

West Countryman's Diary



With **LES DAVIES MBE**

AT last I have a reason to believe! The weather is changing, the evenings are getting lighter and I think spring could be on the way. I've seen the first of the spring lambs with their wobbly legs and shaking tails, the first golden celandines are cautiously showing their heads above ground, whilst the primrose (which always seems to be in flower) is wondering what

all the fuss is about.

According to my diary, spring begins with the Vernal Equinox on March 20th; from here on in the weather should be improving. I'm finding that my memory is being very kind to me and after only a few days without rain, I am forgetting those seemingly endless days of bad weather.

Instead there is hope for the future and a longing to see another English spring. Do you remember Robert Browning's poem that I included in my article this time last year? Check it out again via Google, "Thoughts from abroad" – it's well worth a second read.

Season's change, we are all changing, the countryside around us is changing and some of those things that we hold dear and have fond memories of will change as well. For me one such place is the Somerset Rural Life Museum in Glastonbury, which was due to close at the end of March for a couple of years.

Thankfully it is not closing forever, but it will be closed whilst a major re-fit takes place to improve access and educational facilities. There can be no doubt that this work is needed to ensure the museum remains 'alive', but I cannot help but feel a loss for something that has been a part of my life for such a long time.

I have been connected with the museum since the late 1970s when I was the orchards advisor in mid-Somerset for the cider company Coates Gaymers, based in Shepton Mallet. I helped set up the orchard that stands alongside the Abbey Barn and in the early 80s I grafted a small collection of local cider varieties to make the museum self-sufficient with fruit for the annual cider pressing demonstration.

It wasn't long before I was helping with the cider pressing, eventually taking it on. I did the last one in October 2013, helped by my daughter Lizzie, who also became the Wassail Queen in 2014. Through what I still believe to be destiny, she chose the piece of cake with the bean hidden inside. She had always wanted to be the Wassail Queen!

It wasn't just the apple side of the museum that interested me; it was the whole 'rural' feel of the place. The old farmhouse with its kitchen range, that spread a warm and familiar glow throughout the room; the wooden floorboards and staircase that had seen the passing of generations and felt the pounding of countless footfalls.

My children still remember the small Christmas gatherings at the museum and the smell of mulled cider on the range, as they sat staring into the embers of the fire, it made the whole place feel so magical. There were the warm early autumn days, when I would bring my old International B 450 tractor in to drive the threshing machine.

People loved to see this old kit in action, and became mesmerised by the hum of the machinery, as the thresher and



Les in action at the museum

tractor gently rocked back and forth. I always knew when I had the flat belt running at exactly the right speed – I could lean against the tractor back wheel and feel that gentle rocking motion.

The museum will hold many memories for many people; it was a place where things 'happened'. It wasn't just glass cabinets and preserved artefacts, there was a real 'lived-in' feeling about the place that I think its previous occupants would have approved of. It was the museum of rural life in Somerset, and I hope that will not change in the future.

As always with such change there will be the impact on those who work at the museum, and who over the years have come to know it and understand its importance. Their knowledge will now be lost as they move and find other jobs. I doubt they will return once the museum opens again. To all of them I would say "Thank you", thank you for all those years of enjoyment that you have given me and many other people and thank you for keeping the Somerset Rural Life Museum alive.

Don't forget its Mothers Day on Sunday March 30th. British Summer Time begins on the same day, so put your clocks forward the night before. It will be so good to have the longer daylight hours, and with them a little warmth, I hope. The garden is in desperate need of my attention, after all there has been very little opportunity to do anything over the winter, or very little inclination for that matter. Now I am feeling that need to get out there and get on with things; that only comes once the weather turns for the better and the blackbird is once again giving his vocal all at the end of the day.

My mother was talking about double summer time during the war when I was on the phone to her the other day, and how she and my eldest uncle Geoff were allowed to stay up late during the school summer holiday. She recalls being in the left-hand steep ground at 10pm at night whilst the hay was still being brought in! We think that we work long hours sometimes, but this was capturing every bit of daylight and stretching every muscle and sinew for those who worked on the land back then.

Finally, don't forget the Arthritis Research UK walk on Saturday April 19th. It's Easter weekend so we are all hoping for good weather. Around nine miles of open farmland and woodland, as written up by Sue Gearing last month's edition; come and join us if you can.

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