



SWITHLAND AGRICULTURAL HOLDINGS
Proposed Business Development Plan

Date : 23rd January 2004

Swithland Agricultural Holdings
Main Street, Swithland, Leicestershire, LE12 8TG



Historical use of the farmland in Swithland

The historical use of the farmland in Swithland has been for the grazing of Friesian Dairy Farm Cows. In the 1880's, a water mill and possibly a small cottage occupied part of the land which can be seen on historical maps of the area.

Structure of land

The land comprises a large field with boundaries consisting on dry stone walls, hawthorne hedges, post and wire & post and rail fencing.

There is a stream running along the frontage of the land that supplies fresh water suitable for a diverse range of agricultural uses.

Access to the land is provided from Main Street Swithland through three separate gates. Two main gates provide suitable agricultural machinery access, whilst a side pedestrian gate provides access to the spinney. This side gate was historically used as an access to possibly a watermill located almost directly behind the pedestrian gate.

The ground ranges from rich black topsoil to orange clayey sand and brown subsoil with slate fragments. The topsoil is typically 100mm deep with 400mm of orange / brown subsoil.

The land is currently laid with field drains emptying into the stream which provide a well drained soil suitable for a wide range of agricultural uses.

A public footpath runs along the easterly boundary of the land.

Intended use of the land

With the increased cost of commodity farming, the restructuring of this parcel of land comprising 5.02 hectares or thereabouts not currently being used to full potential makes logical commercial sense. Such parcels of land can no longer be productively farmed by traditional dairy farming methods and other uses must be explored and trialed.

“Opportunities” on the holding

We have identified a small number of opportunities on the land :

- *Niche Market Cheese Production*

Grazing of niche market high fat milk cows for the on site production of specialty soft cheeses. This has proven to be a profitable method of farm diversification for smaller holdings that may benefit from prized locations.

Typical successful examples include areas around Stilton near Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire where the production of Stilton Cheese has become an international brand. Many small to medium sizes holdings operate from these areas producing arguably some of the countries finest blue cheese.

Rather than focus of existing varieties of British cheese, considerations have included the production of a cheese similar to Gorgonzola in its early maturing stages.



Gorgonzola has been produced for more than 800 years in Northern Italy. Originally aged in caves, the blue veins of mold developed from spores naturally present in the caves. Today, again like most blue-veined cheeses, the mold spores are mixed right in with the curds in the cheese making process to maintain consistent standards. Gorgonzola is quite different to Stilton in that the cheese goes through two unique processes of production that gives it a unique texture and flavor.

The creamy cheese is pierced with needles, causing the formation of the telltale greenish-blue veins. The mold lends a spicy, sharp flavor to the creamy cheese. Gorgonzola is generally a crumbly cheese, but can also have a smoother texture. Its taste ranges from semi-mild to sharp.

Gorgonzola that has been left to age for longer periods typically turns into a crumbly and rich tasting cheese, not dissimilar to Stilton, however varieties that are aged for shorter periods of time remain creamy, soft, mild and sometimes slightly runny in the middle.

The milder form of Gorgonzola would be appropriate to differentiate from Stilton and other British cheeses.

Combining the beauty of the village of Swithland with the abundance of natural spring water on site would present unique opportunities to exploit a niche market product such as “Swithland Cheese”.

- ***Niche Market Seasonal Vegetable & Herb Production***

Commodity vegetable production must be produced in large scale to show profitable returns. The production of seasonal vegetables does not however lend itself entirely to mass production.

Times are changing and so are people's lifestyles and dietary demands.

Only 20 years ago, few people would know what to do with sweet potato or Pak Choi.

Demographically, the United Kingdom has exploded with culture, especially since the early 1990's with the growth of universities to cater to foreign students from all over the world. A massive area of growth in the nearby market town of Loughborough has been the expansion of the University to accommodate the demand from overseas students.

The expertise of the university has always been sports and technology. Both are highly respected disciplines in South East Asia, especially the Peoples Republic of China. This has led to a massive growth of the Chinese community in and around Loughborough. This growth is set to continue because the British Government accepts that the United Kingdom is uniquely placed to capitalize profitably from providing education to foreign countries.

With the gradual changing of the local ethnic mix, come other unique opportunities such as the growth and supply of niche market vegetables traditionally unavailable within the UK.

Supermarkets such as Tesco's have shrewdly been recently investing in niche market vegetables and have clearly realised that such vegetables command premium prices.

The premium prices that supermarkets and even outdoor markets (such as the UK largest outdoor city market located nearby in Leicester) have now established a stronghold for such products selling at premium prices.

Although we have identified that niche market vegetable production would be sensible farming practice, especially considering the unique diverse local ethnic mix, we must also consider if the land is suitable for this type of farming.

The land has already been identified as suitable for crop growing following a study of the soil. One must also consider what range of niche market vegetables would suit such a location.

The following are just a few of a wide variety of ideal vegetables :



Chinese Kailaan

This white flowered cultivar is very quick growing, producing thick, tender, fleshy stems and edible flowers.

Use steamed or stir-fried this is rarely available in British Supermarkets and a firm favourite within the Chinese Community.



Choi Sum

This is a vegetable that Tesco's now sell, typically three stems for just under £3.00.

This is a fast growing vegetable which is cooked lightly fried or boiled in water for just a minute.



Pak Choi

This delicious vegetable has dark green leaves and succulent white stems that can be harvested from the 'baby' stage onwards.

Very versatile – ideal in salads, stir fry dishes, steamed as a vegetable or gently braised.



Wa Wa Sai Cabbage

A Baby Chinese Cabbage that can be grown closely spaced.

Used as baby leaves for crunchy salads or grown on to form succulent hearts for use in tasty stir-fries.



Kin Tsai

Slender Chinese celery stems with light green leaves and a very strong celery flavour. It can be used sparingly in salads, as a herb flavouring or stir fried.

Hundreds of other varieties of vegetable and herbs exist that would also perform well grown on the holding and would command high profit margins.

Research

To further investigate the cultivation methods of specialist vegetables and herbs we traveled to China. A reliable source of seed has been established and time spent with a number of successful vegetable growers.

The techniques required for profitable vegetable production have been carefully studied. We have learnt that same type vegetables must be cultivated in significantly different ways depending on climate and growing season.

For this reason, we chose areas of China that were similar in natural light hours, humidity and temperature to that of the United Kingdom. Beijing and its surrounding provinces are very similar to the United Kingdom during the Autumn, Winter and Spring. Beijing summers tend to be much hotter although Spring tends to be very much like that of the United Kingdom during the summer.

The use of poly tunnels in China during winter months has extended the growing season massively, especially with fast growing, seasonal crops which can be harvested in as little as six weeks.

Techniques never seen before in the United Kingdom that are used on a daily basis in the Far East have a huge impact on cultivation times.

The practical growing season in the United Kingdom is limited to late Spring, Summer and Autumn, however the Chinese have incredibly simple but effective techniques that push the active growing season to all year round without the need for artificial heating other than heat supplied by the sun and the natural heat in the ground.

As a result, the land productivity of a 5 hectares holding can be dramatically increased at very low cost.

- ***Specialty Bacon Pig Breeding***

Within the last 30 years, it has been commonplace for supermarkets to import bacon from the continent who's mass market production techniques have allowed for lower cost production.

More recently, smaller producers have identified the need for home grown bacon due to the increased desirability of British Bacon.

Going a step further, many producers have identified the commercial benefits from "Pasture Raised Bacon" otherwise known as "Free Range Bacon".

Free Range Bacon commands a premium, especially dry cured varieties that intensify the flavor of the bacon.

Sold in high end super markets prices tend to be at least 40% more expensive than mass produced imported bacon.

Heritage pig breeds are the most likely types of pig suitable for niche market bacon production. Such breeds will clearly differentiate away from mass market breeds. The following would be considerations :



Gloucester Old Spots



Tamworth



Berkshire



Red Wattle

Weaknesses and Threats

The Weaknesses and threats of all of the above listed agricultural operations may be dictated by local authority control, weather and economic / demographic variables.

- *Local Authority Control*

Certain operations will require the approvals of the local planning authority, especially with regard to necessary buildings required on site for the establishing of the proposed new agricultural use.

Established use of the land for purely grazing requires no such planning but will not take the holding to new levels of sustainability for the future.

All of the above agricultural operations will require a building to house equipment, machinery, tools, seed, straw, hay, feed, packing, drying etc.

Having entered into discussions with James Hicks of the Planning Department of Charnwood Borough Council, advise has been sought in regard to such a building. Advise has been to make a planning application for the construction of a barn for agricultural use through the submission of an "agricultural determination form".

- *Weather*

Holdings of small to medium size can be severely affected by the weather, especially in regard to planting crops. However such threats are limited due to the massive advantages of the stream that flows through the land. Pumps may be set up during dry weather to maintain healthy crops, and the use of poly tunnels can assist in extending the growing season throughout the late autumn, winter and early spring.

- ***Economic Factors***

No matter what type of agricultural holding in operation, the state of the overall economy and competition will affect the prices and demand for product. Whilst this may appear to be a potential threat, it is believed that entering into niche market production will avoid competition, and by specializing in product that meets local demand with help to avoid such risks.

- ***Demographics***

Risks associated with the demographics of race and culture within the locality will affect the long term growth and sustainability of a business. Looking at the opportunities outlined in this plan, if we focus on specialty vegetable and herb production, we mainly face the risks of ethnic migration away from the locality. We don't consider this to be a major risk because if anything Leicestershire is becoming more and more diverse in culture.

The Plan

Having taken regard to all the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with small to medium scale possible future agricultural uses on the land, we have decided to take the following course of action :

- (1) Re-locate the agricultural holdings "base" at the site in Swithland. As it will be necessary to build an agricultural "Barn" on site it makes logical business sense to locate the farm office in the Barn. This will make best advantage of the businesses location. The prestigious location of Swithland will provide a higher perceived value of the product produced there, and the business will have its own address located on the holding.
- (2) We will split the holding into three distinct areas – ***Specialty Crop, Heritage Pork*** and the gradual implementation of ***Swithland Cheese*** production.

Phase (1)

The first phase of development will be the restructuring of the land. Currently the land is not put to good use and has not benefited over the years from sensible and strategic land planning. This will involve putting in an agricultural planning application into the Local Planning Authority.

Operations to be undertaken include :

Removal of selected hawthorne trees. This relates to hawthornes that serve no benefit to the holding (excludes all hedges which will remain in place due to the benefits of wind protection and maintaining the natural beauty of the surrounding land).

Removal of embankment of soil. There is an embankment of soil on the far left side of the site which was left over from the slate mines operated within the village. This embankment will be removed and the soil scattered around the site to make the land more productive. The removal of the soil embankment will also provide space to locate the holdings barn development which is also conveniently located well behind the spinney which will provide a good deal of seclusion from the road.

Construction of a barn. We have decided to design an architecturally interesting barn which will house the farm office, equipment, machinery, seed, straw, hay, packing, storage, materials and ancillary items necessary for the holding to operate.

The construction of such a building would typically be of modern steel framed portal design, however due to historical nature of the village of Swithland, considerable regard must be given to the design of such a building.

The barn will be designed using environmentally sustainable materials that will blend into the natural beauty of the village of Swithland and will enhance the historical interest of the locality. The following factors will have an impact on its finished design –

- **Slate Stone walls**
- **Solid Oak Timber Frame**
- **Graduated Swithy Slate Roof**
- **Curved Top Windows and Doors**
- **Oak Topped Barn Door Frames**
- **Timber Doors and Windows**

The proposed barn will occupy a rectangle of 15.5m x 30m with a floor area of approximately 300 square meters.

Design considerations – taking into account the planned agricultural operations on site, we need to ensure the barn will accommodate the required activities on the holding –

Machinery – Tractors, Trailers, Harvesters, Rough Terrain Fork Lift.

The building must be high enough to accommodate the proposed range of agricultural machinery and at the same time be of good architectural design. A minimum headroom of four meters will be required in the main machinery store. This will give the greatest flexibility of machinery type that will finally be used and stored securely on site.

The Tractor Store must have a headroom of at least 3.5 meters to accommodate tractors with pre-attached equipment.

The Trailer store requires a headroom of no less than 3 meters and it is proposed that access will be from the front and the rear of the building.

A Grain store will be combined with a tools store and storage area for agricultural machinery parts and repair equipment (to include compressor, storage racking and working areas).

An office and staff room are required. We are locating our “office” within the barn, on-site. This will enable farm correspondence to be delivered to the holding in Swithland directly.

In accordance with Agricultural Permitted Development rights, a new building may be constructed to a maximum of 465 square meters and must be reasonably necessary for the intended agricultural operations on site.

The actual building shape will be angled halfway through the building to minimise the visual impact from the road. Key features of the locality will be incorporated into the design including varied ridge heights and a turret (to locate the office in the barn). The gross internal area of the barn will be approximately 300 square meters and there will be hard standing surrounding the barn for access. Having given careful consideration of the proposed use of the barn we consider this a reasonably necessary size.

Reconstruction of the bridge. A historic bridge was located behind the timber gated entrance to the land at the back of the spinney. Historically this must have been used in association with a water mill that no longer exists on site but is shown the historic plans dating back as far as 1885.

The bridge cannot be repaired as it has already collapsed and rubble remains lay in the bottom of the stream. Rebuilding the bridge will allow easier vehicular access to the new barn without the need to construct solid road surfaces from the other gated entrance. As the road will pass through the spinney, the visual impact of such a road will not be seen from the frontage of the holding.

Phase (2)

After completion of the first phase, it is intended to establish the new operations of the holding. Further planning consents will be applied for the construction of four “30 meter x 6 meter” poly tunnels to extend the growing season of the specialty vegetable production. The poly tunnels will only be used from November to April and will be removed and stored in the barn out of season.

Portable Pig Huts will be located within the spinney and a range of heritage pigs brought to site.

A range of agricultural machinery will be purchased for use on the holding.

A tree planting program will commence on site to seclude the whole frontage of the site from the road.

Phase (3)

Phase (3) is a the longer term development on the holding (in excess of 8 years), we intend to investigate further the “Swithland Cheese” business opportunity and subject to necessary planning consents operate the business from the Swithland site combined with our other land nearby.

Projected Capital Costings

Phase (1) works estimated costings :

Land Works prior to construction of Barn £5,000

Barn Construction £300,000

Phase (2) works estimated costings :

Purchase of additional machinery £24,000

Construction of pig huts £2,500

Poly Tunnels £6,500

Tree planting program £2,000

Phase (3) will be implemented but possibly at another of the agricultural holding sites depending on the success of the decided short term agricultural plans of Phases (1) and (2). Further land in the locality may be set aside over the next several years to further support the development of the holding. For this reason no capital costs are not included.

Marketing Strategy

Our proposed routes to market are via :

- Strong relationships with a national distributor will provide opportunities to distribute our produce on a national level.
- Local farmers markets (Melton Mowbray, Loughborough etc) will allow customers to buy directly from us and give us a greater profit margin.
- Selling through Leicester Market Traders will ensure daily local sales.
- Direct to Asian restaurants and takeaways throughout Leicestershire and surrounding counties.

Planning

Following the advice of James Hicks of Charnwood Borough Council, a Planning Application will be submitted on an "Agricultural Determination Form" within the next few days to secure the approval of Phase (1) works which will include the erection of the barn. As the barn is instrumental to the proposed business development plan of the holding, only upon receiving permission to build the barn may Phase(1) works commence.

Date : 23rd January 2004



Charles White
Swithland Agricultural Holdings