

## West Countryman's Diary



With **LES DAVIES MBE**

MAY has been a really busy month for me, with plenty of family birthdays and a few anniversaries of those family members no longer with me. There is also a lot going on in the countryside and a whole new generation of wildlife is seeing this world for the first time.

It's not all good news for them though; every day will be a struggle for survival and there will be casualties. No matter how cruel we think it is, the natural world has its balance and we can't change that. Where there is life there will also be death and to see that can be quite upsetting.

I can't help but think just how fast this year is going. When I was a child, school seemed to last forever and holidays were over in the blink of an eye. Well for me now, every day is a holiday and the days seem to fly by, so I am trying to make the most of them. I went to the North Somerset Agricultural Show on Bank Holiday Monday at Wraxall. I hadn't been for a couple of years, but had a great day out!

There were lots of people having a good time and the weather was kind. As always there were plenty of people to bump into and have a chat with – they call it 'networking' these days, but it's the same as it's always been, whether you are leaning on a gate, the bonnet of a Land Rover or propping up the bar in your local.

Conversation is important and putting the world to rights is a popular countryside pursuit. Most of us are far too busy these days to take the time to stop and talk, but when we do our lives are all the richer for it.

It was also nice to go and have a look at the tractor pulling – again I haven't seen it for quite a while. It's a real boys' thing with roaring engines and masses of diesel exhaust pouring out of pipes the size of a chimney stack. There is a great feeling of elation at watching these custom-made beasts drag the sledge as far as they can before stopping with one final grunt from the engine.

Like a body builder who has become grotesquely deformed, these machines are built with massive back wheels and tiny front wheels that claw uselessly in the air as the power thrust tries to wind the tractor around the back axle. I found that there are still reminders of the origins of this agricultural sport in some of the machines taking part and was delighted to see an old Fordson Super Major hook up to the sledge.

Yes it was stretched with a massive engine and had a turbo-charger that seemed to be the size of one of those Dutch pumps that was draining the Levels a while back, but the origins of British tractor pulling from the late 1970s was still showing through. I remember names like 'Avon Lady', a tractor from Winford, if I remember correctly, with two international engines joined in line, and once saw 'Funky Fergy', a gutsy little T20 with over-sized rear wheels.

This little Ferguson wouldn't stand a chance pulling today but epitomised the early days of improvisation and adaptation so strong in the agricultural world. Everything seemed to be built on to a Fordson Major back axle then, probably because there were plenty around, and they were quite robust.

Those days had all the thrills and gore of a Roman circus, with the crowd hungry for 'full pulls' and delighting in the misery of a blown turbo-charger (with its accompanying belching column of



white exhaust as the tractor came to a very sudden halt) or some other 'expensive sound' that dashed the hopes and dreams of an unfortunate competitor. It's a little less 'bloodthirsty' now and rules and regulations govern the day; no doubt politics have crept into it as well. Still, it was great fun to watch!

I've had a day with a group of student teachers on Mendip. They were great to be with and I think they enjoyed the day as well. I had been asked if I would run a training day for them after their coordinator Kit Whitely from Somerset Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) had listened to my Mendip talk. She felt that there was something in this landscape with its history and geology that would be a help for them in their future careers.

For my part I was so very pleased to be asked. It is nice to see that teaching ideas are now going back to getting children out of the classroom and into the world that surrounds them. I also watched two very good presentations from the group in St Hugh's at Charterhouse. Everyone was impressed with this wonderful building and it was a great base to explain the history and mystery of Mendip that surrounded them.

So what is so exiting about the fields that surround the old school that is Charterhouse Centre? To the casual observer they are green fields with humps and hollows, but once you have the eyes to see, they become a link to the past, and to those who have gone before us.

The recognition of wild plants and trees is now starting to come back into the educational system and with it an understanding of their past use and future possibilities. Hunter-gatherers of the Palaeolithic period would have needed to be completely in tune with their natural surroundings to survive. They would have forgotten more than we will ever know about natural remedies and things to avoid – after all, they couldn't download an 'App' onto their mobile phone to check something out, it all had to be done by trial and error.

Some of these new teachers had been able find jobs already, whilst others continued to trawl for interviews and appointments. It's not going to be easy for them to follow their chosen career, but I did feel that these were special people who could enthuse and encourage future generations to learn, appreciate and look after our world. It was once said that those who can 'do', and those who 'can't' teach. I think that that was said by someone who had no communication skills at all.

Don't forget to come and see the Environmental Youth Awards stand below the commentary box alongside the main arena at the Royal Bath and West Show this year. There is a new and exciting display with plenty to see. If you are a school or a youth group of any sort, you might like to think about entering next year. I'll be at the show all week on the stand and helping out at the Cider and Orchard tent in between.

You can always contact me through my website: [Westcountryman.co.uk](http://Westcountryman.co.uk)