

West Countryman's Diary



With LES
DAVIES MBE

THE days have shortened and the temperature drops towards the close of the day. At the end of the month our clocks went back and winter now begins. Although it all sounds doom and gloom, I hope that there will still be some fine weather still to come. Every day of sunshine at this time of the year is one to be treasured.

In one of the spells of bright weather, I've managed to get in a day's scrub clearance on the Somerset Wildlife Trust's Black Rock Nature Reserve. This was some slope work with my new machine that gave me the ideal opportunity to "bond" with the new equipment.

You may remember me commenting about the expensive noises that came from the gear box of my other alpine tractor whilst working on a slope. This is being repaired at the moment, but I have decided to invest in something a little more modern.

In doing so I have to really settle into the new kit and gain the confidence in its ability to climb and cross slopes (for which it was designed). I can happily report that I am now confident it can do both and my backside is really starting to settle down in the tractor seat!

It was a wonderful Mendip ploughing match this year at Green Ore, where the sun shone and lots of people turned out for a sunny day's agricultural entertainment. Close on 90 ploughs were entered on to the field that day, including two horse teams who not only made a wonderful spectacle, but also proved they were capable of producing some top quality work at the rate of an acre a day.

At the other end of the scale were the multi-furrow reversible ploughs pulled by tractors that measured their horse power in the hundreds. It is still nice to smell the Tractor Vaporising Oil (TVO) and hear the quieter engine notes from the vintage section. These machines were at the cutting edge of agriculture in their day and, together with those enthusiasts who lovingly care for them, they are still capable of a day's work on the land.

Such an event takes a lot of organising and a huge amount of preparation time, all of which is given freely by those members of the Mendip Ploughing Society Committee, which I am pleased to be a member of. It never fails to amaze me the way in which it all just seems to happen with no fuss or shouting.

The real heroes of the day are the ladies in the catering tent who will make acres of sandwiches, pour gallons of tea as well as providing lunch for every judge and steward on the field. Every competitor has their lunch delivered to them at the headland and this is no mean logistical undertaking.

It gladdens my heart to see that more schools are visiting the match every year. This year I spoke to four schools, with a total of 60 children, all of whom were having a wonderful day out and learning about farming and food at the same time. Like many of you, as a young boy growing up in the countryside my view on life was shaped by those old men who told me all about it.

Well, I'm the old man now, and it's my job to tell the youngsters of today, and there is so much to tell! Most of our units of measurement were land based, but have now slipped into obscurity with the age of decimalisation. For racing fans the "furlong" was "the furrow long" (220 yards), a length of



ground that the medieval plough teams of oxen would work within the open field system.

In order to steer these docile giants a boy was employed. He did not lead the oxen, but prodded them in the ribs with a pole measuring five and a half yards in length, that's around five metres, thus giving us the old measurement of "rod, pole or perch". These measurements can still be seen today in the ridge and furrow, so clearly visible in many of the fields, that measure 11 yards across, (10 metres approx).

Having said in my last article that there can't be too many of the old Hessian sacks surviving, I saw several hanging from the side of a cattle box at the match, along with a whole host of redundant equipment for land tillage and seed sowing. It really brought back to me just how labour intensive working the land used to be.

I've had a wonderful response to the contract sack article last month and was sent a lovely email about a man called Les Pritchard, who worked for United Sack Contractors for 50 years. His daughter Liz told me that he started as an office boy when the company were West of England Sack Contractors in Queens Square Bristol. He later rose to become the company rep visiting farms and markets in the area.

She also says that they were a good firm to work for; does anyone remember Les? Another story came from a lady whose mother used to make rag rugs out of the sacks, whilst I was reminded by my mother of how my grandmother would make school bags for her and her brothers from Hessian sack during the war. I'm sure that there is still more to tell of this story, so please let me have your recollections.

I was reminded by a farmer at the ploughing match of how these sacks were used as a hooded cape to keep the rain off. I can remember using them to keep the hay from going down the back of my neck when carrying bales – sartorial elegance was everything!

Don't forget to hollow your pumpkin out for Halloween. I think this must be a bit of "Americanism" that has crept into our culture, because I don't ever remember pumpkins being used. I certainly had a go using a mangold, but I don't recall it being so popular as it is today.

Finally I've got a picture (above) for you of a piece item rarely seen in Somerset, but more often linked to Hereford and Gloucestershire. It's not complete, because the stone wheel is missing. I know what it is, but what do you think it is?

You can always contact me through my website by tapping "westcountryman.co.uk" into your search engine.

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