



### Day in the life of a rural vet

By GARETH BUTTERFIELD - Ashbourne Telegraph



Think of a rural vet and those of us old enough to remember the romantic and heart-warming trials and tribulations of book and TV character James Herriot will probably get completely the wrong end of the stick.

Rural vet James Dixon, from Westpoint Veterinary Group in Ednaston Business Centre, was keen to show me that such stereotypes paint completely the wrong picture of his daily routine so I agreed to join him for a couple of calls.

I'm pleased to say I'm a bit too young to remember the programmes and books that made James Herriot a house-hold name, but I do remember Christopher Timothy and Robert Hardy pootling along the country lanes in their vintage car during the quaint title sequence of *All Creatures Great and Small*.

James had promised to shatter this illusion, but as I made my way through Ednaston to his office the narrow lanes and pretty clusters of houses reminded me a bit of the rural idyll painted by the programme and I almost found myself humming the theme tune.

Shattering the illusion was a short-sharp shock, as it turned out. I don't think I was honestly expecting to see a charming little surgery in a front room, but James's unassuming and frankly rather dull office was hardly what I expected. It didn't even smell like a vet's office. Probably a good thing I guess.

Westpoint is an agricultural veterinary group, and farmers don't tend to have the time, equipment or especially financial resources to bring a sick Friesian for a check-up, or cart a flock of sheep over to a surgery to have their jabs — so vets like James have to go to them.

Our first call, on a bright but chilly Wednesday morning, was Flagg Hall Farm, a fairly large herd of dairy cows run by Andrew Mycock.

Mr Mycock's huge farm was a fascinating place to look round, using some of the latest technology to help his 320-strong herd of holstein frisians stay healthy.

Despite Flagg Hall farm using a fairly high-tech and surprisingly automated system, welfare of the herd is absolutely paramount. As James explained, an unhappy cow will produce less milk so all of them are treated to the most luxurious lifestyle possible - and this is where James's regular attention pays dividends.

Modern dairy cows are highly tuned milk machines and every aspect of their daily life has to be monitored to within minute tolerances, and the appliance of careful science crossing over with nature can be seen all round the farm.

The cows wear collars, which identify each one and track their productivity and movements around the farm. For example, automated gates will read information transmitted from each collar either allow them into the milking parlour or deny them access.

Cows have incredibly complex digestive systems and getting their diet right is fiercely complicated. A mix of vital ingredients is put out for each batch of cows, depending on what part of their life cycle they are in, the time of year, and whether they are in calf.

And that's what James has come to Flagg Hall Farm for today. One of his most regular jobs at this time of year—fertility testing. It's vital to the dairy industry as a cow will only produce milk if it has produced a calf.

Mr Mycock and his staff had already separated a small herd of cows ready for testing by the time we had arrived and donned our waterproofs.

Preparation for James took a bit longer — his arms were about to reach into areas mine weren't going anywhere near. If you catch my meaning.

Cow by cow they queued up and, often very reluctantly, put themselves forward for "inspection." That's a pretty high tech process too. James uses a probe that produces an ultra-sound image displayed on a set of sci-fi glasses he wears on his head.

Very quickly, and causing minimum distress to the animal, James can tell whether the cow is in calf, ready to "run with the bull" or, in the occasional case, suffering some sort of infection.

Notes are taken as the cows are fed through and each cow's unique number will then allow the farmer to refer to a record to decide how to feed it, whether to treat it, or even which shed to keep it in.

After a few hours of fertility testing at Flagg Hall Farm it was time for the next stop on James's rounds, just down the road near Monyash.

But, and here comes the death of another James Herriot fallacy, moving from farm to farm isn't just a case of jumping in the Austin Seven and pootling along the rolling hills with "Piano Parchment" playing in the background.

Biosecurity is absolutely paramount these days, and for people like James that hop from farm to farm, stopping the spread of potentially devastating diseases demands a 20 minute wash and brush-up before we can even climb in the car.

Tagg Lane is the proud home and business of Les Boam, who keeps an immaculate herd of around 80 Jersey cows. Unlike frisians, Jerseys are full of character and present their own challenges to the specialist farmer.

Mr Boams chose Jerseys to corner a different part of the market, and his higher quality milk is used for totally different applications in the dairy industry.

Ever tried Bailey's Ice Cream? That contains milk from these cows, as does the cream on Wimbledon's obligatory strawberries.

We were here for some routine blood testing — taking samples from under the tail to be sent off for analysis. If it sounds easy, it's not.

Jerseys are much more forthcoming and friendly than frisians, which means boisterous behaviour is a bigger problem than finding willing volunteers. But James and Les were in (almost) complete control though and the job was soon dealt with.

On the way back to base James pointed out other farms he visits regularly, most of which were dairy concerns, taking up the largest chunk of his business — but some of his customers have large sheep flocks.

So I've been given a whole new perspective on a typical day for a rural vet. And while James's day seems a little more repetitive and routine than his fictitious northern namesake, it's still a life I found myself quite envious of.

At least up to the point where his hand disappeared down the back end of a cow, that bit made me feel pleased to be stuck in front of a computer screen all day.

JAMES'S blog should be appearing on the News Telegraph's blog page soon, alongside blogs by Gareth Butterfield, Debbie Webster and Carolyn Bointon. Visit [www.ashbournenewstelegraph.co.uk](http://www.ashbournenewstelegraph.co.uk) to see them.

To find out more about Westpoint Veterinary Group, call 01335 361420 01335 361420 or visit [www.westpointfarmvets.co.uk/ashbourne](http://www.westpointfarmvets.co.uk/ashbourne)