

An excerpt from Martin Gulbis' article 'Ancient Wisdom and Sacred Cows'

As I walked out one midsummer morning, I cursed: there she stood, eighty six years old, scraping out the pan of mash. I'd promised Mary I would look after the hens. I loved unleashing their pent-up energy from the hen house, loved gathering their fresh eggs, still glowing warm, but today I'd overslept. The hens – her hens! – were fed by seven o'clock, no later!

I had come to Plas-dwbl, a small farm below the Preseli Hills of West Pembrokeshire, run as a charitable trust by three ladies with a life-long passion for organic farming. The farm stands on land strewn liberally with ancient wisdom. The Preselis abound with menhirs and cromlechs: on this farm's own doorstep is the circle of Gors Fawr, a Stonehenge in miniature. These standing stones still defy all taming of the landscape.

I was taking time out from my teaching career, having cherished the notion of living on a farm since reading Thomas Hardy's novel, *Tess*, during my own schooldays. While working at a dairy farm, *Tess* is courted by the gentleman-scholar, Angel Clare, who has come to learn how to milk. As they walk out in the early morning to find the cows, the pasture appears like a sea of dewy grass, with dark, dry islands where the cows have lain that night. Such revelation of the wonders a farmer has access to had haunted my adolescent imagination; now I, too, wished to milk a cow.

I felt honoured to know cows so intimately. Twice each day I practised milking, my forehead pressing into the Jersey's flank, the deepening sound from the pail a running commentary of my progress. My first achievement was to extract 'enough milk for a cup of tea'; I felt so proud the day I milked her out, and Nim presented me with a homemade milking certificate!

"Time spent watching cattle is never wasted," Keith would say; a local man, and a living book of country lore, he came in daily to keep everything in working order, and to keep us in touch with village life. I watched; I ached to see flies teeming in the weeping crevices of cows' eyes; I laughed at the cheeky jackdaws prising loose hair from their winter coats.

By midsummer, the fields were ripe, the sun shone, and we made hay. A neighbour brought his old baling machine, relentlessly spawning portable rectangles, and we stacked them to air, four leaning together, in neat, dolmen-like structures. As the sun mellowed, and the moon rose, Nim brought out drinks; welcome refreshment, but a reminder that we must stay till all was done.

As I walked back that midsummer evening, I felt at one with the ancient hills around me. Plas-dwbl lived in time with rhythms charted in stone here long before, the deep rhythms that perpetuate life, and for a short while I'd walked in step with them. As I walk out each morning schoolwards now, I see Mary feeding the hens, I hear the steady stream of Nim's expert milking, and I stand beside Keith, watching the cows. I asked Katherine – nearly eighty three – for the secret of her striking good health. "Work!" she answered, simply.



Martin with daughter Emily

The article was published in a book entitled *Ancient Wisdom and Sacred Cows* – a community volume for Mynachlog-ddu, Llangolman and Llandeilo edited by Hefin Wyn and published in 2011