

Blue Sky Thinking

Chapter Eight

November 2004

The beef continues to sell well and I have secured my first contract to supply a local pub. Another local hostelry is also interested. This will be a real bonus for all of us, as I will have a guaranteed market for half of a bullock, they will be able to charge a premium for locally produced beef and we will both be able to gain from each other's publicity. Partnership is often more rewarding than competition! Even better, the pub is the one next to our caravan site, which hopefully will be open in the New Year - customers will be able to stay on our site, eat our beef in the pub and take a box for the freezer when they return home! We are now also able to offer lamb boxes, each containing $\frac{1}{4}$ of a lamb, i.e. 4-5kg. This has been greeted with enthusiasm by people who cannot fit 12kg of beef into their freezer!

We are continuing to develop our plans for farm tours and I have booked myself onto a three day training course in the spring, in order that we will be accredited to provide tours for school parties. We have also recently acquired a second hand marquee, so that we will have somewhere dry and windproof to offer discussions, information and refreshments at the end of the tours. We are thinking of selling tickets to view our first attempt at erection! We are also very keen to encourage adult groups to visit the farm, so we eagerly accepted an invitation to speak at the local Rotary Club Ladies' Night dinner - experience has taught us that most groups will subsequently wish to avail themselves of a tour. Michael and I crafted ourselves a carefully constructed double act, with slides to illustrate our explanations. Unfortunately, the power went off ten minutes after our arrival and stayed off all evening! Dinner was by candlelight and the audience had to manage without visual stimulation. Nevertheless, they were extremely interested and enthusiastic and the Rotary Club will be visiting the farm next spring.

The forthcoming changes to the agricultural subsidy system have meant a re-evaluation of our arable enterprise. Once subsidies are decoupled from the production of crops, it will no longer be economically sensible to pay rent for poor land and we will only plant crops which offer a real prospect of profitability. We thought that we had explained all this to our landlady's agent back in the summer and he had agreed to draft new farm business tenancies to reflect the changed arrangements. Therefore we were somewhat perplexed when the new tenancy agreements arrived with the same old rental requirements! An urgent meeting was arranged and the economic realities of the Single Payment Scheme were reiterated. The outcome was that we handed back 175 acres of land. If the agent cannot find a new tenant, he will employ us to carry out the work necessary to meet the cross compliance rules and claim the payment!

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November is a busy time in Sussex, as the Bonfire Societies' annual festivities reach a climax at the internationally renowned parades and displays in Lewes on 5 November. Our local Primary School has its own bonfire celebration each year, with a stunning firework display provided by one of the local Bonfire Societies. The evening is organised by the school PTFA, of which I am now a member. In order to raise funds, we provide a BBQ and at our committee meeting, we had a bit of a crisis about who was going to peel and chop the onions - for some reason no-one wanted the job! We solved it for this year by allocating everyone 5 onions each, but thankfully I have now found a local firm who will provide 10kg of peeled and chopped onions for £13 - that is one money-making road down which I wouldn't personally want to travel!

At the end of the Bonfire season, Christmas is fast approaching and I started my annual task of trying to find out what present might find favour with Michael, who can never think of anything he would like! Surprisingly, however, he informed me that he wanted an air rifle, so that he could clear the barns of pigeons without causing damage with the shotgun. We shopped successfully for the rifle and Michael, Timmy and I went down into the wood to try it out and to line up the sights. I have never shot anything before, as I do not like the noise and 'kick' of the shotgun and this was also Timmy's first attempt. We were fairly successful in our attempts to hit a target on a tree and returned to the farm to investigate the barns. I aimed at a pigeon in the roof, fired and, to my surprise, hit it at the first attempt - I didn't think shooting was so easy! It is a necessary activity in order to keep the grain and equipment free of bird droppings, but I do not feel comfortable about regarding it as a form of recreational entertainment. My usual philosophy is; if you kill it then you should eat it - unfortunately, Bilbo, our all consuming labrador, got to my pigeon before I did - still, food for thought!