

West Countryman's Diary



With **LES DAVIES MBE**

IT'S now the middle of January and already I'm wondering where the time is going. We've had the first 'bite' of winter, a dusting of snow over Mendip that made the Hill look impressive and inviting, without causing too much disruption or discomfort.

Perhaps that's how snow should be, just enough to say that you've had some and to be able to enjoy it, but not enough to make

life difficult. As always my expectations of life are somewhat simplistic.

This time last year the Somerset Levels were flooded, but so far this year we can give thanks that that situation has not re-occurred. I was down there a couple of days ago, the river was still running very high at Burrowbridge and water was lying on the lower ground. This as I have said is a long way from the suffering that was experienced through last year's flooding.

I'm told that a kind summer has allowed all the initial emergency work to be carried out and that the Environment Agency have been working closely with the local people, making good use of their knowledgeable local managers. There is now a 20-year plan in place to ensure that issues that may have contributed to the problems of last year will not occur again.

I have to say with some pride, that the Royal Bath and West of England Society were amongst the vanguard in raising the levels of awareness and money to help with flood relief. Through the able leadership of Edwin White, the society has taken a very active role in ensuring the future protection of this area.

It has also raised a considerable amount of money, showing that they truly know how to put their money where their mouth is! This is just the sort of thing that is at the heart of the society, building a strong rural economy linked to the importance of the landscape and conservation is the way forward.

February has always been a wet month, be that rain or snow. If Mendip is to get snow it's normally around this time of the year, but with the small consolation that it's not likely to stay around for long. Several years back, I trawled through the Charterhouse school log to find some entries from the school's first headmistress, Sarah Manning, who bravely took on the role in 1881.

She was a single woman who found Mendip (and its people) somewhat harsh. The hard realities of living high on the isolated Mendip Plateau, where she was totally dependent on outside help for food, supplies and transport, obviously shattered her hopes and expectations of rural education in this part of Somerset. Her entry into the school log for February 1888 shows the despair:

"No healthy woman would ever desire to be a nun if she spent one winter alone here, let alone seven. But the markets are crowded."

Such despair can only be imagined in winters where she records: *"I returned after my holiday (Jan 10, 1887) to commence school this morning, having been forced to ride in an open car (railway carriage) on Saturday from Bristol – no other conveyance."*

She would then have had to make her way to the school house from Blagdon or possibly Burrington. She continues a little later



in the same entry to talk about her supply of house coal: *"It was covered with more than a foot of snow."* In a later entry she tells how the snow was waist deep, and that she couldn't get to her coal heap. She gives a neighbour a large knob of coal for digging out three buckets full for her. This incidentally was in February, 1887.

I don't mind the cold, but wet and cold can really upset me. The livestock are no different to us and it's the damp that causes problems. I paid a visit to a friend of mine recently, who amongst many other things, raises beef shorthorn cattle. His cattle shed has proved to be essential, especially with the wet and cold conditions. Yes, they are hardy beasts, but they do so much better under shelter. Like us, if you can take the rain off their backs, they are a lot better for it.

When I cast my mind back half a century things were so much different. Cattle in sheds were kept on deep litter, with 'bedding down' being a daily task. At the end of the season all that deep litter had to be cleared out. No such thing as a skid steer loader then and doorways were invariably narrow. This meant it all had to be done by hand, using a four-pronged dung fork and a hay knife.

No need to go down the gym after some of this. It was heavy work and just a 'tad' tedious as well. I remember working in relays; the 'calves' house' consisted of wooden pens in a long building with doors. Everything had to be forked out of the pen into the alleyway; from there it went down and out of the door; then on its final leg of the journey it was carried to the shed door at the top of a flight of stone steps and cast onto the dung heap in the yard below.

Each forkful had to make this journey and as you can well imagine it was somewhat repetitive. I preferred not to cut it out in blocks with the hay knife, but to remove it in layers. As always a 'free thinker' from an early age!

I know that I have put on a couple of extra pounds (and have been told as such) over the Christmas period. Like many I made free with good food and wine and took a bit of a rest. In truth we all need a little extra on us at this time of the year, especially if you're getting outside. As you can see I am already justifying my situation, but this 'extra' will soon burn off.

Even in the most miserable of weather conditions there will be a period when you can get out for a walk, so put on those new neoprene lined wellies that you had for Christmas and go for walk. Don't forget the hat and gloves that also arrived courtesy of Santa, because they make life so much more comfortable.

Have a good February, spring is on its way, and I've a photo of spring crocus at Langford Court to bring a little colour into a dark February.

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