



WITH GUY SMITH

Smith's SOAPBOX

Burgeoning bureaucracy?

“ My mum passed away in July, so the worrying news is that I'm now

an orphan. She was 95 and increasingly infirm so it was a bitter-sweet moment. We were sad to see her go, but at the same time, felt lucky to have had her for so long.

The heart-filled eulogies at her funeral were cause for reflection. It reminded us she came from a very different post-war world to today's times. The fact that in 1942 at the age of 11 she lost her father in a Luftwaffe bombing

raid is a reminder that the 'good old days' weren't as good as we sometimes think.

Mum was happy with the label 'farmer's wife' and wrote that on her passport as her occupation. As a child I played with a set of Britain's farm models which included some farmyard characters; the 'farmers wife' was a long-haired woman dressed in overalls carrying a heavy bucket across a farmyard – she could have been modelled on mum.

In contrast, the 'farmer' dressed in a tweed jacket and carrying a gun looked far more prestigious but somewhat idle. Indeed, that wasn't unlike dad who wore a tweed jacket, flat cap and collar and tie to work every day.

Like most women on family farms, to pigeon-hole mum as

an add-on to my father doesn't begin to write her story or appreciate her contribution. When I made notes for the eulogy, you couldn't but feel a bit breathless at the roles she had both on and away from the farm. From establishing a village Girl Guide pack to working on various hospital boards; from captaining Clacton Hockey Club for decades to cycling thousands of miles to raise money for Macmillan nurses and much more besides – it was humbling.

One of mum's roles was running the farm office. It made me reflect on how red tape and paperwork have changed during the past 50 years. We often assume it's become far more burdensome, thus bleeding time and resources away from food production, but I'm unsure that stands up to much proper analysis.

For starters, until the 1980s, there was no benefit from the array of electronics and computers that populate farm offices today. Mum's desk calculator was mechanical with a large cranking handle on the side which when pulled, printed out the calculation onto a roll of paper, while wages were determined by hand on a system called Kalamazoo.

Printing copies of forms was done on the Gestetner machine. Having prepared the master copy on a manual typewriter, the Gestetner reeled out copies with all the heavy labour of a large Victorian butter churn. In short, working in a 1960s farm office was probably the equivalent of a session in a gym.

Then there was the reams of paperwork to apply for endless schemes. By way of one example, every year an application for the wheat deficiency payment scheme

was put into the post. The MAFF form required a record of the sown acreage, the harvested yield and the amount of crop sold, all of which needed verifiable evidence. Applications for these subsidies for other crops and livestock had to go through the same tiresome rigmarole.

On top of this there were strict quotas for crops such as potatoes to adhere to, with more form filling. Then there were grants to apply for – drainage, hedge removals, grants for concreting the yard – the list was endless.

To police this morass of bureaucracy the ministry had an army of farm inspectors who could arrive at any time to check records and verify data used to apply for those all-important farm subsidies. So when we moan today about SFI applications or yearly assurance inspections, we should remember there was a time when the burden of red tape was undoubtedly worse and it was 'farmers' wives' who bore the yoke.

On reflection, it's probably the case that the reason there's more moaning about having to keep farm records isn't because of an extra workload, but because men have got involved. ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely St. Osyth Marsh – officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of. @essexpeasant

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