

Award-winning columnist and Shropshire-based producer Roger Evans' recent trip to Suffolk saw him prodding 'plastic' fields, pestering farmers and pondering production 'polarisation'.

Farming 'maps'

If you take a three-day break, out of season, there are bargains to be had. In February we went down to Suffolk for three nights. I'd never been down there before, which is an important thing for me because I like to go to new places. It was only just dry and bitterly cold, but it didn't really matter. You could 'farm the land' ok through the car window.

The land had two main features – one third of it was covered with plastic and another third of it was covered with pigs. Not big on arable farming, we didn't know what was under the plastic so we decided to turn off a main road and go into one of these 'plastic' fields and lift the plastic up and have a look. We turned into a gateway and nearly ran a farmer over.

He was going to interrogate us about what we were doing in his field, but he soon found that he was the one being interrogated by two other farmers who wanted to know what was under the plastic. Winter greens and cabbage, and the like, under the plastic to keep the east wind off. Not as interesting as the adjoining field, which he was preparing for yet more pigs.

He had 1,100 sows elsewhere and was preparing this field for another 1,000. He explained that there was a strip of land that overlays sand that stretched right up into Norfolk. It was ideal for outdoor pigs, you could keep pigs on the same field for two years and after two years of pigs you could grow really good wheat crops. Sows were left unsupervised, to farrow in arks, and at 20-something days the little pigs went off to be finished for bacon in straw yards on yet another farm.

When I was at school there was an order to things. Everything was polarised. In geography, there were 'blobs' on maps. There was a blob across the centre of Scotland that said 'coal and ship building'. The blob across South Wales said 'coal, steel and teachers'. Mind you, when I went to school there was a picture of a sea serpent out in the Bristol Channel that carried the caption: 'Here be monsters'.

I wonder if we still see farming 'polarised' like that? As far as I know, most large-scale pig production is in the east of the country. There are chicken sheds everywhere, but there seems to be a hell of a lot down along the Welsh Borders.

'They' reckon there are now more chickens than sheep in the old Welsh county of Radnor. And there's a hell of a lot of sheep! Whisper it quietly, or preferably whisper it not at all, but they have been able to get big EU grants for chicken sheds in Wales.

And you have been able to get big grants for cubicle sheds and parlours. So if you thought you were operating on a level playing field, you weren't. Yet the majority voted to 'leave' in Wales. I haven't worked that out either. I wonder if dairy farming will be similarly polarised.

I wonder if we will end up with 1,000 cow herds situated close to the dairies that supply the liquid market and 1,000 cow spring-calving grazing herds in the west, which supply milk for manufacturing. I've got a feeling we will.

