

WHEN I was growing up in East Limerick there were no no motor cars passing by our house, no plastic bags, no Sellotape, no ballpoint pens, no birthday celebrations, no Mother's Day cards, no Tippex.

Our money, which came from selling milk to the creamery and calves to West of Ireland calf buyers, was kept under the mattress by my father. There was very little of it to spare for extravagances. Neither was there any ambition to find ways to

invest it or multiply it.

As a breed we seemed to lack any aspiration other than to make do and enjoy life. There was no ambition to take over the world and exercise real power.

Whatever fate dished up was accepted and polished up a bit. Just a bit. Any more would be real enterprise and it might interfere with living, just as a motorbike would interfere with a Bushman of the Kalahari. I never had any illusions but that this attitude was disability as

well as a virtue.

We had a tendency to work hard at what some people call inconsequential things. Our ten acres were kept drained, the *geosadans* (ragwort) pulled, the ditches breasted, and a cow never went hungry. The pikes and reeks of hay were neatly trimmed and tied down and our pigs (dead, of course) were cut up with surgical precision. Handles of implements were made and leather, whether it was for horses' tackling or our boots, was sewn and

greased. I am proud of these things. Proud enough to record aspects of that lifestyle as a kind of social document so that my children, in later years, will, at least, half know where they come from.

While doing that, I've realised that there isn't a generation gap between me and them. There's a two-century gap.

I grew up in the '30s and '40s with the trappings and technology of the 19th century in rural Ireland, they with ET of the 21st.



# BLOOD

**T**HE pan was the round one my mother used for baking — about sixteen inches across and five inches high. On the day we killed our two pigs, usually in November, it was brought out and held under their throats to catch their warm blood. It always had a fistful of salt in the bottom to keep the blood

from congealing. I was given the job of holding it. I was eight.

My career as pan holder lasted one year. I lost the privilege because my father saw the pain and horror on my face. He told me to quit. I was replaced by my younger brother who had more stomach for the job. I was obviously weak-kneed.

After the age of ten I

stayed in the kitchen, at ease with being a coward, and listened to the squeals of our pigs as they were brought to their place of execution. This was outside the pig house door on the kitchen table, brought out for the day. Once one series of squeals had died down and the first pig was dispatched by a knife thrust in the jugular there was

always the second series of squeals to come, an hour later. I found the tension of that period devastating and tried to keep myself busy so that I wouldn't be thinking of it. The men who came to help my father hold the pigs weren't at all upset at what was going on but laughed and joked all the time. The pigs had come to us as bonhams in May and, ►