

Business File

Even the pub lunch is being hit by Britain's farmyard blight as people give the countryside a wide berth, finds Neil Bromage

FOOT and mouth is devastating not just farming but all rural industries and businesses dependent on agriculture. The woes of road hauliers has been much discussed but the ripples spread far wider, and there are few if any benefiting.

William Walne is the owner of The Derby Arms, a rural pub/restaurant in Thornley with Wheatley, Lancashire, an area not overly affected by the disease. "We recently had a Ramblers' society dinner for 80 and an agricultural lunch for 70 cancelled on us and we are seeing much quieter periods in the evenings as people are unsure about the safety of traveling into the countryside.

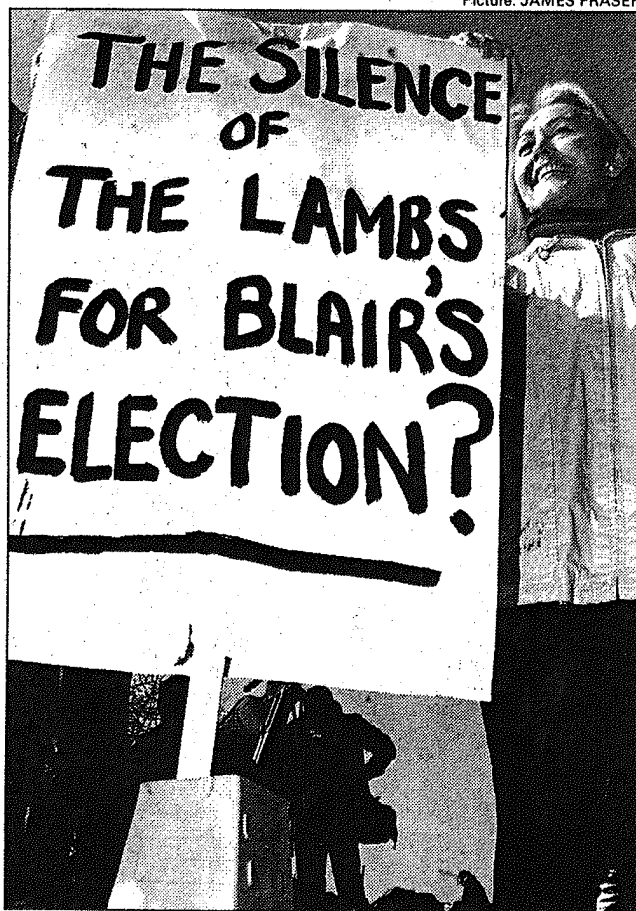
"That aspect in particular needs clarifying for people so that they know whether or not it's safe to go out."

At Knowsley Safari Park in Liverpool, David Ross the general manager says he is "being hit even more sharply than the farmers", as the park cannot replace its stock with ease should it become affected.

Knowsley is currently in an unaffected area and has voluntarily closed its doors to the paying public in an attempt to prevent further spreading of the disease and protect its livestock. But this is having a disastrous affect on the business.

"We are haemorrhaging money at present, probably to the tune of £40,000 to £50,000 a week and we simply can't afford to do that for very much longer", he says.

Lancaster-based R E Buildings, which for the last 10 years has specialised in the manufacture and erection of agricultural buildings, recently launched the Ronson Shelter, as temporary home for people in disaster areas. As foot and mouth



Picture: JAMES FRASER

Very non-ewe: the ripples of the foot and mouth crisis are being felt far from the farmyard gate and is hitting all parts of the rural economy

Died-in-the-wool attitudes

disaster has hit the UK, it has been putting up temporary shelters in fields, to aid farmers with the lambing season.

David Lucas and his daughter Angela Narey farm in Houghton near Blackburn and recently had a shelter erected. "We simply couldn't have coped with lambing without the Ronson Shelter. Most of our lambs would have almost certainly died as we couldn't transport them to warm dry conditions".

As much of racing was cancelled all the transport, betting, training, catering business suffered. The Racing Post said it lost 30pc of its circulation and 20pc of its advertising revenue.

One group of potential winners was disinfectant manufacturers and suppliers. Neil

Hufton, managing director of DiverseyLever, one of the country's largest manufacturers and suppliers of agricultural disinfectant, says, "It's true to say that we have sold a considerable amount of disinfectant over the last two months, about 20 times our normal sales levels.

"However this has been offset by a lack of sales in other agricultural business, which is rapidly grinding to a halt. Overall, the impact will be very severe and probably affects our business for the rest of the year."

Even those who play a direct part in fighting the disease turn out to be losers in the end. The plant hire companies, whose machinery lifts and dumps animals, are having other contracts cancelled as a result of knock-on effects on their customers.

The security businesses patrolling the farms are being sent away, and for those involved in policing sports events such as racing, the work has been cancelled in many areas.

The effects spread wider than expected. Emma French of Safeway says the supermarket chain has had increased costs of bringing in meat from other parts of the world by airfreight rather than ship.

The main travel agents such as Thomas Cook remain coy about the situation, there is evidence of increased numbers at the main UK airports. Stephen Moss, managing director of airport parking company BCP, said: "We are certainly having a busy time at the moment though we are unable to put that down specifically to the foot and mouth crisis in the same way we could during the recent rail crisis. Easter should help us to do that more clearly."

Jane Seddon, head of tourism for Blackpool says, "We certainly wouldn't want to be seen to be capitalising on other people's misfortune but it's fair to say that Blackpool has seen increased visitor numbers recently, particularly increased day trippers at weekends.

"People are quite rightly heeding the warnings not to travel around the countryside and are coming to Blackpool for our 14 miles of coastal walkways and improved beaches which now meet EU standards". Morecambe too reported a big increase only this week and other coastal resorts can expect to see increased trade over the coming weeks.

Perhaps it is the suppliers of kiss-me-quick hats, candyfloss and ice cream who should be gearing up for a bumper summer.