogan was, "make two blades of grass grow where only one grew before", and farmers responded, there is nothing a farmer likes better than to produce more, it is a quirk of human nature. If the British farmer was allowed to grow the sort of produce this island is suited to grow, then we would not have such a high level of imports, and the public could be assured of a good supply of healthy food. We hear so much today of the shortage of timber yet not much effort is made to recycle waste paper, and the sad sight of good land being planted with trees, when only a few years ago tax payers money was given to clear land of trees to grow crops on the cleared land, now tax payers money is being used to encourage tree planting, surely it would make more sense to import the timber and grow our own food, at least we would know how it was being produced. Perhaps I have rather strayed from the subject of the arable farmer in winter; still it is an historical record as seen by a grass roots farmer. Here I will leave the arable farmer through the seasons, the sort of man I have written about did exist, but I doubt if we will see his like again.

The farm horse in winter, the horse had a better life during the winter, in that the daylight hours were less, so this meant less working hours, nowadays tractors and other farm machines have

such good lights that they are able to work around the clock if they need to. When twilight comes the ploughman homeward plods his weary way. There are still carting jobs to be done, but not the long hours of sheer toil of the spring and summer. Some farm horses were hired out to woodmen in the winter to be used for tushing timber that had been felled out of the woods, but this would not involve many horses. All horses were well looked after in the winter so that they would be in good condition for the heavy spring work, as after all they were the chief source of power on the farm. The cob type of horse as kept on most farms had regular work taking the farmer to market, to take his wife to do the shopping, to take the family to church and to take the farmer to the pub.

School in winter, I did not like the winter; living out in the country in winter for kids was not much joy. The only fire was a coal fire in the living room, there was no central heating, the toilet was outside often at the end of a long garden path, there was no hot water for washing, and you were faced with the prospect of walking or riding a bicycle, carrying your sandwiches to school with a cold classroom that had just one fire by the master's desk, and if you sat at the back of the class it was damn cold. How we survived those days I do not know, children today would have a shock to learn what we had to endure, but the experience would do them good. When we got home sometimes we would have a dinner warmed up for us, with a saucepan lid on top and the gravy gone dry around the outside of the plate. I did not like this especially if it was fat lamb.

Head lice were a problem in those days and on a Saturday afternoon, you would have your head combed with a small toothed comb, to rake out any lice, then my stepmother would rub some sort of ointment into your scalp, which after a while would make you feel as if your head was on fire. I used to hate that. Before my real sister passed to go to the local grammar school we used to walk to school together, with our sandwiches in a small case, this case had a tin handle which was very cold in the winter time, and we used to quarrel as to who should carry it, why we could not have a satchel like other children I do not know, but I did have a satchel in later years. Snow was the worst, if it was very deep we were allowed to stay at home; otherwise you had to get to school as best you could. It seems strange that I do not have many vivid memories of school days, but I do remember the first day, the little infants used to sit in little individual chairs in the front of the class and I often marvel that I even survived, never having been very big and robust, having to walk in all winds and weathers, to a school without any proper heating and a few sandwiches and a piece of cake to last the day. I often wonder, did that type of upbringing lead to a tougher race of people, it is hard to say. As far as this writing is concerned, I write when I am driven indoors by bad weather, which I feel is not ideal, I like to think about what I write and once the mind gets tuned up time matters little and I like to keep going.

Today April 5th. 1994 I was digging in the garden when a spiteful storm drove me indoors at 3.30pm. then at 4.30pm. I will be off to help my son David down at the farm, although it has been one of the wettest winters on record it has been raining since last September with 968mm. I have not written much in the last month, as I have been busy with the ewes lambing and a speech to compile for the Chepstow Agricultural Society dinner. As I write now in 1994 about my days in school in winter, that is sixty years ago, and yet this does not seem all that long ago and yet how life has changed the village school that I went to, is no longer a school. As is the case with many others it has now closed and a way of life as I knew it will never be seen again, the children all now going to larger schools.

I just wonder if my grandchildren, all now in school, will when they get to my age decide to write their memories, I just cannot begin to imagine what they will write. Our eldest grandson Robert has just returned from a school trip to France at the age of thirteen, whereas at that age the furthest that I had been was Porthcawl. Perhaps they will explore outer space, but for my own part I am content to enjoy the simple things in life, content with the sounds and sights of the countryside.

Winter and the gardener, winter for the gardener is a quiet time in that weeds have stopped growing, pests either have died or they have crawled away into hiding until the spring and the lawn has stopped growing. Early winter is a time for tidying up, covering up shrubs that could be damaged by frost, planting bulbs trees and shrubs, pruning, and winter spraying. In the vegetable plot any spare ground is dug over to let the frost break it down to make it easier to prepare a seedbed next spring. I always find it strange the fuss people make about digging, it is like ploughing, there is no better way of getting a level garden than by good honest digging, with a good sharp spade on a dry afternoon in early winter with the little robin never very far away, it is good healthy exercise and it looks good if done properly, no real hardship and I am grateful that I am able to do the job.

Then there are those vegetables that always taste better after we have had a few frosts, brussel sprouts are one of the best examples and one of the best winter vegetables there is. Parsnips, leeks, swedes the garden varieties have a more mellow flavour than those grown for livestock as well as savoy cabbage can all benefit from frost, they can be dug and enjoyed fresh. Compared with going to the shops which must be easier than digging from the garden if the weather is really bad the satisfaction and better taste of vegetables fresh from the garden is well worth the effort, even in bad weather it does not take long to pick enough sprouts for a meal and the exercise and fresh air are very beneficial. If the weather is really bad we have stored carrots, beetroot and

onions, and surplus summer produce of beans and peas are in the deep freezer, so we manage as country people have always done.

Times have changed and even a lot of country folk including farmers rely on the supermarkets for most of their vegetables, here in our village there are not many people who grow their own vegetables, their gardens are mainly shrubs and flowers and patio areas have become very popular, they are convenient for barbecues and of course they often have a lawn. We seem to be in an age where leisure is the priority with as little work as possible. Then people have to go on special diets to stop them getting too fat, they also go out jogging because of this lack of exercise, mankind I think must be going quite mad. There is nothing so rewarding as a reasonable amount of meaningful work, it amazes me to see people lying out in the sun to get a tan, not only is it dangerous, but the best way to get a tan is to work in the sun and as the skin and muscle stretch and relax you will obtain an excellent tan, keeping fit at the same time. And so we leave the garden, always a joy even in winter and here at Merrylea it is rare if there is not a shrub or a bulb in bloom, and of course we have the brook, which in winter is more active than in the heady days of summer.

Winter and the townsman. I have to say that thankfully I have never lived in a town, so really I am not qualified to write in this vein, so I will have to imagine what the position might be. I do not like towns, but during my travels I have passed through many and they are very varied, at least regarding where people live. In the suburbs I have noticed really beautiful properties, with grounds and well laid out and beautiful gardens. Then there are the high rise flats in which my life span would be very short, the rows of terraced houses, each one exactly the same as it's neighbour, and even today there are slums but I have only seen these on television. So I would think that to a lot of people who live in this type of restricting accommodation, clubs, pubs and bingo halls are their natural choice of refuge. To my mind drinking alcohol is the root cause of much trouble and unhappiness, using money that should go towards establishing a happy family in a comfortable home. Although I enjoy the occasional drink and have mixed in all types of company I have never been drunk, and I am resolved that I never will get drunk. But today there are things worse than drink, the scourge of drugs, and I feel sorry for the poor helpless victims that get hooked, and are then at the mercy of the pedlars, and it is these pedlars that I save my wrath for, and once they are caught, they are never properly punished, just fined and their worldly goods that can be found are confiscated, whereas they should be locked away in a very secure prison for a very long time until they reach the age of infirmity, I regard them as the scum of the earth. So there are temptations to some townfolk that we who live in the country do not have to face. No doubt there are many good things in the towns in the wintertime, theatres, cinemas, leisure centres offering many types of

constructive pastimes and excellent sporting facilities. If the will is there it is possible to live a decent honourable and rewarding life whether you live in the town or in the country, it is up to the individual.

I really believe that the majority of the people in the U.K. are good honest people but there are trends that need to be watched, unemployment can lead to trouble, "an idle mind is a devil's workshop", and how true this is in some cases. Not to have an object or ambition in life with the will to work to achieve your aims must be unbearable, that is one marvellous thing about being a working farmer, there is so much to achieve but you are out on your own and you rise or fall by your own endeavours.

It may be an idea before I lay down my pen on this account of the four seasons, to summarise the seasons on this island of ours, in the eyes of a true country man as I term myself. I say that not in a boastful way, but I love my country and feel very fortunate to have lived so close to nature in spite of the many hardships that I have had to endure. The way of life in farming is always changing, but much of the time on the farm you are working on your own, with only the stock you look after and your dog for company. In the days of my youth with the horse as the main source of motive power working in all weather we really suffered. On a livestock farm, no matter what the weather or indeed your state of health work still went on relentlessly. Cutting kale by hand to feed the cows in icy rain or snow was no fun, cleaning out stockyards and loading dung carts with a dung fork was hard work, threshing was a dirty job certainly for the person usually a boy who had the job of raking the chaff from under the threshing machine, I have spent many days on this job and if you did not keep it clear you would get a severe cussing from the machine driver. Hoeing root crops could be a tedious and demoralising job, especially in a large field with a small gang, you would think you could never finish. Harvesting the crops when it was all done by hand was very heavy going in the heat of the day. Trimming hedges usually by hand with either a short or long handled sickle was again hard work, you needed to be fit and you needed skill to sharpen your sickle and you needed to develop a rhythm to be efficient.

These jobs around the farm came in their season, and although they were physically hard and you often worked alone, they did give a feeling of satisfaction. There were more people in the countryside, besides farmers, there were the roadmen working on their individual stretches of road, keeping the verges cut, the culverts clear so that the rainwater would drain away. The postman on his bicycle delivering mail, and the children walking to school. The countryside was a living place, a place of decent honest living people, poor maybe but very honest, if you left your coat hanging on the hedge it would still be there for you even a week later, and it was not necessary to lock your

door when you went to town. In the countryside there were rich people and poor people and many in between, but each in their own order with respect for other peoples property.



Hedge Trimmer made by Alan Fuller c 1950. Peter Bartlett driving the tractor.

Then there are the better aspects of the seasons. In spring the first flowers, the tomtit that just chirps one note but is always the first. The bleat of the first lamb, although with modern methods this has been largely lost. In my youth no lambs were born inside, they were never born before late February at the earliest. The smell of the earth after a real April shower and a group of lambs playing in the spring sunshine were real pleasures to behold. In early summer bringing the cows in for the early morning milking, and the sight of the fox off home after his nocturnal adventures and the cuckoo calling in the woods were all joys of the countryside. The smell of new mown hay in June, the sudden arrival of the old mares foal, the busy swallows going about their business and raising their young, the cock pheasant crowing to reassure his mate who was probably sitting on the eggs waiting for them to hatch were more of the pleasures life held for the country dweller. The skylarks rising high with their songs and although I have spent many years in the countryside I have found very few skylark nests, they are so very well camouflaged on the ground, often in a cow or horse's footprint these are more of the pleasures of summer.

Then comes autumn, "the time of mists and mellow fruitfulness", what an apt description. As a boy I did my share of picking hazel nuts to eat, always cracking them with your teeth of course, my parents never told me to value my teeth, I did not have a toothbrush (of course I had a stepmother). The smell of wild mint as the corn was reaped, and to my mind one of the most pleasing sights was to see a field of stoked corn, as the sunsets.



Building Sheaves of Corn into Stooks.

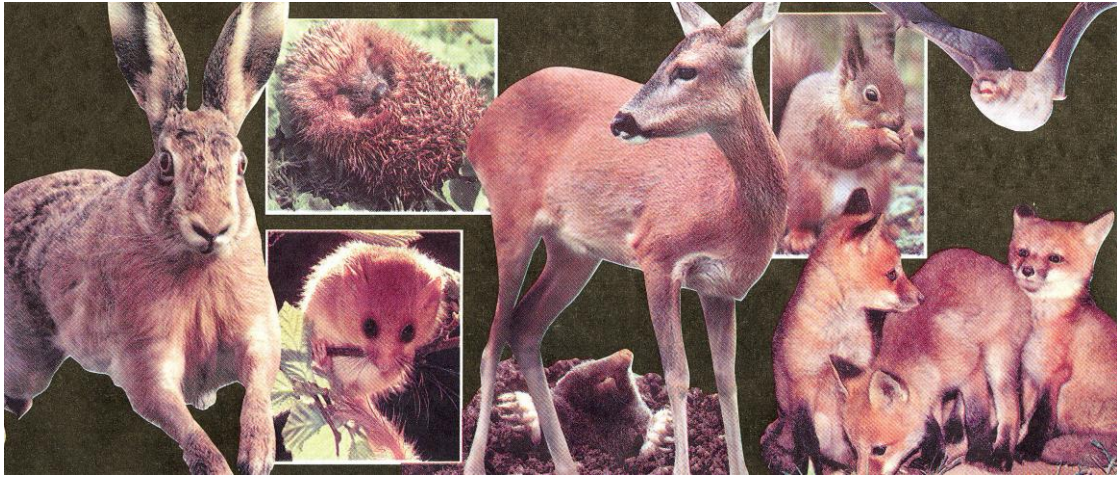
A stook is six sheaves of corn set up by pushing the butt into the stubble and the six sheaves leaning together supporting each other, left in the field to finish ripening, oats would be left out until they had heard the church bells chime three times, but wheat would be hauled to the barns or ricks after a much shorter period.

A real treat was to walk along the edge of a wood in late afternoon to savour the smell of fallen leaves and to hear the blackbirds giving out their alarm call.

Then winter came and the first real frost, with the fire burning brightly in the grate. Sounds I always link with winter are the noisy rooks calling to each other as they fly home to roost. Something I don't see now, that is since the establishment of the Wild Fowl Trust at Slimbridge is the wild geese flying down from the north when cold weather was coming. The geese would fly in a V formation about twelve or so in a group and they would fly quite high and always calling out as they flew. In the days when we kept horses the young colts two and three year olds would be out in the field and they would play if it was going to snow.

Speaking of snow, there is a certain eerie stillness before a snowstorm as if nature is bracing herself to withstand what is to come. As a dairy farmer I liked to start work at six am. and get the milking, feeding and cleaning done by nine am. And although life was hard I had a wonderful wife and partner and I could be sure of comfort and breakfast ready in the farmhouse. The smell of bacon cooking on a cold morning is really something, as is the smell of a wood fire on a cold frosty night. Another pleasant sight on a winter afternoon is the cock pheasant searching amongst the leaves for food, and I have never had a great longing to shoot such a bird, and also to see a hare speeding

away makes me marvel at nature. Rabbits I have no such love for, to me they are a pest. The badger nowadays is so protected with plenty of food that they thrive.



Animals that have all been seen near towns in 2005.

Hare, hedgehog, dormouse, deer, red squirrel, bat and the fox.

Cruelty to animals, either wild or domestic is something that I condemn, and animals that are under fed to my mind that is prolonged cruelty, and as for catching badgers alive to then set them loose in a yard to be ripped apart by dogs to me is barbaric, as also is bull fighting, course fishing I also regard as a cruel sport. However I do believe badger's numbers should be controlled by some humane means, they do a lot of damage on corn and maize fields, and they seem to be connected with the spread of T.B. in cattle.

So although in ages past we have had our seasons, the seasonal weather does seem to be changing, I do wonder if this is due to global warming and the destruction of the ozone layer, and of course it is possible that our climate and seasons will change even more, if we cannot prevent it, we will have to adapt to live with it.

Farming and our way of life has changed and is continuing to change, since the invention of the wheel there has been change, and in my lifetime the things that have brought about most change have been, the internal combustion engine and with it the hydraulic system now fitted universally to all tractors, electricity, artificial insemination of animals, and from these there have been spin offs in many directions. Further change there will be in the future aided by the development of technology and computers. But there is one aspect of modern technology that I cannot see working and that is the milking of cows by a robot, whereby a machine washes the cows udder, places the milking cups on the teats and milks the cows unaided, removing the teat cups when milking is finished. I fail to see how anyone can expect that to work on the ordinary herd of dairy cows.

Having worked now with cows for over sixty years, from the humble bucket and stool and the milking pail, to the one and a half horse power Lister petrol engine driving a vacuum pump to

operate the bucket milking machine, to the modern milking parlour with many modern devices, mostly worked by electronics and a vacuum pump, with cows fitted with transponders linked to a computer controlled feeding station, to ration the amount of concentrate feed that they are allowed to consume, I have employed many of the new ideas. These modern devices are very good and have helped to produce good quality wholesome milk, but the people who milk the cows need to be 100% fit and healthy and with above average intelligence.

I will today on this 21st. day of May 1994 on a very wet morning when work outside unless it is bound to be done is at a standstill, quote that to expect a robot to produce milk from cows unaided, milk that is clean and fit to drink is impossible. I just wonder if I will be proved wrong.

I conclude this short account of "Four Seasons", and hope to write "Encounters of a Country Life", and "Country Crafts, Reason and Effect", at a later date.



Sunset looking East from Merrylea, Shirenewton taken by Ernest Jones late Autumn 2003.

Annual rainfall figures 1987 to 2005.

From the daily recordings made by Ernest Jones at Merrylea.

1987	722 mm.	or	29.0 inches.
1988	879 mm.	or	35.0 inches.
1989	848 mm.	or	34.0 inches.
1990	874 mm.	or	35.0 inches.
1991	991 mm.	or	40.0 inches.
1992	1041 mm.	or	40.5 inches.
1993	1190 mm.	or	47.5 inches.
1994	1237 mm.	or	49.5 inches.
1995	1031 mm.	or	41.0 inches.
1996	999 mm.	or	40.0 inches.
1997	1172 mm.	or	47.0 inches.
1998	1265 mm.	or	50.5 inches.
1999	1372 mm.	or	55.0 inches.
2000	1423 mm.	or	57.0 inches.
2001	1151 mm.	or	46.0 inches.
2002	1333 mm	or	53.0 inches.
2003	815 mm	or	32.5 inches.
2004	1156 mm	or	46.0 inches
2005	926 mm	or	37.0 inches.
2006	1181 mm	or	47.0 inches