**THE STORY OF OUR LATEST DRAMA/MIRACLE AT TAPELEY PARK**

**BY HECTOR CHRISTIE**

On March 27th at lunchtime a new baby Highland calf was born at Tapeley Park…

My name is Hector and I have been farming a smallish herd of Highland cattle for the last 28 years. Back then I was married to a wonderful Scottish lass and mother of my two children, Bess and Archibald. I’d made ‘friends’ with a number of farmers on Mull who I felt I could trust and placed an order for 3 in-calf heifers.

The heifers came out of the lorry at 30mph and made a bee-line straight for me. This was a pattern that was repeated (as this happened every time they set eyes on me) for the next ten years – even the Westleigh graveyard ‘got it’.

On 27/3/18 a spanking clean lorry from Coombe Martin arrived at Tapeley at 7am where, broken –hearted, we loaded up ‘Arthur’ (and a grumpy old Highland who was deteriorating). I bottle fed Arthur 8 times a day for 6 or so months due to his Mum not having milk and the bond remained rock solid for the next 12 years . . . Whenever there was a party at Tapeley (and we’ve had a few) Arthur would break out of whatever field he was in (with a large set of horns and the world truly is your oyster . . . )and join in.

Didgeridoo Festivals seemed to be his favourite where he’d hover in the Tearoom courtyard and enter the barn when some worse for wear type opened up the double doors. Visits to the Permaculture (much to the exasperation of poor Jenny), the Great Oak – where we have had endless ‘Spiritual’ gatherings, and Arthur’s favourite . . . ‘weddings’ were not infrequent. One such example was 3 or 4 years ago now at mid-afternoon I looked out of my bedroom window to check how the wedding was going and was horrified to see 20 + Highlands surrounding the marquee. The panic button was pressed flat to the floor when I watched as Arthur sunk one horn followed by another into the tent during the Best man’s speech. My prayers were not answered as I watched Arthur, followed by ‘Nash’ (another ‘pet’ – beige in colour) and the ‘angry’ one disappear into the marquee. There was a 10 second pause before the screaming wedding guests came running out. I managed eventually to calm the bride’s father down by saying that at least he had a ‘different’ story which would be passed down to the Grandchildren . . . “crikey – how many families could boast they had a herd of Highlands gate crash their big day . . ?”.

In the light of the above – and more, I probably held on to Arthur for 18 months too many (this, the wettest winter on record, exacerbated this). I followed the ‘non-threatening’(often animals go ballistic when they’re made to go into huge lorries with other animals they don’t know) horse box to Coombe Martin abattoir which thankfully has opened up again where I was blown away by the impeccable cleanliness. There was no smell of ‘death’ and both beasts calmly walked down the ramp (just as they’d walked in at Tapeley). A couple of years ago I took 5 Highlands to Hatherleigh Market. It took me 30 or so minutes to get the animals out due to the smell of death (understandably) everywhere (plus no-one offered to get in with me to help – they just stood around and grumbled at me as I got battered and severely bruised). Having said this Hatherleigh is definitely one of the better ones BUT Coombe Martin is truly unique and if we don’t use this amazing facility they’ll close again.

I think most of us know now that the less stress an animal is in at the time of slaughter, combined with sourcing purely grass fed meat, the better the quality.

**A REAL LIFE MIRACLE**

No sooner than I got home (utterly devastated) I was told a new calf had just been born. I’ve always believed strongly in Re-incarnation (written a book about it) and I worked out on getting back to Tapeley that the new calf was born around the same time Arthur was slaughtered. I sincerely believe that the ‘spirit’ of Arthur (just after leaving his body) ‘jumped’ into Mel’s body – displacing the unfortunate (or otherwise) spirit who was ‘on his/her way down’ so he could spend another life with me. That night I was talking to some of the ‘occupants’ at Tapeley and having told them what I believed and the fact that Arthur returned as a female a fellow hippy declared . . . then she should be called ‘Martha’.”

My heart sank when I went into the field and clocked the brown lump was the prodigy of ‘Mad Mel’. Mel was a kick back to the bad (scary) old days where there was always 1 or 2 young Highlands who would charge me on sight (- my ‘fair to middling’ football career had its uses after all).

Mel wisely had her calf pinned against a thick old hedge reinforced with barbed wire and a deep ditch over the back. The mere sight of me some 200 yards away the other side of the fence near the shell house, had her on the red alert.

The weather had just warmed up a little and the cattle were happy to have their first taste of fresh green grass for 5 months. I decided to watch the situation (with others) round the clock then when she wandered off into another field to ‘feed’ I planned to run across the field and grab the calf to get some much needed/vital ‘colostrum’ into it’s body. (colostrum is a cow’s first line of defence full of antibodies that give the calf protection against infection).

Mel seemed to have the kind of ‘savvy’ not seen since the Duke of Wellington outflanked Napoleon and won the Battle of Waterloo. We had at least one person watching across the field ready to jump the fence and grab the calf round the clock. There was no question Mel had the strategic high ground and with an impregnable natural fence and ditch behind her all she had to do was ‘sit tight’.

On Day 3 I was getting desperate. The weather had deteriorated to near horizontal rain and we all knew if we didn’t get her out before dark the calf would have been dead. I then got a load of hay from Morris Dart (the fresh new grass having been all but gobbled up) and put it under a huge Cyprus tree near a gate to try to lure Mel – nigh on starving by now, to have a feed.

The only other safe (ish) way into the field was via a gate by the back drive some 300 yards away. By now Mel was walking towards the hay but on getting close would lose her nerve and run back. An hour before ‘deadline’ (dark) Mel did go to the hay. I then ran around the back drive when Mel caught a glimpse of my white hat – which literally was in her eye view for barely a second, and back she went to guard duty(two other people saw and verified this).

It was now barely an hour to dusk – our last chance, when I got a delivery of square bale haylage from Dave Downs at Tawstock. I knew this was the last throw of the dice so grabbed an armful of haylage and chucked a load by the wrought iron gates leading to the Italian gardens. The sweet smell of the haylage (compared to the mankyish -in comparison, old hay) had the herd sprinting over to it. Mel, agitated and very hungry by now, looked one way (at her near dead calf) then the other at her contemporaries gorging themselves on the ‘caviar of fodder’ when thankfully she ‘cracked’ and went to join in the feeding frenzy.

I knew this was my last chance so leapt over the fence and ‘sprinted’ through the field towards the calf the other side at an incredible 4mph (the field having been turned into a soggy bog with the rain). I then grabbed the now almost totally limp calf covered in thick mud from top to toe and vowing not to look left or right powered towards the fence. Luckily, Mel didn’t clock me ‘til I was 20 or so feet from the fence (this being the first time Mel had taken her eye off her calf) and I just reached the fence before a furious Mel, eyes spinning (literally) in their sockets, and hurled the limp body to safety.

The poor calf’s head was thick with mud (it’s still ‘embedded’ now) and we quickly got colostrum into the body via a stomach tube. I spent the next few nights giving the calf small amounts of ‘organic’ milk every 2 hours (when rather than go to bed I slept with the calf to save going back and forth to the house). On the second night I spent with Martha I’d had a little too much to drink where at around 5am I was on the receiving end of a barrage of kicks. I was convinced it was my girlfriend reacting to something monumentally stupid I’d just said – but all was forgiven when I woke up with Martha licking my cheek.

Martha is now ‘bedding down’ with 2 pet sheep . . ‘Topsy1 and Topsy2’ (not my choice of name) in a shed full of straw, hay and dried food which combined with her 3 huge bottles a day, life could be worse . . .

Hector.