

## Time to Start Walking Again

Nick Barrett, Ramblers Association



**THIS PATH IS NOW  
OPEN**

**THE FOOT AND MOUTH OUTBREAK IS  
SERIOUS AND DEMANDS SPECIAL CARE  
FROM YOU TO HELP PROTECT  
THE COUNTRYSIDE.**

If you keep or handle farm livestock please stay off all other farmland.

Please observe the following precautions

1. Stay on the path and leave gates exactly as you find them.
2. Respect "Keep Out" and "Footpath Closed" notices.
3. Don't go near sheep, cows, goats, pigs or deer.
4. Don't go into any field if you can't easily avoid these animals.
5. If you do come across them walk slowly away, retracing your steps if necessary.
6. Don't leave waste food or litter anywhere and don't feed ANY animal.
7. Keep dogs on short leads at all times and off all land where livestock is present.
8. Use disinfectant where provided.
9. Clean your boots after each walk.

This advice is issued by the Vale of Glamorgan Council based on guidance from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Departments of the Environment, and Transport and the National Assembly of Wales issued to local authorities on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2001. It has the approval of those departments.

*The light at the end of the tunnel for walkers*

Foot and mouth disease might only be caught by cloven-hoofed animals, but there have undoubtedly been many human casualties of this epidemic.

The most obvious have been livestock farmers. Hundreds have watched their livelihoods go up in smoke, while others have spent five months in a permanent state of terror that they will be next.

Perhaps more unexpected has been the devastation to rural tourism. With paths closed, the public has stayed away from the countryside, with the result that thousands of rural businesses have seen a

terrifying slump in income. Even now many owners are wondering how and if they will survive the summer.

Also affected - albeit in a very different way - have been those whose daily routines and recreations have been halted in an effort to minimise the spread of the virus. From the onset thousands of rural attractions were shut, royal parks cordoned off and sporting events cancelled, and the Ramblers' Association (RA) found itself in the unusual position of having to tell people to keep off paths.

It was a routine veterinary inspection back in February which led to the terrifying discovery of foot and mouth disease on an Essex farm. Initially facts were scarce, and official guidance for the general public was less than forthcoming. It quickly became clear that the RA had a crucial role to play in filling this gap.

As more cases of the disease were confirmed, calls and emails flooded in. The RA decided - as a precaution - to advise members and the public not to walk across farmland or other areas near livestock. Within 48 hours of the outbreak our 420 groups across Britain had voluntarily cancelled their walks programmes or rerouted walks away from farmland.

Despite the overwhelmingly responsible public response, one week into the crisis the government took the precautionary step of allowing local authorities to close paths near to livestock farms. A few days later the vast majority of England and Wales' 130,000-mile path network was shut.

The justification for many of these closures, could, at least at the beginning, be understood.

Foot-and-mouth disease's incubation period meant the disease could well be present in areas which to all

Photo courtesy of Dr Kevin Bishop

appearances were infection-free. Furthermore, the virus was known to be highly infectious, and it was thought could be easily spread on boots or clothing. The Chief Veterinary Officer himself appeared on TV imploring people to stay away from the countryside.

Yet local authorities and the government had clearly not anticipated the catastrophic effect footpath closures would have on rural businesses. Meanwhile, evidence began to emerge that recreational countryside users did not pose the risk that had first been suspected.

In early March a risk assessment found that there was no veterinary justification for the blanket closure of all paths, and the government published guidelines aimed at getting the countryside open again. Armed with this evidence, the RA joined forces with the National Farmers Union (NFU) to urge councils to reopen paths in line with government advice. Since that time the RA has continued to support genuinely-needed path closures, but has pushed for reopenings where safe.

So what can the RA take away from the last five months? Firstly, we can be pleased that the organisation's responsible attitude during the crisis drew praise from government ministers and senior farming officials. Crucially, not a single case of the disease has been attributed to path users. We have also, for the first time, worked together with the NFU - a relationship we hope to develop further in the future.

Most importantly, the crisis has shown the vital role that visitors to the countryside play in the economic health of rural communities. It has also shown the vital role of the path network within that countryside - it is abundantly clear that psychologically, the countryside feels closed when paths are shut.

We shall, of course, be making this point to government and local authorities in the future, in an attempt to secure more resources for the underfunded path network. But for now, let's concentrate on the fact that, after a long and difficult

five months, the countryside is finally opening up for business. It's time to lace up our boots and start walking again.

*Nick Barrett is the Chief Executive of the Rambler's Association. For more information about the RA visit their website at: [www.ramblers.org.uk](http://www.ramblers.org.uk)*