

Shropshire-based producer and award-winning columnist Roger Evans shares his memories of winters past and his hopes for a new cubicle shed, which would make the herd a little easier to manage

## Frozen dreams

I'm not looking forward to winter. I'll tell you what made me think about that. In my previous article I mentioned the drought of 1976. I've never been good at putting dates to events. But some events are indelibly etched onto your memory. So I remember the winter of 1963, another in the early 1970s and one about six years ago.

I had a man who worked for me, years ago, who reckoned that the worst winter was 1947. A gang of men in the village worked in forestry, but they couldn't get to work. So they put them to work digging out the road by hand to an isolated hamlet that was cut off. He said the snow was so deep that they hung their jackets on the phone wires.

I said: "I bet you did." He brought a photo to show me the next day to prove it! The winter of the early 1970s I was in hospital. We had temperatures of minus 23°C around here. My son was 15 years old and my employee was 17 and one day the milk froze in the pipeline before they could finish milking.

At the hospital I put my jug of water on the outside windowsill and got it back in when there was half an inch of ice on it. I showed it to the matron and she gave the heating engineer a fearful bollocking. I sometimes regret doing that.

About six years ago we were milking three times a day. I went up the yard at 1.30pm on Boxing Day for the midday milking and the temperature was minus 18°C. I remember thinking, as I read the temperature, "we must be mad". I needed three machines to be running – the scraper tractor, the tractor with the mixer wagon attached and the loader. I thought I'd get them all going first. It took me until 3.30pm to get them all fired up, although they had all been going in the morning.

To be fair, the two hours included a fruitless visit to the village. Three people in the village own vintage tractors and I went to borrow a can of EasyStart spray. But they were all in the pub, which is where I should have been. I found out subsequently that they don't admit to using EasyStart anyway.

The reason I don't look forward to winter is our cow housing set up. Looking back over the years there have been big capital items. We put up two chicken sheds, and then we had the chance of extra ground so we expanded the cows, put in a big parlour and, because we would have to cart a lot of muck a mile or so back to the rented land, we opted for a loose-housed shed for 50 cows.

This wasn't a good idea – it was mine! We couldn't manage the cell count issue, so now we put one side of the parlour into the loose housing and the rest of the shed is handy for calving. So we rely on cubicles in old brick buildings and 60 kennels, which had had their time ages ago. It's a good job they have other buildings to lean on.

The missing piece of the jigsaw is a big cubicle shed. As milk prices improve you start thinking 'maybe'. But pundits say that we should use better income to repay borrowings built up in the downturn. If you prove you can do this once, then your bank might support you again. The trouble is, my bank manager thinks this is a good idea.

