

Thoughts from a Northern Mart. March 2008

The weather

The weather in the North is at the moment behaving quite well and with a general early spring seeming to be on the cards, farmers are out spreading fertilizer and rolling and harrowing the grass producing those beautiful dark and light green stripes which to many of us symbolise a neat and tidy countryside. It is a time of year when spirits are lifted with lengthening days and more sunlight.

Blue Tongue.

The industry waits to see how warmer weather will impact on the midge population, and their ability to spread Blue Tongue. With many farmers questioning the amount of vaccine being produced and its administration, farmers outside the current protection zones will have to wait until the animals inside the zones have been vaccinated as a priority. Anxiety over the cost of the vaccine is another problem for the livestock farmer.

Post Offices .

Much of the area of the Northern marts has been learning that they are to lose their local Post Office and will be left with journeys of up to 40 miles round trip to find one. Some of these Post Offices are to be replaced with a mobile service calling for a hour once or twice a week, often at inappropriate times of the working day. With the closure of many village shops which often operate in tandem with the Post Office, and the fact that many village pubs are finding it harder and harder to trade profitably, the natural centres of communities are disappearing.

Trends and prices

The current up turn in prices has helped the lowland flock masters to make reasonable returns for their lamb over the past few weeks, coupled with higher returns for beef would at first glance appear to indicate a thriving industry. As one farmer said to me 'this is a much needed return to profit after years of poor returns. The money is needed to return balance sheets into the black after many years of red ink on the bottom line. However all is not equal in farming, as has been shown so many times in the past. The back bone of livestock farming, the upland farmers of the North of England are heading for a average loss of £2000 this financial year – which means some farmers are losing much more – and many of the difficulties which put them in that position still apply. The theory that farming should stand on its own two feet without subsidies does not sit as easily when applied to the hill farmer. It is much easier to farm without subsidies on the flatter more fertile lands, capable of growing 4 ton plus crops of wheat per acre, compared to the profit that can be made on acre of fresh air on the top of the hills which has spectacular views and is a great place for the tourists and visitors. The Hill Farming Allowance goes in 2 years time and Single Farm Payment will be cut over the next 4 years until the demise of the current scheme in 2012. What is left will probably be turned into some kind of countryside environment scheme. While on one of these high hill farms, I commented to the farmer about the fantastic view, to which he replied :

'Ay, but views don't pay bills as a rule.'

Congratulations

The man that to many symbolise the Northern marts, Harry Woodhead , has been honoured as The Yorkshire Farming Personality of the year. Harry has been the driving force behind the creation of the Thirsk Rural Business Centre which is home to Thirsk Auction Mart, complete with the Gavel Café and bar, together with Askham Bryan Agricultural College's Thirsk Centre, Green Animal Health etc. The Mart hosts the biggest primestock sale in England every Thursday, a large store market every other Tuesday, alternating with a furniture sale with in excess of 1000 lots each time. These sales are complimented by monthly fur and feather sales, plant sales, horse sales and pedigree sales . The venue is playing an increasing role is hosting Meeting events, Social gatherings and Information events, for farmers and community alike.

As Harry prepares to celebrate his 90th birthday later this year he shows no sign of slowing down from his Mart interests or his farming and other business interests in and around the North of England. We all offer him our warmest congratulations. His award is very richly deserved.

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