**So, where is the Highland?**

This is my 11th weekly blog, something we started in week 2 of lock down?

Are we still in lock down? Arguably yes, but we are gradually beginning to see things ease – more quickly in some parts of the country than in others. So, we will continue this weekly contact blog for a week or two yet – unless you tell me that you are now fed up getting it!

The other day someone asked me whether Covid 19 had badly affected the work of the Society. And the reality is that, for the most part, life has continued for us just as it has continued for those of you in the farming fraternity. You have still had to deal with lambing, calving, spring sowing and all the attendant related tasks - and for the Clydesdale Breeders amongst you, foaling has come along in nature’s way, just as it comes along every other year.

In the Society office, in much the same way, work has continued unabated – with emails and correspondence coming in and requiring to be dealt with - and so much of the day to day work has continued as before. If anything, the throughput of incoming postal mail has been a little lighter than usual and interestingly, junk mail is, at present, almost non-existent. Snail mail is taking noticeably longer to arrive, which I guess is the same when it comes to me sending letters to you! My copy of the Scottish Farmer, which habitually used to arrive punctually every Friday morning rarely now arrives here before the following Monday and sometimes the Tuesday – something which I know is concerning the SF Editor, judging by a news release he sent out last week. It is still a good read when it arrives!

And of course, trips to the Bank are now something of an additional, time consuming adventure. In Crieff our bank branch (and I know that we are lucky still to have a branch locally) is open from 10am – 2pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday – with outside queuing in place and only 2 folks in the branch at any one time. So, my normal 30 second foray into the bank to deposit the many cheques we still receive in the office can turn into a test of queuing patience – and patience is something which, I confess, I don’t possess in any great abundance!

But soon we will be experiencing the first real gap in our schedule – with nowhere to go in the third week in June this year.

For so many of you the Highland is your week of …. well how shall we describe it? It’s a sort of holiday but it’s not a holiday of relaxation - because for those of you who are showing there’s much hard work to be done. It’s not a rest in the normal sense that one expects to have a rest whilst on a holiday - because the days and nights can be even longer than the long days you work to survive back on the farm!

But I know that for many of you Highland Show week is the main week of the year where and when you get off the farm or away with your horses. It’s a week where you meet up face to face with friends, colleagues, and compatriots, some of whom you won’t see until the same time next year.

It’s a time of busyness, socialising – and so much more – and it’s that one week of the year which you look forward to with great anticipation for many months before it is actually upon you.

And of course, as we all know, this year because of that infernal virus it ain’t happening!

For the Society, the fact that the Highland ‘ain’t happening’ this year is also a blow. It is a great week even for us – meeting people, entertaining some of you, selling high quality CHS merchandise and hopefully supporting you, the showing ambassadors, by educating the general public in some of the ways of our Breed. For me, it is also a good time to chat with you folks and find out what’s happening in your Clydesdale lives.

In normal circumstances everything would all typically begin for me this coming weekend with the transportation of our Exhibition Unit to the Show ground. And each day between then and the Thursday it is good being on site – watching the final build-up of the showground take shape. It never ceases to amaze me just how much work is done in that final week. 5 days before the show, as you look around, one is left wondering just how on earth the showground will ever move from organised (or maybe disorganised) chaos to the state of readiness for the gates opening on the Thursday morning. But every year it happens just like clockwork (or not!) – defying any belief that it would ever fail to happen!

And during these preparation days the showground takes on a completely different feel from that which is experienced on show days. The camaraderie and co-operation between stand holders are rarely anything other than completely cooperative. Each stall holder knows just how important the 4 days of the show is for the other. One guy told me last year that he makes one third of his annual profits over the 4 days of the Highland – so you can imagine just how he is feeling right now!

The stabling area is also transformed in these last few days – from the Saturday where empty stalls are all labelled up and where the passageways are well-nigh impassable, unless you come equipped with mountaineering clamps and ropes to scale the huge piles of sawdust – to the Sunday before the show when I know some of you turn up as a sort of advance party to claim your rightful share of that sawdust!

And the sight, probably late Tuesday or early on the Wednesday, of the first Clydesdale being led out into what will be the collecting area for the show is a timely reminder of why we are all here!

Soon the sun will rise (we hope!) on the Thursday morning. Let the judging begin!

Over the four days we will see emerging Male Champion, Female Champion, Cawdor Cup winner, Ridden winner and HOYs qualifier, Harness Champion, Young Stockman and Young Handler Champions for the year – and on the Sunday lunchtime, rising like a great impressive phoenix (but I stress not from the ashes this time) - and after 4 days of stiff, keen, and competitive events, the final winner of the week will be announced – the Champion Turnout team of the year.

Then following the final grand parade on the Sunday afternoon there is an increasing sense, as the late, great football commentator on the radio, David Francey, was famed for saying ‘it is all over’! The tidy up and the packing begins – lorries begin to get loaded with kit and tack and everything else – not forgetting the horses – all in readiness for the exit gates being opened to allow the journey home to begin.

And so, it really is all over until next year – or at least that’s what we thought 12 months and two weeks ago! Little did we think then - nor even was it in our wildest dreams at Christmas - that a pernicious wee virus from the east would scupper these plans and dreams lock, stock, and barrel.

But we will see it’s like again.

Who knows what the next year will hold for any of us – but the Highland will rise again - and we will be there – waiting patiently (or not as the case may be) to ‘gie it laldy’ once more and to crown another series of Champions – and so this wonderful rare breed of ours will continue on in its journey of survival and growth!

Next week some more Highland Show thoughts and today, to end, one or two photos from recent years at Ingliston.

Stay safe and well until then.