

Freedom

The word is officially out. 'All outstanding surveillance results have now tested negative and Devon is to be classified as an FMD free county'. The headlines say 'Devon is now free'. The Minister has given the all clear.

There are still one or two little points of detail. Walkers have been warned by the county council that they could be fined up to five thousand pounds for using any closed footpaths. A local celebrity is celebrating the fact that there are no footpaths crossing his hundreds of acres and so he has no fears of viral transgression.

Foxhunting is to recommence just in time for the Boxing Day meets but only with ministry permits. The risk assessment of hunting has shown that 'groups of people on horseback moving from farm to farm' present a greater risk than walkers on footpaths. It is not spelt out but presumably the penalties for infringement will be greater as well. It is emphasised that the temporary permits are only concerned with regulating FMD risks and 'has no connection with the separate issue of licensing hunting'.

Full details are awaited but the hounds, horses and followers must not go onto infected premises and their main residence must be in an FMD free county. There will be 'specific conditions that apply to the horses, dogs and vehicles'. 'Hunts will be required to enforce these conditions on their followers'. No-one locally expects any difficulty with the Beagle packs or Otter hounds. They muster twenty folk on a good day and few onlookers follow the huntsman through the waist deep rivers and bogs. Most stay on the road and then retire to the pub. The larger foxhunting fraternity with their entourage and saboteurs present different control issues.

Hunting of deer with dogs is prohibited in England and Wales. The disturbance of deer appears to be a major issue for the permittees. It has presumably been shown that deer are expected to be a concern for spread of the virus. Is this because they may have the disease, clinically or subclinically, or simply that they could carry the virus externally on their coat or feet from area to area?

There are still infected premises in the county even though the last recorded case was over five months ago. Some people are still cleaning up and one traditional farm has only just had all the concrete yard removed and relaid. The cattle rotted here for several days after slaughter so the area is considered high risk and uncleanable in its well worn state. Infected premise status will be lifted when cleansing and restocking has been completed. Farmers with infected premises always had the option to press ahead with the clean up or wait twelve months before restocking. Whether anyone did decide to simply wait, when the cost of cleaning was to be met by government, is not certain but it is likely that a year will pass anyway for a few units. For some people, the idea of months and months of people fussing around their farm was a difficult option immediately after the culling.

The book by Mrs Bolt of the life of her family and the farm over seventy years has been published. The recollections end with the culling of the cattle and sheep in 2001. At the

launch in a local village hall the car park was overflowing and the room was packed. Relations came from far and wide. Mrs Bolts mother had seven sisters so there are a great deal of cousins to offer support. One elderly lady explained the family tree. When quizzed as to whether the sisters lived locally she looked somewhat shocked and said no they mostly farmed at Braunton. She said it as though she were speaking of the end of the world instead of fifteen miles north.

When you meet these traditional farming people collectively it seems impossible to consider that this way of life is being threatened by current policies. They can recount all manner of adverse conditions over the years and their spirit persists whatever comes along. The same spirit is shown by the current crop of young farmers and although the circumstances and times change the determination to make the best of it and move forward appears exactly the same.

One story in the book, about the bicycle, does highlight social change at least. Two sisters had one bicycle between them and both wanted to go to the dance ten miles away. One set off on the bike and the other ran. After a mile the bike was left in the hedge and the rider ran. The second sister mounted the bike, overtook the runner and left the bike in the hedge. They progressed like this for the ten miles. Why they didn't both ride the one bike is explained in that they didn't want to risk falling off and tearing their only party dresses. Of course the term teenager wasn't around then!

Richard can be contacted on 01363 866353 or rgard@agmed.freeseve.co.uk or www.agmed.org.uk

Richard Gard
29th November 2001