

West Countryman's Diary



With LES
DAVIES MBE

THERE is so much going on at the moment! After a disastrous start to the year, we are now getting some good weather and I don't want it to end. I am managing to keep the garden up together and do some of those jobs that have been put off for so long.

Getting outside is my life, but it's so much more enjoyable when the sun shines. I have actually sat in the garden this year, which is

something I rarely get the chance to do. I am taking the time to appreciate and enjoy it.

It's certainly not a show garden – it's very practical and almost 'utilitarian' with some of my quirky decorations and containers that make good use of redundant or worn-out tools and artefacts. It's fun and that is what life should be!

I've been helping other people enjoy their surroundings and putting them back in touch with the simple pleasures of rural Somerset. I've lost count of the number of schoolchildren (and their teachers) that my colleague Helen Woodward and I have taken around the Yeo Valley farmland near Ubley Drove, through the Farmlink programme.

It has been about 'them' and the landscape and how it provides the food and health that we all want to enjoy. I never fail to be amazed at the level of hidden knowledge these children have when it comes to history, landscape and food. Our job is to encourage that understanding of something so important to our wellbeing, and so vital to our survival.

They are always excited when they arrive at the Wills Barn down Ubley Drove. They come tumbling out of the coach with an array of hats, big bags and 'welly' boots being dragged behind them. The staff are normally a little stressed at having to find us without sign-posts, and the coach driver heaves a sigh of relief at having reached us without getting stuck down some farm track.

"Attitude affects behaviour and behaviour affects attitude." I learnt this a long time ago and I have seen so many times when the contact between people has broken down because of this. Get it right, however, and things are so much better. The staff get a cup of coffee and a freshly-made biscuit from the Yeo Valley kitchen; the children run off a bit of steam on the grass and the coach driver comes to joins us as well.

All is well with the world again and the view across the valley, and beyond, gives everyone a 'feel good moment'. We have taken the time to welcome them, calm them and put them into the right frame of mind to appreciate where they are.

Life is a very busy place and we rush about from one job to the next; we should have been at a meeting 10 minutes ago. No wonder we get stressed and at times ill from such a lifestyle. Mine isn't like a real job! Taking time to relax is important and some time on the 'Hill' can help. I watch those same school children who earlier in the morning came tumbling out of the coach all excited and shouting, and who are now laid on their backs, eyes closed and listening to the sounds that surround them.

Some would say this is a waste of time and I would disagree. This is about de-stressing and opening the mind. I sometimes think that we put too much pressure on our children to achieve academically, when we should be helping them to find their own level of success and contentment in the world. For us 'grown ups' the world can be scary place as well and so it's even more



important to have some kind of sanctuary and solitude. For me it is the 'Hill' and those moments that I spend on it and share with others.

I've done a couple of walks with 'grown ups' recently. One such group was with the ladies from Wrington Vale Rotary's Inner Wheel. All local people, they've all been on Mendip before and enjoy every moment that they are out on it.

My walk with them wasn't far, probably only about a mile across the southern slopes of Mendip around Deer Leap. The views are stunning and our Somerset landscape is amongst the best that any county can offer. Beneath our feet lie centuries of history that is locked into the land, as those who went before us were.

There are two deserted farms on this site that became abandoned around the time of the plague, when those who survived found there were better sites and better land coming onto the market. Their life was tough and I don't think that we can even begin to understand how they struggled for existence on a daily basis. For me there is a connection across the void of time through such sites as these, where ordinary people lived out their lives, and raised the next generation in the hope that theirs would be a better life.

This year we commemorate the start of the First World War and we remember all those who lost their lives in that terrible conflict. Very nearly a whole generation was wiped out on the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East, in a war that was intended to end all wars. Many of those who went were Territorials, members of the Territorial Army. These were citizen soldiers who had civilian jobs and trained in their own time with locally raised regiments such as the North Somerset Yeomanry, a cavalry regiment, and the Somerset Light Infantry.

Such men were often from the land and what an adventure it must have seemed to take part in such a 'show' as this. How soon was that to change with the stalemate and horrors of trench warfare. Today's successors to those Territorials are still serving. Together with their comrades in the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and RAF, they are still defending our way of life, sometimes at the ultimate cost to themselves. They deserve our thanks as well.

I have just completed a day on Mendip with 26 students from the University of Georgia in the USA, but more of that next month. In the meantime, I leave you with a photo of the ladies from Wrington Vale Inner Wheel, who having been driven half mad by my 'ramblings' about Mendip, have all taken part in 'synchronised lying down' to form the famous Rotary wheel. Photo courtesy of Patricia Murphy from Blagdon.

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