



Farmer Ben relaxes with Henry, who now weighs nearly 300 kilos

Bovines and Bottled Water

Jeremy Miles meets a Purbeck farmer who diversified to survive and hit liquid gold

It's a glorious summer's day and we're bouncing across the Purbeck Hills in farmer Ben Bowerman's 4x4. The views sweeping down across the fields to Swanage and the shimmering blue sea beyond are breathtaking. He pulls up to survey the heart-stopping slice of rural Dorset that has been his home for the last 45 years, and points to a swathe of rough pasture below us. "I'd really like to introduce a herd of bison down there. That would be amazing."

He chuckles, files the idea in the matters-pending part of his brain and

fires the little jeep back into action. Ben Bowerman is a prime example of a new breed of farmer. Faced with tough trading conditions, he has headed full-tilt into diversification rather than risk losing his livelihood.

Ben has more to lose than most. Godlingston Manor Farm and its ancient stone farmhouse – parts of which date back to medieval times – is inextricably woven into Purbeck history. Extensively rebuilt following a fire in the 19th

century, the magnificent old house was taken over in 1949 by Ben's grandfather who signed a three generation agricultural tenancy with the old Bankes Estate. In a shrewd move he put the farm in the name of his son, John, who ran Godlingston with his wife Jean until he suffered a major stroke in the 1990s. At that point Ben took over the day-to-



The view from Godlingston Manor Farm in the 1950s

PHOTO: BOWERMAN FAMILY



Godlingston Manor today with Henry the calf
Below: Godlingston Manor in 1949 on the day the Bowermans moved in



PHOTO: BOWERMAN FAMILY

day management, officially inheriting the tenancy when his father died seven years ago.

With his family to provide for, Ben was acutely aware of his responsibilities. He also knows that, if he can keep the business financially buoyant, there's a money-can't-buy legacy waiting for his children George, 12, and Isabel, 10. He admits that times have sometimes been hard. At one point in the early days he found himself effectively bankrupt with a £358,000 loan to pay off and little idea of how to achieve it. Even today his cattle don't even begin to pay the bills. Yet within moments of meeting Ben and his wife, Catherine, it is clear that they must be doing something right.

There is a Porsche in the drive, a £5,000 Breitling watch on Ben's wrist and he even has his own helicopter landing

pad. Ben and Catherine's salvation came in the form of an ancient spring on their land – the source of Godlingston Manor Water which these days you can find in office water-coolers all over the country. The spring had been at Godlingston forever - remains of Bronze Age stone tools have been found on the site. The family largely took it for granted until one day a guest sampling the water with his dinner suggested they ought to sell it.

“The farm couldn't possibly survive on its own. The water business runs everything.”

Today with a major bottling plant on site and a lucrative deal with one of the biggest water cooler companies in the world, the old spring delivers the equivalent of liquid gold. “The farm couldn't possibly survive on its own. The water business runs everything.” says Ben. “It also pays for the children's

education and my helicopter.”

Amazingly his original deal with water cooler giants Aquaid was based on a gentleman's agreement. “In 2006 they paid me over £1million and the whole thing was just based on a handshake. People can't believe that we did it that way but at the end of the day it's about trust.”

Ben also applies this philosophy to his farm work and actively encourages what he calls “a fruitful and harmonious relationship” with the National Trust who own the freehold of his 450-acre estate. “I needed their permission to build the bottling plant and in return I have gone out of my way to promote conservation on the farm. The result is that they get a handsome royalty from my water business and I get cooperation and a fair rent.”

At Godlingston there's plenty to conserve. Not only is more than 100 acres of land officially designated as being of special scientific interest but it is also home to a huge colony of Adonis blue butterflies and there are even rare bee orchids growing on the front lawn.

Agriculture, he says, is a desperately tough business. “People think I'm living the dream but they don't see me at 2.30 in the morning crawling around in a stable sticking a stomach-tube down a



Henry became a pet for George and Isabel



The Bowerman family watch Henry polish off a bucket of milk



Henry at the kitchen window

calf! It can be incredibly stressful, and there is so much paperwork these days.”

Business at Godlingston has become easier since his wife Catherine, a trained lawyer, started helping with the admin. “She’s got degrees in English, French and law,” he says proudly. “It’s like being at school. I hand the paper in and it comes back covered in red crosses and notes that say ‘You can’t say that. Write it like this’ It’s been brilliant for me though!”

Catherine was also the creative brains behind a number of on-line videos which last summer catapulted the Bowermans’ 21st-century version of the *Good Life* into the sight-lines of tens of thousands of YouTube followers. She shot a series of mini film-essays about the progress of a bull calf called Henry who, after nearly dying at birth, was nursed back to health and became a family pet and star of the internet!

When I first met the Bowermans a year ago, Henry – little more than three weeks old – was happily playing in the garden with George and Louise and wandering in and out of the kitchen as though he owned the place.

Things have changed a bit since then. Henry now lives in a field with the rest of the herd. Weighing nearly 300 kilos and growing fast, he is simply too big and powerful for domestic life, though this good-natured bovine still loves to play. “He gives me gentle head butts and likes nothing better than having his head scratched,” says Ben. “But if he steps on your foot it hurts like nobody’s business.”

A year on from his birth the Henry the Calf videos are still proving hugely popular and have now been viewed on YouTube more than 50,000 times. “Originally we did the videos for the local school,” explains Ben. “We got loads of messages from people saying how cute he was, and one or two who were concerned that we would eat him.”

They needn’t worry. Ben assures me that Henry is regarded as an integral part of the family these days. “I must be mad to have decided to keep him, it makes no financial sense at all, but then I don’t do this for the money!” □

Do you own or run a farm and have an interesting story to tell? E mail helen.stiles@archant.co.uk

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