

3. Looking to the Future

Recovery in Devon

- 3.1 The outbreak of Foot and Mouth in Devon soon brought into the sharpest relief the interdependence of farming and what is generalised as tourism but includes all aspects of human enjoyment of its environment. Indeed, the interaction of both with all aspects of rural life and work were revealed more starkly and to a wider audience than ever before. While industries upstream and downstream from farming itself were predictably affected greatly, all kinds of rural and rurally-based trades found themselves without their normal customers. Jobbing builders could not go on to farms, craftsmen had no shows at which to sell, and many a retailer discovered how much his village trade was supplemented by the regular visitor whose target may have been a moorland walk but who bought meat or cheese from a favourite shop on the way home. Village teashops and guesthouses saw trade after the spring half term die right away, and farmers who had diversified (as advised) into a visitor's service of some kind were dealt a double whammy as booking cancellations were added to their inability to carry out any other kind of transaction. At the same time, the portrayal by the media of what appeared to be happening throughout the countryside was seen to affect potential and actual custom in towns and on the coast, as well as for rurally-based businesses.
- 3.2 The clear need for the earliest recovery of the socio-economic well-being of Devon focused the attention of the County Council as soon as the scale of the crisis was perceived. It attracted support for its Devon Recovery Plan from 150 partners including Government departments, their agencies and many Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). We have welcomed Lord Haskins' ready endorsement of that Plan.
- 3.3 Much of the 10 point Plan looks beyond the recovery phase. That for agriculture sets the tone:

establishing a long term vision for the future of Devon's agriculture, the capacity to deliver it and a development programme to help the industry adopt more sustainable practices, including the marketing of local produce, organic farming, co-operative ventures, forestry, horticulture, new local abattoirs, local processing and renewable energy.

- 3.4 More of the 10 points have longer term implications. They are: marketing the 'Devon brand', health and welfare support, environmental multiple benefits and new initiatives relating to access.
- 3.5. This Inquiry's terms of reference (Appendix 2) includes at ii:

The creation of a sustainable, competitive and diverse farming and food sector which in turn contributes to a thriving and sustainable rural economy and advances environmental health and animal welfare goals.

The findings of the Inquiry in those respects and which relate to the longer term future of the countryside of Devon are summarised below.

The Agricultural Perspective

- 3.6 The agricultural environment of Devon remains one in which, despite global climate variation, grass is the most significant and optimum crop and livestock conversion of it the sensible core of food production in the bulk of the county. Young stock for finishing, meat, milk and their derivatives are our most competitive products in a fair free market.
- 3.7 We feel it necessary to register in passing that even those product categories vary in the context of competition. The next World Trade Organisation (WTO) round and the extension of the European Union (EU) eastward will probably increase that variation and thus the need for even more careful selection by the producer of what works best for him or her. As we said at the beginning, food needs to be treated differently from other commodities in WTO terms. Temperate countries need to be able to satisfy

their home markets to the greatest possible degree, in that which they produce best, and export their surplus specialities. We say this here only because DEFRA's own figures show how great is the imbalance for the UK in so much of the relevant trade. (Exporting milk powder - lowest value dairy product - and importing yoghurt - high value - is the classic example). It is considerably less than a lifetime ago that the British Isles was providing its own domestic vegetables and fruit in season (and we have lost that component of the variety of life geared to land and time of year). DEFRA's figures also show that wheat and even bread and dough cross the Channel in both directions, as do beef, lamb and pork. These contradictory movements are in remarkably similar quantities which, if reduced to the difference between them, would save a substantial proportion of the food miles an average British meal costs. Of course there are other factors at work but working with nature is an important base for sustainable land use and food production as pre-refrigeration and prairie times proved.

- 3.8 However, the basic grass/stock formula in paragraph 3.6 implies a landscape for livestock, and thus dominated, below 300 metres OD (sea level), by medium-sized fields right for stock management and shelter functions, with variation where appropriate soil, slope and aspect encourage arable working for animal feed production. Devon banks and their summit hedges and small copses will also have a continuing role. In turn that implies that while average farm holding size may increase as landowner numbers change, perceived patterns in the countryside need not change in general terms. Thus the well-loved Devon pastoral landscape should persist and so, therefore, will the demand for maintenance of all its singular characteristics.
- 3.9 To these ends, we find that **Government (and EU) spending and support patterns in the Devon countryside should reflect the need to achieve two things: the further development and sustaining of a quality livestock produce industry; and an adequate labour force.** The latter is required to achieve more sophisticated stock management, more added value on or close to the farm and more detailed environmental quality maintenance. Principles agreed already to these ends within Common Agricultural Policy reform need to be pursued with more urgency and with the overt motive of accelerating change.
- 3.10 We find that **developing the marketing of quality Devon farm products (within the 'Devon Brand') should be pursued vigorously with the avowed intent of developing a local loyalty to a far greater degree than presently exists. Then market extension must be sought regionally and where appropriate nationally, building in all three cases upon existing successful enterprise. The most successful of these already demonstrate the virtues of co-operative finishing and trading, and this will be critical if destructive over-competition is not to damage the natural evolution of the new value-adding farming. (There is a limit to the number of similar enterprises which any locality can support).**

The Workforce

- 3.11 We find that **sustaining a comprehensive livestock industry from breeding and store production in the hills to finishing animals and producing the whole range of dairy products to the quality level a modern society requires, will in the end demand a larger labour force than presently deployed. Prices paid by the customer, reduction in the middlemen's 'cut', and support funds from Government will have to reflect that.**
- 3.12 While that workforce properly lead and managed could also maintain the well-loved detail of the farmed landscape, the increased demands generated by environmental and biodiversity improvement objectives and obligations will further increase the labour required. Contractors, who have become an integral part of the agricultural scene over the last 50 years, will doubtless have an extended role here.
- 3.13 Relating the public support referred to in 3.11 above to 3.12, a headage payment for stockmen and lengthmen is no longer necessarily a joke. Some clever agri-environment experiments and management agreements have already shown an increase of such specialists on the farm and in the contracting ranks. It is claimed that enjoyment of such work and its contribution to self-fulfilment have increased at the same time. It goes without saying that a labour force requires to be housed, but any commentary on the future of the countryside anywhere in Britain cannot avoid reference to the need for affordable housing in both bought and rented sectors. The reinstatement of rural 'council' housing on the countryside management agenda would show that government recognised a policy vacuum that needs to be filled.

- 3.14 We find that these future demands for more sophisticated labour (ironically with historic as well as new technological skills) imply new goals for training and recruitment. In turn they require new approaches to the integration of agricultural and environmental skills in further and higher education. Colleges must develop the required courses for combined operations on the farm if succeeding generations of farmers are to deliver what the paying public customer needs. Family farm succession is significant, because the delivery of sustainable farming, forestry and landscape demands stable management strategies that extend further into the future than a generation.
- 3.15 Government agencies and non-Government organisations underlined these needs and proposed to us 'new' models for the public purchase of environmental goods and services. Some of them have already been tested, the most useful one (Tir Cymen) in three districts, or 10% of Wales for some 8 or 9 years now, and while its all-Wales successor (Tir Gofal) is an endorsement of its success, some values have been lost in the extension. Similarly, management agreements under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 proved more sophisticated and flexible than the bureaucratic Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) and Countryside Stewardship systems are now. Those who live close to these schemes now pleaded, before us, for much greater flexibility in them.
- 3.16 We find that a more flexible approach to these and any new schemes which allows operational plan-making on the farm and ensures that the plan integrates food, fibre and environmental outputs, should be sought. This demands a consensus between agricultural and environmental agencies in both public and private sectors if the farmer is to get sensibly balanced advice and help which he or she can turn into practical and profitable application.
- 3.17 We find that the integration of quality food and fibre production with recognised environmental outputs should be the ambition of a new farmer-culture. That culture shift (universally assumed, as opposed to the scattered shining examples already with us) is best begun at the educational and training level where new courses (as we have said above) should be devised to achieve the integration.
- 3.18 However, the farming industry has always readily accepted advice usually linked to incentives. It has always shared experience and more recently on-the-job training. Thus a high proportion of the present generation of farmers is not necessarily immune from cultural change in its own time if the right resources are made available. **Most are just now peering for the light at the end of a tunnel and advantage should be taken of that.**
- 3.19 We are aware that headage payments, at least in terms of the Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance (HLCA), are being phased out, and replaced by area payments (HFA). In the interests of a sustainable agriculture the principle could well be extended and not confined to the hills.

Support Schemes and Public Goods

- 3.20 **We find that all livestock farming support systems should be devised so that numbers of stock are no longer the basic criterion for any relevant formula - in the lowland as well as the hills.**
- 3.21 It was suggested to us that sustainability in farming is, and should remain, underpinned by the concept of the family farm (see also 3.14) and, despite 3.8, a variation in holding size would probably ensure the persistence of certain qualities in the landscape. In both respects support and regulatory systems need to take account of the desirable end. They also need to assimilate the variation in the agricultural potential of the land in question as expressed in the grading of that land.
- 3.22 **We find that the basic payments in any tiered system of agri-environment support should be tied to long established grades of agricultural land quality on a sliding scale. Within each grade, thresholds relating to holding area should be applied to favour the smaller but viable farm.**

Access

- 3.23 The network of local roads and rights of way is critical to farmers, the services they require in both delivery and collection, to other countrymen and to the visiting public. The Foot and Mouth epidemic and its handling in respect of movement restriction on and off farms and of public recreation highlighted that in many different ways.
- 3.24 **We find that a rare opportunity now exists to enhance and refine, with public support, the network of footpaths, bridleways, cycleways, byways and unclassified roads in the interests of**

reconciling farm and livestock management and enjoyment of the countryside.

- 3.25 **The day-to-day management of access for leisure, exercise and the welfare of animals (in general and during future crises) must also be greatly improved. That demands increases in the application of money and manpower to it by all the relevant authorities. It probably also implies delegation of that management by Highway Authorities where there is other competence to hand in the interests of speedy action and deploying available manpower more effectively.**

Visiting the Countryside

- 3.26 It is clear that many businesses outside the farming industry suffered greatly as a result of the FMD crisis and its handling. Many are part of rural communities' essential structure - shops, post offices, builders and all the allied trades - and the extent of that suffering will not be clear until well into next summer. They in turn, and with some farmers, depend upon the visiting public, popularly: tourists.
- 3.27 Like agriculture, the tourism industry is made up of a vast number of operations, varying greatly in size. It depends upon representative groupings and agencies to produce anything approaching corporate action or lobbying. Yet its enormous variety is its lifeblood. Farmers have been urged to diversify and their easiest other option is some form of tourism or visitor servicing. Those well into the combined activities of farming and tourism were dealt a double whammy by the consequences of the Foot and Mouth outbreak.
- 3.28 **We find that tourist industry representatives should be included in the local and national contingency plan preparation to which we have referred in 2.2 and especially its access management arrangements. They should also be recipients of all information from Day One in communications planning.**
- 3.29 **We also find that tourist operators and accommodation providers across the spectrum should have access to timely and accurate information to help prepare their own advice for visitors in advance so that a welcome, despite a disease epidemic, can still be offered and activated.**

Financial Management

- 3.30 It is clear to us that the future health and well-being of society would be enhanced by what we have found. We acknowledge that much of what we have concluded and written under this heading only confirms that which many rural thinkers have argued for some time. Indeed, we have recorded that some good models for the public purchase of environmental benefits have also been tested. But to achieve the improvement necessary in the contribution which the countryside makes to British society through food and fibre production and the opportunities for all forms of recreation there must be a reorganisation of spending.
- 3.31 **We find that that reorganisation applies to the individual through prices paid and taxes tolerated, and to the corporate will through government at all levels from the European Union to District Councils. 'Reorganisation of spending' includes increases in the funds applied in the right places and decreases in the bureaucratic complexity involved. This complexity has been shown in the last few months to distort grossly the routes, and time taken for funds provided, to reach the point of application on the ground. The process of applying the FMD Business Support Fund by some Regional Development Agencies appears to us to have been a case in point. It seems to us that the bureaucratic regulatory processes by which EU funds, for instance, are drawn down and applied to work on the ground in the UK are much more complex and inhibitory than in other close neighbour countries. Such complexity frustrates worthy action and diminishes the available funds by absorbing them into administrative costs.**
- ### Afterword
- 3.32 The Secretary of State said before a Parliamentary Committee in mid October 2001 that it would be a miracle if FMD was finally over. The more reason therefore that the Government now swiftly plans how to deal effectively and efficiently with any future outbreak or resurgence. We believe that this report is 'the voice of Devon' after the crisis. We intend that it should not fall on deaf ears.