

## **Farm Diversification. Dr Peter Wells**

What do the following have in common?

1. You could have been home ages ago. Chiltern Railways (twice).
2. Active Truck Hire. Advertise Here.
3. LPG2GO.
4. Kitchens...08700 607507 (twice).
5. West Midlands Boat Jumble.
6. Ansteys of Worcester Farmhouse Cheddar.
7. Costa. Available Inside.
8. [www.volvo-usedcars.co.uk](http://www.volvo-usedcars.co.uk)
9. Swift removals. Full house / Single items.
10. BMW Service. Independent.

The answer is simple, they were all advertisements spotted while driving west and south along the M42, M5, M50 and finally the A48 coming into Cardiff. Apart from the last two and number seven, they were all in fields: mostly in the form of a rear curtain-side trailer, though there are variations on this theme. What is going on here?

The phenomenon started with messages of a more political character: two campaigns in particular formed the foundation of this proliferation into crass mercantilism. The first, now consigned to history in the era in which food is better travelled than most of the people that eat it, was that which urged us to 'Buy British'. In itself, this was anyway a campaign imbued with a distasteful hypocrisy given that farmers indulged themselves in Toyota Land Cruisers, John Deere tractors, and the usual plethora of EU farm subsidies. Still, it had certain relevance for the activities pursued on the land and some merit from an economic and environmental perspective. The second, altogether more suspect, was that of the Countryside Alliance and the campaign against the ban on hunting.

Now, like graffiti artists who crave a new blank wall, farmers appear to have become addicted to this new form of farm diversification and are unable to stop. Lacking any political message to convey, and doubtless tempted by the money that must be being earned in this insidious blight that is creeping across the landscape, farmers and landowners have succumbed all too easily to the temptation to make a bit of ready cash through this novel form of exploitation. The subliminal attitude of course remains the same: this is my land, and I can make money from it in any way I want regardless of the consequences for others, either now or in the future.

There is a good reason why in the UK, unlike other places such as the US, we do not have grotesque signs sprouting skyward advising us on the nearby attractions of fast-food restaurants or car dealerships. That reason is safety.

Drivers could easily be distracted by random commercialism, lose attention to the task in hand, and have an accident. Obviously, this is of no great concern to those who pay for, or receive payment for, plastering some trivial exhortation across the side of a forty-foot trailer nestled neatly into a hillside at the edge of the M5. Do they expect us, while driving, to write down the 08700 number and call on our mobiles to enquire about the latest in kitchen cabinets? Do they expect us to memorise that website so that when we get in to our office or home we rush breathless to the computer and place our order for a used Volvo?

Few people, other than perhaps professional civil engineers or those with a particular love for the finer nuances of tarmac, would find the M5 an attractive place (though see below for a web site if you do have a passion for three-lane highways). Some may even crave that the tedium and aesthetic gloom to be lifted by the cheering thought that there would soon be a boat jumble sale in the West Midlands. To me, this is intrusive, a wanton despoliation, nothing more than litter – all the worse for being placed with such calculating deliberation. It is visual pollution of the worse kind, a crass denigration of one of the few redeeming features of motorway driving – that you get to pass through the softening embrace of fields and forest. In short, it is insulting to standards of taste and decency, the height of bad manners.

Is this a trivial complaint? It is difficult to say. Here is a classic back of an envelope calculation. Say the trip involved from the West Midlands to Cardiff was about 100 miles. In that time, I passed 10 of these fly-adds or rollerboards or whatever we are going to call them (incidentally, it is probably the case that being on wheels enables some legal nicety to be observed so rendering the perpetrator immune from prosecution). So, a nice easy bit of maths, gives us one sign per ten miles. Now, from the delightful website [www.cbrd.co.uk](http://www.cbrd.co.uk) that lists all of the UK motorways along with their length, I added up a total of 1,965 motorway miles. So, that means about 2,000 signs across the UK, most of them bigger in surface area than a typical urban billboard, and most of them showing to hundreds of thousands of people per day. Even if the farmers or landowners were only paid £10 a week for the 'service' provided, that would mean over £1 million per annum changing hands.

It can be safely asserted that I will not be travelling by Chiltern Railways to pick up my used Volvo (converted of course to run on LPG), and then driving to the boat jumble, stopping but briefly to snaffle some quality mature cheddar and quaffing hot coffee while contemplating my forthcoming house move and the problems involved in persuading an independent BMW service specialist to use the vehicles provided by a quality van hire business to transport his recently bought kitchen.

If it were adolescent bad behaviour, or wood rot in your window frames, the advice would be to 'nip the problem in the bud' and stop it spreading. Already it has progressed from occasional irritant to persistent nuisance, adding to the cacophony of 'buy me' messages that assault our daily lives and further despoiling the countryside. The time for action is now. For those interested,

please send a donation and I will use the funds to set an anti-trailer advertising website, you'll be able to get details from the truck parked alongside Junction 32 of the M4!