



Family fortunes

MEAN SYNDICATION

“Keeping it in the family” certainly rings true for the members of several traditional rural businesses where grandparents, parents, offspring and even fiancées work together as generations have done before them. By **Charlotte Mackaness**

HOWEVER far one lives from the City, the impact of the current economic calamity can be felt far from its epicentre. Although the countryside is not immune to this downturn, the Commission for Rural Communities believes that it is well placed to weather the recession thanks, in part, to high levels of flexible self-employment and a growth in skilled jobs.

At the vanguard of this rural resistance are family run, traditional businesses such as Horace Batten Bespoke Bootmakers. “In the good years we’ve put money aside and invested it rather than splashing out, and I think that’s what the banks should have been doing,” chuckles Tim Batten, the sixth generation of Battens to make boots. The seventh is his daughter Emma, who joined the firm in 1998.

“One of the secrets of our success is that we’ve been doing the same thing for more than 200 years,” he continues. “We haven’t tried to diversify, not even into shoes. The only change is that we started making our own trees recently. Some might think this shows a lack of ambition but we’re just very content doing what we do well.”

With stars of equestrianism, the Household Cavalry and some of the most esteemed names in hunting as clients, Tim’s confidence in the quality of his Northamptonshire firm’s product is well placed. “One of the advantages of a long-standing family business is expertise. My father, who is 97, still works with us. If we’re ever stuck on anything, we can call on Dad who will say something like ‘I remember we had a similar problem in 1932.’ That tentacle into the past is amazing.”

FAMILY FALLOUTS

The Batten workshop is steeped in history; the techniques and even equipment have changed little in centuries. “We use a blocking machine that wasn’t even new when my grandfather was working with it,” says Tim. “Some of our business comes from people who like to re-enact battles, such as Waterloo. Our methods haven’t moved on that much since those days, so it isn’t difficult to make something that looks authentic.”

But does working so closely lead to their own Batten family battles? “We’re always falling out about something or other – usually about how something should or shouldn’t be done. Happily, though, it’s never serious,” insists Tim. “At times I think the survival of the company has been remarkable given that my father, my daughter and I are all only children but perhaps not adding siblings into the equation has been a good thing.”

Thatcher Steven Dodson has the most intense of family and professional relationships – he works not only with his fiancée and father but also his identical twin brother, Stuart. “We’ve been working together for 14 years, the past two-and-a-half of which have been on the same jobs, but we get on extremely well,” reveals Steven. “There have never been any problems, and being twins hasn’t caused any serious mix-ups – it’s just a nice talking-point with customers.”

Dodson Brothers has won many prestigious projects, including Enid Blyton’s house in Bourne End, Queen

Charlotte’s cottage in Kew Gardens and Jamie Oliver’s Essex barn, yet neither Steven nor Stuart started life keen to continue the business that had been established by their grandfather in 1920. “My father is passionate about thatching and has totally devoted his life to it. He had high expectations of us and possibly that inhibited us at the beginning,” suggests Steven. “We both came into the firm and then left before joining again. I don’t think we realised quite what a great opportunity it was and what a fabulous job thatching is until we came away from it.”

Steven now shares his father’s fervour and believes he has benefited from his example: “Dad taught us to have great pride in our work. If anything, we sometimes spend too long on a job but I’d rather break even and do an excellent job than cut corners to make a profit.”

Working for oneself allows for such discretion. Small rural businesses offer other advantages. For



Three generations of the Batten family (above) use a workshop (left) steeped in history

Ben Skailes, whose family has owned Cropwell Bishop Creamery since 1948, the picturesque commute is one perk. “I used to be a broker in London. Making cheese in Nottinghamshire is a different world. I have gone from having to sit on a stuffy tube for 45 minutes to a 10-minute drive through the countryside with only one traffic light. It’s much less stressful,” he says.

However, helping to run one of only six stilton makers in the world is not entirely worry free. “It is a difficult cheese to produce; it’s very unforgiving as everything has to be spot on,” Ben explains. “That’s why it is ideal for small, niche producers – stilton needs very close management and there >

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isn't enough in it for big business." Such care has obviously paid off: Cropwell Bishop Stilton is sold by the likes of Harrods and Fortnum & Mason, while the creamery has been featured on Rick Stein's *Food Heroes*.

LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

Fortunately, only the cheese is temperamental, and the 60 or so staff and Ben's cousin, uncle and father are easy-going colleagues. "Of course, working as a family presents challenges but we're all pulling in the same direction. When my cousin and I joined, we were able to see the business from more of a ground level, which our fathers found useful," he believes. "New blood brings a fresh energy and perspective." It also inspires confidence: "From the point of view of staff, customers and suppliers, knowing the next generation is involved gives a sense of security. We've built long-term,

The Dodson twins (above) take great pride in their work (above right). Charles Wood (below with his father John) says honesty is the key to working with one's family

personal relationships with those we do business with so this continuity is extremely important. Most of our staff come from the village or live very close by, so we feel a sense of duty to the community and that the buck stops with us."

In contrast, Baltex warp knitters having been in his family's hands since 1831, Charles Wood has some reservations about his own children working in the Derbyshire business. "The future does concern me even though my children are still very young. With three of them life could become very complicated: siblings mean there is the potential for rivalry and one feeling less favoured," he says.

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT?

"I'm an only child and have been lucky that my parents and I have got on brilliantly at work. Of course, we disagree occasionally but one of us will say 'I think it's time for lunch' and then we switch out of business mode to being simply a family again," he reveals. "However, it is crucial that firms like ours stay as professional as possible. There is a danger with a family concern that you have people who are not best suited to their role. It takes a certain honesty to be able to step back and see where the strengths and weaknesses are. Clear organisational structures are essential."

There are numerous advantages to working as a family. "There's so much motivation to succeed. Also, you're able to take a more considered, long-term view because there aren't shareholders demanding their pound of flesh," he says. "And if we want to buy a new piece of machinery, we have a quick chat and make a decision.



"Inevitably, there is slight tension between the generations: the older members tend to be less open to new ideas. My father found this with my grandfather," reveals Charles. "The company wove traditional cloths until my father shifted it into technical fabrics in the Sixties, but not without a battle with my grandfather. My father was very keen on motor-racing and wanted to produce fire-retardant gloves. Before my grandfather would allow him to make a sample he insisted my father sign an agreement saying he'd pay for any damage to the machines. My father produced this country's first pair of truly fire-retardant gloves and they were worn by the top drivers.

"I suspect my father was driven nuts by his father, who wasn't in a hurry to retire. My grandfather loved fishing so when things got desperate my father would book him



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Cropwell Bishop Creamery (above) has been owned by members of the Skales family (below) since 1948, while Elderkin, the gunsmiths (left), run by William Elderkin (below right) has outlived Woolworths, a previous rival

into his favourite hotel in Scotland and claim the fishing conditions were perfect even if they weren't," says Charles.

Spalding gunsmith William Elderkin relished working with his father. "He was an utter fanatic but he gave me a free rein and believed it was important I learnt from my mistakes. We did have differences of opinion but, as soon as five o'clock came, they would be forgotten about and we'd go fishing or shooting. Working together and sharing the same interests did mean that we were together an awful lot but I lost my father quite early, so I feel extremely grateful for that time."

IT'S IN THE GENES

William claims he wanted nothing more than to work in the shop that has borne his family's name for more than 130 years. "It's in the genes," he declares. "Your soul is in it, you live and breathe it. My father never put any pressure on me and I think that is the best way. If a child feels the future is already planned, it's less likely to want to follow that path."

What of his own offspring? "My daughters are nine and three so it's a little early to be choosing careers," discloses William. "It would be nice to think that one might be interested or take the firm along different lines. Although we're not immune from the economic dip, our business has always remained fairly constant. Up until the arrival of Woolworths in Spalding between the wars, Elderkins also sold general household hardware. We have outlived Woollies, so perhaps it might be time to claim back those customers." ■

