

Chapter 1

It was no surprise I am sure to my parents that my first paid job was as a pig stockman. I moved away from home at sixteen, three hundred miles away.

What fun I had on that first piggery, learning all I could about the sows, *my* sows, and their wily ways. I learned much from that first boss, much of which I still practise today. You've heard the phrase, 'back to basics', well, I haven't strayed from the original ways and have still managed good results.

I remember, with a smile, the first time I experienced the death of a very healthy piglet. I happened upon it while feeding *my* sows. I finished feeding the whole shed, their whining too deafening for me to do otherwise and went back to remove the dead piglet. To be sure of its passing, I poked at it a while before picking it up. I was only young at the time and was very respectful of the young life lost, so instead of grabbing a hind leg, as I would do today, I placed my hand under its belly. As I lifted it up, the whole body flopped, like a wet fish, in my hands. Thus confirming; it was indeed dead. I hung my head and tucked it under my arm, its head and ears swung loosely as I walked out of the farrowing house.

In those days the cemetery was never far away, and I soon found myself in front of the good ol' muck heap. I got to about fifty metres from the muck, and then threw the body in that general direction, knowing that I couldn't possibly miss. With it sailing through the air, I turned on my heel and headed back to the farrowing house to get on with the rest of my day.

I stepped one foot inside the door, when something barged my leg and emitted a disgruntled high pitch squeal. The little blighter I had just thrown onto the muck hill

ran through my legs squealing, presumably for its mother. Talk about a freight, I nearly jumped into the rafters.

I laugh at it now, but I certainly thought I had seen a ghost. I even ran back to the muck heap to be certain I hadn't. Lesson learned I never did throw anymore piglets away until they were completely rigid.

Oh the memories that flood back about that place. My favourite time of day has always been breakfast, and back then we, the dairyman and I, were invited into the house to have ours. We always got porridge, my favourite. So when one day a determined sow held us up, I became irritated not to be having my porridge.

The sow had come to that, as I used to think of it, awful time when she had spent long enough on the farm and it was her time to retire. She refused point blank to load onto the trailer. We managed to get her on the back door, but that, she decided, was far enough. We coaxed her as best we could, but when our best efforts failed, I became more agitated.

There was nothing else for it. I wanted my porridge, and if this charade was to continue I was looking at not getting back to the house till lunch. We had her pinned, with both trailer gates closed into a V; the only way for her was forwards. I was beginning to taste my beloved porridge on my tongue, so I had no choice.

I held on to both gates, and placed myself directly behind her. Then as a man possessed, I began to thrust my pelvis forwards as hard as I could, shouting, 'Get in there, get in there.' You can imagine the cries of laughter that followed. Never did I thrust so hard in all my life: much to my girlfriends' dismay. Lucky for me, mobile phones were not out yet, nor did any of them carry a camera.

I hope my old boss is not reading for I found great pleasure at that job, by skiving off work. I loved walking the centre isle watching *my* grower pigs after I had bedded them up. Yes I was checking them, but I know I spent more time than I ought to in that passageway. They used to look so happy though, and always ran around their pen going wild, burying themselves in it, if I had given them enough. Which I quite often did although was never taught to do so. I watched with excitement as they grabbed mouthfuls of straw and ran around shaking their heads from side to side, often their whole bodies would be waggled causing them to lose any sense of direction, which often ended in them banging into their pen mates, knocking them flying.

All good things come to an end though, and after I finished my year, I moved back home to attend college. It didn't work out though, all that sitting around in sometimes stuffy rooms with people I didn't know, so off to a new piggery I went: happy days.

I remember on one farm I was fortunate to meet a very clever man. He gave up the pigs while I was there. To be fair he did tell me beforehand, but I was happy to go along and help the destocking. He had an outdoor piggery and the farrowing paddocks were arranged with ten huts to a paddock. Or to put that into a bit more context, instead of having one irate sow to look out for, we had ten. Should we have not paid enough attention, one of the sows, who incidentally were fed away from the huts, would be at our backsides trying to take bacon of their own, or ours if you like. But oh no, if one bounded over to us, squealing bloody murder, she would often be accompanied by at least two of the others. Run and you were chased down and

probably eaten. Stay and you were probably just eaten. The only options really is, either jump on top of the hut, if her hut had a flat roof or if not, keep behind her hut. If you were lucky she'd run to her piglets in the hut. If not, you were running around the hut, like a game of musical chairs, only without the music and chairs and the only prize was you were less a finger or limb, or, well, let's not go there. Also, if you were lucky, then her accomplices would run off to their own huts, and you'd be able to deal with just the one. If not, you better be ready to run faster than the boss.

One morning while he and I were feeding the *farrowings*, as we called them. We had put down the breakfast and noticed that two of the sows hadn't come to see us.

Working together we checked the two rows of five huts. He walked one, I walked the other. He found the first missing sow and told me she was just starting. I came across the other in the next hut I checked. She had a grand litter of twelve, I counted. Normally one would assume she had finished, but as I looked closely at her, something inside told me that she wasn't quite done. I told the boss of my find and what I thought. His reply was that she was more than likely done, but he didn't rule out the possibility of her popping out one or two more.

I left him to his recording her in his book and went ahead to check the rest of my row, inspecting the litters already farrowed. Before I arrived at the next hut, the boss called me back. I rushed to his side. Once there he asked me to look inside. To my delight I saw a freshly born piglet, trying desperately to gain its first footing. Looking back at the boss he looked down at me and with a wink and a grin said something like, 'Always trust your instinct. It appears to be good.'

I never forgot that advice, and have always listened to myself whenever the need arose.

This farm being one of the first outdoor units I had encountered, I learned one of the reasons piggers hate the hot weather. Being in North Yorkshire, summer days did get rather hot, much to my own personal disliking.

I am a strong believer that these are our most intelligent farm livestock, but sometimes sows do the most silly of things. I was again helping the boss feed the farrowing paddocks. We were feeding the 'new ones', or sows that had recently been put into the paddocks before farrowing. Having put out the feed, I noticed one sow lying in the far corner. She would have heard the tractor, so at first I was stumped. I alerted the boss by simply pointing to her. After he had taken a glance, he muttered a few un-publishable comments and we both made our way over to her.

She had done us no favours and had abandoned her hut, (if she had been using one at all,) and had farrowed her piglets in a hole in the dirt that she had probably spent the entire night creating.

Thus for the next twenty minutes or so, the boss and I gathered the newly-born into the large feeding bucket. It was all going well, until it came to getting her out of the said hole. She was determined not to move, even though her piglets were busy crying out for her in the bucket at my feet.

The boss tried plying her with nuts from his pocket. When that didn't work he yelled a few more of those un-publishable words and began coaxing her forwards with the use of his board. When that didn't work, and with speed I had not seen in him before, he threw his board to the ground, leapt to me, plucked a piglet from the bucket and ran for dear life. The piglet squealed its hardest, my boss ran his fastest. The sow... well she just stood and watched.

In the end the sows' composure waned as she realised her offspring had sprung. She became more and more irate. I took the bucket and contents to the nearest of the huts. The boss had already placed his piglet inside, and I added the rest. We decided our best option was to leave her for a while and let her calm down. We fed the rest of the field and by the time we got back, the sow had moved. She was busying herself with some left over feed, but when she saw us coming back to her she came straight to us. She was hungry.

We used this to our advantage and led her to her litter, by the boss putting out those nuts of his; from his pocket. When we got to the hut, the boss threw his nuts into the hut. She seemed to understand and went for a close inspection of the doorway to the hut. Either that or she simply got a whiff of the bosses nuts, in the hut.

She didn't look back and immediately dived out of sight. The boss left her some nuts in her fender and we abandoned the farrowing paddocks. On the way back, the boss was quite happy to have sorted the problem out, while I was left in wonder as to what we might find the next day.

Another hot day greeted us the next morning. Ever since waking I thought of that sow, and how we might find her in the same hole, having taken her litter out of the hut and back to her choice of farrowing arrangement.

Well, how right was I finding my new found instinct? Spot on. There was indeed a sow in that same corner. Did it give me a sense of well-being and put a smile on my face? Yes and Yes. That was until it dawned on me that we had to go through the whole sodded affair of getting her back to her hut. The boss was showing that he too had been thinking along the same lines I had. Approaching the field of 'new ones',

paddocks with the soon to be farrowed sows, I noticed his eyes roaming to that same corner. He looked at me and we both laughed.

We fed the sows that had come running for the tractor and I immediately saw that in fact the sow over in the corner couldn't be the same as the one we found there yesterday. I recognised the sow we had bargained with the day before by her ear length. I alerted the boss. He asked if I was sure. I was certain, but read off her ear-tag number and sure enough, it was her.

We trudged the field. One and a half men, armed with some nuts and a good stiff board. What does every man need when marching to war? That's right, a good sense of humour. We laughed all the way to her with the boss grumbling about the perils of outdoor pigging.

On arriving at the sow in the already prepared hole, we noticed she had only just begun. She had only pigged two piglets, so our task was an easier one, with less piglets to worry about. She was an older sow and perhaps knew she had been in the wrong, for she followed in-step behind the boss as he led her, with piglets in hand, to the next available hut. Quite relieved, I followed on while watching the master at work. She caused us no hassle and quietly got down to the business of farrowing.

It was a sad day when I did move on from that farm and that farmer and his family will always stay with me wherever I go.