

NEWS

Book has coloured in the picture of a region

THERE can't be many people who get around to writing books about their lives, even if there are countless thousands who say they'll definitely pen their story one day. But when someone does describe their existence on paper, the resultant book can be very interesting indeed for those who know the autobiographer - because there will, inevitably, be some connection or interplay with the reader's own life.

I begin this review in such a way because a great many people across the Westcountry will have brushed up against Anthony Gibson at some time or other. In fact, I'd say there can only be handful people in the region who are as well known. The full title of his newly-published autobiography helps explain why - it is called *Westcountryman: A Life in Farming, Countryside, Cricket and Cider*.

If you have been something of a leading light within those particular areas of interest, then you will indeed be very well known across the South West - and in Anthony's case you could perhaps add the word 'admired'.

I do not go as far as to say 'universally liked' because Mr Gibson is intelligent and a self-assured bloke

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who is not afraid of putting forth his own views - which means there have been times (by his own regular admittance in the book) when his forthright stance has failed to win him friends in certain quarters.

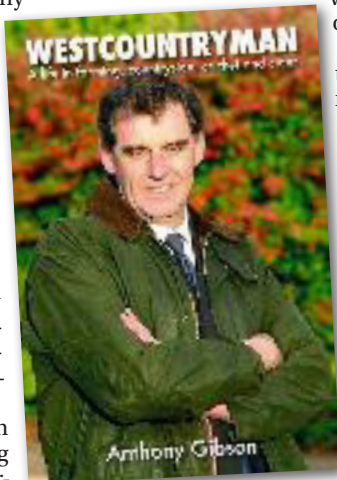
Nevertheless, if you have had anything to do with the four subject areas highlighted in his title, then you will know of Anthony Gibson - or Gibbo, as he's been known far and wide for the best part of half a century.

Indeed, when the terrible foot and mouth epidemic closed down the UK countryside at the start of this century, you didn't even need to be involved in farming. As regional director of the NFU, Anthony was well and truly in the firing line and anyone watching TV news would have seen him on their screens most evenings for months. He

regularly featured on the front page of this newspaper - indeed the cover photo chosen for his new book is taken from page one dated 2 November, 2001 - although *Western Morning News* readers knew him anyway, thanks to the regular farming col-



> Anthony Gibson proudly shows off his autobiography



umn he contributed for many years.

He describes autumn 2001 in this way: "As the Westcountry's 'face of Foot and Mouth Disease' I did endure something of a baptism of fire..."

The chapters on foot and mouth make fascinating reading both for those involved in agriculture and indeed anyone interested in food and/or the countryside. Having said that, I found every chapter fascinating - even the one on golf, which I have no knowledge of or interest in.

And perhaps the reason I liked the book so much is because of the main title: *Westcountryman*. There are probably a great many people who've spent our lives west of Bristol

who could have reached for the same definition had we written autobiographies - it would certainly have been one I'd have toyed with, having been Somerset born and bred as well as working as a writer for the region's main daily newspaper for 20 years.

I do not begrudge Anthony's grabbing it one bit. Not only was he born and brought up in the region (in south and west Devon), he has played an important role in many of the region's most important issues.

His involvement with farmers and farming is obvious. Anthony seems to have a particular love for support-

but it was a distant dream only 30 or 40 years ago.

I could rattle on about Anthony's many achievements, but I return to the title *Westcountryman* - and to the way in which I began this article. As I said, we are all self-interested to some degree - and having known the author on and off for some 35 years I thought the book would be interesting when it came through the letterbox. The reason I've taken the trouble to write this review is because I couldn't put it down.

It's not so much that Anthony is a good writer (as is witnessed in other tomes he's penned), but far more to do with the fact that he - for lack of a better term - has sort of 'coloured in' huge areas of my own beloved region. Corners which I had some idea about, but not much.

It's as if I was looking at some vast pen and ink drawing in a colouring book portraying the Westcountry's story. Obviously, given my journalistic career, I could add my own colours to a great deal of that black and white drawing - but now, thanks to this book, I have been able to fill in huge areas which were either a little bit grey to me, or entirely blank.

So although this is the tale of one man's working life - as told by himself - it is a lot more than that. *Westcountryman: A Life in Farming, Countryside, Cricket and Cider* (published by Charcombe Books at £20) is a fascinating and well-written account that is part historic document and part nuanced portrait describing, as it does, one important era of an entire region. In short, if you like books and you love the Westcountry, this is a tome that should be on your shelves.

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ing the smaller traditional mixed farms that were for centuries the hallmark of the region. In this light, he helped set up numerous commons agreements for the agrarians of Dartmoor and was hugely influential in devising ways and means of supporting agriculture and wildlife on the Somerset Levels (neither of which were easy tasks, believe you me).

More generally, the region's food-and-drink-lovers have Anthony to thank for helping to instigate the move towards honouring the first class produce of the South West - something which seems obvious today when we have major organisations such as Taste of the West and Food Drink Devon taking the lead,

> **Animals burn on a farm near Clawton, Devon, during the foot and mouth epidemic** Sam Morgan Moore

