



“Combined Effort” to Beat Crime on the Farm

CHESHIRE is predominantly a rural county, criss-crossed with dairy and arable farms. Because of this the farmers of the county are a community every bit as close-knit and important as the others we serve.

This has been highlighted over the past year as the farming community of Cheshire joined with police to stop a spate of thefts from farms of machinery valued at hundreds of thousands of pounds.

And it shows that when the Constabulary talks about the ‘communities’ it serves, the term has a far wider application than an estate in a town or a particular ethnic group.

Farmers are individual businessmen, usually operating on their own land and not communicating much with their neighbours. The farms of Cheshire cross geographical and social boundaries – but when they feel the need, they can bond together as firmly as any smaller, more close-knit group of people.

High Legh farmer Anthony Houghton said: “We may not all get along all the time, but when someone is a victim of crime we all band together – no-one wants to think that someone they know has had stuff stolen.”

Anthony himself found out just how close this bond is recently, when he was woken by the sound of his own tractor being started up in the middle of the night. He leapt from his bed and gave chase as the thieves drove the £100,000 vehicle out of his yard, the lights flashing and the engine roaring as they struggled to master the complicated controls.

Anthony explained: “As soon as we realised the tractor was being taken we were on the mobiles to other farmers in the area, and they all responded really

quickly. We had pickup trucks and cars on the roads, keeping an eye out for it and following it at a safe distance.”

After a low-speed chase, the thieves eventually realised they weren't going to lose their followers and abandoned it – managing to sneak away into the night. Anthony then found out that his Ford pick-up truck had also been stolen. He got that back weeks later – but in the meantime had bought another pickup to replace it, which he then had to try and sell on at a loss. That was annoying enough, but things are a lot worse when the bigger equipment is stolen.

Anthony said: “Having a tractor stolen isn't like having a car stolen – we can't go to the shop and get a new one to replace it. Often our tractors are built to order, and there can be a long waiting list for a new one. If we don't have the equipment we can't get the jobs done, and this can have a knock-on effect, especially at times like harvest.

“There is also the cost involved - you don't want to know what my insurance bill is every year!”

The theft of farm machinery is a relatively new problem – in recent years tractors have become more and more complicated – they are also massive. A tractor from 30 years ago would look like a child's toy when parked next to a 21st century John Deere or Landini.

“I can remember that my father used to leave his tractors in the field overnight with the keys still in the ignition, and they never got touched,” said Anthony. “We simply couldn't do that these days.”

The problem is that the tractors and machinery are needed out in the fields, but in the fields they are sometimes miles away from the farmhouse, hidden from view from the owners or any potential witnesses to the theft. This means that, thanks to the thieves, every time Anthony and his workers leave a field they have to take everything of value with them, bring it all back into the yard and make sure it's secure – hardly an ideal way of working.

“We have had instances where someone has left a tractor in a field, removed the keys and locked the doors, and when they get back there half an hour later it has been stolen,” he said. “The thieves lie in wait, hoping that you'll be called away.”

Anthony's farm yard these days is more “Prison Break” than “Worzel Gummidge” – you can see how it used to be open to the fields, but now where

there was once access there are padlocked gates and barbed wire to stop the thieves getting in, and enormous concrete blocks to stop the tractors getting out.

“A tractor is basically a tank – there isn’t much that will stop it if someone decides to drive it off. It is built to go across fields – a hedge or a padlocked gate won’t stop it,” said Anthony.

The tractor-proof blocks are so big and heavy that they need to be moved around with special equipment – yet more hassle the farmers could do without as they try to do their day to day work.

But with the help of Cheshire Constabulary through Operation Sphinx at least one gang of tractor thieves has been put out of business – and the Force is keen to work with the farming community – and further afield – to make it harder for the tractor thieves to operate.

“The bigger tractors can cost more than £100,000 new, so they are very appealing to thieves,” said Deputy Chief Constable Graeme Gerrard. “There are also security issues with a lot of makes – they are nowhere near as secure as even the most basic car. Can you imagine buying a new Porsche and being told that it doesn’t come with an immobiliser or an alarm? We are working with the manufacturers to address this, as it cannot continue.

“We think a lot of them are stolen to order and end up in containers being shipped out to Eastern Europe. Unlike cars, the driving position is always in the centre, so they have a much wider market.

“Cheshire’s farming community is just that – a community. And we need to make sure that they are safe and feel safe. When it became clear that rural crime was on the increase in Cheshire, the farming community came to us and we acted. It soon became clear that what appeared to be individual thefts were actually part of an organised, county-wide campaign. This was when we launched Operation Sphinx, and with the arrest and jailing of the eight people responsible we have sent out a clear message that we will not tolerate rural crime in Cheshire.”