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Headline: *Putting bonemeal in cattle feed seemed like a good idea at the time...*

Centuries of intensive inbreeding have done nothing to change the design of a cow's stomach. This is a complex mechanism, starting with the rumen (hence ruminant). Here food, ideally grass, is not so much digested as fermented, allowing it to be absorbed by the intricate digestive system that follows.

The study of cattle feed is as old as that of breeding. The challenge in Georgian England was to provide green stuff during winter. Jethro Tull's seed planting drill led to the planting of crops specifically for winter feeds. By 1782 the subject preoccupied the Society of Arts, which offered a prize for a

method of extracting seed oil for the enrichment of cattle cake.

There is much argument about when bonemeal was first included in cattle rations. Expert witnesses at the BSE inquiry have suggested the practice goes back "centuries". It seems logical that the vagaries of famine played apart. In fat years ground bone might have gone into fertiliser. but in lean ones, into food for cattle and humans. The Georgian years were marked by famine, and in the 1750s allegations that bread-making flour was adulterated with bonemeal prompted this riposte from Emmanuel Collins: "Fe, Fa, Fum/ I smell the Breath of An English Man/ Be he alive or be he dead/ I'll grind his Bones to make my Bread."

Similar suspicions arose again during the agricultural depression of the 1880s. The Co-op supermarket was founded by the Rochdale Pioneers as an alliance of farmers, food manufacturers and shopkeepers to

equalise prices and prevent adulteration of food.

After the second world war Britain, blessed with lush pasture and leading the way with artificial insemination, lagged behind the US, the Antipodes and Europe in the development of high-protein dairy feeds. As our competitors noted, no matter how many cows you have, to "ruminant" connotes slowness. So their dairy technologists had been looking at ways to create proteinaceous cattle feeds that bypassed the rumen, thus improving milk output.

In 1957, by contrast, as Britain signed the Treaty of Rome, British agricultural emphasis turned to intensification of the pig and poultry industries. However, by 1973, the Common Agricultural Policy was inaugurated and overnight the National Farmers' Union lost its price-fixing powers. It was obvious that the great milk drive had resulted in overproduction, and milk

lakes and mountains of powdered milk became a symbol of the new Europe. Between 1968 and 1975 the number of UK dairy holdings fell from 124,800 to 80,100.

However, as holdings collapsed to little more than 60,000 by 1980, the dairy cattle population dropped only slightly. The cost-efficient were poised to inherit the industry.

In January 1981 a magazine called the Feed Compounder launched with a stern editorial warning: "The welfare of the dairy industry as a whole is more important than the well-being of individual uneconomic producers . . . With a large proportion of its annual tonnage destined for use as dairy feeds, compounders cannot sit by and view the situation with equanimity."

Farmers saw it as a challenge not to produce less milk, but to find a way to push up output before the introduction of quotas in 1984. They turned to improved feeds containing "undegraded protein".

This was in many cases meat and bonemeal, whose inclusion in cattle rations between 1975 and 1985 rose on average from one to four per cent.

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