



## Q & A WITH FIFTH GENERATION FARMER AND FCN VOLUNTEER SAM BURGE ON THE DIVERSIFICATION OF HIS FAMILY FARM



### PLEASE INTRODUCE YOURSELF

Hi, My Name is Sam Burge, I am a fifth generation farmer based just outside of Winchester. I am thirty-six years old and along with my family, have lived and worked here on Vale Farm for the last fourteen years. Vale farm is a mixed and diverse farm where we grow arable combinable crops, niche crops, herbs, use renewable energy, have an MOT and service centre, run a small shoot, offer Glamping, rent out other workshops and offices and run a self-storage service. We also have 32,000 free range laying hens.



The Burge Family



### PLEASE TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR DIVERSIFICATION VENTURE

As mentioned above we have diversified into Secure Self Storage. Our close proximity to the city of Winchester has meant that we have now for over a decade been offering storage solutions to both businesses and domestic customers in the area. Starting very small at first with only second-hand storage units, we now offer a range of different storage unit sizes.



### WHAT WAS THE BACKGROUND TO YOU INITIALLY LOOKING INTO DIVERSIFICATION?

We are a relatively small family farm and right from the beginning I knew that if there was a future for me back on the farm, there would need to be something else.



### HOW DID YOU DECIDE WHAT DIVERSIFICATION VENTURE TO PURSUE?

The start of diversifying into self-storage for us really happened by accident and has grown from there. However, I appreciate this is not standard and most will stem from ideas and inspiration and years of planning.



## WHAT WERE YOUR INITIAL OBJECTIVES?

I knew that we needed something that would not tie me up full-time as I wanted to farm. I also knew that we had something that people wanted, space! Even today, one of the biggest motivations for me is that I have a chance to leave a diverse but more importantly 'profitable' farm to my children, whatever they wish to do with it!



## HOW DID YOU GET STARTED?

I started our self-storage business about fifteen years ago, when the opportunity came around to purchase two second hand shipping containers and then rent them to a friend who needed some secure accessible storage. I cleared a small site at the back of our farm buildings that my father let me use and the number of units kept growing!



## WHERE HAVE YOU NOW GOT TO? HOW IS IT GOING TO DATE?

Some fifteen years on and now living on site which makes life a lot easier for me and also very appealing for the customer, the self-storage has transformed our small family business, going from 2 to over 500 storage units and now employing a full time member of staff responsible for managing all move ins/outs, sales and enquiries, invoicing and banking.

We now specialise in offering the whole storage package - a range of six different storage unit sizes both inside and outside. We also offer storage insurance and packaging and can also arrange the move in and out. Our reputation has grown in the last few years and despite having three big national storage companies in the area, we have become the number 1 go-to place. Other challenges that I have faced have been negotiating business rates, managing traffic to and from the site (We have tried hard not to encourage too many customers that visit daily as all our traffic has to come through a small village) and to a certain extent, dealing with the public which is something that not all farmers are keen to do.!



## WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST CHALLENGING ASPECT OF THE VENTURE?

At first, raising capital to purchase the storage units was tricky. I was also very keen as soon as we reached a certain number of units, to install security gates, CCTV and security lighting which makes all the difference to the customer who is quite often placing their worldly goods in our hands. We are a relatively small farm, and the space was also at a premium, so I had to be sensible. After not too long, I had to apply for change of use planning permission for a building that we then wanted to convert into storage and this has continued to be a big part of the set-up.



## WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Good question! I have only recently completed the building and start-up of a new free-range laying hen unit which has slightly put the stops on any storage growth for the moment. However, we have been so pleased with the storage and the financial return that I am keen to keep pushing on if possible. Farming is still my number one passion and if nothing else, the diversification into storage has meant that we are able to continue farming which is very important to me. It has also meant that when needing to borrow a significant amount of money recently for our new project, the cash flow is extremely attractive to the bank.



## WHAT WOULD BE YOUR TOP THREE TIPS TO SOMEONE STARTING OUT ON A DIVERSIFICATION VENTURE?

1. Firstly, only do something you enjoy and something you think will give you a buzz, if you do, it won't ever really feel like work!
2. If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail. Although my entrance into diversification happened almost by accident, I would encourage anyone to plan carefully. Talk to people, visit others, do a budget, maximise space, consult planning and most importantly, make your mistakes on paper!
3. Work to your strengths. With any new project I now start with looking at our strengths and weaknesses as a business and as individuals - our proximity to our customers for example. Then our opportunities and threats. Always base figures on the worst-case scenario and then generally you will always be pleasantly surprised!

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