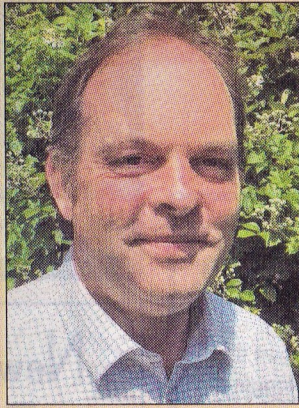


KEVIN Prince has wide experience of farming and rural business in Berkshire and across southern England as a director in the Adkin consultancy based near Wantage.

His family also run a diversified farming operation with commercial lets, holiday cottages and 800 arable acres.



WITH Covid-19 focusing minds, it's easy to overlook that 20 years ago the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak was beginning to devastate UK agriculture.

Just about everyone in the rural community was affected in one way or another, from villagers being prevented from taking their usual walks to valuers like me working constant shifts on livestock farms.

Disease prevention notices became commonplace as farmers saw their lives ripped apart.

Many of the farms we visited housed closed herds, especially where pigs were concerned, which meant the owners had spent years nurturing pedigree bloodlines that could be sought after the world over.

But instantly the UK became an international pariah and

no-one wanted our livestock.

At the time the news broke, I was in a meeting, all suited and booted, and was summoned away by the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) to value livestock on a farm with a newly-discovered outbreak.

I dashed to a country store with a colleague to buy overalls and rubber boots so we could set to work.

The scene at every farm was devastating.

Livestock was corralled into pens and as fast as we worked through valuing each animal the vets were following behind to destroy them.

We could enter a property with hundreds of head of livestock knowing that when we left there would be the same number of worthless deadstock.

In some parts of the country

FARM BLOG: Two decades since epidemic ripped farming apart

great pits were dug to bury them, funeral pyres lit to dispose of them with palls of smoke hanging over the countryside.

The UK ran out of vets to put down animals and some had to be brought in from abroad to do the work.

The outbreak of 2001 followed on from that of the late 1960s when the Army was called in to dispose of carcasses and between the two we had mad cow disease, another zoonotic that transferred to humans with bovine CJD which devastates the brain but cannot be truly diagnosed until it has proved fatal.

The disease was later found to be a result of feeding sheep remains as a protein booster for cattle so that the scrapie that affected the brains of sheep became a disease in cattle and passed to humans who ate affected meat.

When such disease outbreaks strike, there can be a lasting impact on mental health, such as we are seeing now as people suffer from lockdown isolation and loss of human contact.

This has garnered plenty of media coverage, but the ravages of isolation on mental



health have been well known in the farming community for generations, the more so since mechanisation cut the number of farm workers to such a degree that many farmers now work alone day in, day out.

Recent research for the Farm Safety Foundation (www.yellowwellies.org) has shown that 88 per cent of farmers under the age of 40 rank poor mental health as the

biggest hidden factor facing the sector.

It has just been running its Mind Your Head campaign, recognising the high suicide rate among farmers and also that poor mental health can lead to accidents – agriculture has the highest death rate per capita of any UK industry.

There are other organisations, such as the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Association (RABI)

and The Samaritans, that can help in times of crisis.

The umbrella organisation Farming Help can be called free on 03000 111999.

If you know a farmer who mostly works alone, keep in touch.

Make that phone call today that you put off yesterday and, when lockdown rules allow, call in for a socially-distanced cuppa.