

Chapter Twelve - Challenges and Changes 2007 to 2010.

(By Ros Earthy)

The last paragraph of Mary Allen's articles ended with a question and a statement. 'Where is goat-keeping heading next – organic? Whatever the future sends, the Society must be prepared to continue to adapt to the changing needs of its members'. In fact the next challenge to face the society was a familiar onefinances. One of the committee's roles is to agree a budget for the coming year based on a projected income and for several years the budget had failed to 'balance'. This made it necessary to consider any expenditure very carefully. The committee decided with considerable regret that it was unable to justify employing two people in the office and Sue Daniels, who for many years had been an excellent part-timer, was made redundant.

With the disease position still putting a damper on competitive showing, and the increased interest shown by the general public in goats' milk products, the balance of Dairy and Commercial goat-keeping had changed. Despite the Society's financial situation the Committee agreed that it should be represented at the Dairy Event organised by RABDF at Stoneleigh. Thus recognizing that it realises how important it is to work together with the commercial side of goat-keeping. In 2008 and 2009 a goat section consisting of talks, demonstrations and displays of breeds of goats was put together by Ros Earthy, Christine Ball, Fay Ogden and Dreda Randall. Tiff Hall brought Boer goats and an information stand, and a number of specialists gave talks. This event was very much aimed at the commercial sector as commercial goat-keeping, including for meat was expanding. Excellent photos taken by Peter Cox showed how some of the best commercial herds achieved their results.

One of the most popular parts of the event was the A.I. demonstration given by Christine Ball. In 2007 Christine had 'hit the headlines' (literally) when she became stranded with a consignment of kids which she was delivering to Cyprus. A disease outbreak, and a good deal of official incompetence, caused the journey to take a good deal longer than intended, but did produce useful publicity for the fact that British goats are in demand for export as Christine's story was taken up by both the BBC and the 'Daily Telegraph' which did a half-page feature.

Health scares and changing regulations continued to pose difficulties for goat-keepers. Many people were not happy with ear-tags which could result in torn ears and were also felt to be a less secure means of identification. Then regulations required identification in both ears, although a tattoo was considered acceptable in one ear. Goats were not required to be electronically identified.

The arrival of Blue-tongue in Europe created further problems and it became impossible to export goats to

Southern Ireland, despite the demand for them, because of differing health status. Several herds left the Scrapie health scheme as a result of changed rulings concerning the use of males, and this further reduced the number of animals available for export. It was perhaps partly the increase in regulations that resulted in an event which shocked many involved with livestock - the abandonment of the Royal Show, which was held for the last time in 2009.

However, as 2010 approached the greatest challenge facing the Society was the need to move forward at a time when finances were limited. It was obvious that the computer system in the office was unable to offer many of the services which members wanted and it was equally obvious that the BGS would not attract new members if it could not give them what they wanted. One thing which some members did want was the Grassroots system for registering and recording stock.

At an Autumn Conference held in Durham, this system was demonstrated and (amazingly, in a group of goat-keepers!) a unanimous vote was passed to recommend that the BGS invest in the system. The committee was thus presented with an interesting situation in view of the obvious wishes of the membership and the lack of funds. However an appeal for funds specifically for Grassroots showed the enthusiasm of the members by raising the £10,000 required. The cost of the office in Devon also needed to be considered as the lease was due for renewal. The landlord was informed that the Society would not be extending the lease and discussions took place with Sue Knowles about her intentions. As she was nearing retirement it became possible to devise a very successful solution.

The committee took the drastic decision to allow Sue to take a slightly early retirement when the office closed. At the same time a new Secretary would be advertised for and the Grassroots system bought ready for the new secretary to use. (Clearly there was no sense in training Sue to use it if she was about to retire). A small sub-committee met at the Dairy Event in September 2009 to draw up an advertisement which invited applications for a Secretary able to offer some form of office accommodation. After all those years the BGS would once again be without a rented office of its own.

Attempting to deal with three issues together (leaving the office, Sue's retirement and buying Grassroots) created a considerable time pressure and interviews were fixed for the first week in January. The committee's decision to take what could have been seen as a 'boat-burning' decision was vindicated by the number and strength of applicants received. The weather on the interview day was really awful (2010 proving to be an especially bad winter) but all the invited candidates duly arrived. Any uncertainties which the sub-committee may have felt earlier in the proceedings were dispelled during the interview process, and Jane Wilson was the unanimous choice.

Ironically this meant that the BGS office moved from South Devon to North Northumberland!

Jane and Sue worked together for a short time, but by early summer the move was complete and Grassroots starting to show what it could do. A pleasant surprise for members early on was the new registration cards – arriving quickly and with a three generation pedigree, something members had been requesting for some time. The Journal became more colourful and membership started to increase. In September a meeting to show what Grassroots could do for Milk Recording and Show secretaries attracted approximately sixty delegates. Financially things were much better without the cost of the Devon office, and the ability to produce more material 'in-house'. There is no doubt that the start of the 21st Century gave the BGS an especially large number of challenges. There is

no way that we can avoid external problems such as those caused by the Foot and Mouth out-break, but the difficulties associated with the computer system and the office have been solved. What is more, in solving them we have arrived at a situation which is vastly improved. Now, at last, we can continue to recruit new members with confidence in what we have to offer them. Just at the present the future for Society really does look very bright!