

West Countryman's Diary



With LES DAVIES MBE

IT is really difficult to sit down at the computer when the breeze is blowing through the open window, the sun is shining and the scent of clematis drifts into the room. Like many

others, I am feeling so good with the arrival of what I am hoping is summer.

How different this is from last July. I see fields cut for hay and drying in no time at all, not quite cut and bale in a day, but very close to it. Seeing this both lifts my heart and feeds my soul with good feelings, perhaps this will be the summer we have waited so long for.

Wild flowers are around in plenty and not least in the grassland at St Hugh's Church at Charterhouse. It is so nice to see that the grass is still being allowed to come to full height before cutting and the human desire to tidy up and straighten everything is being resisted. I am not opposed to straight lines and tidy surroundings in their place, the orchard and my garden are areas in which I strive to achieve such conformity.

Here in the little patch of grassland of the church yard is a wonderful collection of common spotted orchid; vetch; plantain and pig nut to name but a few. At one time this patch of grass was surveyed by the Somerset Environmental Records Office because of its diversity and as an example of unspoilt Mendip grassland.

The door on the outbuilding was locally made with open windows to allow nesting birds freedom of access and a sign above proclaims that it was funded by English Nature (now Natural England), through a scheme called 'Living Churchyards'. As Warden I obtained that funding and helped establish the grassland management regime that I am pleased to see is still enhancing the wild plant diversity of this little bit of Mendip. Once all the seed has set, the grass will be cut in late July and everything tidied up ready for autumn and winter.

Sitting on the wall at the back of my house is a spanner from my collection of redundant rural and agricultural paraphernalia. It's from a Bamford mower and proudly proclaims itself to be 'No 5'. I remember these mowers from a time before the name J.C Bamford became synonymous with the wheeled and tracked



excavation machinery that JCB are now world famous for producing.

I'm far too young to remember the horse-drawn mowers in use, but the tractor-pulled version of the Bamford trailer mower I do remember. These mowers were certainly a 'lumpy bit of kit', with cast drive wheels and axle that housed the drive mechanism to power the reciprocating knife via a wooden con-rod. This con-rod converted the rotary drive from a crown gear and pinion housed in the axle.

The 'in and out of gear' was achieved through a short, heavy looking gear lever located on the back of the mower's drive axle, so that the machine could be trailed between jobs. Sharpening the knife entailed it being removed from the cutter bar with a long hook, (not unlike the mystery object that was baffling museum staff in the last edition of *Mendip Times*).

The knife was a series of triangular segments riveted to a flat bar. These segments were sharpened with a file, normally done on any handy gate, with the help of two very simple clamps. Once completed the whole thing was replaced into the cutter bar with its finger points and 'ledger plate', which the segments cut against, (same principle as a hedge cutter). There was an awful lot of clattering when this machine went to work, and it didn't travel at high speed, so there was time for the wildlife to get out of the way in safety. The work rate was lower, but so was the fuel consumption. Agriculture was different then, and it, like everything else, has had to move forward.

I paid a visit to the new wetlands project at Steart recently to see how work is going to provide both sea defence and wildlife conservation into the future. The project is being run by the Environment Agency and will eventually be managed by the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust, (WWT) better known for their Slimbridge site

started by Sir Peter Scott. It covers some 500 hectares and will cost around £20 million to complete; it is arguably the largest wetland project in the UK.

Rising sea levels led to a loss of 20% of salt marsh habitat in Kent between 1973-1988. Sea levels will continue to rise and the current sea defences around Steart will not remain effective – it's also unfeasible to maintain them. The Steart project will disperse wave energy and reduce erosion through a series of creek systems that have been established. Over time these systems will 'naturalise' and the whole area will become valuable salt marsh habitat. Grazing will again return to the salt marsh, with farming playing its role in keeping the vegetation under control and producing meat for our consumption.

It is hoped that the outer sea defences could be breached near the mouth of the River Parrett as early as September this year, with flooding of the area expected up to 100 times a year. There will be public access and recreational benefits, the Parrett Trail will be realigned and new access routes created. There is no such thing as 'instant countryside', so it will take time to mature. If you want to know more, tap "Steart Wetland Project" into your search engine to find the website.

Last month's picture was on the edge of Pelting Drove from Priddy – Norman Chivers' shed and the beech windbreak were the clues for me. This painting has already been sold in Peter Coates' exhibition at Wells and MendipMuseum.

This month's picture starts a different theme, it's from my collection of rural ironmongery, but what is it, and what did it do?

My new website is up and running, so please take a look at: westcountryman.co.uk where you can contact me as well.

I'm always happy to hear from you, so drop me a line at Les.Davies@westcountryman.org.uk