

## The Sounds of Summer



The heavenly view that greets me every morning. What's there not to like?

There's a banger sounding loudly in the field directly opposite my lodgings. "A banger?" urbanites may well be stating in a questionable tone.

No, there's not a rusted hulk of a Cortina coughing out exhaust fumes just beyond the 'far over' ditch; I refer of course to the machine which emits a thunderous clap to ward off peckish pigeons from developing acreages of crop.

Quite what those unfamiliar with bangers would make of its startling emission intrigues me.

As someone born and bred in the countryside, having heard them in operation for most of my summers thus far, it's as regular a component of the rural soundtrack as the silage-drawing tractor.

To the uninitiated, it might have one drawing parallels with the ceremonial firing of the 'Mons Meg' cannon at Edinburgh Castle, which may or may not also send pigeons scurrying from Scotland's former seat of power, something I can neither confirm nor deny.

As I write, the fields surrounding me are sprouting all manners of produce destined for the 'green aisle' of our local supermarkets a few months from now - and the bangers are doing their job very well indeed.

With a goldfinch chirruping serenely on my rooftop and a few more on the nearby electricity wire and from agreeable branches on aged beech trees, it's difficult not to feel a sense of gratitude.

With a pleasant breeze and only wispy cloud overhead, there's precious little preventing the sun from flooding across the fields, hills and trees that surround me.

Unlike Patrick Kavanagh, there's no "stony grey soil" that shall incur my particular wrath, for this is sound, managed and rotated farmland, tended to with care and pride by those who manage it.

Who needs a lounge and the occasionally unwelcome din of fellow tourists several hundred miles away when one can sit in an Irish garden, drinking in both the sunshine and relative silence such as this?

The countryside's atmosphere, when contrasted with the absence of urbanised interruption, has been a blessing for me over the past year.

It's facilitated much of my weekly output both for this august tome and other publications of weekly and monthly persuasions.

The old romantic in me has felt quite pleased to position an old sewing table that belonged to my grandmother in front of a window facing onto my back garden, pull up a chair, brew a pot of tea and begin writing, often at dawn. In fact, I can think of no more idyllic a workspace.

With my phone turned off, internet access used sparingly, and both television and radio decommissioned, my productivity levels have soared – of course there's a whole quality/quantity issue that has to be considered. But let's not get into that now!

My theatrical pursuits have also benefited from my surrounds, particularly when it's come to learning dialogue or lyric, be it for the play and musical I've featured in these past 10 months.

I've shed skin from my bare feet, walking from one end of the house to the other with my script in hand, then leaving it down in the hope that I'll have a director exhaling in relief at rehearsal that evening. And how welcome it is to be "off script" once it's been requested – more-or-less!

Singing at full volume is something I couldn't countenance in a residential estate, for example. Whether someone would construe my singing to be pleasant or an affront upon his/her senses, such delivery would be no different than cranking the music system or TV up to its aural extremity. But I can do so here knowing I might disturb nothing more than a rabbit foraging nearby.

Just as a truck trundled up the narrow road outside my digs, another sound from summers past left me recalling the daily soaking that I and my then fellow teenagers received from the leaves of the turnips we busily 'snagged'.

The 'swoosh' and 'swish' generated by the cleavers handed to us pre-Leaving Certers as we hacked the cream and purple-tinged vegetable from its healthy green leaved mop, is a sound file permanently stored in the memory banks.

So too is the Cockey-twanged instruction we received from our 'field foreman', one Jimmy Connors, who looks as fresh faced today as he did in those summers of my youth.

"Snag 'em in the morning and bag 'em in the afternoon" was Jimmy's professional refrain in the fields surrounding Piltown, Fiddown and Carrick-on-Suir. We snagged, we bagged, we perspired, learning the value of a hard earned pound as then it was.

For four long summers (1995-98), I earned my first wage in the employ of the O'Sheas at Iverk Produce, work which proved as beneficial to my life's education as any textbook I'd ever fixed my studious glance upon.

Avoiding blisters from a parsnip stem, praying you'd not end up on a back-breaking stint with the spud crew and packing an extra pair of socks for those damp days in turnip fields were always high on the 'market gardening' agenda.

The lure of overtime and a free tin-foil wrapped sandwich also occasionally came our way when the weather was particularly good (as it was in 1996, a good year for the spud, I can inform you!).

A decade and a half later, the wheel has come full circle, and while I'm no longer working in those same fields, I am living alongside some of those I once inhabited for my pocket money. Enjoying the silence. And loving the summer.