

## **Grunting and Groaning**

When Foot & Mouth Disease came to Devon the local miller had a team of salesmen who were instantly withdrawn from farm visits. As the weeks went by farmers were 'phoning the office and chatting to the staff for considerable lengths of time. The markets were closed and it became clear that there were many frustrations and concerns that people needed to vent. The salesmen set up a series of 'Grunt & Groan' lunches in local pubs.

Grunt and Groan has proved to be one of the most successful marketing activities undertaken for many years even though no attempts at selling or promotion were made. The staff simply set up a weekly pub lunch in different villages and telephoned the farms with an invitation. Farmers came singly, with their wife, with their herdsman, with their son or with a neighbour. No less than ten individuals attended and the largest was twenty. People simply chatted, had a moan and went home feeling a little less upset. The company has now realised just how important people to people contact is for farmers who mainly work alone.

The need to grunt and groan is probably a natural part of the agricultural mentality the world over. In the original 'Magnificent Seven' there is a scene where the rooting tooting gunslinger stays behind with the Mexican peasants. 'How will you put up with their moaning' says Yul Brynner. 'They're farmers, they always complain', was the closing response.

The nature of farmers appears to be causing severe problems to the ministry. So much so that the local office has despatched a missif to stop direct contact regarding movement licenses. 'Under no circumstances', says the handout in bold type 'should personal representations be made to the offices'. Is this really the way to support farmers struggling with uncertainty? Keep away. Keep out. If you don't understand the rules go on the web or read the handout sent to you five weeks ago. The ministry should consider funding grunt and groan liaison officers. They need to visit local hostelrys and listen to the concerns. This may do more good for the farmers than all the over regulated public enquiries.

The commercial aims of the more enlightened agricultural businesses is now to put 'more fun back into the industry'. There is just a tiny opening of improvement in prices. It is better this week than last and hopefully next week will be even better. The idea of annual assessments is not the current yardstick. Day by day some small improvement is being sought.

The fine weather is helping to raise spirits. The dairy herd is still out on the grass and therefore not using so much valuable straw. Yesterday a new born calf drowned in the steam, which was unfortunate, but the fact that it was a bull calf and worth about one pound reduced the sense of loss. A heifer would be highly prized, looking forward to an optimistic future. The Home farm is selling lamb for the freezer at £55 (@£1.30 per lb) and beef at £1.50 per pound in £50 packs. Most of the sales are to friends and acquaintances. If you can interest the vicars wife, the headmistress of the primary school and prominent members of the WI you have the market cracked.

Organic meat sold at the local town market does well but the differences between home produced and organic is not apparent to the local housewives. Their aim is to stock the

freezer with a local product, well presented at a price lower than the supermarket. Local families are encouraged to tot up the food purchased and work out the percentage of British produce. Try it yourself. The figure calculated from a farmer friendly family basket is twenty percent. Obviously peanut butter and bananas are unable to be British sourced but if 'foreign' items are discounted what should be the target?

It is interesting to listen to the explanation of the meaning of 'organic' and the application of standards. Rather like the understanding of the nature of farmers there is misunderstanding about the nature of the organic label. The standard has nothing to do with the quality of the food. The standard applies to the means of production. At some time 'organically produced' as a label was considered too lengthy for packaging gurus and the sharper term organic was born. Now there is a major marketing plus with shoppers even purchasing organic dog food. The banking fraternity clearly see 'placement' of market sectors as the future for agriculture. With billions of pounds invested by each bank they are anxious to see a return. When this subject was raised the question was 'how do you obtain inorganic dog food'?

Gathering people together to grunt and groan has been an effective steam releaser. Now the people who can generate positive vibes have their opportunity to shine.

Richard can be contacted on 01363 866353 or [rgard@agmed.freeseerve.co.uk](mailto:rgard@agmed.freeseerve.co.uk) or [www.agmed.org.uk](http://www.agmed.org.uk)

Richard Gard  
22<sup>nd</sup> November 2001