

Natural *law*



Ex-lawyer-turned-pedigree pork producer, Deborah Blackmore, has probably never been busier than she is now but, as Chris Graham discovered, she wouldn't change a thing.

It's hard to imagine a more startling career change than from the clean and bookish world of British law, to delivering a trailer-full of pig carcasses to a village butcher for jointing. But that's exactly the transition made by former lawyer, Deb Blackmore. Ten years ago, Deb was hard at work in a busy firm of solicitors, and certainly had no inkling about what was in her future.

Now she finds herself happily managing a herd of Gloucestershire Old Spots on a windy hillside in the Forest of Dean, rather than juggling a busy caseload in a warm office; how times have changed!

New start

In fact, the transformation happened relatively recently, after she and her husband, Stuart, had decided that a change

▲ Deb doesn't miss her previous life as a lawyer, and is delighted with the lifestyle choice she's made.

of lifestyle was needed. With their children having left home, options opened up for the couple, and they set about transforming their urban back garden, as Australian-born Deb explained. "I was keen to start growing our own vegetables so, about ????? years ago, our back garden was turned over to this. What's more, we rescued some ex-battery laying hens, in true Tom and Barbara Good style!

"Then we got the chance to move to our present house, with a bigger garden, in the Forest of Dean," she added, "and that allowed us to take things to the next level with our livestock ambitions. After I'd attended a number of practical, pig- and sheep-related courses, we bought three Shropshire sheep and our first four pigs, which were Gloucestershire Old Spots. Even at that early stage, we were pretty

committed to the idea of becoming self-sufficient in terms of food, and quickly came to appreciate the heritage aspect of our native breeds, and the importance of helping with their conservation.

"But, because most of the garden at this house is set at a steep, 45° angle, it wasn't long before the pigs started undermining the fence posts. Essentially, they trashed the land and, despite our best efforts, we came to realise that we were fighting a losing battle. The only practical option was to think about alternative arrangements."

Influential pigs

But those first, four pigs had really struck a chord with the couple, as Deb recalled. "Despite the awkwardness of the site, we'd loved every minute with those first Old Spots, and they'd convinced us of the



many benefits to be gained from rearing pigs ourselves. They grew to pork weight without any serious drama and, although I found the slaughtering side of things emotive, it was a totally natural end to the process for me, and the pork we got back from the abattoir was just superb; such a difference compared to what we'd been used to eating!

The logical next step was to buy some land, but finding a suitable plot took some time. Eventually, though, the couple heard about a farmland plot on the edge of a nearby village, that sounded promising. "At that stage, we had no ambitions to develop what we were doing into a business," Deb added, "the whole thing was being driven by our desire to know where our food was coming from, and that the meat we were eating was high-welfare."

"Then, during the land-purchase process, we gradually realised that the extra flexibility this was going to bring us presented a great opportunity to start something completely new, and the idea of Plump Hill Farm was born. We secured the first, six-acre pocket of land in January 2017, and haven't looked back since."

"We put a track in from the gate, erected fences, created a vehicle turning area and put in 150 hedging plants, apple and silver birch trees plus a white chestnut. We then managed to buy an additional 5.75 acres of the same field in two separate transactions, which gave us plenty of room to rotate the pigs and sheep from enclosure to enclosure, as required. We continued to improve the land by the addition of shelter and hard-standings, and this work continues to this day!"

▲ **Life is as good as it gets for the Plump Hill Farm pigs.**

Quality meat counts

"Our tagline for the business is 'Pedigree with provenance', and that really is at the core of everything we do. The aim is to produce top-quality pork, lamb and beef, and supply it to local hotels, pubs and restaurants. I'd done a lot of work to establish that there was a market for such an operation in our area beforehand; basically, I went out and networked for England!"

"I spoke to everyone I could think of, joined business networking groups and worked very hard on social media. All the reaction that came back was positive and

in support of what we were trying to achieve. There are competitors, of course, but we have been fortunate in finding a niche for our product."

"I've found that the breed, and its provenance is an increasingly important aspect to our customers and, in this area, people seem very aware of what they're buying and the quality it delivers. The fact that both the GOS and Shropshire are local breeds is important to buyers."

"Much of our growth has come about thanks to word-of-mouth promotion. The new customers I visit love the fact that we are a small operation rather than an

▼ **It all started with a bare field...**





enormous, commercial producer; churning out intensively-reared meat. They appreciate that we're producing on an ethical, high-welfare basis, and that makes a difference.

"Many of our customers now treat us as their supplier of choice for special occasions, and that's something that I try to encourage. We're simply not set up to be supplying meat on a 24/7 basis, and never will be; that's not our aim, or the way we want to work. Our purpose is to provide meat to pubs, restaurants and spit-roasters etc, who appreciate the time and effort that's gone into the product they're buying, and can use the fact that it's from native breeds – and has been properly reared, outdoors – to help sell the end-product to their customers."

Evident passion

Deb added: "I think that what really helps potential customers buy into what we're doing is our obvious passion. Lots of our now regular customers have said to me that it was that aspect that really drew them to us. They can see that we're not playing at it, and that what we're doing really matters to us. The welfare of the

▲ ... Stuart and Deb (with help from their children), have work incredibly hard to set up the infrastructure needed by their pigs and sheep.

livestock, and doing things the correct way, are central to the way we work."

But Deb was also keen to emphasise that things haven't been easy over the past couple of years. "We've invested everything we've got to reach this stage, so there's a lot riding on the on-going success of the Plump Hill Farm brand. We're now at the point where we need to sell our home to help push the business forward, and have no idea, at this stage, where we're going to live! Ideally, we need to get closer to our land; being a 10-minute drive

away might not sound like much, but being detached from the livestock is never ideal. We've already suffered one break-in and the loss of lots of equipment, which was a real blow.

"But our commitment to the enterprise hasn't wavered, despite the hard work and financial impact it's had on our lives. It's certainly been hard work to get where we are now. I have a part-time job locally while, Stuart works in IT from home, so we both retain the day-to-day flexibility that's so essential for keeping livestock properly.



Despite the awkwardness of the site, we'd loved every minute with those first Old Spots.

► While maybe not a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, Plump Hill Farm is delivering a way of life for Deb and Stuart that brings them riches in so many other, more fundamental ways.



"One of the hardest aspects, as far as promoting and growing the business is concerned, has been driving myself on to make sure that ball keeps rolling. But, of course, there's a balance to be struck. I think it would be quite easy to find more and more outlets for our pork, but that's not the aim. We don't want to get too big and suddenly find ourselves unable to maintain the highest possible welfare and husbandry standards; that would be completely counter-productive. We just want to work with the people we work with, and gradually increase the number of pigs we sell to them although, maybe just a few more restaurant or pub customers would be nice!"

Breeding potential

It became apparent during my chat with Deb that the couple haven't yet bred any pigs of their own, so I was interested to find out more about their reasoning behind that. "Currently we have 21 pigs on the farm, all of which were bought from established, local breeders producing birth-notified stock," she explained. "We've yet to take the plunge into breeding ourselves, primarily because I haven't felt confident enough in my own knowledge and ability to deal with that."

"But I feel that I'm getting close now, and the plan is that we'll start a breeding programme next year. However, before that happens, I intend to go and spend some hands-on time with an established keeper during farrowing, so that I can become totally familiar with everything



▼ The covered, concrete pads that Stuart created are really valuable, especially in the winter.





that's involved. I absolutely hate to see an animal suffer because its owner doesn't know what they're doing, and have a horror of finding myself in that position.

"We shall only breed on a small scale, though, with perhaps just a couple of sows producing two litters each, per year. So, we'll still need to supplement the numbers with bought-in weaners. The fact that good-quality weaners have been in short supply around here on a couple of occasions in recent months, is another aspect that's pushing us towards producing our own animals.

"Another factor in the delay has been that I'm still undecided about how best to proceed. In my heart, I'd like to buy a boar and let nature takes its course but, in practice, I think that we're more likely to go down the AI route. Bringing in a boar would take things to a whole new level of practical complexity, and I think that artificial insemination could well be our best option for the time being."

Smooth journey

In many respects, Deb and Stuart have enjoyed a remarkably smooth journey into more serious pig keeping. It was



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▲ **It'll take time for the new trees and hedges to become usefully large, so Deb makes sure there's always plenty of shade available for the pigs.**

undoubtedly helped by the fact that they were both absolutely captivated by their pigs from day one, and evidently remain so to this day. "Looking back," Deb said, "we haven't really had a single drama to deal with; no fighting, no injuries and no escapees. Our pigs truly have been as good as gold.

"There are a lot of Wild Boar in this area, but they haven't caused us – or our pigs – any problems so far. I know they

wander up and down the drive, but I guess we've been lucky. I've spoken to other keepers who have had issues with them but, to be honest, I like having them running wild as part of the forest. However, I also appreciate that they need to be managed more effectively, so that overall numbers are kept in check.

"As things stand with our pigs, we know what our maximum capacity is, and are very careful not to creep beyond that. For





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example, we were approached by Gloucester Services – the famous motorway service station on the M5, which has its own farm shop. They were keen for us to supply five pigs a week, but we politely declined. That level of throughput simply doesn't appeal as it would destroy our hands-on approach, and would have probably lead to cost-cutting at the point of sale.

"One of my particular bugbears is that pedigree meat must hold its value because it's worth that price. It's important that customers continue to pay a premium for it, not only because it's better, but because the income it generates has a direct bearing on the survival of our important native breeds. It's not cheap to produce pork of this quality, and corners can't be cut without adversely affecting the quality of life and the wellbeing of the pigs involved. People who start discounting this sort of pork will simply devalue the product, and make everything so much harder for everyone else."

Feeding is key

"At a practical level, we haven't found the Old Spots in the least bit fatty, which is what I've heard the breed being criticised for. As with any native pig, it all comes

► **Deb and Stuart only keep Gloucestershire Old Spots pigs at Plump Hill Farm, and see no good reason to change that.**

▼ **Food is carefully delivered at Plump Hill Farm, to ensure that the carcasses produced are never too fatty.**



down to how the animal has been reared and fed. If you don't manage the feed intake properly then, yes, too much fat can become an issue. But it's all under your control, as the animals' keeper. I'm quite a stickler for all the rules and regulations concerned with feeding pigs, and always follow the Defra guidelines to the letter. This means I'm extremely careful about what my pigs get to eat."

In terms of the mechanics of the Plump Hill Farm business, Deb told me that most of the pork is sold as bulk orders and delivered by her. "It just wouldn't be viable for me to be haring around the countryside delivering a packet of sausages here, and a couple of pork shops there," she explained. "We also supply meat to an organisation called the Dean Forest Food Hub, which is operated by a conglomeration of local farmers who all deliver their produce to a central distribution centre.

"When supplying restaurants or hotels, I'm always very keen to work with the chef. I think it's important for them to visit the farm so they can see, first hand, how the pork is reared, and get a better feel for everything we do. Most are willing to do so, and have a genuine interest, which is great; it makes working with them so much more enjoyable.

"Increasingly, restaurants are starting to write their menus around the seasonal food they have available, which is great for us. Our lead time is always a consideration, and somebody wanting three carcasses for next-day delivery, is going to be disappointed!"

I came away from my meeting with Deb feeling very optimistic for the couple and what they're striving to achieve. Their passion for their pigs is infectious, and I can

see why customers are so often impressed with not only the pork they produce, but the way in which they do it. Evidently, Deb's legal mind suits the management of livestock very well and, once it starts, I have every confidence that the Plump Hill Farm pig breeding programme will produce excellent results.

Deb's devotion to the Gloucestershire Old Spots is such that she has no desire to expand into any other pig breeds. "I'm perfectly happy with keeping just the one breed and really love the Old Spots. I've never considered branching-out into anything else simply because I don't see the need – the Gloucestershires do it all for us." That degree of focus can only be a good thing for the business going forward and, although it's not quite been running for two years yet, all the signs look encouraging.

Deb and Stuart are convinced that their switch in lifestyle has been the correct one, and they've certainly backed their own conviction with an impressive financial commitment. It's always heart-warming to come across people who are determined to stick to their principles, and to put the health and welfare of livestock at the top of their personal priority list. I certainly wish them well for the future, and trust that Plump Hill Farm will mature into a successful business that retains breed preservation at the very core of its operations. ❖

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For more information about Plump Hill Farm, you can visit the website at: plumphillfarm.co.uk, or send an email to: deb.blackmore@plumphillfarm.co.uk



