

GOATS HAVE FEELINGS TOO . . .

Alex Sykes meets a pair of Somerset cheesemakers whose state-of-the-art dairy had to be built with its users in mind – the result is an award-winning building which produces great cheese and happy goats too

Many of us harbour the dream of getting away from it all, of starting a new life in the country, or of returning to our roots. Some of us moved out of London to do exactly that but few of us are brave enough to venture much further than the civilised confines of town let alone to give up everything to start an entirely new business.

Hill Farm Dairy is the brainchild of Will and Caroline Atkinson. It was born out of Caroline's passion for cheese, kindled during a period working at Neal's Yard Dairy in London, and the couple's desire to leave London for more rural surroundings.

Neither Will nor Caroline were born to farming – they sort of fell into it. In June 2006 they left London and made it as far as Bath. Here they stayed for 18 months while Will continued to work as lawyer in Bristol and Caroline made cheese with Mary Holbrook at her small, highly regarded dairy in Timsbury. It was here that Caroline turned away from her initial intention to open a cheese shop and determined to make goat's cheese.

From the outset Caroline was clear that their produce would be manufactured on site using only their own milk – the emphasis being on quality not quantity.

So turning their lives upside down, Will and Caroline quit their respective jobs and moved to the heart of the Somerset countryside and a collection of listed buildings centred on a late 16th century farmhouse, Hill Farm. Although already operating as a farm their new home was far from ready to house the livestock needed or produce cheese. It was clear that they needed a plan.

The project was ambitious and both Will and Caroline were embarking on an enterprise of which they had little experience.

In late 2007 a friendly recommendation led the Atkinsons to Designscape Architects, based in Bath. What attracted Will and Caroline to Designscape was the fact that they had not done a dairy building before. This enabled the design team to see the project from their client's perspective, to tailor their service to the level required, and to embark on a collaborative and productive learning process where client and architect travelled a similar path towards the end objective. The benefit of this approach was the team's ability to see each stage afresh and suggest innovative and elegant solutions to the client's brief. The result is a unique and satisfying building for all users (human and goat) as well as being efficient and easy to use.

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The Atkinsons very much wanted to get away from the image of 'agri-industry' which they felt was inconsistent with their basic ambition for the business and their product.

Designscape introduced the Atkinsons to Momentum (structural engineers) and E3 (building services consultants), also Bath based, to assist with the design. Working together and with specialist technical expertise provided via Caroline's list of contacts gathered during her time at Neal's Yard Dairy, plans were swiftly put into motion for a new livestock barn, milking



parlour and dairy. These needed not only to answer the client's brief for a small scale, state-of-the-art production facility, but also to provide a building whose quality and design matched the ethos of an artisan goat's cheese company – a quality handmade product using natural materials and low energy solutions, created with respect for its surroundings.

The result was a contemporary, cost effective design where a complex brief required an efficient, programme-led design response. Designscape split the brief into three separate elements running parallel to each other and dropping down a south facing hillside. The topography of the site led directly to the design response. Cheese maturing rooms sit under the milking parlour, enabling them to take advantage of more stable climatic conditions as they are built into the hillside.

The dairy is given large linear windows which enable the occupants to enjoy panoramic views across the valley. The milking parlour is a short distance from the barn limiting the goats' exposure to bad weather (goats are sensitive creatures) and handy when they must be milked twice a day.

Finally the milk is able to flow by gravity from parlour to dairy, avoiding pumping / agitation and thus preserving the quality of the milk. It is Caroline's belief that these factors directly affect the quality of their cheese.



PATIENCE REWARDED: Stawley cheese is produced in the dairy next to the milking parlour

CHEESEMAKERS: opposite, Will and Caroline Atkinson, with daughter Kitty, in their new dairy

Despite considerable forward planning the construction process was far from straightforward. The timescale revolved around the gestation period of the goats. Eager to get started, the goats arrived at Hill Farm in April 2008 and were temporarily housed in the existing stable block.

Meanwhile the design team waited for Planning and Listed Building Consent. Once necessary permissions were obtained the first phase works started with the construction of a new barn. On completion, a little behind schedule, the goats were rehoused and construction of the dairy and parlour was able to begin in December. The mating season soon arrived and the goats could wait no longer. Construction of the new building continued but the challenges of the project, including a sophisticated services strategy demanding the input of several specialist subcontractors led to delays in its completion. Will was soon hand milking his goats, one by one, twice a day, throughout June and July – nature waits for no man. It was a trying time for the Atkinsons but fortunately the works were completed before their enthusiasm for the project had been extinguished. Completion of the project enabled the design team to breathe a sigh of relief, to look back at what had been achieved and reflect on a successful collaboration with their client.

Not so Will and Caroline who now embarked on their real trial – making their business work. This required them not only to produce a quality cheese but also to convince others to market it. After a period of trials, tests and sampling, Stawley (named after their local community) was ready to meet its public. Swiftly adopted by Neal's Yard Dairy, Stawley has recently become available in Chipping Sodbury via the Hobbs

House Butchers, it's also featured on the cheese board at the brilliant Hobbs House Bistro.

A couple of years have passed and Will and Caroline are now getting into their stride. Reflecting on the project, the loss of weekends and holidays –

cheese making is a full time business – the Atkinsons have little time to miss the turmoil of their old London life. They are rewarded by a sense of accomplishment in all that they have achieved. Stawley has sold out every season and is well received by all those who have tried it.

As for Hill Farm Dairy, the result was a new cheese production facility built in beautiful rural surroundings taking its cues from an analysis and understanding of the landscape. The project has been recognised as exceptional by its peers and was runner-up in the Royal Institute of British Architects (south west) Town and Country Awards 2010, in addition to being shortlisted for the Regional Awards in 2011. Designscape's reward is a happy client and a successful business.

As Caroline says, "Designscape's work on our project has resulted in a barn, milking parlour and dairy that perfectly match our aim to have modern agricultural/commercial buildings that sit comfortably within their rural backdrop, and in particular compliment our medieval farmhouse and outbuildings. This aesthetic result was achieved while still achieving the required functionality of the buildings – we have a well ventilated, light barn, a neat, efficient milking parlour and a dairy that has been described by a French cheese consultant as one of his top five dairies in the world – highly recommended in every way."

Stawley is a soft goats' cheese made with unpasteurised milk. Neal's Yard Dairy describes it as: "dense and smooth in its paste with a nutty, creamy breakdown under the wrinkled geotrichum rind. Flavours are floral, honeyed and lactic."

Keep the cheese wrapped in its waxed paper and store in a cool, humid place, such as the salad compartment of the fridge. Take the cheese out of the fridge a couple of hours before serving. ■

For more information on Hill Farm Dairy and other projects by *Designscape Architects*: tel. 01225 858500, or visit: www.dscape.co.uk Hill Farm Dairy: tel. 01823 674436, www.hillfarmdairy.co.uk Hobbs House Butchery, 39 High Street, Chipping Sodbury, Bristol BS37 6BA: tel. 01454 312136, www.hobbshousebakery.co.uk



About Cleo and her chums

The first 23 goats arrived at the farm early in 2008. The Atkinsons are currently milking 48 goats (aiming to increase the herd to a maximum of 100 milking goats). There are also three Billies, who are on duty from October onwards, but spend the spring and summer in their own residence on the other side of the farm. The herd comprises three different British goat breeds. Cleo, pictured, is

one of the Anglo-Nubians, and Hill Farm also has British Toggenburgs and British Saanens. The Saanens give higher yields, but the Nubians and Toggenburgs produce richer milk. The herd is fed with a mixture of cereals, hay taken off the RSPB nature reserve at West Sedgemoor and, from early spring until late autumn, they browse on our permanent pasture.