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**BSE stands for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, the scientific name for 'Mad Cow Disease.' Common in Britain, the acronym is rarely used in the United States. It breaks down to Bovine (of cattle), Spongiform (sponge-like) and Encephalopathy (brain disease).*

HEADLINE: What the cows were eating that you might wish you'd known about

On Monday the BSE inquiry reconvenes for phase two: scrutiny of cattle feed. Feed, it is accepted, spread the BSE agent by the inclusion of meat and bonemeal (MBM). Fashionable thinking at the onset of BSE laid blame at the door of the renderers supplying MBM. It was thought that a change in rendering techniques approved by the Tories in 1979

risked contamination as a cost-cutting measure. In fact the new methods protected workers from solvent exposure, and subsequent trials comparing the old and new processes show that the BSE agent can jump both. Moreover, it now seems that for the BSE epidemic to have been in full flower by 1988, it must have started earlier, under Labour.

To recap from last week, the dairy industry was in free-fall between 1968 and 1980. Farm holdings fell from 124,800 to 60,000 (and are now about half that). Yet during that period the dairy herd only decreased by about a fifth, while output per cow was rising. According to an EU group led by Michel Petit of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Sciences Agronomiques Appliquées, between 1973 and 1983 the milk yield per cow increased by 23.2 per cent.

During this period the technological focus shifted from breeding to protein-

enriched feeds. Industry produced them, the Ministry of Agriculture's advisory service, Adas, recommended them.

While everyone agreed they worked, only a minority, it appears, understood how. Sir Kenneth Blaxter, chairman of the working party on the nutrient requirements of ruminants, began his 1980 report by explaining that it was a completely new document from the 1965 edition, that "the new information was so great that a complete rewriting was necessary to accommodate it."

In the 1970s local feed mills were closing just as fast as dairy farms. By the time the Tories came to power in 1979, if a farmer had bought concentrate, there was a 50 per cent chance it had come from one of seven big companies: BOCM Silcock (owned by Unilever); Bibby; Rank Hovis McDougall; Nitrovit; Spiller's; Pauls and Dalgety.

According to John Malcolm, retired economic

adviser at the National Farmers' Union, farmers began petitioning industry and the government for exact labelling of dairy rations in the late 1970s. "Both declined," he explained in 1996. "The compounders advanced two excuses. They said that farmers don't need to know the constituents, just the metabolisable energy content. Eventually they wrote the ME levels on the bags. They said there was a large number of constituents, so it would be extremely long, and that if they gave the proportions, it would give the game away to the competitors. They also argued that they varied the content from day to day. Fish meal, soya bean meal or cardboard, what have you, and that they couldn't get bags printed in advance."

Certainly the letters "ME" for metabolisable energy make prettier reading than some of the additives then being discussed in the specialist press. Entries from the 1981 Nutrition Abstracts and Reviews list slaughter waste, whole

cattle blood, dried cattle manure, urea, poultry excreta, swine fecal solids and feather meals. A 1981 edition of the trade journal the Feed Compounder lends insight into the economics. Topping the price index of purchase prices for ingredients was wheat, and the cheapest was meat and bonemeal, whose inclusion rose from one to four per cent.

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