

West Countryman's Diary



With **LES DAVIES MBE**

IS there anything else but the weather on our minds and in our everyday conversation these days? Since I wrote in last month's issue, things have gone from bad to even worse on the Levels,

with water levels constantly rising, whilst the pumps battle to maintain control. The truth is they are not winning and far more water is pouring in than can be shifted through the drainage systems currently in place.

Some pretty high level visits have taken place down on the Levels over the last couple of weeks, with promises of help, both now and into the future. We need to take a very close look at how water levels are controlled from now on. Perhaps it's time to take a radical look at the systems already in place, and putting aside the arguments of dredging for just one moment, ask the question: "Are they still fit for purpose?"

Is it time for a new system of main drains to be dug alongside those already in place? Perhaps it's also time to look at how much concrete and tarmac we are putting down and the inevitable run-off of water that creates.

I know that I am in danger of becoming one of those people who sit back and give their 'considered opinion' whilst others struggle to get on with their lives and sort the situation out. We cannot entirely blame the authorities for what has happened. Things go wrong, that is a fact of life, and no-one has the ability to predict the future in any great accuracy. What's important is the action taken once things HAVE gone wrong.

These weather conditions used to be viewed as being exceptional; now we are waking up to the reality that they could become far more frequent as climate change makes its presence felt. If we thought that 2012 was bad, it's time to think again and hope that there is going to be a massive drying out period through the summer.

I also hope that something good will come out of all this. If we are going to see more water, let's make use of it through sustainable energy generation. Perhaps the future will see that happen. Perhaps there will even be a new cut "The Prince of



First aid for a victim of the storms

Wales Drain" dedicated to the man who came down, saw what was going on, put his hand in his pocket and put his money where his mouth is.

Well, with all that said and done, things do not look good out of the window at the moment. High winds and heavy rain again today! If you do get the chance to get out for a walk it's going to be criminal to miss it. With my positive head now firmly in place let me remind you of the annual Arthritis Research UK sponsored walk over the Easter weekend.

This year the walk is moving off Mendip, but still has a Butcombe Brewery connection. Take a look at Sue Gearing's walk this month and you will see that we are moving this year's 'bimble' to the Charlton Adam area of south east Somerset. Now before you rush off and get your Cheddar map to try and locate this place, let me tell you that it's just over the border onto the Yeovil map.

It is a very different landscape and even considering the weather and ground conditions when I walked it with Sue and her husband Peter, it still has a lot to offer with stunning views, woodland and open farmland. So mark the date, Saturday April 19th in your diary for a splendid and invigorating day out over the route of around 9.5 miles.

I'm still in the orchards pruning and now moving off the levels towards the edge of Keynsham, (spelt KEYNSHAM for those of us who remember Horace Bachelor and his winning football pools formula). I recently went to prune the Long Ashton Research Station fruit tree collection at the University of Bristol's Goldney Hall. This is an amazing place tucked away high above Hotwells Road and was the home of the wealthy Quaker merchant of the same name in the 18th century.

It commanded a strategic view of the

river approach to Bristol (before the trees grew up) thus enabling this rich merchant to identify his ships and dispatch his agents to ensure quick turnaround of his vessels. Now part of the garden is home to the Long Ashton Orchard, a collection of 36 different varieties of fruit trees, mainly apple, that were developed over the 100 years plus of the station's existence.

Thanks to Bob Hughes, who was the station's greenhouse manager for many years, the collection is all in one place. For me the pleasure is immeasurable. To be invited back to carry out the pruning on these trees is a journey fulfilled. I started my working life at Long Ashton and learnt the skills of my trade there. I've now come back to repay that investment! The other good news is the local community orchard in the village of Long Ashton will be grafting these varieties on, so that they will be back in the area once more.

On my way back, I took a detour through what was once the Research Station and what is now a residential housing estate. The entrance road to the estate goes through the site where my house was when I worked there. The remainder of the roads were a mystery to me until I reached Pear Tree Road where, still growing alongside the road, are some of the pear trees I grafted all those years ago. The words from a song by the American singer/songwriter from the 1970s, Jim Croce, spring to mind: "When people and memories join, they're not the same!"

Some other things not to be forgotten in the West Countryman's Diary for March: Shrove (pancake) Tuesday March 4th.

The Vernal Equinox and spring begins on Thursday 20th.

Sunday 30th is Mother's day and, would you believe, the start of summer. The clocks go forward!

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