

Disinfectant stands ready in this empty Cumbrian builders merchant.

Foot and mouth: The forgotten victims

For weeks, our TV screens and newspapers have been filled with images of the havoc wreaked by foot and mouth on agriculture and tourism. But the effects of the disease on rural builders are no less devastating. Tom Broughton visited Carlisle, one of the worst-affected areas. Photographs by Douglas Jones

KEITH ALLEN WALKS BACK INTO HIS SMALL COTTAGE ON Hornhouse farm in Abbeytown on the outskirts of Carlisle, Cumbria. He pauses to check his answerphone: the two messages epitomise his situation.

"Mr Allen, I need to speak to you urgently," says the first voice on the tape. "Can you please call me at the TSB as soon as you can to discuss your situation." The machine beeps, and then a second message plays: "Mr Allen, it's Wendy from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. You need to send in the form to indicate the restricted movement of your sheep as soon as possible."

Allen, 61, glances at his wife Trisha and then hangs his head in despair. The foot-and-mouth crisis is ruining him.

Allen is a builder, specialising in agricultural building. He holds the building and maintenance contract for the Camping and Caravanning Club of Cumbria. But like many small rural businesses, he has developed a number of sidelines to boost his income. He keeps a flock of sheep and runs a small caravan site on his land.

Every aspect of his business has been affected by the crisis: his building work has ground to a halt because of the exclusion zones and movement restrictions. Tourists are steering well clear, leaving the caravan site empty. And now the Ministry of Agriculture is coming to inspect his sheep for signs of foot and mouth.

His face drops as he says: "Apart from my family, my whole life centres around three things; my building business, the people I meet from letting out caravans and my flock of sheep, and at the moment they are all under threat."

As foot-and-mouth disease spreads, the Cumbrian countryside is effectively closed. The area is paralysed; numerous farms plus huge sections of footpaths and roads are taped off from public

access and depression has descended on the local community like a thick fog.

The agricultural and tourist industries are very much in crisis, with reports of up to 80% downturns in trade. But rural builders face consequences that are just as severe, although there are no official statistics documenting their plight.

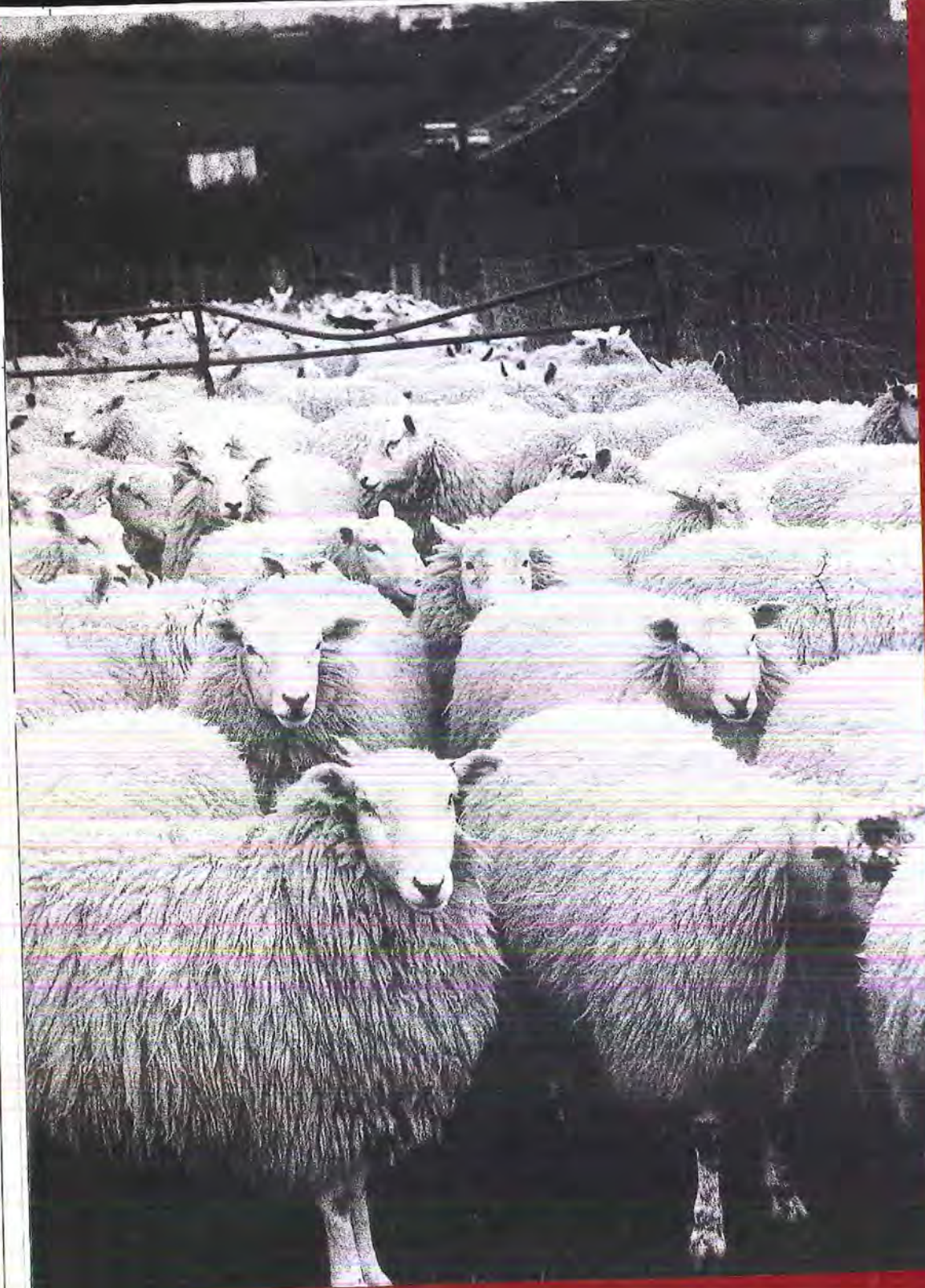
Allen and his wife are ridden with guilt at the prospect of having to lay off workers they have employed and known for years: "I've got two lads working for me, but it looks like I'm going to have to let them go soon because there just isn't the work. We can't get on to any land, you see," he says.

Bob Richardson, another local agricultural builder, is facing a similar problem. Unless the crisis eases, he will shortly be laying off staff that have been working for him for more than 20 years. Richardson, 43, says: "If we can't get on to farms within a fortnight, the situation will start to bite very badly. I've got two staff and there just will not be enough work for them because 60% of my work is on agricultural projects."

Building company Aspatria Implement has more than £100,000 of work outstanding on its books, but Martin Donald, office supervisor, says he has never seen things looking so bleak: "I've been at this company for over 30 years, man and boy. The state we are in is absolutely devastating. We've so much work we could do, but we can't get to it."

Since the intervention of prime minister Tony Blair, the authorities have moved decisively to take control of the crisis in Cumbria. When *Building* visited the area, huge slaughter and burial programmes were in full swing. MAFF was in the midst of recruiting local builders to help dig the vast pits to bury sheep carcasses. A few days later, contractor Cumbrian from nearby Penrith was recruited to clear slaughtered animals. The contract was small compensation for the postponement of a ▶





Left: The sheep, like Cumbria's builders, face an uncertain future.

'Things aren't helped because all the plant contractors have been seconded to MAFF so it's difficult to get the machinery for some of the projects I can work on'

Bob Richardson, agricultural builder



'Apart from my family, my whole life centres around three things; my building business, letting out caravans and my flock of sheep, and at the moment they are all under threat'

Keith Allen, Carlisle builder (left)

► £7m bypass on the A66 in Cumbria, delayed because of foot and mouth.

Richardson adds: "Very soon I'm going to have to think about turning to MAFF myself to start looking for an alternative income." But it is something he is not keen on doing. He feels that MAFF's involvement could make local builders' problems worse. "Things aren't helped because all the plant contractors have been seconded to MAFF, so it's difficult to get the machinery for some of the remaining projects I can work on," he says. "If I do turn to them, it really will be when I'm on the financial brink."

Small business minister Patricia Hewitt says that although the government's top priority is to ensure that foot-and-mouth disease is contained and eradicated as quickly as possible, it is also doing all it can to help small firms survive the crisis. "We have to ensure that we offer as much support, help and information to those small businesses most affected by this disease," she says.

The Department of Trade and Industry is developing an emergency survival pack so advisers can give help to stricken businesses in Cumbria. The scheme is an expansion of Business Link, which is a helpline that advises affected businesses who to contact. But for many of Cumbria's rural builders, the problem is simple; all work has to be stopped because of the outbreak and a telephone helpline is not going to change that.

The Carlisle branch spokesman of the Federation of Master Builders believes that builders in the region need to be higher on the government's priority list. The spokesman says: "Foot and mouth is affecting builders in Cumbria really badly. They are in as much crisis as the tourist industry and deserve just as much help."

Many local builders are trying to pick up alternative forms of

work. Michael Johnson, a self-employed builder from Penrith, was building a milking shed at the time of the outbreak of the disease. He was forced to leave the project and has since been seeking work in the industrial sector. He has a job at the moment, but in a week's time he will be searching again. In the mean time, he is reliant on his wife Sheila's income – she is a nurse in a local infirmary. She says: "We have been very worried and my husband has been up in arms about the whole crisis. But there is nothing really that we can do; you just have to get on with life and take what it throws at you."

Mike Armstrong also specialises in constructing farm buildings and has already had to lay off two off his staff because 95% of his work was affected when foot and mouth struck. Armstrong says: "I was very, very, worried when the scare started because I didn't have any jobs on at all. It's just luck that I have picked up a couple of industrial jobs in the past two weeks." But he adds: "The main problem I've got is that at the moment I don't have any jobs lined up for the coming months – there just aren't any enquiries coming in – so I don't know what I'm going to do."

Architects are also feeling the pressures of the outbreak, says Peter Raymond Whittaker, a director of practice Architect Plus in Carlisle. "The biggest problem that we have encountered is not being able to get some of the builders we need for jobs. I know of some builders that are not being able to tender for some of their future jobs because of the problem." And he adds that there could be more trouble ahead: "There will definitely be rumbles in the industry and I'm sure that although there are not many immediate effects, there will be some long-term problems from the backlog of work piling up." ►

► Swarbrick Associates, another Carlisle architect, has also suffered disruption to many of its projects, and blames MAFF for its treatment of affected areas. Sandy Johnston, an architect at Swarbrick Associates, spoke of one particular project where a school had to be closed and the building contractor pulled out because of a scare, but within a week was allowed back onto the site. She says: "I don't think MAFF really knows what it is doing because the school was allowed to re-open and builders were allowed back on the site after a week. It was chaos." She adds: "Similarly, a site in Penrith was severely disrupted because we were instructed by MAFF to make sure that we clamped down heavily on health and safety regulations on the site."

The disease will eventually be brought under control and the countryside will slowly return to normal; a couple of days after our visit, government scientists were for the first time suggesting that outbreaks of foot and mouth may have peaked. The question is how many small construction firms will be able to go under before the outbreak is eradicated.

Media coverage of the effects the crisis is having on agriculture and tourism has been enormous, and the government has already announced huge compensation packages for both industries. So far, rural building firms have got nothing, and the long-term effects on the construction industry can only be guessed at.

Back at Hornhouse farm, Keith Allen and his wife Trisha say they can only pray that the crisis will ease so they can get back to their work and their flock of sheep can be saved. "The future does not look good at all," says Allen.

Have rural builders been given a raw deal?

Last week, *Building* called for rural contractors to be added to the list of businesses receiving government relief. What do you think? Send your views to adrian_barrick@buildergroup.co.uk.



Above: A building company takes measures to prevent the spread of the disease.

Below: Construction equipment stands idle in the Cumbrian countryside.



Building materials firm manager Duncan Hillary is spending £150 per day on disinfectant.

Foot and mouth could ruin my livelihood

Duncan Hillary, 43, is the joint manager of Joseph Hillary, a supplier of building materials in Aspatria, Cumbria. His company has suffered severely as a result of the foot-and-mouth crisis and its problems are getting worse.

"Foot and mouth is a disease that affects animals," he says. "But it is ultimately going to ruin our livelihoods unless something drastic happens and soon. Within the next two weeks, if it still has a grip on Cumbria, my company will be forced to go to a three-day working week and then after that there is a real possibility that we may be forced to start laying off workers."

"It is a problem that I do not want to contemplate at the moment because I've known some of the guys working here for quite some time and it's already making me feel quite awkward just facing them everyday. There is a real tension about the place at the moment; everybody knows that the problem is worsening and that jobs could be on the line."

"The outbreak has had a great effect on about 95% of our business and I've worked out that so far we are down in profits by about 70%. The only positive that I can see at the moment is that I supply pressure washers and it's rumoured that MAFF may be wanting to buy or hire them from us to disinfect farms and farm buildings. They may even use our men as labourers if the work is available."

"But even then there is a downside; in order to keep the business up and running, we have to disinfect all the vehicles' wheels that enter our car park. Employing a man to do this, along with the electricity and detergent, is costing us a fortune. The cost of the detergent alone is £150 a day."

"At the moment, everybody working here and everybody in this town is in a state of depression over the situation. All that we can hope is that the weather brightens up so the disease doesn't spread so rapidly."

'The outbreak has had a great effect on about 95% of our business and I've worked out that so far we are down in profits by about 70%'

Duncan Hillary, building materials firm manager