

And Now the Cows

A summer morning, clear and cool with a few clouds. We were at home at the time and we were called in by our radio alerter's at about 0830. All the professional firemen at Kempston lived in houses provided by the fire service just across the road from the fire station. It was a twenty second run to the station or two minutes if we were in bed. On this occasion I was up and dressed.

The shout was to cows in a Slurry Lagoon Beancroft Farm, Beancroft Road, Marston Moretaine. The attendance was the water tender ladder, a rescue unit, and L4P* from Kempston. Station Officer Mike Hall was also sent on the call. We were soon on the scene, there were five cows in this slurry lagoon, and it was in fact a polite name for an animal cesspit. Someone had left a farm gate open and the cows had wandered into this pit, first one cow then four others followed.

This pit had a sort of crust on top and on entering the area, the cows soon sunk into the mire. Also all five cows were in calf at the time. The farmer Mr. Tony Owen had laid corrugated sheets of metal from roofing across the crust. This time it was my turn to go in with the hose and my buddy was Leading Fireman Tim Smith. We carefully ventured out across the metal and into the cold murky pit. Mr. Owen used halters and ropes to secure the cows heads so they were just above the crust. This was going to be a protracted job and we had to take care as obviously stale animal waste is not a healthy environment to be in! It was part brown liquid and part sludge; the smell was the worse I have experienced either before or since.

Soon after we entered the pit, a man arrived on the scene with a digger, by coincidence his name was Mr. Michael Hall the same name as our Officer in Charge. He did a good job by digging into the side of the lagoon thus releasing most of the liquid which helped us in our task. The level of the lagoon had dropped to waste level.

We used our hose which we passed under the belly of the nearest cow then attached the doubled hose to the farmers digger at the side of the pit. The cows looked at us with a big staring gaze and they gave the occasional "moo". As I bent down to pass the hose under the first cow I noticed the liquid was very cold, I think cow waste must have a degree of ammonia.

We had taken our fire tunics helmets and shirts off and left our boots trousers and leggings on. Once everything was secure the man working the machine slowly and carefully lifted the arm of the digger. The cow moved and with some care our actions were working slowly. The first cow was brought to firm ground, was led to safety and was gently hosed down with the assistance of firemen and farm workers. The second, third, and fourth cow came out the same way; we were doing well, just the last cow to deal with. With my head and shoulder against the side of the cow I carefully reached down with the hose and passed it under to Tim on the other side, my head was turned sideways and my left ear was just into the pit. Suddenly and without warning the cow moved sideways, I lost my balance and took an unexpected dip in the s***. The cold and the shock hit me but I managed to get to my feet, thankfully without swallowing anything. I got to the side and there were helping hands pulling me out. Tim had managed to grab the hose and the cow was soon safe. The farmer shouted, "Go up to the house, go upstairs and jump in the bath."

As I walked up the farmyard towards the house I shed the rest of my clothes, I was in the buff, not wishing to get too much 'muck' in the farmhouse. It was a nice hot soak and I returned downstairs to the hallway. As I was about to leave by the rear door of the farmhouse a lady entered by the front door! I did not wait to find out who it was; I quickly covered my embarrassment with my hands and made a very hasty exit. I found a pair of overalls on the pump, and kept warm with my fire tunic. On the return journey nobody sat near me or my stinking clothes, but it was a job well done. This incident was a talking point for some time in the fire service and we all had a good laugh about my unexpected dunking in the slurry lagoon.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting up with Mr. Tony Owen the farmer; he kindly invited me into the farmhouse for coffee. I chatted to him about the day the cows wandered into the lagoon. He was most complimentary about our actions that day saying, "I was most grateful to the Firemen, they were absolutely superb and they worked so hard."

* Land Rover