

## 1. JACKIE

Good morning everyone. Thank you for coming.

We're going to start off with a history lesson. As you probably know, Richard and I have decided that this Autumn we will be backing out of the day to day running of the farm. So it seems like the right time for looking backwards, as well as forwards.

So – we go back 35 years to when Godstone Farm first started to take in visitors. I inherited some money. I had no idea what to do with it, so decided that land was pretty safe investment. This farm was for sale. It was only 15 minutes from our home and it was cheap - so I bought it.

It was, of course, cheap for a reason. There was 80 acres of pretty poor sloping land, very few usable farm buildings, a very small cottage and a monster of a house. **PICTURE OF HOUSE.**

The part to the left was the Victorian and had four nice bedrooms. The part on the right was Georgian and had all the plumbing. The part in the middle was the oldest and was locally listed. The roof leaked. The central chimney was leaning badly and threatening to pull the house down. The exterior walls were 4 inches thick and made of lathe and plaster. No heating apart from fireplaces anywhere in the house and the wiring was dubious, to say the least.

The lady who sold us the farm had been in the house for 51 years and raised her four children there. She was in her 80's and had been living in the Victorian side. However the plumbing was all on the other side. So to go to the bathroom, or to make a cup of tea, she had to cross the middle section. In the middle of winter it must have been like crossing the Arctic. She was one tough, but delightful old lady. She moved over the road to the manager's cottage and came over every day to see what we were doing and to deal out advice and encouragement.

So – there I was with a farm. Well kind of. A delightful man from ADAS came along to advise me and suggested that if I ran it single handed and raised cattle for beef I could make £5000 a year. This bought me to the next hurdle. I had four young children and no farming experience. I knew though that the children's teachers were always looking for places to go for outings. So I decided to look for a manager to run the farm as a mixed farm, which should break even, and to take in school groups to pay the profit.

So I put a letter in the Rare Breeds magazine entitled "Nut Wanted". Only one person replied, and that was Richard. We met by the ringside at the rare breed show during the cattle sales. We got on OK and decided to give it a try.

Richard and Sue and their two children shoehorned themselves into the bit of the house that had the plumbing.

Richard set to with gusto to erect fences, and I set off to do some market research. This consisted of one visit to a local school where 80% of the children said they thought milk came out of bottles.

I then went to visit the Cotswold Park Farm. This was the only farm in the country at the time that was open to the public. It was run by Joe Henson, Adams father. It was winter so the farm was closed, but Joe showed me around. He explained how they coped with the school children and how they managed the stock to avoid poaching the fields. He advised me not to take school parties around, but to let them go by themselves and then sit them down somewhere to talk to them. I asked why and he said 'You'll find out why the first time you try to point out the woolly coats of sheep to the children while the jack is busy serving the jenny in the field next door'.

So – we changed the planning permission from agriculture to agriculture and education. We wrote to all the local primary schools and they started to book.

**RICHARD** (to cover period from arrival to 2009)

When Sue and I first looked around the farm the whole place had a special feel to it. We could immediately see it's potential. We arrived there with Laura 4 and Abigail 2. **PICTURE OF RICHARD WITH CHILDREN** Charlotte was born the following March.

The house was quite interesting **PICTURE OF PLUMBING** But we set about making it habitable and the farm ready for schools. The first animals we bought were two cats to catch the mice in the house. The next was a Gloucester Old Spot pig called Sunday Lunch which came from a boys' prep school, and A Highland Cow which had the disconcerting habit of chasing anyone who was carrying a bucket. **PICTURE OF VALLA**

We tried to ensure that the farm gave children the opportunity to see a real working farm in action. They fed the animals and hand milked them. We wanted them to experience hands on contact with the animals with the touch, sounds and smells that you can't get from the TV or from books. We had letters from children thanking us for making the mud, and with comments such as "I didn't know poo and wee were hot!". **PICTURE OF BOTTLE FEEDING**

For the first year the workforce consisted of Jackie, Sue and myself (with Charlotte on my back in a carrier) Jackie did the running around as she had the only car with a tail bar. Our shop was a couple of trestle tables selling post cards, rubbers and pencils in the hall way of the old house.

In order to meet demand, in the second year, we increased to two school visits a day. Sue went back to work and we found a retired farm from the village to help with the schools. Later we were joined by a retired shepherd who was working in Sainsbury's collecting the empty trollies. He was delighted to leave the trollies behind and do demonstrations for the children.

I sheared 100 sheep each year with hand shears throughout the summer. **PICTURE SHEARING** The children were able to feel the lanolin in the wool and were then told that it is used as an ingredient for face cream – to which the invariable reply was always "Yuuuuuk".

We used to get the children to line up as a human barrier to move the sheep from one field to the next. They thought it was great fun, especially when the sheep and lambs charged through the line in the wrong direction.

The children who visited with the schools wanted to come back with their families, so we started having open days and eventually opened full time from Easter to October. There wasn't room for all the schools in the haybarn so we put in wooden stables for picnicking. We put them on sleepers so they were temporary and didn't need planning permission.

The centre of the house was rebuilt and we put in a tearoom and in 1998 built the playbarn. The playframe was bought second hand from an indoor play place in Watford which was being changed into a pole dancing club.

It is quite surprising on looking back to see how much things have changed

The biggest change is probably **HEALTH & SAFETY**. There was none when we started. Rules applied to the workplace, but no one was interested in the safety of visitors or children. EColi O157 didn't exit. **PICTURE OF CHILD WITH CALF**

There were no rules or guidelines for playgrounds. We built most of our own playground equipment and designed it along the principal that if it was safe for our children then it was OK. We tried to make it exciting for our age group. Our guideline was that an occasional broken arm was acceptable, but under no circumstances should a child be able to sustain brain damage. Bear in mind this was in the days of concrete playgrounds. Safety surfaces were "sissy". **PICTURE OF ABBEY IN**

**CONCRETE TUBES.** This was taken in a public park – not here! We realised that things had seriously changed when our local EHO told us he would really like to confine play equipment to planks one foot off the ground

## **POWER POINTS for changes**

What else has changed – lets see:

2. **BANKING** Jackie's husband ran laundrette shops. Our first bank manager came to see the farm and then, on his day off went up to London to have a look at the laundrettes. He agreed to lend up some money and showed us how to draw up a cash flow chart to show to his superiors.
3. **P THE LOCAL COUNCIL** were really helpful. They gave us advice as to how to apply for planning, and what would be acceptable. AND they did it for free.
4. **P WE PAID NO RATES**
5. **P TOILETS AND HAND WASHING.** For the first two years we had one unattractive outside toilet and the children washed their hands in a bucket. They then ate their picnics sitting on the hay in the dutch barn.
6. **P EXCEPT FOR BUYING THE FARM** there were no contracts. Sometimes a handshake was given and sometimes just a nod. I can't remember anyone letting us down on anything they had agreed on and I hope we never let anyone else down. There were no employment tribunals and no one could sue for anything. It made life pretty simple.
7. **P NOBODY SUED US** Everyone was responsible for their own safety.
8. **P WE EMPLOYED STUDENTS FROM 13 UP.** The younger children were great to employ. They were very enthusiastic and they didn't party to all hours and come in with a hangover. We also had work done by inmates from Wandsworth Prison who came with a warden and were paid in sandwiches and coffee. And we had scout groups who worked at clearing the marsh area. They were paid with lunch, tea and supper and spent the night on the tea room floor.
9. **P EXCEPT FOR PIGS THERE WERE NO CHECK ON MOVING ANIMALS.** We didn't have to eartag sheep and our chicks came down from Yorkshire by rail. We picked them up at the station where they were happily cheeping away in their box.

Things went on pretty well, but it was far from plain sailing. Some of our mistakes cost us dearly:

## **Jackie POWERPOINT**

### **MISTAKES**

1. **ALDER TREES FOR FENCE POSTS** was the first mistake. These were free, which was nice, but they either fell apart after the first year or sprouted into new Alder trees. The children liked them, but Richard had to start fencing over again.
2. **P WE TOTALLY UNDERESTIMATED THE AMOUNT OF MONEY WE NEEDED.** The animals never broke even and the visitors needed better toilets, and better paths and better picnic barns – and that was just for a start.

3. **P RARE BREEDS** were the next error. We didn't realise that most teachers had never seen a live pig and certainly didn't know the difference between a Dexter Cow and a Jersey. So there was no point in teaching children about rare breeds. In addition the reason most breeds were rare was that they were unprofitable and we couldn't sell them in the market. So gradually we went over to more common commercial animals.
4. **P OUR TARGET AGE** was 5-11. Basically primary school children. However we found that the lessons we gave in farming were not suitable for the older children, but we had a lot of enquiries from nurseries and kindergartens. Eventually we decided that those younger children benefitted just as much from the visits and we fixed our target ages at 2-8.
5. **P ADULTS WERE FREE.** This was because we felt that children enjoyed the farm more than the adults. However we painted ourselves into a corner with it. When people look at prices they look at just one, they don't add them together. So they looked at £6 per child and thought it was expensive.
6. **P WE CHARGED FOR THE PLAYBARN** When we opened the playbarn we charged separately for it. The advantage was that it kept our entrance price down and people didn't mind so much if it was really busy and they couldn't get in. However we had a lot of complaints – particularly in the winter. So eventually we included it in the entrance price.
7. **P WE ALLOWED OUR PRICES TO SLIP BEHIND.** We always tried to give good value for money. 10 years ago we started to slip behind and then it is hard to catch up. Small rises are acceptable to visitors. Large rises cause resentment.
8. **P WE TOOK THE GATE MONEY FROM THE CARS.** We thought it the best way to check the numbers. However when credit cards became popular we couldn't cope and the queues became too long. In addition when smoked windows became popular it was hard to check the number of children hiding on the floor. We even spotted one family hiding their children in the boot.

To balance the mistakes we did quite a lot of things right – even if some of them were more by accident than by design.

## Richard POWERPOINT

### WHAT WE DID RIGHT

1. **P THE FARM WAS IN THE RIGHT PLACE.** Unknown to us the perfect position for a farm attraction is near, but not on, a main road and near to where lots of people live. It also makes a good meeting point for families who don't meet up very often. However to counterbalance this we have no buildings near the car park, which is not good in winter. We are also in the green belt on the edge of a protected village, so building permission is hard to get.
2. **P WE OFFERED SOMETHING DIFFERENT.** The children enjoyed their visits and wanted to come back with their families. The mixture of farm experience and play was fairly unique at the time and people liked it.
3. **P WE MADE THE ADVENTURE PLAYGROUP LARGE.** It a big selling point in summer where parents lie out on the grass while the children play. The disadvantage is that it is good for picnics so the tea room loses out.

4. **P OUR PLAY EQUIPMENT IS DESIGNED FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN.** It's fine for small children but boring for 10-12 year olds. We did this on purpose to discourage groups of older children who can be rowdy. We can only do it of course since we have a large catchment area. Our playbarn frame is the same. The original frame in Watford was based on 6ft cubes. We used the components but re-designed it around 4ft cubes with no straight runs where older children could get up a head of steam. The exception is where we had an aerial runway at the back. This was removed recently and is waiting for renovation.
5. **P WE HAD NO COMPETITION** for a good while, though one stage a tatty smallholding down the road changed their name to Godstone Little Farm. The Little on the sign was very small. Quite a number of first time visitors on their way here were caught out and paid good money for very little.
6. **P WE DIVERSIFIED.** When we were struggling we looked for ways to raise cash. We let out some of our fields. We hosted caravan rallies. We used the cottage for holiday lets. We held car boot sales, craft fairs, rare breed days and small holder events. It was at this time I learnt that people could be very demanding as to which pitch was theirs. We even let out a shed to a wholesale fruit and veg man. He paid us in unsold produce, so although our income was low we ate wonderfully well.
7. **P WE DID VERY LITTLE ADVERTISING.** At first we did none, as we didn't know how to anyway. Later we tried it and then did a survey as to how visitors heard about us. 98% said they heard by word of mouth. So we stopped advertising, and still do. Last year we spent less than £1000. We do though give a lot of family tickets away for school raffles.
8. **P WE EXPANDED SLOWLY WHICH MEANT OUR BORROWINGS WERE LOW.**
9. **P WE KEPT A RISK ASSESSMENT DIARY** This has proved one of our best assets. Every time we discuss something that might affect risk we try to write it down. All accidents are discussed and decisions as to whether changes are needed are documented. Examples are if flooring is getting worn we talk over whether it could be dangerous. If we decide to change it we make a note and more importantly if we decide not to we make a note and write down why.

## MEMORIES **BOTH?**

**Jackie** 35 years has thrown up some interesting memories.

The first trailer we had was a fairly unstable single axel one. When I bought our first cow home in it I was disconcerted to find that each time she shifted to the back of the trailer it felt like she raised the back wheels of the car. One day I was taking a fairly wild highland steer to market. Half way there the trailer got a puncture. I had a spare wheel but no way of lifting the wheel to change it. I had stopped beside a chicken farm, so went in to telephone. The owner was very resourceful. He bought his fork lift out and raised the trailer, steer and all, high enough to change the tyre. The steer had other ideas and did his best to escape. So I stood with a stick on a packing case and tapped him on the nose each time he tried to scramble out, which the chicken man changed the tyre. I was very happy to reach the market and even happier to see the steer sold, even if it did cost us the price of a case of beer.

**Richard** What about when Toni Bell set up his van in the car park?

Or when the EHO suggested we put dayglow down the sides of all our play equipment so children didn't run into them.

**Jackie** That same EHO was the one who went scrabbling under the goat bridge during the ecoli fallout. She was looking for goat droppings and rose triumphantly when she found some, only to be told they were grass nuts.

**Richard** Do you remember when XXXXXXXX bought their trailer to borrow XXXXXXXX to take to a fete. The pig escaped jumped out on the way and made a bee line through the open door of a nearby house. When we got there later to retrieve the pig we found the lady of the house following her round with a jar "just in case she had an accident".

**Jackie** Some children were watching us put the tup in with the ewes. A five year was explaining to a three year old the purpose of the raddle. It included such words as "rainbow" and "dancing" and "flying". We decided that it was one occasion when it would be a pity to spoil a good story with plain old facts.

**Richard** What about when a member of staff was caught with a bagful of magic mushrooms that he had gathered in the fields. He thought we were daft not to make the most of such a good source of income.

**Jackie** We had quite a few problems with trailers over the years. Probably the best though is when we were taking some dexters up to the rare breed sale before the M25 was built. We were just passing Victoria Station at about 6 in the morning. When the axle in the trailer broke and the side door came open. The two cows calmly stepped out to emerge right beside a bus queue. I have never seen Richard move so fast. He was out of the driver's seat, around the car and caught their headcollars before they could go more than three paces. The look on the faces of the people in the queue was quite something.

Anyway – we continued to do OK **TURNOVER TO 2009**

**Richard said recently "We started it as a couple of nuts, and we thought we had it cracked"  
But we came to August 2009**

The summer holidays were great. The numbers were high, The weather was good, everyone was enjoying themselves and there was a lovely buzz about the place. Then came ecoli.

The outbreak was handled by the Health Protection Agency. They were frighteningly inept. The outbreak ended when we decided to close the two animal barns. They continued to dither and then shut us down after it had finished. They didn't allow us to re-open for 3 months. To add insult to injury they rang to ask what arrangements we had made to slaughtered all the animals.

This is what it did to our TURNOVER. **TURNOVER TO 2010**

Most of the information about it was in the Griffin report along with a lot of research that was not available to any of us at the time. Their recommendations were entirely sound and have led to our Code of Practice.

If we all abide by the Code it won't eliminate the risk **POWER POINT** but will a) reduce the chances of it happening and b) reduce the number of cases if it does happen.

Two things that weren't in Griffin. One was gels, although the code has picked it up. Some of you went recently to a talk by a scientist who is looking into vaccination against ecoli. He said that they did an experiment. They took a stick and rubbed it with ecoli infected faeces. They then immersed it in gel for 10 minutes. They then rubbed the gel off and the ecoli was still alive and kicking underneath.

The other thing was temperature. Our senior EHO made a graph of daily temperature against when children picked up ecoli. There was a marked rise of infection when the temperature had been over 20°C for a day or two. So worth being extra vigilant in hot weather.

I'm sure all of you have been to other attractions where they were doing things – or not doing things – that we wouldn't dream of allowing now.

There have been 12 recorded outbreaks of ecoli O157 from open farms since 2009. They were small in the number of people affected although one involved 6 people and the one last week in Lancashire 11 people.

I'm sure you all visit other farm attractions, zoos, and shops and tearooms where they have animals. If you see they are not complying with the CODE then do please, for all our sakes, talk to them and if necessary write to their local EHO's. I know feels like ratting on them, but it really is in all our interests.

While we were closed we had a lot of time to think about the future.

**P** Should we sell? Should we close? If we continued what changes should we make?

## RICHARD

**P** After a lot of discussion the answer was “no” to the first two questions and “Lots” to the third.

The next questions were:

**P** SHOULD WE CHANGE THE NAME? We had over 500 letters and emails of support during the outbreak from our customers, so felt it would be a pity to waste their goodwill. We still can't decide whether it was a mistake or not.

**P** SHOULD WE CHANGE THE ethos of the farm and go more along the play and adventure line. Both Jackie and I are more comfortable with the low key, educational approach so we decided to stick with that but do it as well as we could.

**P** We had very little income coming in and lots still going out. We managed not to make any of our permanent staff redundant, but some of them had left us anyway. So we had a reduced workforce but still of course all the animals needed feeding and in addition we had to spend a lot on alterations. We took a deep breath, raided our pension funds and prayed.

## Power Point

- 1) **P** We decided that visitors should have contact with rabbits, poultry, pigs and ponies but not with ruminants. All ruminants were double fenced. We put in the viewing gallery in the main barn to give visitors a good view into the ruminant pens
- 2) **P** Following on from No 1, we now keep ruminants entirely separate from the non ruminants. Different fields, different barns and different implements to clean them out. It's labour intensive and not, of course, fool proof as the bug can be transferred by birds and rabbits.
- 3) **P** We redesigned the layout to make the circular farm trail and we put up the viewing platform in the middle.
- 4) **P** We decided to make the double fenced areas as attractive as possible You will see when you walk around we filled them with small animals, poultry, flowers and vegetables. We employed a full time gardener and a part time artist to make the farm look generally more attractive.

- 5) **P** We put up different warning signs. In 2009 we had 41 signs up on the farm warning people to wash their hands or directing them to wash areas. We redesigned these and made them larger and clearer.
- 6) **P** We put in new hand wash facilities. We already had 6 different ones. We now have 10. Most of these have warm water which cost a lot of money. We have saved on energy and water though by putting in sensor taps. They are fiddly to maintain but save a lot of money.
- 7) **P** We concentrated on the farm rather than play, but we made small additions to the adventure play each year and put in the mini drop slide in the playbarn.
- 8) **P** We started to change the old information signs, which were looking very sorry for themselves.
- 9) **P** And finally we started to make our management structure more formal so as to give the senior members of staff more experience in running their own departments.

**Jackie** A lot of time and energy at that time was spent battling over our rateable value. This had been dragging on for 4 or 5 years. The dreaded Mr Whitehill our valuation officer had been dragging his feet. We threatened to go to court, we threatened to report him to his superiors and we threatened to complain to our MP. The refund received in the end was over £40000 Well worth the hassle.

All our figures were skewed by ecoli. For I've plotted wage costs as a percentage of turnover costs. **WAGE COSTS** There are without Richard and I who are paid from profit. They have for a long time been steady around 27-30% of turnover. In 2010 they jumped to 48% but have come nearly back to normal.

Our Turnover has increased steadily over the years, with the odd hiccup – usually when there was a very cold or wet spring. **TURNOVER CHART** As you can see it dropped by over 50% in 2010. Our visitor numbers dropped to **VISITOR NUMBERS CHART** and have still not fully recovered, although we are well up this year. Our school numbers, understandably, dropped even more **SCHOOL CHART** and are still way down. They have always dropped when the price of coaches has risen sharply. We would be interested to know whether your numbers are normal – or down.

### SECONDARY SPEND

Our secondary spend used to be about 42% of turnover. In the past two years it has dropped to 36%. Possibly this is partly because we have pushed the entrance prices up. But again we would be interested to know your experience.

Of this the largest portion, 71%, is catering income, including ice cream, has remain remarkably steady over the years.

Next is the shop takings 23%. These used to be more but have dropped steadily since 2012. We are addressing this!

The rest is from animal feed, tractor rides, pumpkins carving etc.

The total spend per head is £8.50 **SPEND PER HEAD** That includes small children. Of this 5.45 is Entrance, 2.20 Catering, 70p shop and 17p other.

With regard to running costs:

### RUNNING COSTS



The animals cost us about £23000, without including labour. In you include this loss as an expense, then wages account for 65% of running costs. Rates and insurance each account for 6%. Fuel is 5% and animals and maintenance, both without labour, are 4%

I mentioned before our dilemma over entrance prices. [ENTRANCE PRICES](#)

This shows the how they have risen, but it also shows how we started to charge for adults 2013 was the first year that both paid the same. As we did it there were winners and losers. So we had to do it gradually. People with 2 or more children per adult did well. Those with one or more adults per child did badly – and squealed loudly in a few cases. It also shows two columns for this year. This is because for the first time we are charging a lower price in the winter months.

By 2012 our visitor numbers and our turnover were improving and we were having problems keeping up with the workload. We had started to replace our old information sign like this **OLD SIGN** with ones like this. **NEW SIGN** But this work had ground to a halt. PR was being neglected and the way staff interacted with visitors needed improving. We looked for a Visitor Services Manager and we found Layona. This was the first time in 33 years that we had filled a senior post from outside and it was quite a cultural shock. As she will show you she has pushed us very firmly into the future.