

## Scooping a New Future Down On The Farm (981 words)

By Michael Percy

Adversity brings out the best in people and Adrienne Boshier was ready to answer the call three years ago when the decline in British farming meant that the dairy business she had built with her husband was under threat. An ice-cream machine came to the rescue.

I met Freddie and Adrienne in the kitchen of their farmhouse. Freddie was having a late breakfast – several hours after starting work - and Adrienne was grating the zest off a dozen lemons ready to make lemon sorbet ice-cream. She popped the lemons in the microwave briefly: “that way I get more juice when I squeeze them,” she explained.

They keep a herd of 80 pedigree Ayrshire cows on a farm in Burnham which has been in Adrienne’s family for two generations. Freddie and Adrienne have been married for 35 years and both come from farming backgrounds. Co-incidentally Freddie was born on a farm owned by Adrienne’s grandparents. Their two daughters grew up loving life on a farm and relishing the work but the grim reality of modern economics meant the business could not support them.

Freddie had been up since dawn milking and feeding the animals. “Then I have to clean up and there are always lots of little jobs to do. Then I do it all again tonight, and tomorrow and the next day...”

Freddie is quietly philosophical about the price he has to accept for his milk: “It varies between sixteen and twenty-four pence per litre. To make the business pay I need twenty-six pence at least. The worst thing they ever did was get rid of the milk marketing Board.”

Adrienne was more outspoken: “The supermarkets control it all. They don’t care if farmers make a living or not.”

In order to keep the farm going they needed an additional source of income. “I was already in catering which I’d got all the equipment for,” said Adrienne, “so we wanted something on those lines. Freddie and my youngest daughter Charlotte went to the Dairy Event at Stoneleigh to look into opportunities for diversification and came back with the idea of making ice-cream.”

It has taken three years to develop the project to a point where the farm supplies ice-cream to local pubs and restaurants. The farm shop is particularly busy most weekends; in the summer families bringing their children to sit in the sun and enjoy an ice-cream cone are welcomed by Lizzy and Lily – two sheep who live next to the shop. The shop also offers a range of homemade products and Adrienne specialises in unique ice-cream cakes for all occasions.

Using the highest quality milk is vital to achieving the taste that distinguishes Hitcham Farm ice-cream. “We use our own milk, local free range eggs, fresh cream and natural flavourings,” said Adrienne. “The fruit ice-cream has real fruit. When we made blackberry and apple Freddie and my daughter picked the blackberries, the apples came from a neighbouring farmer – from a tree in his garden.”

Adrienne purees the fruit before it is added to the ice-cream. For varieties like banana and toffee crunch, pieces are added to the mix. She loves to experiment: “I’ve been playing about with popping candy – it explodes in the mouth. Kids will love it. I’m working on champagne, white chocolate chip and cranberry, and I did Christmas pudding and chocolate orange for last Christmas.”

What Adrienne is doing at Hitcham Farm could be described as a cottage industry but a peek into her ice-cream kitchen reveals a high tech environment of spotlessly clean stainless steel equipment humming away.

But despite the impressive and expensive equipment, the most important ingredient is Adrienne’s skill as an artisan ice-cream maker. “Most of my customers come from word of mouth,” said Adrienne.

Freddie smiled: “We had a whole family come in one Sunday afternoon. They’d been to lunch somewhere and didn’t like the look of any of the desserts. So they came here on their way home for one of Adrienne’s ice-creams.”

Breeding is a vital part of maintaining a good dairy herd and Freddie still breeds pedigree Ayrshire heifers that are sold to other farms to strengthen their stock. “I’ve just sent twenty heifers to Sussex,” he explained.

Showing livestock at agricultural shows was an important part of building a reputation for the quality of the stock and Hitcham Farm heifers

have won many prizes and took the top award – The Burke Trophy – in 1988 at The Royal Agricultural Show.

“Showing was the shop window for the business,” explained Adrienne. “I prepared the animals and it cost a lot of money to attend the shows. But it was good for our reputation. We are still known for the quality of our animals even though we stopped showing years ago. That’s a great skill Freddie has built up over the years – it comes from experience. You can’t put a price on that.”

In the past Freddie was a regular judge at the shows and has been a master judge at The Royal. “It’s all different now,” he said, “not so much emphasis on showing animals – not so much interest. I do a bit of judging these days. Not much.”

The important thing for Adrienne and Freddie is to keep the farm viable so it can be passed on to the next generation in their family. Charlotte is involved in the business as much as possible although she must work outside farming for the time being.

Now the future of Hitcham Farm lies not only with the quality milk and the prize heifers but in the growing success of home produced ice-cream. Local catering businesses call to collect their week’s supply; passers by – attracted by the sign proclaiming ‘Home Made Ice Cream’ venture down the farm track to explore the farm shop. “Our farm is open for business,” said Adrienne, “this is the reality of farming in the twenty-first century.”

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