

Some ethnographic reflections on the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease Epidemic: A case study from Devon

Michael Winter

Introduction

The Foot and Mouth epidemic in Great Britain brought into sharp focus a number of issues of interest to social scientists and rural observers. However, despite a growing number of publications on the epidemic remarkably few researchers have employed in-depth research techniques. This, of course, is easily explained by the access problems presented by the disease. Such was the extent of the closure of the countryside, and of farms in particular, as part of the attempts to control the spread of the disease that for a period few researchers were in a position to engage in direct rural research of any kind and certainly not in-depth participant observation or ethnography within communities directly affected by the disease. This paper is an attempt to fill that gap, by providing an ethnography of the impact of the disease within a single community in a locality within the west of Devon, one of the most severely affected English counties.

An ethnography was possible because of my own circumstances – a rural geographer who happened to be resident in the heart of the outbreak and a member of a number of networks encompassing members of the farming and political communities. At this stage it is important to note that although my closeness to the immediate impacts of FMD makes this account possible it is, as with any ethnography, both partial and particular. Even within such a small locale as a west Devon market town and its surrounding villages, my own networks did not encompass all caught up in the crisis. I did not experience every aspect of the epidemic as it unfolded.

In mid February 2001, just a week after the first confirmed outbreak of the epidemic in Essex, a case of FMD was confirmed in the village of Highampton in west Devon. During the following few weeks it spread rapidly in Highampton itself and surrounding parishes. One of the first affected, just three miles away, was the small market town of Hatherleigh. As a resident of Hatherleigh, I found myself in a unique position to analyse the unfolding events both as an observer and a participant. I participated at several levels. My own tiny flock of sheep (4 ewes) had just lambed. I took part in efforts to give practical support to members of the farming community (primarily through regular telephone calls to specific farming families organised by local churches.) In time I became centrally involved in regeneration activities in the community (these are not discussed in this paper). In none of these activities was my prime concern social science enquiry, but in none of them was this precluded. I observed and I recorded. I wished to understand events in which I myself was caught up.

At the same time I sought to follow the developing national and regional debate and literature. What follows is a short reflection on some of the key issues that emerged to me as a social scientist. Some of the themes set out here are being developed into a longer ethnographic account for publication elsewhere.

Solidarity and Sharing the Grief

Both as a local resident and as an owner of sheep I was involved in a community caught up in crisis. Although the proportion of the population of Hatherleigh directly involved in agriculture is relatively small (less than 10%) the economic significance of farming is much greater because of the presence of a livestock market. The influx of farmers and family members on market days means that the range of shops and businesses in the community is far greater than its own population could support. Thus an almost immediate consequence of the suspension of the market was a sharp decline in the trade of local businesses. Alongside such local service businesses, Hatherleigh contains a number of tourism enterprises – a pottery, art gallery, antique shops and pubs. These too saw a rapid fall-off in business.

In the first few weeks of the crisis, the real concern of the community could be seen in its sympathy for farmers and local businesses. Initial shock and despair seemed to be shared deeply by those in agriculture and by the many members of the community not directly involved in farming. Local fund-raising efforts were undertaken for the farming charities that had been set up. Hand written notices appeared urging people to support local businesses. This concern for the locality was not entirely new, although it was accelerated by FMD. Research undertaken in a locality close to Hatherleigh in 1999 showed an emergent localism in food purchasing based on empathy with farmers caught up in the agrarian crisis of the late 1990s (Winter 2002). A powerful sense of community solidarity and mutual support emerged in Hatherleigh. Conversations in the town revolved about the latest news on the spread of the outbreak and who had been affected.

To the fore in expressions of practical support were the churches. The importance of church ministers as front-line caring ‘professionals’ (see Davies et al 1990) was evident from early in the crisis. While the social services, the health service and advice services struggled to organise a presence in the town and surrounding villages – it was some weeks before these authorities established an emergency crisis advisory centre on the Methodist Church premises - church ministers were already on site.

The Church of England priest organised a network of individuals prepared to undertake regular telephone calls to farmers isolated on their farms. The network involved a range of individuals, lay and ordained, Anglican and Methodist. If this was a logical extension to the Church’s historic caring and outreach work then there were other aspects of religious response that

were more to do with religiosity per se. Sociologists of religion have noted the increase in the last twenty years in Britain of ritual acts in response to tragedy, notably involving the use of flowers, candles and memorabilia either in cases of mass disaster (Davie 1994, Walter 1991) or at the sites of road accidents, murders and the like. In Hatherleigh, this trend was most noticeable, not in the Anglican church, but in the Methodist Church notwithstanding the anti-ritualist, word-based Bible Christian tradition from which Methodism in the locality is derived. The church not only was open daily for prayers but introduced votive candles and a board for the display of written prayer requests, poems, and other reflections on the crisis. Children of the church produced a display of modelled clay figures of animals and people depicting the crisis and providing a further visual focus for reflection, prayer, and grieving.

Thus in the early stages, the crisis can be seen as providing examples of reinforcing traditional expressions of solidarity but also examples of crisis-induced change, in the instance given in expressions of religiosity.

The Rituals of Boundary

The importance of ritual acts was not confined to obvious religiosity. My own experience as part of the telephone network brought home to me the wide range of responses and reactions to the epidemic within the farming community. In particular, the assumption in the media that *all* farmers were farm-bound and cut off from their usual networks was not true. While all took precautions and limited their off-farm movements to some degree, farmers exhibited range of behaviours, in part determined by spatial location and in part by other factors such as children's schooling and family members with outside occupations. Moreover, behaviour changed over time. Some of those whose families remained farm-bound over the first few weeks subsequently modified this extreme strategy with more subtle behaviour. This might involve the imposition of strict boundaries not so much between the farm and outside world but between different activities and functions on the farm. For example, the use of disinfectant, and the removal and isolation of on-farm clothing, created a boundary between farm and non-farm within the confines of the holding.

By strictly demarcating the farmhouse (or rooms within it) as 'clean', it was possible for some members of the farm household to resume a relatively normal life. The rituals of disinfecting, changing clothing, showering came to symbolise the negotiation of boundaries necessary for off-farm social interaction. Thus after a few weeks some farmers were seen in the streets of Hatherleigh again, including some whose stock had been lost to the disease. But they appeared in unfamiliar garb not in the familiar working overalls and wellington boots.

These rituals were clearly seen as bounded temporally. They were seen as a response to crisis to be endured only until 'we can get back to normal'. The new boundaries set were seen as artificial and unsustainable in the long term. Transgressing the boundaries, as a prelude to re-setting them

was seen, as both inevitable and desirable. Thus the symbolic importance of the desired return to normality provides a clue to the vitriolic opposition felt by many farmers to the continuation of tough biosecurity measures long after the crisis was perceived to be over by many farmers. Most farmers can, in actual fact, deal reasonably easily with the biosecurity rules that remain in force in auction markets and even with the livestock movement restrictions, inconvenient though they may be on occasions. However the restrictions provide a lasting reminder both of the disease itself and the failure to re-set boundaries. Normality has not returned.

Threats to Solidarity

As the weeks and months of the epidemic passed, certain threats to the initial community solidarity arose, not in the case of Devon between tourism operators and farmers as was reported from some parts of the country. From the outset, the media showed a strong interest in Highampton and Hatherleigh as centres of the crisis. For the first two or three weeks, and intermittently over the following six months, television cameras and crew were present in Hatherleigh, not just from Britain but from other countries too. Both Japanese and US television companies were represented early in the crisis. The town's mayor and local priest, in particular, gave numerous interviews. I gave some myself. This coverage gave rise to some contention and tension. Some saw the media coverage as exploitative and intrusive. Some, too, saw it as painting an intrinsically negative picture of Hatherleigh. Participants such as the mayor, were urged to take a more positive stance as some claimed that negative news coverage was adding to the woes of the community with businesses suffering even more than was necessary. A campaign to publicise that Hatherleigh was 'open for business' grew up out of these concerns, led by the non-agricultural business community in the town. But care was taken to avoid any inference that agriculture might be to blame. On the contrary, the media provided a convenient scapegoat to which to attach blame for declining returns in local businesses. By so doing, the implication that there might be competing local interests with regard to farming versus non-farming interests was hidden. Attacks on the media served to cement further community solidarity, but underlying tensions had emerged.

These were added to, but again initially submerged by the impact of growing disquiet, uncertainty and even opposition to the control methods used with regard to the policing of the disease. The term policing is not used in a metaphoric sense for the law required a police presence at the entrance to farms during the period after suspicion of the disease up to slaughter (in the case of a positive diagnosis). This could be several days so a police presence on a remote rural community arguably any under-policed hitherto was also a subject of comment in the community.

On March 16th 2001, the government announced a significant amendment to its control policy with the introduction of a contiguous cull of livestock on farm holdings adjacent to any confirmed outbreak of FMD. The

background to this innovation was epidemiological work undertaken, at some speed, by scientists at Imperial College. Nationally the move seemed to have the support of the National Farmers Union, but not by many farmer representatives locally or regionally. Some in Hatherleigh saw it as an evil necessity, others rejected it completely. What is more striking is that non-farming residents began to voice increasing opposition to the slaughter policy and, in particular, the slaughter of healthy animals under the contiguous cull.

To a considerable extent, the introduction of a contiguous cull marked a turning point in the community's experience of the disaster. Hitherto its anger and despair had been directed against the impersonal agency of the virus itself. There had been much talk of the nature and characteristics of the virus, debate over how it was spread, its durability, its impact. Now the virus was not the sole enemy. The contiguous cull introduced by government edict and the officials charged with enforcing it became, in many eyes, an alien antagonistic force. It became clear that there were three main opinions with regard to the cull. A smaller number, mostly farmers, accepted the scientific cure and saw no alternative. A larger number of both farmers and residents were unconvinced by its need and efficacy. They felt there was room for negotiation and compromise. Some contiguous culls should be opposed and fought; others, perhaps were inevitable. Critically, such people did not attack the vets and MAFF officials charged with inspecting stock and implementing cull policy. As many of the vets, drafted into Ministry teams, were farm vets, some even from the locality, this is hardly surprising. Indeed there were a significant number of vets who themselves challenged the need for a cull.

However a third group came to radically challenge the cull and saw it as unnecessary and evil. Conspiracy theories began to take hold in which the government was accused of wishing to destroy the UK livestock industry with the cull as a convenient tool for this end. The beleaguered and 'victim' mentality of farmers noted elsewhere (Milbourne et al 2001, Reed et al 2002) contributed to this. Given that the NFU nationally and for the main part regionally, accepted the need for the cull, it is not surprising that the groundswell of opposition to the cull and to MAFF's entire handling of the crisis, should have led to a new expression of farming opinion, known as "The Heart of Devon" established and funded by a local landowner and TV personality. Heart of Devon launched a vigorous press and website campaign led by its chief spokesperson, Lisa Johnson, a farmer's wife whose own stock had been lost to FMD.

Ash Moor: A Conflict Unleashed

The breakdown of consensus over the cull was further fuelled by another development that caused even more obvious rifts in the community. In the early weeks of the crisis, carcass disposal was largely undertaken through burning on gigantic funeral pyres. The extent of the burning was in contrast to the greater use of burial, including use of lime to accelerate

decomposition, in 1968. In 2001 this method was judged environmentally risky, itself a comment on the changing balance of political interests in the interim. But fears grew that pyres were becoming questionable in terms of efficiency, impractical because of lack of burning fuel and unacceptable because of their symbolic power to deter tourists. In response, MAFF developed ideas for mass burial sites with procedures in place to protect ground water. One such site, and a very large one was chosen three miles from Hatherleigh.

Unsurprisingly, public concerns emerged rapidly in relation to public health and environmental impact. A vociferous pressure group opposed to the Ash Moor Pit emerged (STAMP). Protest marches were held, a 24 hour vigil was held for many weeks at the entrance to the site, public meetings, petitions, lobbying, all took place. Notwithstanding the reassurances provided by both MAFF and the Environment Agency that the risks were minimal and the site was only a contingency measure that hopefully would not be needed, rumours in the community were rife. These reached a pitch during the General Election campaign of May/June 2001. STAMP campaigners opined that a mass cull would be put in place covering all sheep on Dartmoor and Exmoor immediately after the election. By this stage, blood-testing was taking place throughout the country and the reports from MAFF and vets on the ground were that very few positive results were being found. These views were flatly contradicted by STAMP campaigners. Not surprisingly, notwithstanding a general criticism of MAFF, not everyone in the community shared this analysis. Some were reassured by MAFF and, more significantly, some felt that the control of disease and farmers' interests in rapid carcass disposal were of paramount concern. Collision was inevitable. The main protagonists defending the Ash Moor idea was the local Anglican priest, supported by some other church people. From being a local figure, with a high degree of media coverage as a community spokesman at the outset of the campaign, the priest was now vilified for his failure to support STAMP. He was seen as failing to show care and concern over the possible negative environmental and health consequences of the site, As a STAMP poster cruelly put it, "what can be sicker than an uncaring vicar?"

How should the Ash Moor incident be interpreted? At one level STAMP is a classic example of a spontaneous local environmental pressure group, although the lack of involvement of mainstream environmental pressure groups is notable. The strength of feeling and the high level of distrust of MAFF/DEFRA and the Environment Agency meant that any constructive and participative engagement was almost impossible to promote. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the scientific argument surrounding the site, it seems clear Ash Moor Pit provided the catalyst for an outburst of anger directed at the authorities perceived to be, in some measure, responsible for the FMD disaster. Ash Moor became a symbol for those critical of the manner in which the FMD epidemic had been handled. It is a small step from criticising a particular mode of carcass disposal to attacking the extent and nature of the cull. Here STAMP was able both to contribute to, and draw on, a wider critique of, in particular, the contiguous cull.

Because of these links, it would be simplistic to see the Ash Moor dispute as instigating or reinforcing a rift between farming and non-farming interests. On the contrary, the Ash Moor dispute took place at a time when the agricultural consensus on how to approach the disease was itself breaking down. A critique of the contiguous cull from farmers found particular expression in other emergent local politics surrounding the 'Heart of Devon' campaign as well as in the growing dissent from the organic farming community.

There can be little doubt that the strength of opinion represented in STAMP and Heart of Devon, contributed towards a growing regional dimension to the politics of FMD. These processes were replicated in the NFU regionally, where there was a growing distance between the local and regional NFU position and the Union's central policy on contiguous cull and vaccination.

Conclusions

These reflections have not been entirely easy to write. My closeness to the events both spatially and emotionally remains. I am neither distanced nor separated from what happened. The boundaries I have erected between myself and the events I have described are those of academic language and convention. But those are frail and insubstantial. I remain too close to events to be entirely comfortable or capable of finding any firm conclusions to this particular paper. Perhaps that will come with temporal distance. In the meantime these reflections may offer some insights into an event that is already all too often only described in the arid languages of statistical analysis, economic impacts and policy implications.

References

- Davies, D. Watkins, C. and Winter, M. 1991: *Church and religion in rural England*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark
- Milbourne, P. Mitra, B. and Winter, M. (2001) *Agriculture and Rural Society: Complementarities and conflicts between farming and incomers to the countryside in England and Wales*. CCRU Report to MAFF
- Reed, M. Lobley, M. Winter, M. and Chandler, J. (2002) *Family Farmers on the Edge: Adaptability and Change in Farm Households*, Report by University of Plymouth and University of Exeter to Countryside Agency
- Walter, A. (1991) The mourning after Hillsborough. *Sociological Review* 39, 599-625

Winter, M. (2003) Responding to the crisis: the policy impact of the foot and mouth epidemic. *Political Quarterly*, 74, 47-56