

Biddenden

After six years at Edenbridge we had built up enough capital to buy our own farm. We purchased 80 acres in Biddenden on heavy clay land. This farm had a modern house, electricity, water and telephone, but no gas or mains drainage.

We invested in a dairy herd for the main enterprise and had built it up to thirty cows when I got appendicitis. Because it had become fibrous the doctor said it was inoperable until it went down, and recommended several weeks of lying still in bed. The man I had helping me with the milking was not doing very well, and some of the cows were hardly being milked at all.

My neighbour came across one day and took four gallons from one cow which had just been through the milking parlour. This was very worrying for both Eva and myself. At that time we had two young children to look after. One night my appendix flared up and I was rushed to hospital, where it was taken out the next day. I could hear the cows when I returned home from my bedroom and they didn't sound very happy. When I had been at home for three days I decided to go out and see the cows. At about 8:30am, after I got the cows in to be milked, my cowman arrived. On being asked when he was supposed to arrive he said, "When I like." So I said, "You'll go when I like, and that's now!" He said, "What about my holiday?" And I told him to get stuffed!

This left me with the cows to milk. Any lifting was extremely painful. Getting someone else to do it at short notice was difficult, but we did manage to find a young woman who was good with the cows, although she was hopeless with the tractor we used for taking in the hay. It was winter time, and hay and straw had to be taken into the yard where the cows were kept when not being milked. This was about 100ft square, with hay racks running down the centre. It had a fairly crude building built of telegraph poles with a corrugated iron roof that would house up to 80 animals.

We realised that other people probably needed temporary workers, so we started up the Kent Farm Relief service. When it got going we had up to twenty-two men going as far afield as Yorkshire and the Isle of Wight. Some customers were difficult. One wouldn't have the person we sent. When I phoned him up he explained that the person we sent was Irish. When being told that he was Irish himself, he said, "But your man comes from Cork and I'm from Mayo". On another occasion the man we sent, who was first class, was told he couldn't possibly be a pig man as he was too clean! Occasionally I went when our man was delayed and, on one occasion, when the chap we sent broke his ribs after slipping and catching himself on the trailer while loading milk churns. This was very awkward as Eva was left without a vehicle.



We added to this business the sale and hire of Husqvarna chainsaws and we had the sole agency for these in Kent. The difficulty here was that most buyers wanted HP and we weren't big enough to get this from a firm. Doing it ourselves was dodgy as in several cases the purchaser fell ill, or had an accident and ran out of money. Hiring could also be risky. Although we asked for a £15 deposit, when someone put in the wrong fuel or ran off with a saw, this did not cover the cost.

One man who lived in Faversham did not return his saw. I couldn't contact him so decided to pay him a visit. Accompanied by Bill, one of our relief workers, I found his house, but there was no-one in and no light on. We were knocking at the door when a woman, who said she was his ex-wife, approached us and said we would find him in the local pub. The barman said he had been in, but had left. I think he must somehow have had warning that we were after him.

I decided to cruise about for a while to see if he appeared. After about half an hour we were just returning for home when I saw what I thought was his car so gave chase, whereupon he accelerated. We were going through town doing 60 miles an hour as he headed out on the main road to Ashford with us in hot

pursuit. Bill said, "Do we know this is the right car? Perhaps it's someone else". The car went fast round the roundabout and headed back the way we had come. There was a row of parked cars on the left and I was able to box him in. He wound down the window as we were by this time alongside. He said in a surprised voice "Oh, it's Mr Stone!" I told him to stop messing about and give me back the saw. We followed him to his house. It was evening and dark and there were no lights on. I went in with him. The saw was under the bed. The electricity in the house was turned off. He said he had no money and couldn't pay. At least I had the saw back. About six weeks later an envelope arrived with eighteen pounds from him, so he wasn't all bad, just down on his luck.

One man hired a chainsaw for the weekend to sort out a fallen tree. When I went to collect it he hadn't got on very well. In less than an hour I cut up more wood that he had in the whole two days he'd had the saw. I didn't charge him extra for my time! He asked if I could cut down a large dead tree in his garden. I looked at this, saw that it was very close to electric wires and to the road, so I replied that I was sorry, but I was too busy. (Cowards way out!)

This excuse of being too busy could be useful. One day some of the local farmers were going fishing in Dungeness and asked if I wanted to go. We hired a boat between us. This was big enough for several people and had its own pilot. We anchored about two hundred yards or so offshore, and there was good fishing. Unfortunately I was in the prow, and, owing to the slight swell and the boat going up and down steadily, I was quite seasick. I had never been affected before, even on rough crossings to Belgium. They took me back to shore, along with one of the others. Those left on board had been in the Navy and were unaffected. In fact they were eating sandwiches when I was feeling terrible, which made me feel even worse. They brought some fish to me when they got back, and told me I had left one on the hook. Two weeks later Stan said they were going again and would I like to come? I said, "Sorry, I'm too busy!"

Another time I let someone have a saw and he gave me a false address. He phoned up after three days, which was when it was

due to be returned, and asked for an extension. However he didn't bring it back after a week. I thought he looked like a gypsy. I had dealt with gypsies before and found them mostly okay. However, on going to his false address in Tonbridge, there were no clues. But there was a gypsy camp nearby where I went to enquire. The men were absent, so I asked the women if anyone could cut down a tree for me. I made out to be particularly wanting a man with a red mini van, as he was so good. One woman said, "I know who you mean. He's moved to the camp at Chelsham".

I decided to pay a visit although I was told I'd probably get castrated or worse. No-one at the garages close to the site had filled up a red mini van with petrol. By this time it was dark, and time for the men and vans to come in. I made two circuits of the camp in my car but there was no sign of the van. All the inhabitants were in their caravans and never came out. I left and returned home and never recovered the saw. Perhaps it was good luck not to have found the person I was looking for, as a confrontation with ten or twenty gypsies perhaps would not have been too good. After another year I gave up the saw agency and Webbs of Tenterden took it over.

The other enterprise started at Biddenden was the sale of hatching eggs to a local hatchery. This started well but came a cropper when we went on holiday. The person looking after the hens let them run out of water. Instead of 75%, production dropped to 10% and never recovered. After this we concentrated on rearing calves for milking cows and for beef, also at one time rearing some for veal.

At Biddenden, as with all our farms, we had a continual problem with rats and mice. On one occasion the cat chased a mouse into a spin-drier. I thought to encourage it to leave I would turn the drier on briefly. However it didn't come out. The next time we used the drier the clothes were covered in little bits of mouse.

When we kept cows in Biddenden some of the cows were hard to calve. The Friesians usually have a large calf but the pelvic bone only opens to the same size as a Jersey cow, which of course has a much smaller calf and is usually no trouble.

Later I bought a kind of jack to help. This was a T-shaped bar. The end was placed against the back end of the cow and cords tied around the front legs of the calf, a slippery operation, especially as the legs were still inside. These cords were joined to the moving part of the apparatus, then pulled up the notches by a ratchet. This method, although sounding cruel, was in fact easiest on the cow and calf as sustained pressure could be applied.

Usually this operation was performed with the cow in a standing position and the calf landed on the floor (hopefully on straw) in a mound of blood. It could only be used if the calf was presented in the correct position. Sometimes the calf's head was back and had to be twisted round. Quite a tricky operation, being so slippery. Occasionally the whole calf would be presented backwards. This made it difficult because it was against the way the hairs grew and, in spite of all the slime, did not want to move.

There was a call for lean beef and some of the continental breeds were recommended as crosses to achieve this. One of these was the Chianina, which grew very big.

The Chianina was an Italian breed. It was supposed to have small calves which grew very quickly. Unfortunately this was not the case. Of the eight cows inseminated every one was in calf. We had to have one caesarean, which was performed with the cow standing up, and was very successful.

Unfortunately we lost one cow and five calves; we only ended up with three live ones. These were so large that if you held them up by the back legs as high as you could the front legs and head were still on the ground. This breed had been recommended in a farming paper. I felt that this was misinformation and the paper was responsible. I went to the publisher in Surrey and looked through all the back issues but I couldn't find the article.

Sometimes the cows could be vicious kickers. We had a kicker ourselves but she cured herself. One day she gave a nasty kick which missed me and hit part of the tubular frame on the parlour.

She held up her foot for a time shaking it. Obviously she couldn't quite make this out, and never kicked again. A good solution.

One day my difficult neighbour phoned me up at 9 o'clock at night and said "All your cows are in my garden and they're making a mess." I went over and there were lots of young cattle, and they were making a mess. They'd chewed up the rose bed. He had an Alsatian dog, and he said watch the dog, it might bite you. So Eva said "Go and sit down!" And the dog went and sat down, so we managed to get the cattle out and back into the field.

The next morning when we looked out there were cattle everywhere. They weren't mine, they were someone else's! We found out who they belonged to, and the rightful owner came over and called them. All his cattle went with him and mine stayed behind. It was amazing they knew where to go!

