

## West Countryman's Diary



With **LES DAVIES MBE**

SO far the winter has been kind. Yes, there has been some cold weather, but it's not as bad as it could have been. Cold and dry is fine with me so long as we don't get deep frost night after night.

With each day that passes the daylight hours lengthen and spring comes closer. We are not there yet, but we are moving in the right direction. I would like it to

hold on for a little longer so that I can get my pruning work done.

My work with the farm and countryside education charity Farm Link takes me right out of my comfort zone at times and into the urban environment of Bristol. How that has changed from my childhood memories of East Street in Bedminster, where Len Tiley had his greengrocer's shop.

This shop was kept supplied from his small market garden in Tickenham, close to what was the garage down the road from the Star Inn, and by lorry loads of greens and potatoes from Hales Farm. Traffic in that area now is virtually non-stop, apart from the morning that is, when it comes to a complete stop. If I pay a visit to a school for 9am in the morning, I have to leave home at 7am. I can get to Bedminster Down within 45 minutes to an hour, but from there on it can take close onto an hour to get into Easton or St Werburgh's.

My heart goes out to all those people who make this journey every day and then have to come back again at night. I know that I can drive in these conditions, because half the battle is knowing where you're going and where you should be positioned in this mass of traffic lanes. The sight of my muddy Landy must alert many to the fact that "the country has come to town".

The urban cyclist without doubt has the upper hand when it comes to manoeuvrability, but some do chance their arm a little in slow moving traffic. For me there is always a sigh of relief when I leave the city limits and head back over Dundry to Mendip.

I am always amazed by the amount of rural knowledge many of these urban children have and just how perceptive they are. As an introduction to the country code, I ask them to close their eyes and think of what the word countryside means to them. I get some interesting answers and at times some answers that I had not thought about.

Such an answer came from a pupil at a school in Knowle: "People and houses," she told me. It's not an answer I would normally get and it showed that she had an awareness that people did live in the countryside.

Rural communities are the lifeblood of the countryside and not everyone who lives in a village drives a tractor. It's people who have created this landscape we all hold so dear now, people who worked it and lived within it but may not necessarily have thought that it was enjoyable. Life was about survival and life was hard.

Whilst I know many who would 'hearken' back to that simple way of life, I for one would not. Today's villagers are just as likely to work away, or be retired. Many more people work from home in this age of the information super-



highway 'wot' is the worldwide web. They have truly found the holy grail of employment and an escape from the prison cell on wheels that our cars have become.

Add to that the search for a car parking space that can bring out pent-up aggression and hunter instincts in the most mild-mannered of people.

Today's village communities are a world apart from those in the past. The view that you have to have three generations in the churchyard are fading, but can from time to time bubble back to the surface in cases where those who move into a village would wish to bring their urban values with them. On the whole though my experience has shown a diverse community is a happy and prosperous one.

I have had dealings with many such communities on and around Mendip, both through my time as the Mendip Warden and my work now. Where the village shop has been threatened the community have taken it on. You may not want to do your weekly shopping there, but when you've run out of milk, (or even worse, a bottle of wine) they will be close by, it will cost a little more but the convenience far outweighs that. I know one village that has gone even further and taken over the local pub to prevent its closure.

Godney celebrated their first Wassail on Monday, February 9th, with the aim of raising money for their village hall. They asked if I would be the Master of Ceremonies, which I gladly agreed to. The Sheppy Inn hosted the evening and there can't be that many people in the village who didn't come along, children included. It was a real community event that brought everyone together to laugh, talk and enjoy just being together. Cam Valley Morris men lent their bells and sticks to the occasion, and local band The Idle Roses filled the air with music and there was even a piper there. Great work by the organisers!

I've noticed the new lambs in the fields enjoying the spells of sunshine whenever they can. Tucked away in a sheltered spot, or just hiding behind mum, they turn their faces to the sun with what appears to be a contented smile. It won't be long now until the rest of the wildlife will be following on, as another generation of creatures take their place in the countryside.

This month photo is of a community group from the village of Compton Dundon near Somerton. They asked me if I would do an orchard day for them as they had all been bitten by the 'apple' bug and wanted to know more about looking after their trees. It was yet another example of a village getting involved with the landscape that surrounds them. Check out their website for more pictures on [www.comptondundon.com](http://www.comptondundon.com)

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