

Chapter 3

The very first time I tried a Peter Allen feeder, was a job I had dreaded. I never did like the idea of working machinery. I'm a stockman, I deal in animals, not beasts of machinery. Anyway, the boss was at hand, if you want to think back to the very first time I encountered the sow farrowing out of the ark that was the farmer I was working for.

Ha-ha, it makes me laugh to think about it, but he had an old Fordson Major on the farm, and although I'm not the biggest tractor driving fan, I do enjoy the old ones. Well, I remember the very first day I arrived. He showed this old stead to me and asked what I thought. Being the shy lad I just shrugged or said, 'yeah, great,' or something along those lines. What he said next was, 'I bet you don't know how to start it,' if you haven't guessed there is a particular way these things are brought to life. You don't simply turn a key – I'm sure you don't even need to do that these days – you turn the key and then depress a lever to actually start the cranking going, or if that doesn't work, I'm sure you roll the roller whatsit with your foot. Anyway I jumped up there and started the old girl, which kinda wiped the snicker off the boss's face.

Where was I, oh yes, the dreaded Peter Allen feeder. For those not in the know it is a machine that runs behind a tractor that sprays food out of a shoot into the paddock you are driving beside. The boss showed me how it all worked, he set it up for me so that all I had to do was push and hold one button until the desired count had been reached and then, when ready push another and hey presto food was thrown all over the eagerly awaiting sows. Although I was dreading it, once I got into it the experience was marvellous, no more lumping great buckets for me, thank you very much, no sir-e. The boss watched me feed one set of dry sows and once he was satisfied, he as all good daredevil farmers do, leapt from the moving vehicle and left me to it.

All went well and I fed the dry sow paddocks without a hitch. Next came to the radial. Which is basically as it sounds, a circular paddock, normally for keeping served sows in. It

makes for easier serving, believe me. I fed the first pen, no problems. When I came across the second, I fed the sows, and moved off. Before I got to the next paddock, I heard this sow squealing as if she was being murdered, or something. I stopped and looked around. A sow was chasing after me, or rather the food. Unsure of what to do, I rang the boss.

No just kidding, I pushed a few buttons and fed her a little more. Which stopped the squealing and she settled down to her lonesome breakfast.

All went well at the next pen. But on the one after that, during the feeding, or whilst the food was being dispersed, there came an immense squealing sound, as if a sow had just been shot at. I looked out the back window, just in time to see a sow leap over the fence-line and come bounding over to get some grub. Odd, is not the word I used.

I kept an eye on her and went to get her ear tag number. With that noted I went back to the tractor. Not the Fordson I might add here. In the nicely warmed cab: I'd put the big fan on; this wasn't winter but it was a bit blustery. I found her, on the second to last page of the records; it took two checks and I lost valuable time; ten minutes, looking her up. I knew which pen she belonged, so I reversed all the way back to the very first paddock I fed. Well that was the plan. Do you think she followed? No. She kept her head down and pretended not to notice me. I saw her though, looking at me through the side of her face.

So, when I realised she wouldn't come back, I went forwards. When I passed her and the others of the paddock, she stayed put. At the next paddock, she again ran and jumped the fence. The top wire of which was maybe, two, two and a half feet off the ground, so quite a leap for a pregnant sow. She chased me all the way round and back to the paddock before the one she belonged. I did think about leaving her there, but I knew that if I had she might not make it back to her pals, so I rolled a smoke, waited and then, when I thought she'd had enough food, I got out and went across to take her to the centre, where there was a pen with gateways all in a circle. All the paddocks led to this central penning area and each had their

own gate. It was easy, all I had to do was open the gate where she was to go to, and the one where she was now, chase her into the centre and let her find her way home. Simple.

When I got back to the feeding area, I looked around for her, by now knowing what she looked like. Yes, they are all different as any pigger will tell you I'm sure. When I couldn't see her straight away, I checked ear tags. Could I find her? Could I buggery. You have to imagine that by now, all the feed was pretty much eaten, and the sows were starting to disperse the area, either heading for the hut, or for the water trough. I looked everywhere, up and down the paddock I trudged. When I couldn't find her, I decided to heck with it I'm off.

You are probably thinking the obvious, but wait for it. I walked back to the centre, to close the gates. I got maybe halfway there, when I heard her behind me, that squealing as if she were dying. Turning around there she was, running not twenty paces away, in the paddock I was in, by the way. I let her come closer then ran around her to herd her. She kinda turned with me and ended up facing me. Hmm, I thought.

She advanced. I stepped around her and walked to the centre. She followed. Even into the central pen and as I turned to close the gate as she left the wrong paddock, she didn't stop and found her own way home.

She didn't hang about; off she went swallowing me in a plume of dust that she left in her wake. She headed to the other end of the paddock, straight to the feeding ground. She sniffed about a bit while I walked up towards the tractor. When I got nearer, she started that squealing again. She ran straight at me and around me as I walked calmly up the paddock. When I left the paddock, I turned. She was running off heading to the trough for water, or so I thought.

Instead she ran passed it and away to the side of the paddock and jumped the fence again, ran straight to the feeding area and began getting whatever she could find. After all

the walking I'd just done for her, my thoughts were, well, not good. I decided to leave her to her own devices and walked away.

The next day she was in her proper pen and the whole process started again, minus the chasing around at the end, I just left her to it.

When I told the boss about her later that day, he said, 'err, well yes, I ought to have told you about her oughtn't I.' Typical after all the aggro I went through, getting her number, looking her up and then the running around trying to get her home. I should point out, she wasn't in any way under nourished, she was a perfectly healthy sow. One that liked to get about.