

Blue Sky Thinking

Chapter Three

June 04

During the month of June, the farming community has been fascinated by the TV programme "Jimmy's Farm", in which a friend of Jamie Oliver attempts to set up a free range pig farm on a derelict farm site. My husband Michael and I found Jimmy a likeable bloke who certainly worked hard, but were frustrated by the lack of reality in the situation as portrayed, e.g. no application for planning permission for caravans; no sanctions from the bank for being over the overdraft limit! The programme spawned a lively chat room debate on the Farmers Weekly Interactive website, with views varying from abusive to supportive. Some farmers congratulated Jimmy for managing to harness the BBC publicity machine and funding from a well heeled mate, for avoiding the mass market/low value route and for working hard. Another saw the migration of young urban professionals into the countryside as an opportunity, advising, *"They want to keep rare breeds, it's all got to be free range. Be nice to them; help them; advise them. They want to feel liberated. Help them by liberating their money for a start."* However, the most telling point made is that of how the media present agriculture in one of two ways - either as homespun, genuine, back-to-nature real food luvvies like Jimmy: or as pesticide spraying, animal-torturing producers of dodgy food who ought to go back to the traditional ways of their grandfathers. The viewing public fail to realise that without the money from TV programmes and books to back us up, we are stuck trying to produce food at the painfully low prices people are prepared to pay for food nowadays.

However, earlier this month it seemed that possibly our own TV opportunity had come. We received an email, via the National Farmers Union (NFU), from a location manager looking for a working farm for a 'reality' TV show later this year. Ideally the farm would have a mixture of arable and livestock. It could be anywhere in England. The show involved about 10 "celebrities" living on a farm (TV company to provide the necessary accommodation) to see how they cope with the lifestyle. A kind of "Hell's Kitchen", but on a farm! We duly expressed our interest and entered into discussions with the TV company, but as matters progressed they modified their brief, until they were looking for a farm with a "romantic feel" - to be pretty, old farm buildings etc. Ideally there would be a courtyard, surrounded by where the animals are housed. There needed to be an open area of firm ground, to build their production unit and/or barn/residential block. Also the farm must be able to take other animals onto the farm for filming. In the end I sent them the following note of caution.

"Our farmhouse is quite pretty, but apart from a Sussex Barn, our farm buildings are modern and not pretty and those surrounding the farmyard are occupied by diversifications, i.e. other businesses. There is field space the other side of the house or behind the grain store - other animals would need to come with housing as we don't have unused buildings to put things in! I do realise that the primary aim is to produce a TV entertainment show, not a programme about farming, but it is worth

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pointing out that these days, a successful farming business is a specialist enterprise requiring technical and business expertise, which usually tends to concentrate on one or two areas, such as arable, beef, horticulture etc. Most farming businesses also need diversifications, such as B&B, workshops, direct sales or something, to survive. There are very few cute farms with a wide range of animals, unless they open to the public and market themselves as a tourist enterprise. The programme does seem to want to create something which is a long way from reality - maybe worth considering these points in the context of a 'reality' TV show?

I have heard no more.

Having failed to make our fortune from TV, we have turned our attention back to our own farming business. This month we sold the first of our own finished beef, in the shape of two Angus bullocks bought by the local butcher. He has been eyeing them up in the field for some time and recently, the deal was done. We waited anxiously while they were slaughtered and cut up - our butcher then pronounced it the best beef he had seen for a long while. We are now awaiting feedback from those who have eaten it! Hopefully soon, I will have the store room finished and our beef will be available in freezer packs to the general public. The lambs will be arriving in the autumn.

At the end of June, as part of an NFU trip, we had the opportunity to visit various farming enterprises in southern France. In the area around Toulouse, the main crops were grapes; tomatoes; maize for animal feed; tobacco and wheat. The farms which we visited were prosperous and the farmers were very good at accessing funding such as European grants. However, the farmers to whom we spoke had no idea how they were going to adapt when EU subsidies are separated from production two years from now - they were very much burying their heads in the sand and refusing to think about it! The other interesting issue was that of water. All the crops were constantly (and expensively!) irrigated, otherwise very little grew. However, water was growing scarcer and the level of the river was at an all-time low. Perhaps global warming will be their downfall! We do moan about the weather in England, but at least our crops do not usually lack water - quite the opposite, as I sit writing this in a torrential downpour, with the wind howling outside! Another English summer!