

## Edenbridge

**W**e left my father's farm in 1954 for our new home at Edenbridge. We took on an overdraft to cover the cost of five cows plus tractor and trailer. The previous tenant had worked for his cousin, Mr Lewis, who had a contracting business. However we didn't want to do this. Mr Lewis was very good to us and lent us his hay turner for no charge.



*Mark and William*

When we started at Edenbridge and were setting up in poultry, one of the salesmen from Young's of Horley said about us, "What one doesn't think of the other one will!" This shows how we worked together to build up the farm, small though it was.

In 1955 our second son Mark was born, completing our family. Eva was very unwell after the birth, having caught some sort of infection from the hospital.

Broilers were just coming in then, so we decided to ask for a loan to put up a broiler house. I should add that we had got the electricity put in by the good offices of Mr Dawson, who was the area manager for the electricity board and the father of our friend Nigel. We were told this would take many months. However, with his help, it was installed within weeks. This enabled us to use electricity for rearing poultry.

I asked the manager of the Westminster Bank if we could have a loan of £1500 to erect a purpose-built house for raising broilers. These buildings were made by Wernick Bros and were very well

built with double walls and high-capacity fans in the roof, which were set to the temperature required by a thermostat. The bank manager was very dubious and said he would have to put it to head office. I said to Eva, "Let's visit him." We sat in his office and I said "My father will take his account away from you if we don't get this loan and he has been with you for fifty years." Eva added, "And my mother will take her account away." Her mother was with Lloyds Bank not the Westminster!

Incidentally, my father never knew anything about our visit to the bank. He never at any time discussed either with Rod or myself whether or not he was doing well, or what was the best way of making a profit. I think in his later years he didn't know anyway and was losing money.

The next day we got the go-ahead for a new building, which held three thousand birds to twelve weeks old. This paid for itself within a year. The mains gas boilers were very efficient and the cost of heat for rearing was only halfpenny a bird.

The broiler house cost £1200. It had fans and two systems of lights; red lights and white lights. The red lights made the birds sleepy so you could catch them; the birds would be madly active in white lights, but in red they would just stand in a stupor. The birds were heated by brooders, which were large heat lamps eight feet across suspended from the ceiling, which could be raised upwards as the chicks grew. They were very effective and the birds did well. The suppliers always gave one extra chick per hundred, which was about the number we lost.

We bought the chicks at a day old, and had to pick them up from Edenbridge station, as they came by train. They were always very hungry by the time they arrived! We started with batches of three thousand, then four thousand when we increased the size of the building. We would sell about a thousand as poisson at six weeks old, so there was more room for the remaining birds, and this was a way of increasing profitability. Eventually we had two houses, which we filled alternatively.

The broilers were sold to Greggs, a large stores who had a factory only about five miles away. They sent a large lorry at five in the morning and took them away in crates of live birds. It was quite an operation.

The turnaround between batches was always hard work, as we had to clear the old litter, pressure wash all the equipment, get new litter and start again, all within a week. It required precision - rather like a military exercise, but we managed it, as well as raising two small children.

Obviously it was a risk for the bank to lend us money as we were in a rented farm and the birds could die, so there was no collateral which banks usually require. I have heard the opinion that banks will only lend money if you can prove you don't need it. However, in our case they helped us on our way and we became good friends with the manager. Always a good thing. We were lucky because at that time broilers were a licence to print money, and we did very well from them.

We had laying hens in batteries as well as broilers at that time. We sold the eggs to Stonegate Farm. We weren't allowed to wash the eggs; they took money off if you did, so we had an egg cleaner, which was a cotton wheel with grit on it, that cleaned the eggs. William had to try everything, so he put his finger in to see what it was like. It took the skin off his finger, so it certainly worked!

We killed and plucked enough birds each week to take up to Skilton's in Bromley. The manager, Mr Hollis, was very helpful, and would take 100 -150 birds a week. These were battery hens, which, after having laid for about a year, were still quite tender and sold as boiling fowl. He also had eggs and fat cockerels when available, and at Christmas 500 cockerels and 100 turkeys. He said the turkey cocks were too big, weighing up to 35lbs, so we then went to Beltsville White, which were much smaller. He then said the hen birds were too small, so we gave up turkeys and concentrated on chickens. Anyway turkeys were more difficult to rear and were keen to commit suicide, thereby saving themselves from being killed and plucked.



With chickens we were able to get cockerels to 9lbs after 16 - 18 weeks with a lot less trouble. We couldn't always find enough of our own birds to fill the orders, so bought some in. These had to be top quality.

We started off with a dry plucking machine and sold the feathers. This consisted of a drum with plates which opened and closed to grip the feathers, but did not remove the stumps (half formed

feathers), which were present in large numbers on young birds. The dry plucker caused a fire in the middle of one night because the feathers got onto the refrigerator motor. The first we knew was when we heard a crackling noise. Eva got up and looked out of the window. She came back and said quite coolly "I think we have a fire". The feathers were in the garage joined onto the house, and flames were coming out of the open door and going up the brickwork.

We called the Fire Brigade, then squirted water from the hose onto the building and had the fire out before they arrived. The only reason the fire hadn't taken a more serious hold was because we were rearing chickens in the loft above and had laid flat asbestos sheets on the floor to keep out the draught that came through the floorboards. Although we had put the fire out ourselves, when they arrived the fire brigade were keen to make sure it didn't start again, so soaked everything in water and hacked into the charred beams. They even filled a refrigerator full of chickens with water. It certainly worked, as the fire didn't return. We were insured by the NFU at the time and they were very good.

We then changed to a wet plucker, which we bought new complete with a thermostatically controlled dipping tank. It was essential that the birds were dipped at an exact temperature of 127 Fahrenheit. Anything below this and the feathers would not come off; anything above and the birds would go red. This machine consisted of a

revolving drum into which were fixed dozens of rubber tubes. The bird was held against the drum after having been pushed up and down in the hot water for thirty seconds. Although the feathers were unsaleable, the saving in time was enormous. We could easily kill and pluck our quota in an afternoon.

One evening there was a cloudburst. We were upstairs with the children trying to calm them in the storm. I said I'd just go down and make a cup of tea and stepped into the kitchen. I found about 2 inches of water on the floor. Looking out I realised there was an unusual amount of rain which was coming down so fast it was overshooting the gutters. When the rain slowed a bit, and we had had our cup of tea, we went out to see the chickens. Some of these were in arks out in the field. Because it was a sloping field, there was about a foot of water in the arks. We collected any birds still alive and moved them into the new broiler house, which was warm and dry. The birds in the old prefab, which we were using for rearing, were sitting on the feeders. This building had about a foot of water in it too, so these birds were also put into the broiler house. We lost 120 altogether, but it could have been a lot worse.

Our neighbours must have realised what was happening as they came to help. A lot of the cinder road which was above the level of the buildings was washed down, both into the kitchen entrance and also into the open-ended garage where the eggs were stacked, ready to go. These had to be unpacked and washed. After about two days we were back to normal.

One of our neighbours at Edenbridge was very much an old country type. He said one of his cows gave a lot of milk. I asked, "How much?" And he said "she gets that there big old bucket three parts full." A good measurement!

The Old Surrey and Burstow Hunt held their point-to-point races at Edenbridge. Some of this was on our land, and the payment covered nearly half our rent. They prepared the fences for jumping about a week in advance so there was some inconvenience but we could alter the grazing for the cows accordingly. Most of the course was visible from the bedroom window so we had a good viewpoint



without going out. If much damage was done to the grass the hunt repaired it and applied artificial manure to bring it back to life.

The Oxted Agricultural Show was held on fields adjoining us. One August bank holiday it rained buckets before the event. Some vehicles were having trouble getting in even before the show because of the muddy ground. After the show was over many cars and lorries got stuck. I took the tractor and pulled out quite a lot and was paid with cash, beer and flowers.

