

■ Building business on passion — Sue Prince

Deborah Barham Smith tells us of yet another entrepreneur who has become successful in the business world.

With a background as a talented artist, entrepreneur Sue Prince has, for over 25 years, been pouring her passion for the countryside into developing an award-winning organic farm.

In 1984, only a few months after she and her husband had agreed to buy historic 92-acre Beechenhill Farm in Ilam, the EU introduced milk quotas. This restricted them from increasing milk production and the subsequent income necessary for their large mortgage; needing to diversify swiftly, the idea of doing B&B had to be brought forward.

Aware that farming in the Peak District National Park had great potential, Sue and her family have chosen not to farm intensively because of their passion and respect for the countryside. Terry, with his previous farming experience complements his wife, the project director, with his practical skills.

In 1985, Sue became involved with Peak District Farm Holidays, an active network of around 35 farms offering accommodation. She took over the marketing, eventually becoming chairman; then project officer for its business development, taking a year to lead a bid for European funds. This was for capital improvements on the farms, such as putting in en-suite bathrooms; IT investment (innovative at the time and which had the most impact) purchasing computers for 16 farms, training them to become computer literate, and working with a programmer to design a website.

This experience taught Sue a salutary lesson — that to be too efficient as a leader of any group is to “steal their oxygen”. One challenge appeared to be a difficulty in engaging some people in transformational change, particularly as she was clearly ahead of her time with her ideas. Sue’s strength has been in spotting opportunities whereby she can maximise

trends, but beyond that she is creative, brave and tenacious.

She has studied behavioural patterns, giving her the essential knowledge to deal with and influence a wide variety of people.

By 1990, with the B&B and one holiday cottage established, planning permission was applied for on the barn to produce a second larger letting cottage. For its refurbishment, they had a third of the necessary funds in the form of a grant, a third from savings, but still needed the remaining third. After reading William Horwood’s book, *Skallagrigg* (about a boy with cerebral palsy) Sue had the inspiration to get money up front by selling time-share weeks for the disabled, there being so few accessible holiday cottages available, compared with the numbers of disabled (6,000,000) in the UK at that time. After a marketing campaign to major charities, three of them agreed to purchase one week for 10 years and paid up-front, so financing the refurbishment project. When asked for their input as to the design, the charities felt that Sue was the person to do it, as she had obviously impressed with her approach and having the right ideas. The project took six months in all to complete.

After BSE in 1998, farmers had suddenly realised that they had no idea what the content of cow feed was. The Princes had started to look at farming organically as a way forward, Terry having also by this time developed asthma. To go organic took two years with monitoring by the Soil Association.

Terry had initial reservations having farmed traditionally all his farming life. His concerns were about how to manage thistles, etc (sheep will eat ragwort so keeping that down was not a problem). The alternative was pulling it out by hand which was labour intensive, so they employed some Latvian men from Lichfield. In 2000, the farm became fully organic. As soon as sheep-dipping stopped, Terry’s asthma vanished.



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An organic system uses no poisonous chemicals that harm wild animals or plants. Many trees and bushes are planted on the farm to make safe places for wildlife to live; small animals such as hares come to live in these. Insects attract lots of birds and the natural wild plants of the Peak District thrive because no weed-killers are used.

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In 2000, Sue began to see a link between organics and tourism and so became a member of Peak District National Park Authority (PDNPA) hoping to achieve some influence from within. There was beginning to be a need for organic food but there was very little available, so she responded to the Heart of England Tourist Board's call to action, alongside the Women's Food and Farming Union (WFFU) regarding local food. There is no other machinery like the WFFU within British agriculture geared up to achieve: promoting demand for British produce; encouraging farmers and growers to practise better marketing; ensuring British produce is available and well promoted, and lobbying against unfair competition.

Peak District Foods is a group of local food producers and food businesses based in and around the Peak District. Members attend food events and farmers' markets throughout the year. Sue was a real force behind its development. Many food and accommodation businesses in the Peak District also make a point of using Peak District Foods. In 2002, Peak District Food Group produced a leaflet, *Savour the Flavour of the Peak District*, the guide to local food.

Around 2005, a mini-crisis loomed at Beechenhill when some of the staff retired. The workload, also with pulling ragwort, was so labour intensive they had been looking at

employing some Transylvanians to help — as an eco-tourist consultant, Sue had been working with Transylvania. The family decided that they would prefer to cope by pitching in, so some family members came home.

In 2007, Sue wanted to get local food into the mainstream, so she left the local food project to pursue more ideas to advance this.

In 1933 the Milk Marketing Board (MMB) had been set up to secure fair prices for producers and a guaranteed outlet for their milk. The MMB collected and marketed all milk produced by dairy farmers, pooled and distributed the returns while developing milk recording and herd health schemes. However, one consequence was that it had stopped dairy products being produced on the farms, and farmers no longer had the working knowledge or power to produce butter or cheese.

As an answer to this, in 2002 Sue started the Peak District Dairy Wagon project. The Dairy Wagon, owned by the Peak District Dairy Wagon Co Ltd, is a mobile creamery where Peak District farmers and their families can learn lost dairy skills. The idea came about from a series of dairy taster sessions organised in 2002 by the Peak District National Park Authority and the University of Derby, using special Government funds. They, with Sue as Peak District Foods project leader, organised *Making the most of your Milk*, a seminar and awareness-raising event held in Buxton, attended by over 60 local dairy farmers.

As a result of the seminar, over 30 farmers went back to college — Reaseheath College, Centre of Excellence for Dairy Technology at Nantwich — for day-long taster sessions. There they tried their hands at making cheese, yoghurt, cream, soups and desserts. It was while Sue Prince and a fellow farmer were elbow-deep in cheese curds, they realised that it only takes eight hours to make cheese and came up with the idea of a mobile dairy teaching unit, driven by a technician, travelling from farm to farm. This would cut out the substantial set-up costs and overheads

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for individual farmers still wishing to get back to basic farming skills, in order to diversify.

Between 2002 and 2005, Sue Prince as development leader with a mixed team from the Peak District National Park Authority, the Country Land and Business Association, local farmers and other advisors all worked hard to try and get funding for this innovative project. There had been nothing like this anywhere else before, which turned it into a major challenge.

A Social Enterprise co-operative company was formed in 2004; eventually, in February 2005, Sue had the opportunity to present the project to HRH Prince of Wales when he visited the Manifold Valley to meet local food producers and farmers. His Royal Highness was very interested and supportive of the idea, enlisting the help of his charity, Business in the Community. This charity got people from industry involved to see how they could help. A Jaguar Landrover executive accompanying Prince Charles was asked to assist, and donated a Landrover, an essential contribution to the success of the project.

To raise funds and get the Dairy Wagon rolling was a project that took three to four years to finalise due to the many different agencies needed to bring together for it, which in itself presented many challenges. Finally in 2006 Prince Charles launched the mobile cheese making project in Onecote.

The Government published its *Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy* in 2002 (the Curry Report) which set out a national vision for the future of food and farming in England to promote farming and diversity; in line with Sue's image for the future of farming.

For all her services to farming and tourism in the West and East Midlands, Sue was awarded a well deserved OBE in 2004.

From 2006 onwards, Sue began to get involved in researching renewable energy; the

project with small rural businesses had a commonality with Africa. She had been travelling as an eco-consultant, so this would have relevance globally.

The Princes are currently working with the Rural Development Agency (RDA) on the Pilot Light Project, a renewable energy scheme, including a bio-methane digester. It is something that can be utilised on farms, and has already been developed in the third world. To date, the Pilot Light Project has reduced carbon use from 41 tonnes to 22 tonnes in the biomass (wood) boiler. Bio-methane is virtually identical to natural gas, the main difference being that it is produced in days, rather than taking millions of years. The uses of it are as varied as are those for natural gas, for heating, cooling, as a source of chemicals, fertiliser or hydrogen. And it is the world's cleanest and most environmentally-friendly fuel.

When the Princes' daughter got married in 2008, her wedding was held in their refurbished barn. That is now used for 10 weddings annually, with any guests being accommodated in outlying B&Bs, with even Beechenhill transport laid on. Aligned with Sue's ethos, all the produce used for receptions is organic and local where possible.

Recently Sue's business, Beechenhill Farm, was "Highly Commended" (Joint 2nd) in the Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards 2009, out of 2000 businesses nominated globally.

As Sue sees it, Beechenhill's biggest challenges have been bringing all her ideas together, and the people with it. As she says, "It's all about a fantasy." She has truly turned her passion for the environment from a fantasy into a reality.

Additional information

Beechenhill Farm, www.beechenhill.co.uk ■