

# When's your MOT due?

Although I am only referring to car MOTs figuratively, I expect, like a number of my acquaintances, some of you have at some stage in the past suddenly realised several months late that yours had run out.

Likewise, when you reach a certain point in life, in my case at what I am hoping will be at least the half way point, you may think to yourself that it is probably high time to go and have an MOT yourself. In the latter case you will more likely than not just think 'oh, I'm alright, things are ticking along just fine, I'll wait until next year'. Next year arrives and you say exactly the same thing and so it goes on, year in year out, quite probably until something goes seriously awry and you

are forced to do something.

Well, all very well, but what has this got to do with farming other than the obvious fact that you aren't going to get much done from your sick bed. Not a great deal really other than that if you were to apply the same response to your agri-environment agreement, namely thinking that it's all ticking along nicely paying you a tidy sum twice a year you are, sooner or later, quite likely to come unstuck. This is especially likely to be the case if the man from Natural England or the RPA makes an appearance with his new space age GPS tablet and measures everything on the farm down to the nearest mm<sup>2</sup>.

The results of these inspections are assessed against a

penalty framework set out by the RPA which requires a double first from Oxbridge in Pure Mathematics to fully understand but, in laymans terms, the penalties ratchet up in ever increasing increments that can quite easily result in reduced or even lost payments in future years. This potentially unwelcome state of affairs has recently been exacerbated by a protracted turf war, although now resolved in favour of the larger protagonist, waged between NE and the RPA over control of the agri-environment budgets. Despite definitely being more Bugsy Malone than Al Capone the collateral damage has been to produce what can only be described by any objective observer as some very harsh penalties being imposed on farmers who had made the mistake of thinking all was well. These penalties have also very often been characterised by the fact that the error highlighted at inspection was the result of an incorrect decision in the first instance, albeit often very well meant, by NE staff rather than the applicant.

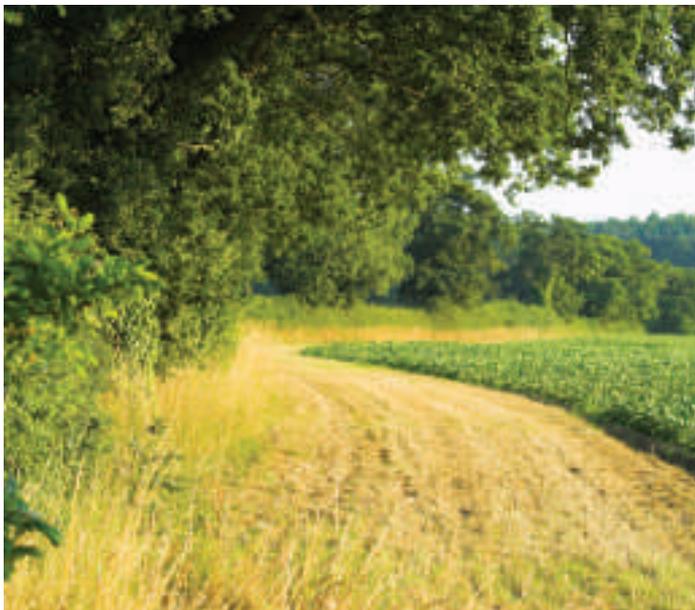
This hardening of approach is likely to be further compounded by the fact that NE staff will quite soon have no new agri-environment agreements to sign off until January 2016 as we move seamlessly from one Rural Development Programme to another and may be turning their attentions to current agreements in the interim. You may, there-



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fore, want to try and establish whether the tussocky corner you periodically catch a glimpse of is either a) a field corner, b) a pollen and nectar mix, c) a wild bird seed mix or d) none of the above (in which case, tempting though it may be to plough it up, you'll probably need to keep it as part of your 'greening' next year). The former three options, in common with all the others on arable land such as grass margins and overwinter stubbles appear to be the commonest failings with either overzealous contractors/ploughmen eating away at the margins and field corners in a bid to tidy things up or, in the case, of the rotational options, being simply overlooked at a crucial stage in the past and then continuing to be overlooked.

So now might be a very good time to unearth that dusty folder and make sure you don't get caught in any custard pie crossfire.



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