

100 Days and On

Published 18th June 2001

It has been announced that the Home farm is within the constituency that has the third highest incidence of FMD. A blighted area within a blighted county. It is noticeable that the usual crop of 'vote for Fred' signs have not appeared in farm hedges. Most political agents have probably not bothered to ask.

Thank heaven for the sunshine. Contractors have been and gone and the first cut of silage has been baled with the fields already turning from scalped yellow to light green. There are pockets and odd corners of buttercups, which normally would have been grazed, which provide an old fashioned feel. It is very pleasant. The wildlife is benefiting and there appears to be a good crop of young birds twittering about with hopefully more to come.

The infected area has only grown so far, with over three hundred and fifty thousand slaughtering, but there are hopes that soon the line on the map will shrink. There was a nine day gap in which no new cases were reported and then one case three days ago. Nothing within ten miles but the notion that some cases are not being reported has grown. Within the infected area an abattoir has burnt down. Nowhere for cash stock to be sent for slaughter which has resulted in more frustration and a 'demonstration.' The rules were changed on demo day to now accommodate movements outside the area. None of my neighbours have been moved to demonstrate but the changes are heartily welcomed.

Most farmers are carrying on as best they can and saying little, hoping that the virus has passed by for good. From now on infected area flocks will need a red sheep shearer. A green one is no good, unless of course the boundary moves and then a red one is not permitted. It is not clear what is required for the shearing licence, once issued, to change colour. A shearer's sheepdog is not permitted on farm whatever the colour. If the farm is under form D restriction you probably need to sharpen your own shears depending on the status of the area. The spinster with a few beasts, who is helped by a neighbour when he does his flock, is distraught. Can the vet clip them for her? Maybe, under welfare, perhaps.

The local community remains very sensitive to the farmers with postponement of all gatherings that might bring in the virus. No young farmers ball in the marquee five fields away. The hire people charged a large cancellation fee. No village garden walk which usually attracts funds for the church from strawberry eating with bloom viewing. No village shoot and fete in aid of the village hall. The son et lumiere, a millennium effort, to be prepared but not arranged until all restrictions are lifted. All footpaths remain closed. It is rare to see a human in a field.

One local farmer collapsed while spraying the underside of his tractor and trailer and there has been concern about the respiratory effects of disinfectant droplets. At about the same time milk tanker drivers were off work, believed to be for breathing distress. These incidents quickly circulate and improve in the telling but it is not clear whether the disinfectants being sprayed are formulated for use within confined spaces like a wheel arch.

Going back beyond the 100 days there was an initiative for farmers to choose free consultancy to advise on farm development. Many visits were made by agricultural consultants to plot the future. That has now been burnt away but the process is planned to begin again as part of the multi million pound support package for business recovery. As bio-security is now part of farming structure, as well as health and welfare, it will be interesting to see if veterinary practices are able to register for the scheme. The vet, as hands on project manager, with a team of interdisciplinary advisers working to secure the future of livestock farming, is possibly a fundable opportunity.

A quarter of the animals culled in Devon have been from infected premises. There are quite large differences between areas in the ratio of infected to non infected culling and considerable differences between species. In Devon, cattle on infected premises account for one third of the total whereas, in Cumbria, it is nearly nine out of ten. The national figures hide many local differences. Within the cleansing and disinfection procedures lies a warning for farmers who become contractors on their own farm - *'This work carries significant Health & Safety responsibilities and obligations'*. As one farmer put it 'you need a hard hat as well as a hard head and a thick skin in this job'.

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31st May 2001