

BSE**Mark Purdey****Bob Woffinden**

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The dairy farmer Mark Purdey, who has died aged 52 of a brain tumour at his home in Elworthy, Somerset, had a strong awareness of the possible harmful effects of chemicals in the environment. A passionate polemicist on environmental issues, he challenged the orthodox line about the origins of the **BSE** outbreak in cattle first recognised in 1986.

Born in Much Hadham, Hertfordshire, he was a scion of the famous Purdey family of gunsmiths - a bizarre irony since Mark was incapable of harming any living thing, let alone shooting it. He was educated at Haileybury college, Hertfordshire, before turning down a place at Exeter University and initially embarking on a kind of post-hippie bucolic existence. He was briefly married, had two children and ran a dairy farm in Devon.

His life changed one day in 1984 when a Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF, as it then was) official told him he had to comply with a warble fly eradication order and treat his herd of Jersey cows with an organophosphate (OP) pesticide. "When she arrived, it was as if my whole life became focused," he explained. "Prior to that, I knew what was happening in farming, and I was concerned, but I hadn't been actively campaigning."

Purdey refused, arguing that the suggested dose was far too high and in any case his natural treatment for warble fly was perfectly effective. The battle lines with the agricultural bureaucracy were drawn; before they had a chance to prosecute him, Purdey took MAFF to court and shook administrative complacency by winning his case.

In the following years, BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) became widespread in British cattle. Mark began ordering scientific papers from the British Library and elsewhere. He turned his fierce intellectual curiosity to the study of pesticides, neuro-degenerative diseases in humans and animals, and multinational chemical companies: was there, he wondered, any link between them all?

MAFF attributed BSE to contaminated meat and bonemeal (MBM) products fed to cattle, and banned the feed in July 1988. As the 1990s unfolded, however, thousands of cattle that had not been alive when the feed was used went down with the illness. Purdey also noted that no home-reared cattle on fully converted organic farms had contracted BSE. He believed that the onset of the disease was associated with the over-use of chemicals on the cattle

WITH THE OVER-USE OF CHEMICALS ON THE CATTLE.

In a series of lectures to the farming community and concerned environmentalists, he attacked the government position. Then, farmers and others contacted him with personal accounts of illness suffered as a result of pesticide use.

He got in touch with me after I made a First Tuesday television documentary arguing that the so-called Spanish cooking-oil disaster had nothing at all to do with cooking oil but was actually caused by OP pesticides. I subsequently wrote the article about him for the Guardian (August 13 1994) that brought his work to the attention of a wider audience.

The generosity of Guardian readers enabled him to establish a small fund for conducting first-hand research on BSE and its human equivalent, CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease), where it was prevalent in other countries. He went, for example, to the Rocky Mountains in the US to examine chronic wasting disease in wild deer and elk; and to Iceland, where, intrigued by his line of research, the country's chief veterinary officer drove him round the country.

In Britain, the scientific establishment regarded him as, at best, an irritant; in other countries government officials were happy to facilitate his research. Purdey wrote his work up in a number of journals, including Medical Hypotheses, the Journal of Nutritional Medicine and The Ecologist. Although an impecunious dairy farmer, he built up a support base for his anti-establishment views. Lord King, the former defence secretary, provided contacts in government; Teresa Gorman, the maverick MP for Billericay, was an enthusiastic backer; Ted Hughes, the poet laureate, was a long-term friend and supporter.

Purdey built his own house on his Somerset farm where from 1989 he lived with his partner, Margaret, and a growing family. At his lectures, he used to joke that he could not personally prove that environmental chemicals lowered male sperm count; however, as an organic farmer with eight children, he was at least proof of the opposite.

On April 2 1998, he gave evidence to the BSE Inquiry under Sir Nicholas Phillips (now Lord Phillips, the lord chief justice). The upshot was that the inquiry discounted his theory. Of course, the theory that pesticides were solely to blame was far from correct, and Purdey was constantly modifying his view; equally, only the ignorant would suggest that it was completely wrong.

What we do know about the BSE outbreak, among other things, are the following: that the animal feed which was so devastating in this country mysteriously had no ill-effects on cattle when it was exported; that the government has failed to prove its theory by replicating it experimentally (which is an exact parallel with the Spanish

theory by replicating it experimentally (which is an exact parallel with the Spanish cooking-oil situation); that no feed manufacturers or anyone else were ever prosecuted for having caused the outbreak (as defence lawyers would soon have picked holes in the official theory); and that, as those who got through all 16 volumes of the inquiry report found out, Lord Phillips, too, disputed the official theory as to the exact origin and timescale of the illness.

In any event, it is already perfectly clear that, in trying to awaken public concern about the adverse health effects of environmental chemicals, Purdey has been proved right. In March 2001, Edward Stourton presented an excellent Correspondent programme on BBC2 about his work. Following that, Purdey was invited to discuss his ideas with the Prince of Wales. We laughed as he told me about the precautions taken in order to get him into Highgrove - Purdey being one of the least likely people to constitute a security threat.

The Correspondent programme was shown in Australia, as a result of which Purdey was alerted to the fate of aboriginal manganese miners on Groote Eylandt, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, a significant proportion of whom had fallen victim to spongiform brain disease. He visited them, and also went to the island of Guam, in the Pacific, to see the long-term effects on the indigenous peoples of US nuclear testing. He was gathering pieces of evidence in his determined personal quest to discover what he termed the "toxicological template" of these brain diseases - a quest that was to prove sadly unfulfilled.

Away from his research, Purdey was an enthusiastic saxophonist, whether in local pubs on Friday and Saturday nights, or (when necessary) as a calming influence for his cows. In December 2005, this kind, gregarious and altruistic man was diagnosed with a brain tumour. He is survived by Margaret, whom he married this year; by their four daughters and two sons; and by the son and daughter of his first marriage.

· John Mark Purdey, farmer and environmental campaigner, born December 25 1953; died November 12 2006

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