

## Chapter 4.

My favourite place on any piggery is to work with the farrowing sows, both indoors and out. I love that fresh new born piglet smell.

Not so good though when you walk into the house that holds the dry sows and you get a good waft of it in the air; it kinda fills you with dread. Most of the time it's like, 'Oh that's where that one went and look she's in the pen next to where she was supposed to have been. Pigs really *can* fly after all; how else would she have gotten there?' Not from my mistake anyhow.

The first time this happened to me I remember very well. It was on the very first piggery I ever worked at. That time I was lucky, not only was the pen half empty, but it was mucking out day and we were due to kick all the sows out for the task. Needless to say I let everyone else out, except her. And then was faced with the job of getting her and her new brood into the farrowing house, and what a job it was too.

Back in those days we had small square straw bales and seeing as I was on my own to shift her, I went and fetched a few on the old dumper truck, (I don't know if I've mentioned it before, but that old dumper had no brakes; boy what fun we had with it.)

My luck was in here too because she had farrowed in the corner of the main pen and I simply set up the bales around her to act as a deterrent should she take a disliking to my intrusion. She seemed quite uninterested with what I was doing, content with suckling her new born and blissfully soft grunting to them, while I worked.

The problems started soon after. I managed to load all the piglets into the feed barrow and wheel them away. I placed them all in their new home and off I went to fetch the sow. She was where I left her, but not in such a docile mood as when I'd walked away with her piglets. She was frantic and paced around the whole pen; straw flew in every direction as she flicked it up with her nose. Those straw bales; not one was square when I returned.

She kept running around the pen, squealing and searching the straw. I walked in with board in hand, well in two hands and the board held directly in front of me. I always hated walking with them this way, they kept getting under my feet and quite often I'd nearly end up, 'arse over tit', as they used to say a lot down that way. She saw me and charged. I did what any man would do: I dropped the board and ran.

When I got halfway up the yard, I turned to look over my shoulder. The sow wasn't nipping at my heels or trying to knock me down. She was still in her pen at the bottom of the yard.

When I walked in a second time, I gingerly crept in, one eye on her, the other on the board among the straw. She was in the corner she'd farrowed in, at the rear of the pen. I had time, plenty of time to get the board and brace for any impending attacks. They never came and I made it successfully to the board and hastily picked it up. I tried to encourage her to charge at me again, this time I wouldn't run, this time I would be brave and take the blows.

She was in the place she'd farrowed though and was not coming out. I yelled at her, I pleaded with her I even tried coaxing her with food. She was not for budging. Time was running on, the boss would be back soon and he'd want to get on with the mucking out.

An idea struck, I didn't like it but it was all I had. I ran up to her litter and fetched the loudest one down with me. I shook it a bit and before I stepped one foot on the straw, she charged. I didn't drop the piglet; I did run though, faster than I ever thought I could. The piglet yelled out, the sow chased, I ran. All the way to the farrowing house and into the central passage and when I placed the squealing piglet amongst his litter mates, the sow, not too dim, saw what I had done and went straight to them. Looking into the pen and grunting to them she walked helpfully up into the farrowing pen, all thoughts of taking great chunks out of me, it seemed, were forgotten.

She raised one of the better litters of that batch.

On another farm, 17 years later, I say that because I came across another one of those times where a piglet surprised and frightened me all at once. If you think back to the earlier chapter you'll see the connection to this.

There I was doing my usual rounds in the farrowing house, when I came across a sow that was in the last throes of farrowing. She'd very recently put out a load of afterbirth and I saw there were two still born piglets: piglets that had died during the process of the farrowing, an unfortunate part of life on the farm but that's nature I guess.

Anyway, I did the usual and took away what afterbirth there was and threw the two still born out of the pen. I then went to the front of the pen to see if there was any food in her trough, sometimes they don't eat all their food just before farrowing and I wanted to make sure there wasn't any left as it can give off a pong later in the day and can sometimes put the sows off eating for a day or two.

Satisfied I leapt back out of her pen and proceeded to check the others in that house. When I got to the far end I saw a little new born wandering, trying to find its footing. At first I thought a sow had farrowed while standing up and the poor wee soul had fallen out of the farrowing pen, but when I looked I saw that the sow nearest hadn't started yet and wasn't in farrowing mode either.

It wasn't until I got back to the sow that had farrowed that I realised one of the two still born was missing. It was a miracle. I looked down at my hands and thought they had some sort of power that brought back the dead.

Sadly this didn't last long, and when I went to the boss he told me the truth. No I hadn't told him of my new found power, just the facts. He said it is something that happens and that my letting the piglet drop onto a cold floor acted as a kick start to its heart. He also said I should be happy to have gone into the farrowing house at just the right moment to catch it before it was lost for ever. Well not those words, but something along those lines.

Every day for the next week I was up and down in the farrowing houses before anyone was out of bed, just to see if I could rescue anymore in the same fashion. Could I find any, no. Either none had farrowed or some were just getting started. If I wanted to play magician I had to go in the houses at the precise moment, but when was that? Who knows? Was that the boss's way of getting more out of me? Again who knows, I'll let you decide.

Whilst working in those farrowing houses one day, my boss came running in to find me. He was smiling, as he usually did, but that day he was doing so even more fervently than normal. Something had tickled him. He asked for my help and duly led me to the flat decks: where the piglets went after weaning.

We sauntered up the isle until he came to the door he wanted. He hadn't explained the reason for the assistance, so when he asked me to take a look inside, I was baffled. I looked nonetheless and couldn't see anything amiss. He took a look in himself and then directed me to a pig at the feed trough. When I looked, I couldn't help but laugh. The silly sausage had somehow managed to put on a tutu, or in this case a sewage pipe straight-connector



(pictured here).

We leapt inside and basically cut it off the poor pig, which was not in any way harmed or showed any signs of distress while wearing his new frock. He did however, look a little

disgruntled after we removed the pipe fitting and me and the boss both thought it looked up at us in embarrassment. 'What?' the boss said down to it, 'You suddenly feel naked.'

We both laughed about it all the way to lunch.