

Shropshire-based producer and award-winning columnist Roger Evans has been zero-grazing this summer, to mitigate a grass shortage, but at least he's not had to mow the lawn for a month.

## Brownfield site

**E**ver since Christmas, one of my friends in the pub has been predicting a dry summer 'worse than '76'. Of course there is no way that he could know, but for those of us who milked cows in 1976 it was just a bit scary.

I think that we went three months without rain until the heavens finally opened on September 15 – a date that sticks in my mind even after nearly 40 years.

I had a consultant, who had around 25 clients, and we were the last to get some rain. If anyone asks me what is the most optimistic thing I have ever seen it would have to be my cows in 1976.

Every morning, after milking, I would open the gate and off they would all rush, with a spring in their step and in a cloud of dust, probably thinking there would be some grass at the end of their journey.

Turns out there wasn't and they would all be back on the yard within an hour, bawling for some silage. But just to scare you, and to test your resolve, we have had two very hot dry spells this year. And each time there's been a little part of me that has said: "Here comes the drought. Here comes another 1976."

In 1976 we used to say: "The farm is burnt off." Today we go around with a plate meter and say: "We have no grass cover." Both descriptions mean the same thing and both recent dry spells burnt the farm off and took all the grass cover. But this year we didn't start on the silage, we looked for a different solution.

We had plenty of grass two miles away on our rented land. We thought we would try zero grazing. We didn't have the proper kit, but we have a decent mower and we have a neighbour/friend who has a forage wagon.

For a week the cows went around the grazing area as usual, but we topped them up with the load of fresh grass he brought for them. After a week he had to harvest his winter barley, so we got a second-hand wagon on trial.

The perceived wisdom on zero grazing is that the less you give the grass 'a hard time' the better the feed value.

The conditioner on the mower is out of action and we have folded the knives on the wagon back so they don't touch the grass. It's doing the same job as a 'proper' zero grazing machine. It's not quite as handy but it's cheaper.

We don't have grazing platforms at the moment – we just have a platform. We are letting the cows onto just one field to get them off the yard and carting all the grass they can eat.

It's one thing to talk about a herd's dry matter needs in fresh grass, but if you have to cut and cart it all it's a lot more real.

It's not all bad news. If you have a 'brown' farm you are also likely to have a 'brown' lawn. The lawn mower is playing up so it's had a month's rest. The worst thing that can happen to a ride on lawn mower is a grandson.

