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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

Farm animals: it pays to be humane

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Practical experience of the benefits of improved welfare – pig production

Richard Blant¹

This presentation, of the essentially practical aspects of farm animal welfare, is based on the pig production system at the pig unit of Beechmast Ltd, at Arnold near Nottingham, which I run in conjunction with a business partner. The unit comprises a 450 sow herd primarily producing finished pigs to bacon weight. The company is also a member of Pig Link Ltd, a pig breeding and sales company with domestic and overseas sales of breeding stock.

May I begin this presentation by taking you back a couple of years when I returned to my farm from a holiday to find a leaflet fixed to my farm sign board. I quote from it as follows:

“To produce pork, ham, or bacon, pigs have to be bred and reared on today’s intensive pig farms – both these stages involve hideous cruelty. About two-thirds of this country’s 730 000 breeding pigs spend their lives permanently shut in narrow crates and stalls lying on concrete. They can never turn round, take exercise, nor mix with their own kind. Every year 18 million pigs are slaughtered for meat. Most will have endured their lives in over-crowded, semi-lit pens, where pelleted food is regularly showered over them – for them to fight for and eat off the dirty bare concrete floor of the fattening pens. Some will have been taken from their mothers unnaturally early and reared for a time in 3-tiered battery cages like chickens. Most of the hog pigs will have screamed their heads off whilst having their testicles cut out without anaesthetics – unnecessarily because they will have reached slaughter weight before sexual maturity.

¹ Paper prepared by Bernard Marshall (Honorary Research Fellow, CAS) from tape recording of Richard Blant’s presentation.

Many will have travelled unnecessarily long distances to the slaughterhouse. Some will have died from shock *en route*. Once there only a proportion will have been properly knocked out by the electric humane stunner. The rest will have been chained and hoisted onto the slaughtering rails paralysed, but conscious. None of this is an exaggeration – if anything it is an understatement. And remember that those 18 million pigs are as highly intelligent as your dog, some even more so. That is the price of the pork on your fork."

The leaflet was in fact issued by Compassion in World Farming, an organisation whose work will be familiar to most of us here. Their aims and objectives are worthy ones and their criticisms, in particular about the extent to which animals continue to be confined by stalls and tethers, are certainly justified. But I do feel concerned that virtually no recognition is given to the thousands of pig producers out there who are looking after their animals with great care and humanity. Nobody wants to know about the good ones, so let us take this opportunity today of having a look at the Beechmast unit in the heart of Sherwood Forest.

An important feature of the unit is that there are no protective gates or fences; the public tend to roam in and out pretty well at will especially on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. The unit is manned 24 hours a day and anyone who wishes to be shown around is welcome. The production system and the buildings have been designed and developed over the years with the intention of providing conditions as close to nature as is possible, in which the pigs can live and thrive without exposure to long hard winters. In more detail the production system comprises:

- (i) *The open-fronted deep-strawed yards* (Plate I) containing about 18 sows in each yard prior to farrowing. The advent of big bales in place of the 40 000 small bales used in the past has made a great difference to the efficiency of procuring and handling the straw. Cleaning out is a weekly operation and is combined with other activities like pregnancy testing. A hessian curtain is placed just below the straw bales – in the winter. These baffles are lowered to prevent draughts, and the temperature can be kept at 60°C to 65°C throughout the coldest weather with no additional heating at all. In the summer the sows prefer to come to the front to lie on the concrete or in the sun. My greatest pleasure is to see them lying there contentedly – clearly infinitely happier than they would be lying in an exposed tin hut.
- (ii) *The farrowing units*. These are small, quiet units each one containing three farrowing crates with straw bedded walls, roof and insulated floor. They are designed in an effort to cut down the stresses and noise of operations, like clipping the teeth of piglets, so as not to disturb the 40 to 60 other sows in the farrowing crates. Sows and their piglets stay in these units for 10 to 14 days.

Plate I: Open fronted deep-strawed yard

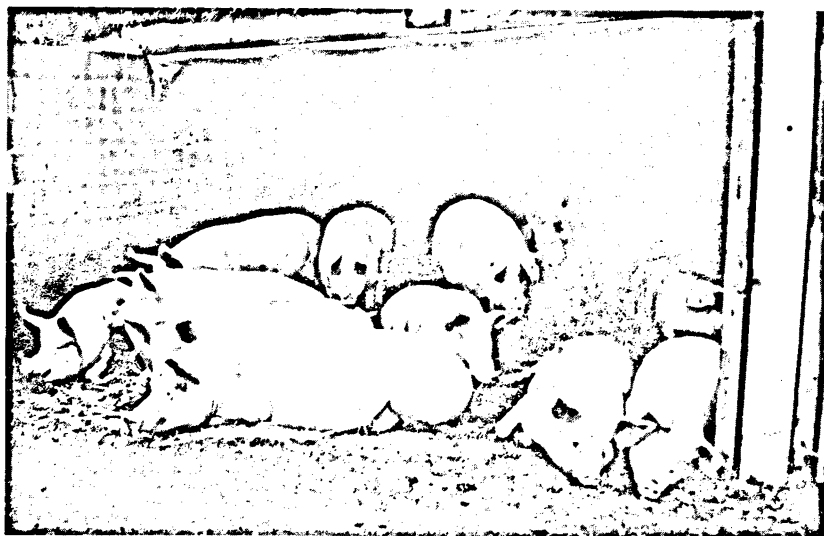
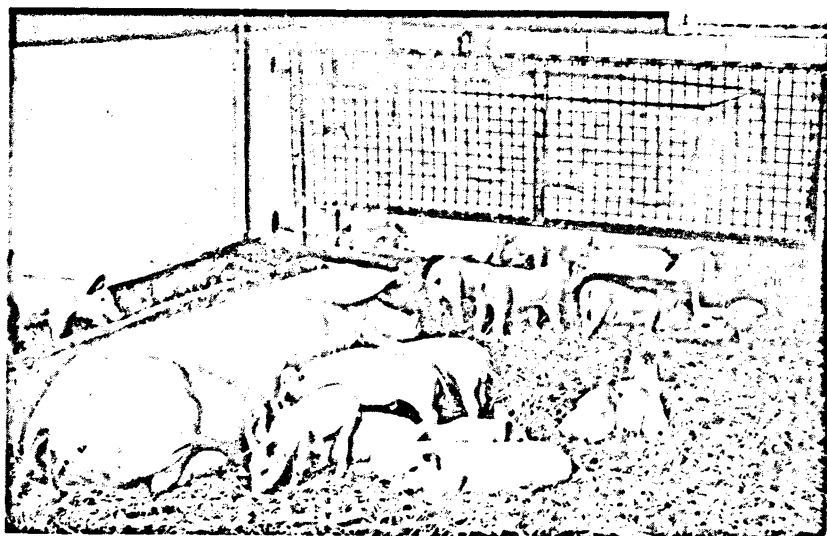


Plate II: Multiple suckling pens



- (iii) *The multiple-suckling pens* (Plate II) or follow-on pens, to which groups of three sows and litters are transferred from the farrowing pens after 10 to 14 days. These are again straw bedded with ample room for exercising and exhibiting natural behavioural patterns. The basic pen is a cheap, south facing structure, with insulated walls, floor and roof and a flap on the front which can be lowered in cold weather and retracted in summer so that sows and litters can come to the front and lie in the sunshine if they wish. Weaning takes place according to the size of the piglets, normally at about 5 to 6 weeks old. At weaning the sows are removed back to the yard system and the piglets are retained in the pens until reaching about 35 to 40 kg when they are transferred to the finishing house.
- (iv) *The fattening pens*, or finishing house, is an old fashioned Suffolk-style building, high with plenty of fresh air and sunlight where the piglets are adapted to a wet feed system. All rations are home-mixed, based on a range of natural ingredients comprising wheat, barley, wheatings, soya and fishmeal; and, with the exception of the weaning compound, no additives except copper are included in any ration. This regime contrasts favourably with the dull, lit, and overcrowded conditions, where pellets are showered over the pigs, as described in the leaflet from which I quoted at the beginning.

To move on now to the last stage of the production system – transporting the finished pigs to the slaughterhouse. This, to me, is as vitally important from the humane treatment standpoint, as all previous stages of the production system. For the home market, my practice is to send the pigs by wagon to a slaughterhouse, fortuitously only 4 miles away; the haulier is an experienced and practical man who has been doing the job for 20 years. I insist on a load not exceeding 40 pigs all on one level – if we have 45 he takes two loads. Slaughtering is normally the same day. I entirely agree with previous speakers that if pigs are kept too long even on the same day they can easily lose 1 kilo in weight – if kept overnight they will lose 2 kilos. For the export market, usually to Spain, I use a transport firm with wagons of very high standard, run by stockmen who have turned drivers, not vice versa; and I am satisfied that my livestock, which are treated with care and humanity throughout the production stages, are properly watered, fed, and indeed pampered during the long 3 to 4 day journey across France to their final destination.

To turn finally to the economics of the operation, the Beechmast unit was planned and started in 1970 with a £10 000 loan, and has been developed since then solely out of the profits. The company has never lost money, even in the down cycles, and is able to generate profits which would equate favourably with many other industries, proving that indeed with Farm Animals – It Pays to be Humane.