

Low Bridge End Farm

Battery of adversity fuels diversity

BACKGROUND

Farm diversification has offered an avenue of relief for this increasingly less viable farm located in a picturesque area of the Lake District.

Low Bridge End Farm has been in the family since 1911 with the current occupiers in residence since 1981. It is a 50 acre farm with 17 acres of woodland and the remainder hay meadow. Much of the latter is used as a grass let.



DIVERSIFICATION

Diversification into tourism began in 1982 when the hay loft was converted to a self-catering flat. In 1995 redundancy forced further action and the tea garden was opened in 1996. In 2000, a camping barn was opened followed a craft workshop in 2003. Plans for the future include the opening of a woodland trail and related education centre for craft demonstrations.¹



FINANCIAL INFORMATION

The strategic plan is for all the separate elements to be marketed as an holistic experience as well as the individual parts.

Support received over the years has included:

- A grant from Business Link to develop the tea garden (unemployment related)
- 22% contribution towards the cost of restoring the Camping Barn, from the Farm Tourism Initiative
- rebuilding the bridge funded by Leader+²
- 50% contribution to the development of the pottery through Leader+ and North West Development Agency

¹ The new award winning Woodland Trail and Information Centre was opened by Lord Clarke of Windermere, Chairman of the Forestry Commission in July 2004.

² This scheme was formerly known as 'Leader II'

Their experience of pursuing funding for different projects has helped them to evaluate their business in a way that they otherwise would not have. It is a good form of discipline. However, it has been a bureaucratic process involving dealing with a number of different quangos.



Barriers to their plans have come in various forms and include:

- National Park's opposition to aspects of the outside tea garden
- Flooding of lower meadows through management policy of Thirlmere Lake
- Edwina Currie's disastrous effect on their free range egg business
- Overseas competition changed the Christmas tree market

The tea garden attracts approximately 5,000 visitors each year, the camping barn attracts approximately 2,100 bednights per annum and the self-catering flat is occupied for 25 weeks of the year.

Annual turnover of the farm tourism business accounts for around 75-80% of total turnover. Without grant assistance, there would be no re-investment.



They are open for business all year round. September and October are particularly busy.

Occupancy rates in the camping barn were 73% in 2003 but are expected to be lower (50%) in 2004³ due to the temporary decline in use by the social services

The customer profile of their camping barn visitors is IE/9A: affluent singles and students and young student areas. 39% of camping barn users were first time users.

There was seen to be a shortage of overseas visitors in 2004. The poor exchange rate and competition from cheap air fares were negative influences.

USE OF LOCAL PRODUCE

Local food is an integral part of the visitor experience. Bacon, sausages and eggs are all locally sourced. Homemade jam and jelly is also provided. Supporting other local businesses is very important. Locally made walking sticks are also sold.

³ Actual occupancy rates for 2004 were 63%

MARKETING

Marketing activity is conducted both as an individual business and as part of the camping barn network. They have their own website www.campingbarn.com and advertise in a number of visitor guides and publications.



They are members of Cumbria Tourist Board and Lakeland Camping Barns.

Next year's (2005) marketing activity largely depends upon receiving the funding they have applied for through North West Farm Tourism Initiative. They have applied for both a marketing grant as well as a capital grant to re-point the walls of the camping barn with

traditional mortar.⁴

INVOLVEMENT WITH NWFTI

They have found dealings with NWFTI to be professional, enthusiastic, experienced and driving. There is a flexibility and understanding that projects change through their lifetime.

FUTURE PLANS

The immediate plans for the farm are for the various elements to act and to be promoted as one package of related themes. For example, passing walkers stop in the tea garden, decide to return to stay in the camping barn, walk in the woodland trail and learn more about the local environment and crafts in the education centre and spread the word.

The long-term future of the farm tourism business will be the transition to the next generation who are keen to continue. As the diversification increases, the proportion of income generated from farming activity will decrease and will act more as a loss-leading managed area which attracts visitors.



⁴ Actual marketing activity for 2005, an upgraded website with leaflet and brochure production, was a result of a successful application to the North West Farm Tourism Initiative. They were refused a capital grant to help re-point the walls of the Camping Barn with traditional materials.