Mr Geoffrey Sutcliffe beside the unlocked water board gates.

**Farmer blames water board after sheep theft**

WEST Wales farmer Mr Geoffrey Sutcliffe is blaming Welsh Water for opening the gate to a band of sheep rustlers who made off with half his flock.

In a quick and quiet operation the gang drove a lorry through an unlocked gate on land owned by Mr Sutcliffe at Banne-y-Mount, near Llanfair, probably late on Thursday or early Friday and loaded up 139 sheep worth an estimated £10,000.

"I am devastated. They took half of my flock," said Mr Sutcliffe.

Mr Sutcliffe, who lives five miles away at Cafrwyd, Mybrlyn, with his wife Doreen, says he lays much of the blame for the loss on Welsh Water.

The authority is building an extra storage reservoir on Mr Sutcliffe's land at Synod Inn. The operation was scheduled to have taken two years but has gone on for an extra six months. Welsh Water constructed four gates opening on to the land for easy vehicular access. And while Mr Sutcliffe can lock his own gates, he says he is unable to padlock the gates owned by the water authority because the land is not officially his until the work is completed and the land handed back.

"I blame a lot of what has happened on the water board. They have prevented me from taking proper safety precautions in locking the gates, and I blame them for the loss," he said.

The stolen sheep were unshorn and marked with a red 'S' on their right shoulders. But Mr Sutcliffe says that the mark could be easily removed when the sheep are shorn.

Western Mail Reporter

The Cedigion branch of the National Farmers Union says it is concerned over a number of recent cases of sheep rustling.

County secretary Mr Emrys Hughes said he believed a well-organised gang is at work in the area, working through a middle man, possibly a farmer, who would not raise suspicion when turning up at an abattoir with a large number of sheep.

"We would appeal to people living in the countryside to keep their eyes and ears open for any strange activities involving vehicles which could be used for transportation, especially if they are parked in unusual settings late at night," said Mr Hughes.

A Welsh Water spokesman commented that the gates were initially erected for the farmer's benefit for ease of access on to the land.

They had not received any complaints from Mr Sutcliffe and he added that there was no restriction on padlocking the gates.