

Foot and mouth disease

A new future for the countryside?

The Foot and Mouth epidemic has devastated the economy of large areas of rural Britain and damaged the tourist industry nationally. It has also ignited a debate on the future of farming and re-focused attention on the importance of the historic and natural environments in delivering the recovery of rural communities.

Britain has been in the grip of the Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) crisis for seven months. Although the disease was partially brought under control in June, serious outbreaks persist, most recently in North Yorkshire, Mid Wales and Northumberland. Further low-level occurrence can be anticipated throughout the year. Despite this continuing uncertainty, rural communities are now beginning to plan their recovery. It is therefore an appropriate time to assess the impact of the disease on the historic environment and to consider the lessons it provides for the future.

To date, the epidemic has resulted in more than 2000 confirmed cases of Foot and Mouth and has been accompanied by the slaughter of 3.8 million animals on some 9000 farms in an attempt to eradicate the infection. The impact on the farming industry has been catastrophic, particularly as it comes during a prolonged downturn in the farming economy and hard on the heels of other public health scares. It is suggested that as many as a fifth of affected farmers may leave agriculture altogether and many more will scale down their businesses. It is particularly poignant that the disease has most severely affected those areas of the countryside that already face the greatest social deprivation and where farming had already become economically marginal.

The impacts of the disease have been felt well beyond the farming industry. The Institute of Directors calculates that its members have lost an average £125,000. The emergency closure of the countryside and the press coverage of the slaughter programme, both at home and abroad, have badly disrupted the tourism industry. The English Tourism Council and British Tourist Authority have estimated losses of some £5 billion this year alone, including £1.5 billion of receipts from abroad, and both believe that the

effects will be felt for several years to come. The ETC also believes that the crisis may result in the loss of 250,000 jobs and threaten the future of 3,000 small businesses. Nor is it simply the countryside that has suffered: it is estimated that the value of tourism to London has been depressed by some £1.3 billion.

Impact on the historic environment

The disease has already affected the historic environment in a number of ways. For example, English Heritage and other key owners of historic properties such as the National Trust, the Historic Houses Association, and the Youth Hostel Association have all experienced a major loss of visitor income that will impair the maintenance of key historic properties. Smaller private or charitable enterprises specialising in the interpretation for the public of historic sites have been particularly badly hit. Some of these – often built up through many years of personal dedication – may go to the wall in the absence of an adequate rescue package.

Given the severity of the disease and the scale of the clean-up operation, it was inevitable that some historic sites would be damaged. In the early weeks of the epidemic, there were impacts on important archaeological sites from pits dug for the burial of animal carcasses. Latterly, there has been much concern over the implications of the emergency cleaning and disinfection programme on the fragile traditional farm buildings that give the countryside so much of its character. Throughout the crisis, English Heritage has worked closely with the Ministry of Agriculture – and its successor Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) – to ensure that impacts were minimised. We have, for example, consulted with DEFRA in order to produce an advice note, *Gently does it*, on the clean up of historically sensitive sites. It will not be possible to fully analyse the immediate impacts of the disease on the historic environment until access to the countryside is restored, but it is likely to have been considerable. In Cumbria alone it is estimated that around 300 listed buildings are involved, as well as many more traditional but unlisted buildings. It is clear, however, that

Foot and Mouth Disease has had a severe and far-reaching impact on the economy of many rural areas as well as the national tourist industry. This progress report covers both the devastation and the issues it raises about the future of the countryside



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With an accelerated rate of retirement from farming expected to follow the crisis, a common recovery strategy will involve the merger of multiple farm units into larger holdings, employing fewer staff and with lower overheads. This intensification process will accelerate the trend – already pronounced in upland areas – towards the abandonment and dereliction of traditional farm buildings, as well as stimulating an increased interest in their conversion for alternative uses. Alongside concern that individual historically significant buildings could be damaged by poorly conceived conversions, there is also a danger that the large-scale conversion of farm buildings will take place without recourse to well-founded economic development strategies. Without these, the visual amenity of our finest landscapes could be compromised by the over-supply of converted buildings, such as holiday lets, not sustainable economically or environmentally.

The current problems in farming, tourism and related businesses will severely depress the economies of affected rural communities. In the small market towns that depend so heavily on these sectors, investment in the maintenance and repair of the historic building stock, that provides so much of their distinctive character, will be deferred. This, in turn, may begin to reduce tourism income. It seems unlikely, for example, that hard-hit communities will be able to invest in much-needed repairs to their parish church, or that visitors will be drawn to historic market places blighted by closed shops and redundant businesses.

If care of the historic building stock in rural settlements, such as West Burton in Bishopdale, suffers as a result of FMD, it may have knock-on effects on the tourist economy.

Care for historic assets should therefore play an important role in the recovery programme, helping to generate jobs, attracting visitors and strengthening sense of community identity

without the cooperation of hard-pressed DEFRA staff, the scale of the problem would be far worse. In Cumbria, for example, DEFRA has commissioned its own expert advice on the treatment of historic buildings in order to relieve pressure on local authority advisory staff.

Future implications

The effects of the disease are likely to exert further and more fundamental pressures on the historic environment well into the future. Among the first impacts will be under-grazing of the uplands, resulting from the loss of stock. This could be reversed comparatively quickly as hill farms are re-stocked, but the intervening period may see growth of scrub and bracken detrimental to important upland archaeological landscapes. Some key archaeological sites may never be fully returned to grazing without specific incentives for farmers. Potentially, more damaging could be the large-scale changes of land use that may take place in areas affected by the slaughter policy, with pressure for archaeologically sensitive permanent pasture to be given over to large-scale woodland planting or to cereal and root-crop production.

Recovery – the contribution of the historic environment

Government is now focusing its attention on a programme of recovery for the worst affected areas. If this is to be sustainable in the long term and if problems of similar severity are to be avoided in future, it is essential that the blueprint for recovery is founded on the lessons learned from the current crisis.

First, we must recognise that the tourist industry is now a critical engine of the rural economy, contributing considerably more income than do the primary products of farming. Second, we must understand that the principle asset for delivering the future economic well-being of rural communities is the countryside itself. It is clear, for example, that the quality of our historic and natural environment is a major factor in attracting foreign and domestic visitors to the

countryside. This does not relate simply to ‘set-piece’ attractions such as castles and stately homes – important though these are – but also to the character of our market towns and villages and to the appearance, diversity and ecological wealth of the landscape that surrounds them. In a recent study of the South-West, North-East, Cumbria and Wales, the National Trust concluded that 60–70% of employment in tourism depends directly on a high quality environment. In the South-West, for example, 78% of all holiday trips are motivated by the qualities of the conserved landscape, and this activity supports the equivalent of 54,000 jobs. Alongside this, a well-maintained rural environment confers other economic advantages by encouraging businesses to relocate and by offering the potential for using landscape character to market locally produced foods and products. Third, and most important, it must be recognised that farmers play an essential role in maintaining the high-quality landscapes that provide these economic advantages. If the current crisis in agriculture is not to put this critical asset at risk, the recovery plan must start with a new contract between farmers and society.

A plan for action

English Heritage recognises that the fabric of the countryside is a record of change and human adaptation. We understand that it will continue to change in the future, both as a result of Foot and Mouth Disease and in response to other pressures. If the best of our landscapes and our key environmental features are to be protected, however, we must manage this change carefully to ensure that short-term plans to assist recovery from the disease do not imperil these fragile and irreplaceable long-term assets. The recovery plan must also recognise that it will not be possible to deliver the range of environmental and cultural benefits society now demands from the countryside unless it assists as many farmers as possible to remain on the land. The future countryside should be *lived in* as well as *worked in*.

The medium-term key to achieving this is to seek reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, so that it no longer subsidises activities that damage the environment. Instead it should reward ‘multi-functional’ farmers for the provision of a range of environmental goods and services, as well as for food production. This principle is increasingly being accepted as the way forward within the UK and by some of our European partners. In the immediate future, however, the government

will need to provide assistance through the grant schemes it has set up through the England Rural Development Programme in the wake of the recent Rural White Paper. Upland farmers should be encouraged through agri-environment schemes to establish low-intensity grazing regimes, designed to maintain the quality of the landscape and its bio-diversity as well as to safeguard historic sites from stock erosion and scrub growth. Agri-environment schemes, the Rural Enterprise Scheme and the Redundant Building Grant Scheme should be focused on those areas worst hit by Foot and Mouth to deliver a co-ordinated programme of farm building repairs and conversions, informed by a good understanding of their historic significance, diversity and landscape value. The market towns initiative operated jointly by the Regional Development Agencies and the Countryside Agency should also focus on badly-affected areas, and fundamental to its approach should be the principle of historic environment-led regeneration, pioneered by the Heritage Economic Regeneration Schemes of English Heritage. Working with other agencies and with our local authority colleagues, English Heritage will be an active partner in these initiatives, offering expert advice and assistance, maximising the contribution to the recovery effort of our own grants and properties and ensuring that the historic environment plays a central role in the rebuilding of our rural communities. □

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Gently does it is available on the English Heritage website at www.english-heritage.org.uk

With farming already in crisis, some farms may be merged after FMD. This could threaten the future of traditional farms and important historic remains. This farm in Ribblesdale includes early, possibly monastic, walls and has a scheduled ring cairn on the holding

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