

West Countryman's Diary



With LES DAVIES MBE

I AM writing for the February edition and the first month of the year is half gone. The weather is nothing to get excited about, especially if you are living – or earning your living – on low ground. I don't think that I have seen quite so much water as when I paid a visit to a good friend of mine, Phil Dolding, at Parsonage Farm in West Lyng.

Phil has land that stretches down from the ridge that carries the road from Glastonbury to Taunton, out onto the moor. The whole area was more like a lake, which may be good for wildfowl but does little good for anything else.

The Royal Bath and West of England Society has launched an appeal to raise sufficient funding for the dredging of the main arterial rivers to be resumed. The aim of the society is to raise £3million to get the ball rolling. Lobbying the Government has all been to no avail at the present time and it is hoped that this money may encourage them to provide much-needed funding, when others are putting their money where their mouth is.

If you would like to know more about what's going on with this project, visit the website: www.bathandwest.com

My last year of a three-year orchard restoration project in Devon has now come to a close, but there are plenty more trees in Somerset for me to work on. I've noticed a few fieldfares in the orchards, but not as many as I would have expected to see at this time of year. The truth is it's wet, but not cold enough for them to seek the shelter, or the food stores of fruit still lying on the ground.

Apples are always a great source of interest for pheasants who like to come and pick them over. I remember the gamekeeper at Abbots Leigh asking if he could round his birds up from the orchard of the late Redvers Coate – so many of them had taken an interest in the fallen fruit and no doubt some chance of sanctuary in the orchard as well.

This year has been the first outing for my AGT Alpine tractor in the orchards. You may remember my tales of woe, when the gearbox failed (in spectacular style and on a slope) on the old Bucher tractor. This has since been repaired, but waits for the



time to be made available to have it re-fitted alongside the engine.

Meanwhile the little yellow AGT 350 tractor from Slovakia, is starting to prove its worth. It has been traversing the slopes around the orchard in Devon like a fly on a window pane. It climbs well and will run all day, powering the compressor for the air saws, on a few litres of fuel. The look is functional and uncomplicated and it has the added attraction of possessing that quintessential agricultural quality of being able to be 'fixed' with a big hammer! I am quite warming to this eastern European immigrant of mine, as my backside really starts to settle into the tractor seat.

For those of you who are a little concerned about taking a pruning saw to your own apple trees, I'm running a course at the Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury on February 8th and another at the Chew Valley Community Farm on March 8th. You will be able to get more details from those organisations concerned by contacting them direct. Pruning isn't 'rocket science' but it needs a certain amount of self confidence and skill in handling sharp-edged tools. If you remember to remove about 25% of living wood from your tree, you won't go far wrong.

My food consumption has considerably increased now the orchard work is well underway. The difference is that I am burning a lot of calories through the physical hard work being undertaken. Sandwiches (yes, plenty please) but they can become a little boring, so I will put in extras like a tin of fish, which is full of protein.

Whilst carbohydrates are important to give me the energy, I try to stay away from too much cake and biscuits, as I will feel quite sluggish. Pasta is great, especially in the food flask which can also be used for soup, and my latest indulgence, the all-day breakfast in a tin! Lots of tea and water as well, to keep up the fluids, complete the day-time rations. It is important however to match input against output, and my calorie intake will reduce when I no longer need them. I shudder to think of what my grandfather's daily intake was, but he worked physically hard ALL the time.

Whilst on the subject of food, a reminder for those of you who are members of the Mendip Society, or may like to become members, that this year we are going to have a dinner after the AGM on Friday March 28th. The venue is yet to be decided, but will be as central as possible. More details will follow, but please put this date into your diary and start sorting out your guest list for the evening. There's no need to rush out to Moss Bros and hire a dinner jacket – black tie won't be compulsory!

Finally, the photo this time is me in seasonal weather engaged in restoration pruning with the little AGT 350 tractor. One day the sun will shine again, but it wasn't having any of that on the day this photo was taken.

More soon, and take extra care in this bad weather. I'm always happy to hear from you. Just tap westcountryman.co.uk into your search engine, and send me an email through the website.

You can always contact me through my website: Westcountryman.co.uk