2. Summary of the spread of BSE, 1985–88

2.1 The following brief account draws on a combination of contemporary sources, scientific journals, and statistics provided by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA)\(^1\) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland (DANI). The footnotes indicate the sources used.

2.2 Early on in the epidemic, all reported cases of BSE were confirmed by histopathological examination at the Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL), following referrals from Veterinary Investigation Centres (VICs), to which farmers or vets initially reported symptoms. It is likely, however, that the first cases of the disease were either not reported or were not referred to the local VIC, making thorough analysis of the pattern of emergence difficult. A full description of the early course of the disease can be found in vol. 3: *The Early Years, 1986–88*. A scientific account of the epidemiology is in vol. 2: *Science*.

2.3 What was later to be recognised as the first confirmed case of BSE was identified in Sussex in the south of England. The animal, Cow 142 on Pitsham Farm, became ill in the summer of 1985, and was killed and underwent post-mortem examination in September of that year. However, the case was picked up once BSE had been identified over a year later, and a retrospective survey of cases was undertaken to see if any other early ones had been missed. For example, seven other cows with similar symptoms had died on the Pitsham Farm earlier in 1985, but it was not possible to confirm that these were also cases of BSE because no brain tissue suitable for diagnostic purposes had been preserved.

2.4 During April 1995, a case showing similar symptoms was seen by a vet on Plurenden Manor Farm in Kent.\(^2\) However, the CVL was not contacted until November 1986. By the end of December it had received three brains of suspected cases from the same farm, where altogether, in the previous two years, seven cows with similar symptoms had been destroyed, and one bull had died (although it was not considered then to be due to the same cause). It was the three Plurenden Manor Farm cases that led to the identification of BSE as a new disease in December 1986.\(^3\) In the same month a further case was referred to the CVL by the Langford VIC in Bristol.\(^4\)

2.5 A paper published by John Wilesmith in 1991 described the distribution of the first suspected cases from April 1985 to December 1986.\(^5\) This showed the first cases appearing in Kent and Somerset, followed by North Yorkshire, then Cornwall and Dyfed, and West Sussex and Devon. The exact pattern of appearance clearly differed depending on the criteria used – the time-lag in some areas between the

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\(^1\) The VLA was created in 1995, amalgamating the Central Veterinary Laboratory and the Veterinary Investigation Centres

\(^2\) T2 p. 53; YB87/7.8/1.1–1.2

\(^3\) YB86/11.25/2.1

\(^4\) YB86/12.16/2.1

\(^5\) J W Wilesmith, Epidemiology Unit, Central Veterinary Laboratory, *Seminars in Virology*, vol. 2, 1991, pp. 239–45. More recent epidemiological evidence suggests that the disease might have spread initially not only from the South West of England, but also from the southern part of Wales (see T111 p. 36)
reporting of a suspect case and the confirmation of disease was an important factor here. However, the general pattern appeared to be of a spread from the South East to the South West, then northwards. By the autumn of 1987, Scotland had its first suspect case.

2.6 By the end of December 1987, 132 cases had been confirmed on 113 farms. Of these 28 had been in Devon, 21 in Cornwall, 9 in Somerset, 8 in Kent, 6 in Scotland and 5 in Wiltshire.6

2.7 An article by John Wilesmith et al. on the initial epidemiological findings was published in the Veterinary Record in December 1988, covering the period up to March 1988.7 During this time the greatest proportion of herds with confirmed cases had been found in Kent, Hampshire, Berkshire and Bedfordshire, all of which had over 4 per cent of their dairy herds affected. Cornwall and West Sussex had between 3 and 4 per cent affected. Only a low percentage of herds had been affected in the north of England, Wales and Scotland – generally less than 1 per cent. Because of the larger number of herds in the South West, the actual number of cases was highest in that region. BSE had also spread to Guernsey, with one confirmed case, and several more suspect cases.8

2.8 Dairy herds were far more affected by BSE than beef herds. The recorded incidence among dairy herds between 1 April 1985 and 31 March 1988 was 311 out of 44,767 herds (0.69 per cent), considerably higher than the incidence in beef suckler herds (11 out of 54,166 herds, or 0.02 per cent).9 This was probably due to the lower levels of concentrate feeding in beef suckler herds,10 and hence lack of exposure to the agent, rather than any breed resistance.11 All cases were in adult females except for one confirmed and one clinically suspect case in adult males.12 The first confirmed case of BSE in a bull was in 1988 in Scotland.13

2.9 By June 1988, when the disease was made notifiable, a total of 727 cases had been confirmed on 585 farms.14 Notification led to a marked increase in reported cases, and a truer picture of the incidence of the disease. The year ended with a cumulative total of 2,296 confirmed cases, and almost all counties in Great Britain affected.15 The highest incidence in dairy herds was now being seen in Berkshire (17.6 per cent), Hampshire (12.5 per cent), Surrey (11.5 per cent) and Cambridgeshire (11.0 per cent). The first case in Northern Ireland was also in 1988.16

2.10 Chapter 3. sets out statistics on the course of the disease up to 20 March 1996, and, in a few cases, beyond that date.