

Award-winning columnist and Shropshire-based producer Roger Evans reminisces about stubble burning and shares his worries about straw prices and availability.

## Drawing the short straw

I've not been to East Anglia many times, but I went years ago when arable farmers were still allowed to burn straw and stubble. The landscape was black, the sky was black, and the air was full of smoke and ash. I'd never seen anything like it and it's little wonder it was banned. The only wonder was that some farmers couldn't understand why.

Following the ban, some of that straw was chopped and ploughed in, and some of it was baled and made its way west and north to where it was needed on livestock farms. There are a lot of cereals grown just around here and, in the recent past, we have grown the odd field ourselves. But mostly we have bought four or five fields of straw 'in the swath'.

We have always bought more than we needed, to be on the safe side, and most years we have had some to sell.

Ours is probably the last valley where a lot of corn is grown before you get into the livestock farms of mid-Wales. And there are lots of these farms within an hour's tractor drive of us and most of these farms will be looking for straw.

Today they cart this straw back 'uphill' in big square bales on quite tidy trailers and lorries. Years ago it was all baled in little bales and carted home on homemade trailers of doubtful road worthiness. Going to fetch straw home was a big adventure and some of the younger drivers would get overexcited and use too much welly.

It was quite a common sight to see a Fordson Major, with a load of bales behind it, marooned on the side of the road, with steam rising into the air and a pool of oil lying on the tarmac.

Today straw is in short supply and expensive. There are lots of reasons for this and chief among them is that there is a lot of straw that stays in the east that is burnt to produce power. I've been saying for a long time that there could be a problem if produce from farming achieved greater returns if it was turned into power rather than putting it through livestock.

I've only managed to buy two fields of straw this year, instead of the usual four or five. There was a field of winter barley straw sold locally. We knew what it cost and we counted the bales. It worked out at more than £50 for each big square bale (not the biggest) and that was before you moved it. Straw is making more per tonne than the grain that grows on the end of it!

But this isn't just market forces at work and it also raises the issue of animal welfare. It's a fair chance that animals that lie on straw will be less comfortable this winter than they have been in the past and that should concern us all. One thing I have observed during the years is that if something is expensive – be it produce or livestock – then all farmers want some.

