

A photograph of a man with white hair, wearing a grey polo shirt, sitting on a blue tractor. He is holding a black and white speckled dog. The background is a lush green rural landscape with rolling hills and trees under a blue sky.

Land of Milk and (no) Money

Roger Evans

Britain's favourite dairy farmer



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MERLIN UNWIN BOOKS

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17 October 2020

You often hear people say that they have put on weight during the pandemic. I know I have. I haven't weighed myself, I can tell from my belt. I used to go to the gym twice a week and I used to wonder if it was doing me any good, it's quite difficult to quantify. But I used to give myself half an hour of stick on the exercise bike and half an hour of hard work on the weights. If you forego that for six months, it is bound to have a detrimental effect. After a life in farming I have two bad knees and they are not as supple as they once were. The gym is open now but I'm not allowed to go because apparently I'm at an 'at risk age'. With a little ingenuity I could exercise at home but that is so boring, I enjoy watching other people in the gym and I keep the exercises going because I suspect that other people there like watching me.

If I have concerns about weight it is the weight of the dog Gomer. To be kind I would describe him as bonny. I have a friend whose teenage daughter was going to her first dance, she came down to give him a twirl and he said she looked bonny and she ran back upstairs in floods of tears!

Gomer hardly has a calorie-controlled diet. For breakfast he has marmite sandwiches. I don't think it is the marmite that puts weight on, rather it is the thick layer of butter between the marmite and the bread. For lunch he either has pork pie or ham sandwiches. After we have had our evening meal he has his big treat of the day, a dried pig's ear. He gets really excited about this. On top of that there is always a dish of dry dog food available. Other dogs come into our kitchen and if they do, Gomer empties the dish. It's not that he wants it, he just doesn't want them to have it. He's a greedy little dog - if he were

a seagull he would have that ice cream right out of your hand.

None of this is down to me, I never feed him, in fact I am his personal trainer. His mother is a long-haired Jack Russell and his father is either a Patterdale or Border terrier, I can never remember which, but it is from his father that he gets his thick wiry coat. Earlier this year, in the hot weather, I had him trimmed. The downside of that was that people could see just how fat he was. My eldest grandson has a bum that sticks out a bit and I often comment that you could land a helicopter on there. I don't think you could land a helicopter on Gomer's broad flat back, but you could land a couple of drones. Even the postman is calling him 'Slab'. He spent two days under the kitchen table because everyone was laughing at him.

But help is at hand. Every day I go for a ride in the truck to see if the grass and livestock are growing. This is a very important exercise; I can count the cattle and see if they are all well. One day I counted 70 sheep in one of our silage fields, and we don't have any sheep!

It is during this ride around that I exercise the dog. He gets very excited at the prospect of this drive around although he surely knows what is to come. He jumps into the truck full of good humour. He is always a good-natured little dog; he has always been friendly to people and other dogs. This is rare in a terrier, terriers usually want to pick a fight with everything in the world, and if they can pick a fight with something bigger than them, so much the better. He gets into the back of the truck and then takes up his customary position. He likes to stand on his back legs and between the front seats, he rests his hands on the arm rests, so he gets a good view of where we are going. It also puts him in a good place to lick my left ear and I wish he wouldn't do that.

At this time of year there are packs of pheasant poults everywhere and should we come on such a pack on the road, which we often do, he gets very excited. He yelps his excitement, as if to say, 'Just let me out and I'll soon show those pheasants who is boss.' I've got some biggish fields at the top and this is where he takes his exercise. When I stop at the usual place he climbs out in good spirits. He starts out on his exercise, he has all the poise and grace of a concrete block and is about as heavy. He tucks in behind the truck and I don't see him again on our journey unless he should stray from the wheel tracks for his ablutions or if he is distracted by a scent, and then I only see him in my mirrors. Our journey takes us 1½ miles which we do at 10mph, which is as fast as his short fat legs will carry him. He seems to cope ok because he is always close at hand. He likes me, he likes me a lot, which is unusual around here. If I am in the house, and we have a caller, he is all growls, barks and aggression. He looks over his squared-up shoulders, then at me as if to say, 'Look how fierce I am.' He would really like to be a police dog but I can think of several reasons why that will never happen.

24 October 2020

We rarely watch *Countryfile* anymore, and when we do, it is only at the end when we want to catch the weather forecast. The last time I watched it there was a Wildlife Trust person in one part of the country telling us what a good thing it would be if there were more field mice about, then we had a Wildlife Trust person in another area promoting the population of pine martins. Never mind that pine martins will eat mice at every opportunity. It is this issue of predation that Wildlife Trusts have never come to terms with. In my own area, they are busy

promoting the populations of ground-nesting birds like the curlew and lapwings. But the air is full of red kites, buzzards, carrion crows and ravens. I hope they succeed but you can't have a strong ground nesting bird population and all those winged predators. The two don't mix and never will. Fifty years ago the predators would be in the control of gamekeepers, but they aren't allowed to do that anymore, and it's starting to show.

I remember talking to a retired gamekeeper. At the end of his career he had charge of a grouse moor. On that moor he had grouse and red kites. The RSPB bought the moor next door which was similarly populated. They wrote to him and said 'We know you are killing red kites and we will be watching you.' About three years later he meets the local RSPB fieldsman on the road. The fieldsman tells the keeper that 'when we bought this moor we had grouse and red kites; now we have neither.' What had happened was that the red kites had eaten all the grouse and now there was nothing to eat so they had moved to the keeper's moor. A perfect illustration of the need for balance. It is there for all to see if they hadn't got their heads buried in sand.

Fortunately, we have never had so many programmes on TV about farming. The best is *This Farming Life* which shows caring farmers that work hard and that can only be good for our image.

There's very real life and very real death on a farm. When a vet struggles to replace a prolapsed uterus of a cow, there is blood and the brown stuff everywhere. I have seen quite a few prolapses in my time. In my experience they usually occur in muddy gateways, or if it's inside, next to a drinking trough where it's all mucky and wet. I shall never forget the first one I saw.

When I was a boy, an industrialist bought some land next to our village. First he built a fine house, then he built a model farm and then he bought 12 in-calf heifers.

When the first heifer calved she had a prolapse. It was a tight-knit community so by the time the vet got there, there was quite a crowd gathered. Fortunately, the heifer had chosen to calve under a tree, so it was a simple matter to put ropes over a branch and raise her back end off the floor a foot. This meant that the vet had gravity to help him and the uterus was soon back in. I shall never forget the white face of the businessman - this was the first calving he had ever seen. Some of the older boys told him that this was a normal calving but it was rare to have the luxury of a tree to help you! All his heifers were gone in about three days. The fields and farmyard soon looked neglected and after three or four years he sold up and moved back into town.

This also set me thinking about the first year I was farming, I had a little fat Ayrshire cow I had bought. She was trying to calve but the calf was big and I couldn't help her. At about 10 o'clock at night, I phoned the vet. At that time we had three vets, a Scot, an Irishman and a Welshman, and it was the Irishman who came out that night. There was no electricity in the box where the cow was, so he had to examine her by torchlight. This he did and the combination of a big calf and a small cow meant that he decided on a caesarean. He didn't have his caesarean kit with him so he said he would go back to the surgery and fetch it. He was gone a long time, in fact he was gone so long I did wonder if he was coming back.

When he returned he proudly showed me what he had been doing. He had taken the front light off his son's bike and he had fashioned a belt so that he could fix the light to his forehead and perform the operation. You can easily buy such a device now but he was ahead of his time. The operation went smoothly although the calf was dead. The calf was so big we had a job to lift it out, it was so big there is a photo of it somewhere, I don't think I've had a bigger calf since! It was the first caesarean I had ever

seen so I was taken aback and I am sure my mouth was open.

The vet gets into his car and gives me some after care instructions. Finally he says, 'For the next five nights, just before you go to bed, it will be a big help if you sprinkle some Holy water on the wound. Do you have some Holy water?' 'No, I don't think we do.' 'Sure, there's plenty in the tap!'

31 October 2020

Pheasant poults go through stages. They are put into their release pen, then they learn to fly out, then they explore their new surroundings, then they go on the road. They move about in groups, there could be twenty in a pack, but there could be 50. I have always thought that their fascination with roads has something to do with their need to eat grit, which is an essential part of their digestion. Should you come on a pack on the road they are often difficult to get through. Not big on road sense, your average pheasant poult. Some will run in front of you until they are so close to the bonnet that they disappear from view, and you don't know where they are. Some will get on to the side of the road but they could easily jump under your wheels. All this time the dog is going berserk, wanting to get out to chase them. Touch wood, I don't think I've ever run one over.

There used to be a man who lived around here that just used to drive through them. I have followed him and he would drive through them fast, he never touched his brakes. He would leave perhaps twenty dead or dying on the road. At least with shooting, the bird has a chance and if they are wounded they are sought-out and despatched humanely.

Early evening usually follows the same pattern in our house. My wife, Ann, is sitting on the settee doing a crossword. Also on the settee is the dog Gomer. This is his preferred position in life. He is asleep and he always sleeps on his back with all his bits and pieces on show. I read somewhere that dogs will sleep 80% of their time, I suspect that this is an average figure, I think that Gomer is a mid-90% dog. He has one eye open. I can't decide if his eyelid comes open because he is lying on his back or if he is watching me. I am sitting in my usual armchair, on my knee is our daily paper and the TV is on.

There is nothing interesting on, so I decide to wind things up a bit. I adopt a sort of gaze, I'm not looking at the paper and I'm not looking at the television, I'm sort of looking out of the window, but it's dark outside. I don't have to wait long, 'What are you thinking about?' says Ann. 'I was thinking about getting another dog'. We then get a range of comments that vary from, 'I don't want two dogs in this house,' to, 'you'll never get another dog as nice as Gomer.' We conclude with 'Why do you want another dog?' 'I thought that if we both succumbed to the virus, Gomer would be an orphan, so I thought it would be nice for him to have a brother or sister'. I am not sure about the technicalities of what I have just said but the word 'orphan' is an emotive one and I can tell she is thinking about it. After about five minutes I get 'If you had another dog, what would you get?' I don't hesitate, 'An Irish Wolf Hound.' There is a minor explosion behind the crossword. I don't actually want an Irish Wolf Hound, but negotiations have to start somewhere.

We have had experience of Irish Wolf Hounds in this house. My brother used to have one and he used to bring it here. It was a bit like having a hyperactive Shetland pony in the house. It was huge. I remember on one occasion I just stopped it stealing a freshly-roasted chicken off the top of the Rayburn. The scary thing was

that it was so big it had to bend its neck down in order to try and pick the chicken up. My brother used to take it for walks in the woods near where he lives. He used to walk along the narrow paths and the dog would wander about exploring the delightful world of smells that a dog enjoys. And then it would realise it had been left behind and race to catch him up. It would often crash into my brother knocking him to the ground. In fact it was a very real prospect that it would break his legs.

So I don't want an Irish Wolf Hound but I have been toying with the idea of having another dog. We get a lot of pleasure out of having one dog but I'm not kidding myself that two dogs would mean twice as much pleasure. Firstly it would have to be a rescue dog and secondly it would have to be about the same age as Gomer. I have a feeling that somewhere there is a corgi that wants rescuing. Meanwhile I think that the world of dogs is heading for trouble. Puppies are at crazy prices and when you get crazy prices of anything, it attracts the wrong sort of people. That is why the import of puppies from Eastern Europe is such a problem. They say that high puppy prices are driven by the need to have companionship during the pandemic. I can identify with that. Delightful though a new puppy may be, they are not puppies for long and I worry that dog charities will be overrun with unwanted dogs in two or three years' time. It might be ok to watch a new puppy chew the corner of a cushion but less so if a three-year-old bored dog on its own all day, destroys a settee.

7 November 2020

November I have found, is the most difficult time of year to manage dairy cows. As far as I am concerned the best place for a cow is out at grass. I know that there are a lot

of big herds where the cows are kept in all year round but that would never do for me. But even my cows come inside for the winter, and the difficulty is to decide just when winter has started. Cows don't mind being cold but they don't like to be wet and cold, who does? Then if it is too wet, they damage the fields for next year and that would never do. So you have to balance all these factors and make a decision.

Ideally, we would like to keep our cows outside until November. What we usually do is keep them in at night at first and then there will arrive a wet, cold day and we just won't open the gates, and winter will have arrived. We are more flexible than we used to be. Years ago our cows used to be either in or out. Now they may be in but if, for example, we get a dry week in December or January and conditions allow it, we will let them out for three or four hours during the day. They love it, they can have a good scratch on the trees or a nice stretch and they lie on the turf and it gets them off the concrete.

It has always been an advantage to live in a quiet, beautiful area but there was an added plus when the lockdown started. On an average I would only see five or six people a day, (including family), and those five or six would only see a similar amount of people who lived similarly isolated lives. All that changed when lockdown restrictions eased: I have never ever seen so many holiday-makers in the area. Now that the feared second wave is fast becoming a reality I hope things will quieten down.

I only go to the pub once a week now. Fair play to them, they have tried to stick to the rules: if you want to go you have to phone to book a seat and there is no standing at the bar. There is a camping field behind the

pub and since lockdown finished it has been full at weekends. There are three areas within the pub and because seats are all designated they tend to sit all the locals in one bar and people from 'off' elsewhere. Because you have got to book a seat and because there are only allowed six at a table, there is often a need to move the seats about. We were a seat short on our table one Saturday and the only spare seat to be found was a big bar stool. This was used, but it put the head of the person sitting on it about two feet above everyone else, there was something of the meerkat about the one who sat there. I was searching for something funny to say, to this effect, but I was beaten to it. 'He looks like a lifeguard on the beach.' And he did.

A reader sent me this story. One day he is taking his dog for a walk over some fields, when he catches up with a lady who is similarly occupied. Her progress has been thwarted because there are sheep in the next field and there were not any sheep there yesterday. My correspondent tries to explain that this is what fields are for, keeping livestock, and the farmer is perfectly entitled to put his sheep in there. But he is wasting his time explaining, the lady will have none of it. She is convinced that the farmer put the sheep there just to be awkward, and he had no right to do so. Probably with a twinkle in his eye, my reader asks the lady something else. Has she noticed that this particular farmer also puts all his gates in muddy places, just to be awkward? The lady is intrigued, no she hadn't noticed that but now she can see that it is true. I expect that she returned home and reported to anyone who would listen 'You'll never believe what that farmer has done.'

I have a good friend who always had this fierce dog with him. If you asked him the breed, he always said it was a greyhound cross. You could see that but I think that if you dug into its DNA you wouldn't have to dig far

to find a pit bull, because you could see that as well. Most people, if they want a crossed dog, seek out a poodle cross but there you go. I've not seen the dog for a couple of years so I ask him where it is. He tells me that it is nearly 17 now and spends most of its day stretched out on the settee. In its prime it was quite some dog, all muscle, teeth and attitude, like a great white shark on a lead. It was often asleep under a table in the pub and you had to take care just where you put your ankles. The owner has a young family now so I ask him how it gets on with his children. He says just fine, and then adds 'It only bites one a week.' Of course he was joking, I think we he was joking!

14 November 2020

You will have gathered by now that rugby has always been a big part of my life. At my club during covid there have been 'touch' rugby matches and that is all we are allowed to play at our level. The hope is that a few people will watch, thus stimulating some interest and income. This sort of rugby is not for me. Rugby is a hard physical game and that is how it should be played. There is plenty of rugby on TV, I particularly like watching Bristol and Exeter because they have come from nowhere to challenge at the very top. I record lots of matches but if the game should prove to be one-sided, I don't watch it. I get no pleasure from seeing someone put 50 points on someone else, I much prefer a 3-0 margin if the game is hard fought, especially if there is a bit of needle in it. But I do have a problem, I write for a sort of newsletter for my club every month and it is not easy to do it when everything is in limbo. I have had to resort to telling (hopefully) amusing anecdotes. If you want to tell people to come to the AGM you have to include content that will

hopefully entertain them as well. I have just told them this story, so I will share it with you. They hold a carnival in our local town every year and a few years ago they used to have an event each night in the week preceding the actual carnival Sunday. I remember that they used to have a tractor pull where each pub in the town - there were seven at the time - had to enter a team that would pull a tractor 200 yards on the main street. This only lasted about three years. It was found or suspected that the supposedly neutral farmer who had lent and was to steer the tractor had been putting his foot on the brake if he didn't like the beer in a particular pub. That was a shame because there used to be about 300 spectators.

On the Wednesday evening there used to be a pram race. Teams of three, all wearing fancy dress, had to have a pram or pushchair. One person sat in the pram and the other two had to push him or her from pub to pub just as fast as they could. At each pub the passenger had to rush in and drink half a pint as quickly as they could then return to their pram and rush off to the next pub. There was a dance at the local hall which was the finishing line, so all the teams ended up at the dance.

One year my son and I and another friend we used to play rugby with, decided to enter the pram race but we determined to do it a bit differently. We hired quite good gorilla suits, which made us anonymous. There were 15 teams entered that year and all the entrants lined up opposite the first pub with their prams at the opposite kerb. At the start signal all the teams rushed across the road, the drinker entered the pub and drank the half pint of beer while the pushers waited outside, pram at the ready. In no time at all they were all gone to the next pub. The three gorillas hadn't moved, which raised a few eyebrows. When the last pram had gone the three gorillas strolled nonchalantly over the road, entered the pub and all three sat down and enjoyed a leisurely pint.

All in our own time we then went to the next pub where all three of us had another pint. It was some time until people worked out what we were doing. At the dance, the MC started to report on our progress. 'The three gorillas have just left the Six Bells and are making their way to the Boars Head.' Loud cheers, apparently. 'The three gorillas have left the Boars Head and are going back to the Six Bells!' This was true - good pint in the Bells. Eventually we got to the dance where we received a standing ovation. The winning pram had done the course in about 12 minutes, we took 3½ hours! We didn't win obviously, but everyone was talking about us and we had the loudest cheer.

We did something similar the following year. We were a different three, my son and I and someone else. We didn't hire costumes but we dressed up to imitate a local character, a farmer from outside the town. Everyone knew him. He always wore a tweed cap, a tweed jacket, cord trousers and hob nail boots. He always had a pipe clamped in the corner of his mouth. My son and I borrowed or begged our outfits. We did not have to worry that the third member would dress the same, because he was that local character! Annoyingly, he never mentioned the fact that we were dressed like him, not once. We made a similarly liquid journey to the previous year, in fact even more so. But it was not the talking point it had been. You can only do something new once. The most memorable event that year was that I fell down in a pub after we finished and broke my collar bone. Can't think how that happened?

21 November 2020

Nothing heralds the onset of winter so much as when I order my first load of sand. Our cows lie in what we call

cubicles and we put a layer of sand in there, so the cows have somewhere clean and comfortable to lie. You could use all sorts of different bedding, like straw or sawdust, but sand has an advantage. It is an inert material, so bugs don't proliferate in it. It is important to keep cows clean, you won't get clean milk out of a dirty cow. Cubicles are designed so that when a cow lies down, should she poo, the poo does not get into her bed but goes onto the concrete passageway. I have never been sure about calling them cubicles. Cubicles as a word, is too near to cow crates (which have been banned in this country for twenty years) and could imply, to those who don't know what cubicles are, a degree of restriction which is totally untrue. In Canada they call them 'free stalls' which is a better name for exactly the same thing.

But it's not winter or cow comfort that I think of when I order that first load of sand. I think of the last corgi we had. She was run over. She was tiny, even for a corgi, she was easily the smallest animal on the farm and because of that I think she had an inferiority complex. We buy big loads of sand, over twenty tons at a time. She liked to stand on the very top of this heap. She liked it so much that she would be on the top before the lorry had finished tipping. She would stay there all day and would bark at anything that came past, be it a human, a tractor or another dog. As we used the sand, the heap would get smaller and she would abandon her position when the heap was three-quarter used and she would then slink off back to the kitchen. But she always seemed to know when a new load was due and she would be waiting for it to arrive. To be fair, we all like to spend some of our time on the high ground and to bark at the world.

There was a double page spread in our local paper that told the story of a corgi on a farm that assisted with moving sheep. As if this were something remarkable! Corgis were originally used to move livestock, they were

known as Welsh Heeling dogs, they could nip at the heels of cattle and should those cattle lash out with a kick in reply, the kick would go over the corgis head because of their short stature.

There was a time when we had three corgis living in our house, (corgis have long moved out of our price range, Gomer was given to us free, that's our price range), and the highlight of those corgis' day was to get the cows in for milking. When I arrived in the kitchen in the morning they would make such a clamour to get out of the door, I had difficulty getting the door open. In the summer months they would be off down the fields to fetch the cows and by the time I had a cup of tea, the cows would be well on their way home. In the winter they would rouse the cows from their slumbers in the sheds and have them in the yard, waiting to be milked.

There was a time, when I first started farming, when it was not so common for farmers to own their own 4x4 and livestock trailers. Stock was often taken to market by local hauliers. Our local haulier used to send two or three lorries to our local 'big' market. These lorries would go out in the local area to collect stock from farms and then they would meet somewhere on a farm and redistribute the livestock. All the cattle on one lorry, all the sheep on another. It saved them a lot of time when they got to market because they would only have to enter one queue. It didn't bother me, live and let live has always been my motto. So if I had stock to go to market I wasn't too worried if two or three lorries turned up on our yard. Then I noticed that the lorries turned up on days that I didn't have stock to go. One day, when we were busy, we couldn't get tractors through the yard because it was full of lorries. I asked one of the drivers, why do you always use our yard?'

He explained that it was because of our corgi dog. 'When the cattle have been on a lorry for say half an hour

and then let off, they are usually reluctant to get onto another lorry, but your corgi will soon get them on, he will put ten big cattle back on the lorry very quickly, saves us a lot of time.' That's the upside. We had this corgi called Sammy, he was a nasty little dog. We gave him away in the end, our son was only a toddler and we were frightened he would get bitten in the face.

It is that time of year again, it's time to open negotiations for our Christmas turkey. Here goes. 'As I don't know what restrictions will be in place at Christmas, I only want half a turkey this year.' He always has an answer. 'We were only going to let you have half a turkey this year anyway.' I do not think it will come to that but if does, I would prefer the front half.

28 November 2020

My brother likes it when I mention him. This is ironic because he never buys my books; he likes his friends to tell him he has a mention. He is a bit younger than me, and we went to the same grammar school but not at the same time. He always maintains that he was caned in his first week at school. He says that the headmaster caned him in case he turned out anything like me.

We have had a spaniel bitch to stay for a month whilst its owner was in hospital. It wasn't any old spaniel either, it was a Clumber, which are a chunkier, king-size sort of spaniel. Gomer fell head over heels in love with her and is inconsolable now she is gone. When I go to bed, he is asleep on the settee but sometime in the early hours he