

The day the cows came alive ...to the sound of moo-sic

'Hello, I gather you play the alphorn? (This is Kevin Dawson, producer for Home Truths on BBC Radio 4.) 'Can we come and talk to you about your instrument and maybe record you playing?'

I didn't stop to think for long. Well, who could refuse?

I suggested that it might be best to meet in a field somewhere, with some cows. He might enjoy seeing, and explaining to listeners, what happens.

Kevin sounded slightly bemused. 'Fine', he said. He was sure that the presenter, David Stafford, would be delighted. What about Tuesday 14th?

I'd discovered the effect of the alphorn on cows quite by chance.

A little while ago I'd had a performance to prepare and was

FRANCES JONES, the UK's first professional alphorn player, tells how she acted as a Pied Piper to a herd of cattle for BBC Radio's Home Truths - with some rather unexpected results

unfortunately staying for a week in a flat in Devon.

So rather than excite the wrath of lots of neighbours with my daily practice, on the first morning I went out to a quiet bit of the South Devon coast path, found an even more secluded 'permitted footpath' that ran along the back of an empty grassy field, and started to play.

After a few minutes I noticed a herd of cows in the far distance, that hadn't been there before.

Then I noticed that they seemed

to be coming towards me.

As I continued to play I realised that they were definitely coming towards me. About 50 Friesians.

As I kept playing, they drew closer and closer and before long I was completely surrounded by cows. They seemed transfixed.

Then I remembered.

Of course, the alphorn in Switzerland was used to call the cows. Here they were. It was quite surreal, but it seemed somehow natural too.

This felt like a very appropriate scenario for the Home Truths team to witness. I made arrangements with John Barker, who keeps a herd of rare White Park cattle near where I live, and wrote to Kevin with directions. I had the following email back:

'I have spoken to David Stafford (the programme's presenter) and he informs me that it has been an ambition of his to play the alphorn for a very very long time. It appears that he is a very very happy man due to the prospect of meeting you and the instrument.'

Tuesday the 14th dawned bitterly cold and raining hard. I rang Kevin and suggested rearranging. Not possible, he said. David was a very busy man. In fact, as we arrived the rain cleared. So out we climbed, out came the microphones and recording equipment. I was introduced to David Stafford and the conversation began.

He asked why I'd chosen to play the alphorn and how long I'd been playing. He wanted me to explain the original functions of the instrument, and why I'd brought him to this field.

He then asked me to get the alphorn out of its case, and as it emerged he suddenly interrupted his calm, measured commentary with 'Ooh! Isn't it pretty!'

He described its size, its beauty and the flowers and Swiss flag decorating the bell. Then he invited me to start playing.

The cattle were engrossed in grazing away in the far distance. The moment the first sound came from the alphorn, though, heads looked up.

As I continued to play, the cows started coming towards us - slowly at first, then running to where the sound was coming from.

David was ecstatic: 'This is absolute magic,' he said. 'It's like - like witchcraft over cows!'

It couldn't have been better. His sheer amazement and excitement as he described the scene to the microphone was wonderful to hear!

The cows came right up to us and very soon we were totally surrounded by an attentive herd of about 60 handsome White Park cattle.

They were utterly mesmerised by the sound of the beautiful Swiss melodies. David was almost speechless with wonder.

We had cows snuffing all around us, mooing a bit, sticking their noses into the recording



As the recording gets under way one very inquisitive cow moves closer to inspect the source of the music

See for yourself the entire video of Frances' amazing encounter with the cows by going to:
www.swissreview.co.uk/video/alphorn



BBC presenter David Stafford just cannot believe it as the cows come running to listen to the 14 foot long alphorn

equipment, my alphorn case, and even into the bell of the horn itself.

After further conversation, exploring opportunities for playing and describing the alphorn repertoire, I played a little more for the cows and then we slowly packed up and withdrew, under the lingering gaze of around 60 pairs of doleful brown eyes.

In his closing remarks, David commented that it was one of the most strange and unforgettable interviews he had ever conducted. And I must admit that although I have played to cows now on a number of occasions, this was indeed a memorable day for me too.

I can't begin to imagine what it all meant to the cows!

A recording of the full BBC Radio 4 'Home Truths' broadcast can be heard on Frances's website, www.AmazingAlphorn.com, with photographs and video footage of the occasion. If you're looking for an alphorn player, Frances can be contacted through her website, or ring 0118 926 8598.



Frances Jones with the man who introduced her to the alphorn, Roger Zanetti, at his home in Yverdon-les-Bains, Vaud