

Blue Sky Thinking

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2004-05

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Chapter One

May 04

In 1982 my Mother-in-law, Marjorie, started a monthly journal, 'Mostly for Women', which was published in a magazine called The East Sussex Farmer. She painted a vivid and appealing picture of the surrounding Sussex countryside, her family and her life as a farmer's wife.

Twenty two years later, farming continues in Little Horsted and it seems a good idea to restart the journal. Marjorie's son Michael, my husband, is now the farmer. His father, Marjorie's husband Jim, still turns up for work each day (including weekends) and in spite of the fact that he is in his late 70s, complains vociferously if there is nothing he can do! Marjorie recalls that when she and Jim were first married, Jim's father used to turn up in a similar way, but at a very early hour. If no-one was up, he would stand under the bedroom window and shout! I have threatened Jim with dire consequences if he ever tries any such thing!

Michael and I have been together for ten years and have a nine year old son, Timmy. Michael also has two sons, Jonathan (21) and Simon (18) from his first marriage. They pass through our household from time to time, eating us out of house and home and leaving enormous trainers everywhere. These are frequently demolished by Bilbo, our all-consuming black labrador!

In 1982 the farm grew crops and had a dairy herd. Eight workers and family members were employed. In 2004, we grow crops and rear beef cattle. Michael is the only full time farm worker, helped out by Jim and some part time and seasonal labour. The machines have got bigger; the work more isolated; the knowledge more technical and the paperwork more complicated and prolific!

Traditionally, farmers wives stayed at home, kept the farm accounts, answered the phone and fed the chickens etc. I do not come from a farming background and throughout our marriage, I have worked outside the farm, for the local authority or the NHS, in various managerial roles. This has provided a useful income throughout a period of great movement (downward!) in farming incomes. This loss of income has been the impetus for many farmers' wives to take on new roles, working outside the farm or running businesses from home.

The declining returns from traditional farming activity have pushed us into various diversifications. We now have various light industrial workshops, storage and offices housed in our farm buildings, employing about eight people. Horses and ponies are stabled and grazed on a DIY livery basis. Michael has been finding it increasingly difficult to manage all of this activity, in addition to doing the farming jobs. Just at a time when many farmers' wives are taking on employment outside the farm, our rather perverse solution is for me to give up my (relatively!) well paid job with the local NHS and join the family business! I think the chattering classes call it 'downshifting'. My role is to help on the farm, manage the

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diversifications, develop new projects and interpret the raft of rules, regulations and funding streams which come out of the government Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Working in the public sector has made me very familiar with government bureaucracy!

I am starting my new role at a time of opportunity. Grants are available to help farmers to develop projects which offer employment in rural areas, enhance the environment, promote tourism and education and utilise redundant buildings. Recent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy means that European Union subsidies are no longer linked to production. Until now, we have been heavily incentivised to grow certain arable crops (especially wheat) in particular fields which are registered to receive subsidy. We are now free to put animals, crops and other activities anywhere on the farm and we can experiment with new ideas and products without a loss of income. We will receive a subsidy linked to the historic size of our farm, which we can increase by participating in various schemes to enhance wildlife and the environment.

While we are busily planning for the future, day to day life goes on. This has been our best ever year for calves. 37 out of 38 cows turned out to be in calf (the bull did a super job!). They all calved within six weeks and most calved on their own. So far we have not lost any from the main group. The bull in fact, got carried away and got some six month old heifers in calf - rather embarrassingly, having sold them to our regular buyer, we had to buy them back and deal with the consequences. This has necessitated several visits from the vet, resulting in the removal of a dead calf and a caesarean birth with a live bull calf as a result. The vet kindly removed the stitches as the highlight of Timmy's ninth birthday party - the children went home with a piece of birthday cake and a stitch each. Beats a party bag any day! The final heifer calved naturally with help from ourselves and the vet, but turned out to be a disinterested teenage mother, so 'Lucky' is being hand-reared by Timmy. The same bull has just arrived back for this season, so we will keep a watchful eye.

Bilbo loves this time of year, as he spends most of it following the calves to get some tasty morsels. When he is missing and he comes back licking his lips, I know where he has been!

Timmy was keen to contribute to our new enterprises and demanded four chickens for Christmas. Michael volunteered to help Timmy build a chicken coop and a simple 'A' coop was agreed upon, with handles to lift it around the field. Various bits of timber were found and nailed together, wire netting was cut and stapled, trap doors designed, weather boarding applied and hey presto! - our first ever homemade chicken coop - a good bit of father and son bonding too! All we had to do was lift it from the workshop to the field and it would be ready. Oh dear - could all those bits weigh so much? Never mind - just another job for the JCB! Henrietta, Chicken Licken, Henny Penny and Ginger are now full grown and laying up to 4 eggs per day. Timmy has decided to sell the eggs and then get more chicken. He has designed himself a flag, drawn up a logo, set his price and is ready for the future. Along the way Michael and I have to move house

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because he is going to run the farm! With determination like that, I hope he has a bright future.