

SWILL

As a schoolboy in the late 60s I worked on a couple of farms in North East Essex - next to each other and owned by the same family. One kept chickens, the other pigs.

The chicken farm was basically two innocent looking aircraft hanger-sized sheds. Inside were tiers of chicken cages stretching off into the distance. The hens were jammed in tight, standing on mesh bars, with just enough space for them to stick their heads out for food and water. The eggs dropped through and were routed into collection trays, the shit would fall onto a flat metal floor surface which would be scraped off. The chickens lost all their neck feathers through rubbing against the bars

when feeding and they would die in their hundreds as a result of suffocation, exhaustion, disease or fighting.

Twice every chicken day we would enter these stifling hell holes (by controlling the shed lights the farmer fooled the hens into thinking there were two days to our one day, driving them to lay twice). The squawking was deafening, the smell utterly repellant, so the objective was to get in and out as fast as possible - feed them, water them, collect the eggs, pull out the carcasses that were being trodden into the bars of the cages, turn on the scrapers, hose down the shit tray and scarper.

But my weekend job didn't last long, I couldn't stand that smell - far worse than pigs, cows or even humans. It was the smell of fear. I had to leave and went to work for the farmer next door. This was a highly industrialised pig farm, with a mixture of swill pigs and meal fed pigs. The farmer had a contract to pick up waste food from local institutions - schools, hospitals, offices, as well as restaurants, cafes and a Butlins holiday camp. Every day his fleet of swill

lorries would arrive and tip brimming bins of waste food onto a conveyer belt - vile brews of blancmange, milk bottle tops, rotting pork chops, broken glass, rancid milk, plastic bags and anything else that might be casually chucked into an open swill bin by a kitchen hand - was emptied off into two vast steam heated cookers. We had to rifle through this food with our bare hands as, the farmer insisted, it was the only effective way of finding the cutlery and large bones that might be concealed in it and which might damage the cookers.

The swill was boiled and pumped down into a pit over which we had to walk to get to our rest room. Here we'd sit on grease covered armchairs and eat our sandwiches just feet from thousands of gallons of steaming swill, great clouds of it wafting in through the door like noxious burps. Swill smells revolting, it gets in your hair, clothes, ears and eyes but somehow you get used to it - although my mother never did and used to make me get undressed at the bottom of the garden and hose me down before letting me in.

One day a lorry arrived and tipped at the top of the driveway. Us boys were sent to cover the load with a tarpaulin 'in case the health people drop by'. The pink mess had come from a well known chicken processing factory and consisted of rotting chicken giblets and other chicken body parts. The smell made me gag and we had to use handkerchief masks before we could get near it. Then we heard the cheeping sounds. One of





the farm lads waded into the filthy matter and frantically started pulling out live chicks, scores of them. Some he couldn't find and the pathetic cheeping didn't stop for a couple of days. Each day a certain amount of the pink filth was forked into the cookers and mixed with the waste food. They didn't want to use too much of it in case it harmed the pigs.

Often a pig would die - at least one or two a week. The carcasses would be butchered and tossed into the cookers. Whatever had killed the pigs was fed back to them. One of the other farm lads and myself were told to clean out the cookers one day. They were cylindrical tanks with circular hatches on the top like a submarine, where the waste food was put in and where the hot grease was scooped out (not for health reasons but because when the fat cooled it would congeal inside the swill pipes and block them). The farmhands drained the tanks, opened the hatches and, wearing only our underpants we were lowered inside. The only light was from the hatches and there was a foot of hot swill washing around our feet. There were long shafts running the length of the tanks with paddles attached for stirring the swill. We sat on the shafts, our legs dangling in the brown liquid in the steam filled tanks and bent double to feel for cutlery, broken crockery, bones and all the other stuff that gets thrown into waste food bins. Another important task was to cut and pull out any string or entrails that had wound around the paddles. Within seconds we were wringing with sweat and gasping for air.

I can often win 'what's the worst job you've ever done?' competitions with this story.

Generally the swill pigs got sicker than the meal pigs. They used to urinate and defecate in their own beds, they would lose all their teeth through lack of use and seemed to have constant diarrhoea. Their pee seemed highly acidic as well and a pair of wellingtons would rot away in a couple of months. In contrast the meal pigs were cleaner and happier. The problem for the farmer was that the meal pigs grew at half the rate of the swill pigs - that would go from piglet to fifteen stone porker in about six weeks. The economics were obvious.

The farmer got away with it. The pigs didn't contract any significant disease, neither did they cause a dangerous epidemic. They were taken on a double decked articulated lorry to the Walls factory as normal (usually five or six would die in transit - of suffocation usually. Some would arrive with broken legs).

We'd watch the pigs being fed in the door of the processing plant and as we walked alongside it to get to the staff shop, our pigs were killed, rendered and their waste body parts were slopping down chutes into skips positioned along the length of the factory wall. We unsentimentally bought sausages and pies for our families at discount rates and headed off home.

We were blithely complacent about the health risks involved and one hopes that things must have improved in the thirty odd years since but even then we all knew that we shouldn't be feeding this muck to the pigs, that it was deeply wrong.

The farmer knew as well and had been concerned about being caught doing it but it was cheap food and he had a red E type Jaguar, house improvements, a swimming pool and a predilection for fine cigars to support.

The farmer has now, fortunately for us all, abandoned farming and gone on to build a huge waste disposal business - something, obviously, for which he was highly qualified, although I worry about what he dumps where.

In any event, whenever the farmers are casting around for consolation and compensation, they'll have to forgive me if I demur.