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# Life in the day

**L**ast time I wrote a similar piece, I was working for a large organisation, receiving a monthly pay cheque and commuting 40 miles daily from my home in Reading through heavy Thames Valley traffic. Our Bulletin editor suggested that my new S(c)illy life must be so different as to warrant another sketch. Here goes.

The strange, not to say perverse, decision to attempt to run a consultancy business from a small piece of rock in the Atlantic was not taken lightly. It was the culmination of many years' thought and planning and despite initial misgivings, the venture has been a satisfying experience.

My day usually starts soon after 6am. The first task is to be taken for a walk by a three year old golden retriever (Mellyn, Old Cornish-yellow). Our route takes us along a glorious white sand beach and there is nothing more lovely than watching the sun coming up over the Eastern Isles. Today it was clear enough to see the coast of Cornwall 28 miles away. Appetite suitably stimulated, I have an early breakfast and am at my desk soon after 7.30.

At the side of my computer screen I have a document stand and prominent is a schedule of the day's tasks prepared the previous evening. One of many things I have learned since setting up my own business is that it is essential to be organised. No-one else is there to impose a structured discipline to the day and the view from my office window across a steep wooded valley is so glorious that it would be easy to dream the day away. I usually start with a few undemanding jobs to get myself warmed up. Several jobs from yesterday need to be filed, reports packaged up ready for posting and account books kept up to date.

My first major task is to write some critical commentaries on several papers related to milk in the diet. When I was with the Milk Marketing Board (MMB), one of my briefs was to establish a nutrition information service for the dairy industry. One element of this was an on-line database in which key papers were given critical commentaries to enable readers to

assess the likely significance of the research for their industry. The work is now funded by the EU and has users in all 12 EU countries. One of today's papers concerns the effects of milk on dental caries. While potentially interesting, the experiments were poorly designed, the techniques insufficiently exploited and the interpretation weak. I wouldn't base a promotion campaign on this evidence!

It is surprising how much time it takes to really get to grips with the details of a paper and I am reminded that it is coffee time by a voice from downstairs. I work upstairs in a room of shoe box proportions and my wife Anne works downstairs (freelance editing and proof reading for various journals). Over coffee we argue about the meaning of an abstruse term in an article for *Lipid Technology* that she has been editing. As it is a glorious day, we are outside. Though we live on a main road, it is only on a bad day that the traffic flow can get up to as much as a dozen vehicles an hour.

Late morning is usually reserved for going into 'Town' (Hugh Town is a village with a population of around 1000) to visit the bank and mail the latest batch of work. It is a daunting journey because Hugh Town is at the other end of the island — all of 1.5 miles away. I have learned now to allocate 50% more time to this trip than it really should require. Scillonians are a friendly bunch and seem to have invented the expression 'laid-back'. After the standard greeting — 'All right then?' (I will leave the accent to your imagination), I hear how Fred's boat broke her moorings last night and 'isn't it a scandal what the Council are doing over at Old Town?' By now it is knocking on midday.

Back home, there is usually a crop of messages on the answer machine and I follow them up. It is also a good opportunity to fit in a few jobs such as making sure I am up to date with the status of the forthcoming issue of *Nutrition Research Reviews*.

Lunchtime arrives, it is still a lovely day and we eat outside. It would be great to relax totally over the meal but invariably the telephone intervenes. The first lunchtime call today was Jeya Henry in Oxford, excited about some promising research results. I am Associate Professor in the School of Biological and Molecular Sciences at Oxford Brookes University and teach courses during February and October. Jeya and I have been studying protein nitrogen utilisation in rats given different oils. It looks as if one particular oil is associated with significantly better nitrogen utilisation than the others. Does this result from fatty acid composition, triacylglycerol structure or a minor component...?

The second call is from a PR agency for whom I do advisory work. The newspapers have picked up a story, 'Cows' milk causes diabetes', based on an article in a medical journal. Could I comment please? Another caller is

a charming voluble Italian trying to arrange a date for a meeting in Luxembourg to advise on nutritional aspects of confectionery products.

After lunch is an immutable ritual — our afternoon walk, taken every day whether there is a force 10 storm, driving rain or thick fog. Despite the smallness of the island, it is enormously varied and we never get bored covering the same ground. The colours are magnificent and the light constantly changing. Those of you who phone now know why you always get a machine voice between the hours of 1.30 and 2.30pm.

Mid-afternoon there are usually phone calls to make. Today I also need to put the finishing touches to a lecture on *trans* fatty acids for a meeting in Marseille. A fax from Ursula at BNF with some information on labelling enables me to complete the job.

Time to clean up and finish a few odd jobs before dinner. I must design the slides for my presentation and fax them to the slide maker. The day-book also needs updating. When the ability to pay the household bills depends on bringing in money from individual clients it is essential to keep good records of the time spent on individual projects.

Ten to six already. We sip an aperitif while listening to the shipping forecast. Life here is dominated by weather and tides. They may determine when one can arrange business or social meetings and even whether you can get tomorrow's food from the shop. A common get-out in Scilly if the goods cannot be delivered is 'It's on the boat.' How are we to know different? Tonight the forecast is for a strong westerly gale with rain and our beautiful day is already looking a bit sick. Dinner in the kitchen tonight as the wind picks up and the outside tables and chairs are firmly secured.

After dinner is when I catch up on reading the many journals and papers that have accumulated, providing the indispensable information that is the foundation of a consultant's trade. The evening is also a useful time to do on-line database searches to locate those elusive papers that are lurking somewhere in the archives! Finally, a late night drink as we listen to the steadily increasing roar of the Atlantic gale.

Better make my list for tomorrow — complete and mail reports to MMB; type the *trans* fatty acids lecture; prepare for next month's teaching in Oxford. Anything I've forgotten? Oh yes — better send off *A life in the day* to BNF. It is past the deadline. There is no excuse!

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