

Mhairi Geddes

QUALITY SCOUT REPORT

Visit to a farm in Stirling

An early start

We were up at 6am for our McDonald's farm visit in Stirling. Normally, this would have been a bit of an ordeal for the children, Connon (10), Grant (7) and Rebecca (3), but because they were off on an adventure, they were excited!

Keeping the cattle warm

The farmer and his wife were lovely. We went into one of the sheds and he explained to us that the cattle are kept in here over the winter months - this must be great for the cattle because they are kept warm and dry. I have to say, the day we were there was miserable with rain, as is typical in Scotland! We envied the cattle.

Mmmm... molasses

The cattle looked very content, and didn't bat an eyelid at us being there. It was obvious to me that the farmer takes great pride in his animals. They are fed a mixture of hay and silage and as an extra, they get a mixture that's made up of barley and molasses twice a day. This keeps them in top condition and they loved it. Rebecca and Connon thought the mixture had a smell of toffee. Rebecca then fed some to the cattle – she was ecstatic!

A new arrival

The cattle had ample room to move about in the shed and the floor wasn't wet or dirty. They had a bed of straw to lie on and it looked clean and fresh. There were two sheds of cattle and the second one had a pen separated from the rest. This shed is where the farmer puts the cows that are in calf. We had an extra bonus because that day (at 3am) a calf had been born and the mother and calf were in the pen. This is so the calf gets a proper chance to suckle its mother without any distractions. The children were delighted because as we watched, the calf took a drink from its mother.

In the shed was a bucket of red/brown mixture and the farmer told us this was a magnesium mix that he gives the mums-in-waiting to keep them and their calves in first class condition. It contains important trace elements such as selenium.

But is it really 100% beef?

The main issue of the day was not really the welfare of the cattle, not that that isn't a major factor but with my husband, Stanley being in the farming industry, we know that farmers like these are passionate about their livestock and treat them well. It's in the farmer's own interest to look after his animals. What Stanley really wanted to know was – is it beef that's in McDonald's burger and is it only beef that's used. We discussed this with the farmer and he told us that it is the forequarter and the flank that is used from the cattle. The forequarter area is the same part of the animal that you get your brisket from for your Sunday roast, chuck that you would use for a pot of stew and plate, which I would use to make a pot of soup. The flank comes from the underside of the animal. Nothing sinister: no bones or eyelashes; just 100% beef.

Putting the farmer on the spot

Connon wanted to ask a few questions and the farmer was happy to answer them – although I think he had a problem with Cannon's accent sometimes! Connon asked how old the cattle are when they go to be slaughtered and we were told between 18 months and two years. He then asked if the farmer was happy to eat at McDonald's and the answer was 'yes' – so that was reassuring!

Any dark secrets?

Nobody fobbed us off with any of the questions that we asked. We weren't told things just to make us happy. There is no dark secret lurking in the background. This was a genuine man, proud of what he does, proud of what he achieves and happy to play a part in our food chain.

I think that was what I took away from the day. I feel I know better now where some of my food comes from and I do think that it's important. So many people don't make the link between the land, its animals and the food we eat.

Almost convinced

I am impressed; big companies such as McDonald's get a hard time. I'm not by any means saying that they're perfect but when you go behind the scenes, they are trying and that's important to remember.

We stopped off at a McDonald's restaurant on the way home. I was waiting to see if Stanley was going to choose a burger – and he did!

Job (almost) done!

But we're off to the factory where they turn the beef into burgers next – so let's see whether that completely convinces my husband...