

Blue Sky Thinking

Chapter Seven

October 2004

Our first bullock sold out in 6 weeks and number two is due back from the abattoir next week. We did keep a box for ourselves and sat down rather anxiously to our first roast dinner. Thankfully, it was absolutely scrumptious and I have felt justified in marketing it as 'Premium beef at supermarket prices'. The feedback from our customers has also been very positive - our friends Mandy and Adrian sat down to a rib of beef and said afterwards, 'Do you know, it was so lovely that we couldn't stop and we ate the whole lot in one go at Sunday dinner.' A similar joint recently fed Michael, Timmy and me for two meals!

Since the end of harvest, I have been trying to prompt Michael to go and buy some store lambs, so that we will be able to sell lamb boxes in the spring. I was greatly encouraged when he suddenly phoned me to say that he was going to Hailsham market with Tom (a young farming colleague with some expertise in sheep) to buy the store lambs and how many did I think we could afford? We agreed on twenty and I hurried home later that day, eager to find out what he had bought. He seemed a little sheepish and explained that there had been a bit of a run on store lambs - they were too expensive, so he hadn't bought any. However, Tom had taken some of his own finished lambs to the market, decided that the price offered was not acceptable and that he would take them home again. Michael promptly bought seven of them and booked them into the abattoir! I found myself with seven days to organise packaging, marketing and another freezer!

Luckily, the first issue of the Bradford's Farm Newsletter was a bit hit and lots of our caravan storage and workshop customers telephoned us, saying, 'We never knew that you did all these other things and we'd like a box of beef'. I'll be sending out Issue 2 very soon, and hopefully they will also want a box of lamb. Several farming colleagues also rang to congratulate us on our initiative!

Our attempts at diversification are beginning to pay off and we did manage to get back into profit last year. The financial projections look reasonably healthy, but somehow the cashflow is always a problem and the overdraft seems to be unshrinkable! We are doing all that we can at present to maximise income and I have attempted to put some controls on spending. One new idea for Jim and Michael is that all household bills should be paid out of a fixed monthly allocation of private drawings. This seemed to be working well until Jim expected to have a box of beef without paying for it! He proved completely unmovable on this point, even though I pointed out that we had paid for ours! I must remember to ask Marks & Spencer if the shareholders are allowed to go and help themselves from the store whenever they feel like it, in addition to

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receiving their dividends. In the meantime, I too, have dug in my heels and I have the key to the freezer!

During October, Michael and I had another trip to France; this time to the Somme area, courtesy of Interreg. This European project aims to support rural diversification and tourism and to promote cross-border cultural and economic links between European countries. Amusingly, the presence of the Channel Tunnel allows us to claim a border with northern France! Interreg gave us a grant towards our marketing and publicity for the meat and farm tours and also funded a large part of this recent trip. We were part of a group of about twenty farmers and we looked at various farming and tourism enterprises in the Somme. We were very impressed by the ability of the French farmers to access grants and with the amount of support and assistance they received from various layers of national and regional government. However, they were facing issues broadly similar to those of English farmers. We saw some innovative diversifications and came home with lots of ideas to try out. We will look forward to hosting a farm tour for them when they come to East Sussex on a return visit next year.

Our own diversifications mean that it is increasingly difficult to leave the farm and as we had just returned from France, we felt that we couldn't go away again. Because of this, when Timmy had a few days away with my Uncle at half term, we ended up driving to Tewkesbury for Sunday lunch to collect him! Eight hours in the car and the delights of the M25 on a Sunday evening! Our only consolation is that some people face journeys on the 'road to hell' on a daily basis! Farming is not such a bad life after all.