

West Countryman's Diary



With LES DAVIES MBE

SURELY no one can moan about the summer we have had! Not even the farming world has cause for complaint, although the continued dry weather did play havoc with grass growth. There was many a lawn (or in my case a patch of grass) that burnt up and turned brown, only the deep-rooted weeds showed any green at all on my patch.

August was named after the Roman Emperor Augustus, not because it was his birth month, but it has been said that in this month his greatest good fortune occurred. What this good fortune was, I am not aware, but it originally had only 30 days in the month, so another day was tactfully added in order that Augustus should not be outdone by that other Caesar, Julius, whose month had 31 days.

This is also the month of Saint Bartholomew's Day, August 24th: "If the 24th of August be fair and clear, then hope for a prosperous autumn this year." So I am watching the apple crop in the hope that this will indeed be a vintage year with high sugar content and lots of juice. My summer pruning is now complete, but there is still time to do your plums and damsons once the fruit has come off. With the tree still active the wound will heal quickly and there is less chance of disease getting in.

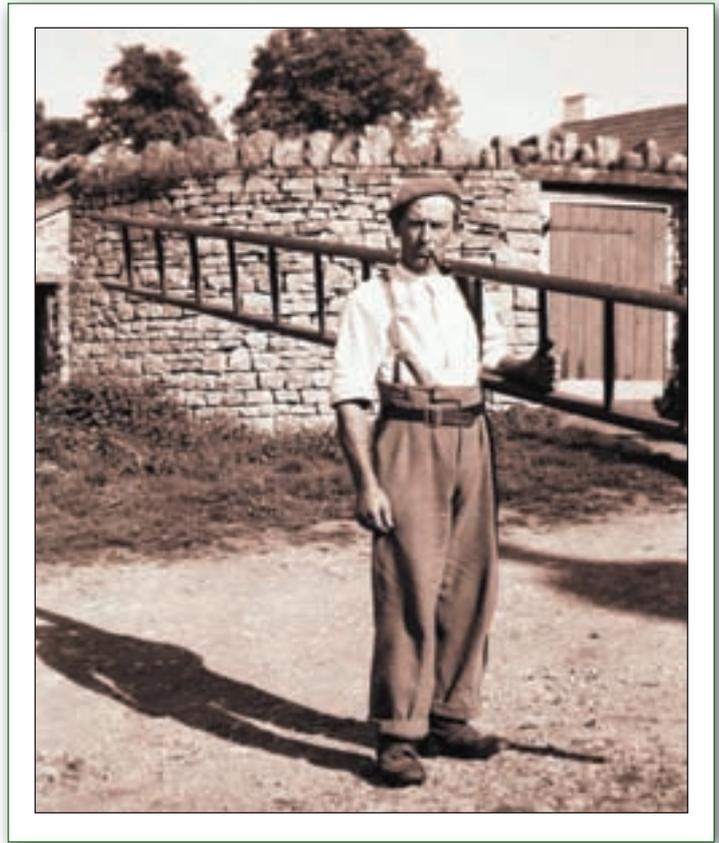
Still plenty of harvest yet to come and I hope that the weather holds to bring it all in. I still remember the reaper binder at work in the fields. Many of these were adapted for the tractor from their horse-drawn origins. All pretty 'low tech' when you compare them to today's combine harvesters with computer technology and dust-free, air-conditioned cabs.

The reaper binder's power came from a land drive wheel that transmitted drive to the working 'guts' of the machine. Knotters are still a mystery to me today and, when anyone tries to explain the intricacies of their operation, I must admit I tend to glaze over. After all there must be some things in life that remain a mystery, surely?

After the binder came the thresher. Lots of hard work for those involved in its operation, including the dogs that would lie exhausted at the end of the day, after killing so many rats that had been living within the corn ricks. Corn ricks are something you will never see today, the only reference will be in paintings or old photos, yet to build them was almost worthy of a design award in itself.

No one would have the time to build such a thing these days, yet alone to thatch it against the elements until it was ready to be taken down. It was a temporary structure that was both aesthetically pleasing and functional in its application. I still have my grandfather's shears that he used to thatch the corn ricks and hay mows during his time; now I use them at cider making time to trim the 'cheese'. They are still cutting straw, but with a different purpose.

I am getting ready to go on holiday! As if my daily existence wasn't 'holiday' enough, I still feel the urge to travel – but not too far. I'm off to Pembrokeshire again to check on the state of the potato harvest and to look at a coastline that is so like north Cornwall, but without the people. Even this short trip is enough of an absence from Mendip for me to really appreciate the 'Hill' when I get back. How do people ever manage when they have to fly away to a foreign country for a couple of weeks!



Now it's September and I can't believe that this year is going so fast. For Mendip, autumn will have begun with Priddy Fair. The evening temperature will drop and the mist will form in hollow and dip. Summer on the Hill goes all too quickly, it's a short growing season with a vast amount of activity before the onset of autumn and then winter again. Autumn however does hold a special attraction, the changing colours of the leaves and that low light that will show every hump and hollow in the land. It will be a time for walks and sitting beside the fire once more.

If you would like to go on a guided walk, then check out the Mendip Society website (www.mendipwalkingfestival.org.uk) for details of the walking festival at the end of September. There will be something for everyone, be it long distance or just a local circular. I shall be leading a walk for the Royal Geographical Society on Saturday September 28th around the former lead works at Charterhouse, so if you would like to know more get in touch with me and find out what it was like on "Wild West Mendip" in the 1800s.

This year's Mendip Ploughing Society match will be held on Wednesday September 25th at Green Ore. If you would like to come along for the day you will be most welcome. Just bring some good weather with you!

Finally thank you to all those who emailed me about the photo last month. It was a drag shoe or "drug shoe" that was used as a downhill brake on horse-drawn wagons. Mine is relatively intact and had not had excessive use; it also carries the markings that inform the user that it was for a three and a half inch tyre. I'm off to the Somerset Rural Life Museum next month to see what I can find there in the way of curiosities.

This month's photo is my grandfather Charlie Tavener on his way to thatch a corn rick at Hales Farm in North Somerset. It was taken before my time, but I note that he's not wearing his customary boots and leggings. The look says it all! Any ideas for a caption please let me know.

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