



Countrywise

by MARY BORROWS

PIG KILLING DAY

Every winter, when I was a child, our Fenland village echoed to the squealing of pigs. Almost every day, whilst there was still an R in the month, the pig killer was about his business somewhere in the district.

"The meeat 'll niver keep if you kill your owd pig in a month wi' out an R in it", the men used to say.

And the women declared that the "baacon would waaste in the pot" if the moon was on the wane when the animal was slaughtered.

It was important in those days to observe the rules and respect the superstitions, for the humble pig represented the difference between poverty and wealth, between hunger and a full belly.

The pig killer was an important man in the community. His calling, though a somewhat cruel occupation in the days before the general use of the humane-killer, was a very necessary one, for almost every household 'fed a pig for the house'. Indeed, many farm workers accepted a pig as part payment of their wages.

The pig was the prized possession of the countryman in those days and played so important a part in the economy of the village that almost every household subscribed a few pence each week to the Pig Club as an insurance against disease or disaster overtaking the animal.

Fat bacon was not only the staple diet of the country family, it was their very life-line!

The hams, chines and choicer bits of meat were cured and hung from ceiling hooks to be kept for high days and feastings, whilst the great sides of salted bacon were wrapped in newspapers and hung on the kitchen walls.

"Them's better than any pictures," the old men used to say.

Some of the larger families and the farming folk who kept resident servants often killed three or four fat pigs a year. I remember my grandmother used to "get out of the way" four forty-stone pigs every winter and such was the size and appetite of her household that every bit, however fat or 'riesty', was devoured before the end of the year.

We killed our pig, like most villagers, just before Christmas, so that we had plenty of good things to eat over the festive season.

Pig killing was a very busy time for everybody. Father had to be up extra early to fill the wash-house copper and light the fire so that there was plenty of boiling water.

As soon as the pig killer arrived he was taken to the sty and amid much squealing and scuffling the animal was caught, roped and secured to a handy post or tree for the sticking. This was a moment to be avoided by the more sensitive child, for in many cases the pig had become the family pet over the year.

As soon as the animal was killed the men hauled the body on to the pig cratch, a sort of slatted work-

table on four legs with barrow type handles at each end.

Whilst the pig was still warm, it was scalded and the bristles removed from the skin with a hand-scrapers. Then the carcass was hauled up on to the tripod, known as 'firm poles', and disembowelled.

For the rest of the day the pig hung up with its belly propped wide open with the 'belly stick', drying out. Meantime we children would be helping Mam to clean the 'pig's puddings'. We scraped the 'chittlings' with the back of a wooden spoon and learned to turn the smaller intestines with a knitting needle, washing them well and leaving them to steep in salt water ready for using as sausage skins the next day.

In the evening the pig killer made his second call of the day to 'cut out' and joint the carcass. Finally came the salting of the bacon in the salting tubs. I can still recall shivering in the outside shed as I held the lantern whilst Dad and the pig killer rubbed salt and saltpetre into the joints and sides of meat to preserve them throughout the year.

The following day was a busy one for mother and an exciting one for we children. Our first job was to distribute the plates of 'fry' among our neighbours and friends. Mam would prepare plates of pieces of liver, kidney sweetbreads and lean pork and cover them carefully with pieces of the 'apron', then we would take them out, saying *"Mam saays doo'ant wesh the plaate"*.

Not that any country woman worth her salt would have done such a thing. She would be sufficiently well versed in country lore to know better than to risk 'bad luck' by washing a pig cheer plate.

After delivering the fries we ran back home eager to watch proceedings in the kitchen. If we were lucky we were allowed to turn the handle of the sausage machine. Then there were the haslets to be made and the offals to be boiled to make the collared rinds.

"Everything but the squeal" went into that pot, our Mam used to say.

Raising the pork pies was a special skill and only Mam knew the secrets of the recipe for the hot water crust that would stand up to the baking, keeping its shape whilst the pie was cooked.

Sausage rolls and 'minchpies' were made in large quantities. We put the ground up 'pluck' into our mincepies and, lungs or not, they were very good!

The most sickly job of the day was rendering down the pancheons of fat into pure white lard. This was stored in the prepared bladder, known as the 'tommy-hodge', and hung from the kitchen ceiling.

The golden 'scraps' of grisly fat remaining after the boiling of the lard, were eaten cold with hunks of home-made bread and provided teatime delicacies for days.

At the end of the day we all sat down to a high-tea of spare rib and apple sauce and that meal made pig killing worth while for me and still 'caps' all my memories.