

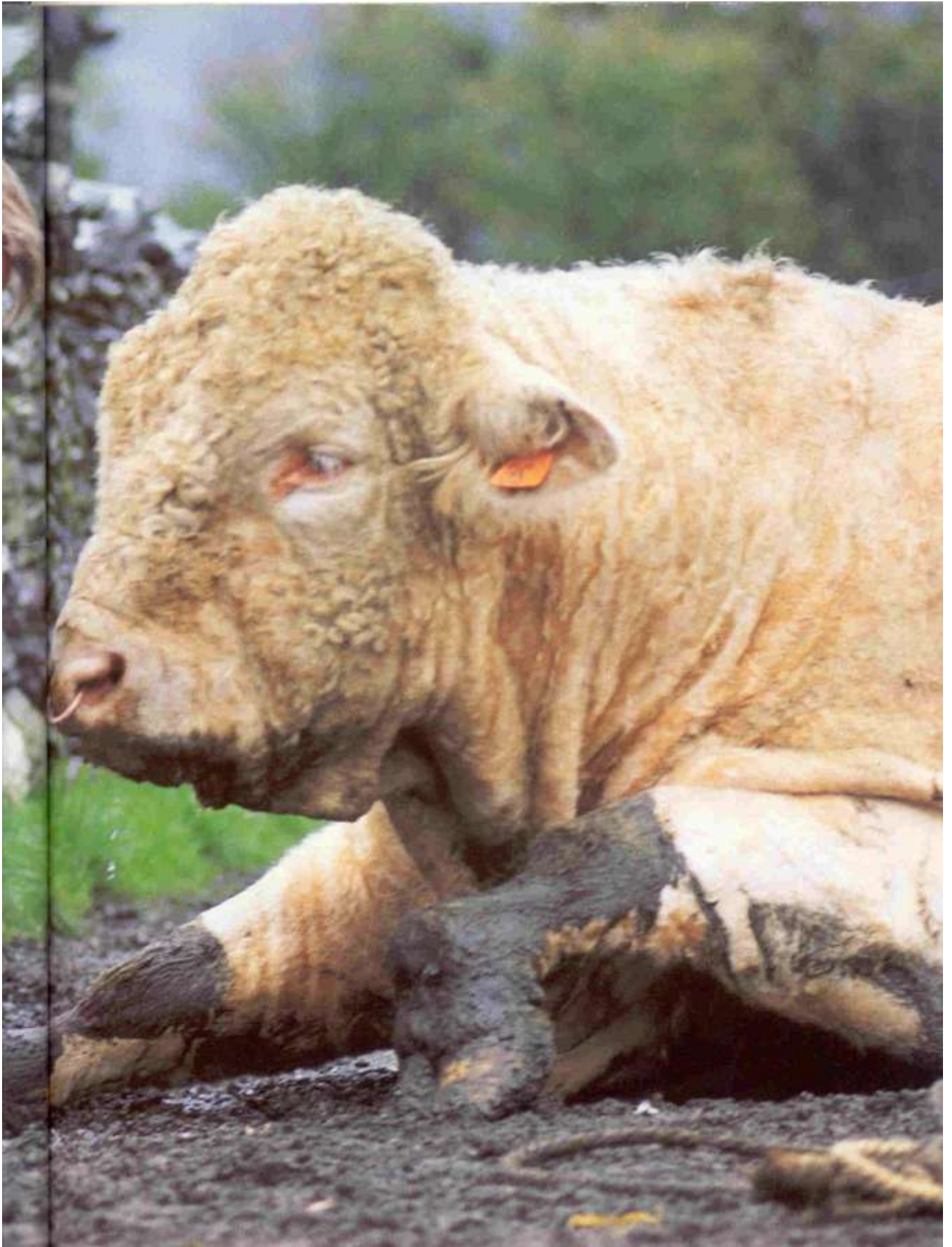


IT ALWAYS HAPPENS TO A VET

The tweedy world of colicky colts depicted by James Herriot is a far cry from today's rural realities, as experienced in a veterinary practice in Snowdonia. By Gareth Parry

Photographs by Jane Gifford

Country vet Bruce Lawson watches for the Charolais bull's reaction as he clips its toenails at Maes-y-Pandy farm, Snowdonia





Above A tawny owl, hit by a car, is treated for an injured wing. **Right** A stream flows down from Cader Idris

Driving carefully up a glistening mountain road in Snowdonia, Iwan Parry is listening to his favourite opera on CD. For the former International Young Singer of the Year, the music provides an uplifting prelude to the day. He is about to spend an hour and a half thrusting his arm up to the shoulder into 53 heifers that repay his prenatal care with sprays of farmyard essence.

Iwan is the junior partner in one of Wales's most respected, and largest, veterinary practices. Tudor, Lawson, Dallimore and Parry covers an area 25 miles north and south from the grey-stoned market town of Dolgellau in the shadow of Cader Idris, Snowdonia's second highest



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mountain. Cattle and sheep form the core of the work, on more than 500 farms. The hardy Welsh Mountain ewes – there are about 250,000 in the catchment area – are relatively trouble free, although some have to be fitted with “false teeth” (a steel dental bridge) to help them graze the sparse hill pastures. The cattle, as well as annual fertility tests, need hooves trimming, mastitis alleviating. Other patients include a wide range of animals and birds, from buzzards to badgers, owls to farmed ostriches and donkeys to dolphins, which have been hit by jet-skiers in nearby Cardigan Bay and found stranded on the beaches. Most of the wild animals treated have been injured by cars. Many are left on the Lawsons' doorstep in plastic bags. Bruce Lawson is the practice's senior partner. His wife, Catherine, picks up the unusual deliveries with the morning milk.

This morning, Iwan's car is loaded to window level with clamps, cages, pulleys, ropes, vaccines and a pop-up dispenser of veterinary science's ubiquitous “One-Up Shoulder-Length Gloves...for Super Sensitivity”. At the farm the young vet changes into a neck-high green waterproof smock, thigh-length steel-toed rubber boots and ten of the “One-Up” gloves on each hand. These he will peel off, layer after layer, as work progresses.

As the fertility tests get under way, the lowing of cattle is deafening – there are nearly 200 animals around the yard and another 300 in surrounding fields. All join the chorus. After each examination Iwan holds up two or three fingers to signal the estimated age of the foetus. Five times his thumb and forefinger make a nought – a last rite for the “empty” cow, which is sprayed across its shoulders with red dye. Four others during the day join the queue to the slaughterhouse. The farmer and his wife are pale-faced; their fatigue, and that of modern farming, is palpable.

It is half a century since James Alfred Wight qualified as a veterinary surgeon and, through *All Creatures Great and Small* and his alter ego James Herriot, ➡



mouth through which the gales moan and the rain rattles on the tin roof. Bruce reaches inside the cow to feel the calf's position and then, having withdrawn his arm, picks up the scalpel for the first critical incision. At precisely this moment, someone breaks wind. As everyone jumps, the scalpel slices into Bruce's wrist. The cut is 6 inches long. Wrapping a piece of rag around it, Bruce continues with the operation. A few minutes later a calf is born, a cow is saved. A further five hours on, duly stitched and bandaged, he opens his morning surgery just as the clock of St Mary's church, Dolgellau, strikes nine.

As he arrives, Michael Dallimore, the

popularised – and in a manner, sanitised – a rural idyll unruffled by the world beyond his tweedy practice. Today's country vets find themselves confronting greater political, agricultural and rural stress, administering as much to the welfare of the farmers as to their animals. Discussions over proposed reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy, held in cowsheds and crop fields all over the country, move on to beef prices. The impact of last year's public health scare over BSE – the so-called mad cow disease – is still keenly felt by farmers: each week in the UK an average of 13,000 dairy cows over 30 months old are slaughtered. August saw part of the scheme's compensation payments from Brussels docked.

What may not have changed is the commitment demanded from contemporary vets. All general practices must be on 24-hour standby, seven days a week, by order of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. At Tudor, Lawson, Dallimore and Parry there are always two vets on call and the partners each work between 10 and 14 hours a day. Why? "It is what we do," Bruce says. "There is nothing more to understand. The Meirionnydd farmer is, these days, a rather old-fashioned figure – a gentle person of honour and integrity and great determination to weather the storm. We consider ourselves very lucky to live and work with him. It makes great sense of what can be a pretty hard job."

A newly qualified country vet keeping his first appointment with an enraged black bull will earn £14,000 a year, plus transport and accommodation. (The city-based novice searching for fleas on your kitten expects £20,000.) Capital investment in a country practice is also

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Top Bruce Lawson, a rural vet for more than 30 years, with his terrier, George. **Above** Welsh black cattle

enormous; even the most modest will have on its shelves drugs and vaccines (most with a limited life) worth many thousands of pounds.

Emergencies usually involve birthing difficulties – cows calve at night while sheep choose the dawn to lamb. At 4am, that coldest hour before dawn, Bruce Lawson has left his bed and driven 15 miles to a hill farm to deliver a calf by Caesarian section. The cow is wheezing with pain and close to death. The young Welsh family, mother, father and three children, have come to hold the lanterns. The deaths of two animals could be disastrous to the struggling farmer, and the outcome of the next few moments are vital to them all.

The hole under the shed door is a

Small Animals Vet today, leaves. Even in Snowdonia, a vet's workplace can be a front room as often as a farmyard. The cases may not be as dirty as farm work, but they can be just as demanding. Michael sets out on the first of 30 house calls, travelling nearly 80 miles in an area north of Dolgellau.

"Ah yes...the rural practice," he says wryly, walking through a housing area littered with old fridges, sofas and wrecked TVs. This is what vets call a "scratching dog" call. The owner cannot understand why her dog's back is covered in scabs. "These are flea bites," Michael tells her, leaving a can of anti-flea spray. No payment is offered, nor asked for. After the dog, it's a hamster with a broken leg, and then an exotic parakeet. Michael has been called in to trim its secondary feathers. This will inhibit – but not destroy – its ability to fly away. Its owner wants to give the bird the freedom of a large, bright blossom-filled conservatory.

Vets are not latter-day Franciscans. Dedicated as they are to the welfare of the animals, they are also in a business in which the happiness and satisfaction of their clients – whether a farmer with a sick heifer or a pensioner with a lame dog – is also important. "I pity the poor doctor, having to listen to a liturgy of aches and pains," Bruce Lawson says. "Animals can't talk – and if you were cynical you might say: 'Thank goodness for that'. We have to know what's wrong instinctively. The satisfaction of saving an animal's life is immense, having done the best you possibly can for a defenceless creature." 🐾



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