

# The Wyken Estate

Kenneth Carlisle<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*In 2004 Sir Kenneth Carlisle was awarded the Bledisloe Gold Medal for Landowners. He first came to Wyken in 1950 and took over the farming in 1974. Nowadays the farming is contracted out and the estate has diversified into a vineyard, a shop, a restaurant and a farmers' market and has opened its garden. Sir Kenneth says "diversification is no panacea. It needs capital to start with and you need to learn a new business." Conservation is also important on the estate and much has been done to safeguard the harmony of its ancient woods and varied soils and farm buildings.*

## Background

Wyken came into my family in 1920. My father's first cousin, Frank Heilgers, bought it after leaving the army at the end of World War I and after a year of agricultural training at nearby Shrubland Park. Frank became MP for Bury St Edmunds in 1931 but was killed in a train crash going up to Parliament in 1944. My grandfather inherited the estate from Frank's mother in 1950. That is when I first came to Wyken.

Wyken is not a grand estate, but it has always been a particular place. It is mentioned in Domesday and in a number of medieval documents. It had its own manorial court. Today the estate amounts to 1,100 acres with 850 acres under the plough and 170 acres of ancient woodland with Site of Special Scientific Interest status. We sit between the sandy soils of the Brecks and the boulder clay of central Suffolk. 500 acres are sandy loam and the rest is clay.

Although my father loved farming, he worked and lived in London, coming to Wyken at weekends. He was a director and then chairman of Liebigs Extract of Meat Co., which owned the Oxo and Fray Bentos brands. He was deeply involved in improving the quality of cattle and grazing in South America and Africa. Liebigs merged with Brook Bond in 1970. I worked for the company for eight years. My father, with some reluctance, let me come to farm full time at Wyken in 1974, and, like Frank Heilgers, I eventually combined farming with a parliamentary career.

## The farm

When Frank bought Wyken in 1920 the price of wheat was 80 shillings per quarter of 504lbs. Within two years it had dropped to 47 shillings and reached a low of 20 shillings in 1934. Many farmers in Suffolk failed in the 1920s. Frank did his best to find the best crops and he created one of the first Friesian pedigree herds in Suffolk for which he won many prizes. Nevertheless the 1930s were a desperate time. Throughout the decade his farm sales were on average £8,000 and his losses £2,000 a year, or, in today's values, £320,000 and £80,000 a year. Only when the war came did farming return to profit.

In 1950 the farm employed 24 people. Like many Suffolk farms we sold the pedigree Friesian herd in the 1960s in order to concentrate on the arable side. The farm was run by an agent. In 1974 we had six men working on the farm. We enjoyed the good times in farming. In most years reasonable profits could be made.

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Kenneth Carlisle runs the Wyken Estate with his wife Carla. He was elected Member of Parliament for Lincoln from 1979 to 1997. During this time he had spells as a Government Whip, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Defence and Minister for Roads and Traffic. He is on the Council of the Royal Horticultural Society.

In 1978 we put in irrigation for 350 acres on the light land and introduced potatoes and onions, although we were never truly professional enough to make these a real success.

In 1998 we made a significant change. On the advice of Jim Wilson, of Wilson Wraight our farm advisor, we decided to contract out the farming. This was a wise decision, and the farm is now being run more effectively than before. The contractor, Will Reed, farms our 850 acres and another 600 acres elsewhere by himself, with additional help at busy times. We consult together over all aspects of the farming at Wyken and Wilson Wraight is at hand for advice and help. I am certain that this is the best way to run the farm at Wyken.

### Cropping 2004

Wheat	380 acres
Winter Barley	90 acres
Spring Barley	35 acres
Winter Beans	54 acres
Sugar Beet	179 acres
Potatoes	48 acres
Set Aside	<u>64 acres</u>
TOTAL	850 acres

We now lease out the potato land and this is our most profitable crop. We aim to make greater use of irrigation and hope to build a reservoir to add to the existing borehole. We hope to double the acreage under vegetables.

### **The diversification**

The most significant change at Wyken in my time has been the diversification. This could not have happened without the vision, flair and drive of my wife Carla whom I married in 1986. Foreseeing the looming crisis for farming, she knew that we had to reduce our reliance on the farm. Before coming to England from the States, she had spent five years in France. She knew about wine and persuaded us to plant a seven-acre vineyard in 1988 on a sun baked southern slope which always shriveled our sugar beet in hot years. The doyen of English wine, the late Gillian Pearkes, gave us excellent advice.

In 1991 we had our first harvest. We did not invest in a winery so our wine is made at Shawsgate near Framlingham. We converted half of our magnificent 400-year-old barn into a shop and restaurant. In July 1992 we opened our doors to the public.

The diversification has four main strands.

- The vineyard produces on average some 14,000 bottles a year. But this varies hugely from 3,000 to 25,000 depending on the weather. Our best wine comes from the grape Bacchus, winner of the English Wine of the Year Competition. All the wine is sold through our shop and restaurant. Even so, it is hard for an English vineyard to make money.
- The restaurant has been in the Michelin and Good Food Guides for a number of years.
- The shop sells a variety of goods including pottery from local craftsmen, woollen rugs from North Carolina, quilts and garden tools.
- The garden is open during the season in the afternoon on six days a week.



**Barn at Wyken**

Three years ago we started a Farmers' Market which is held every Saturday morning. This is a real help to a number of smaller Suffolk farmers and has become increasingly popular. It also boosts the other parts of our business.

In 1992 we only opened for two days a week for six months in the year. We are now open for every day between 10am and 6pm for the whole year except for two weeks over Christmas. The business employs some 50 local people.

We have been able to build this business up over a number of years without, as far as possible, increasing our borrowings. We were lucky in the early stages to support it from the profits of farming. Diversification is no panacea. It needs capital to start with and you need to learn a new business. At Wyken we had to learn how to run both a restaurant and a shop. The business has also required Carla's insistence on the very highest standards.

We think that around 70,000 people visit Wyken every year, but this includes many return visits from some delightful regular customers. We feel that the business should not grow further. We do not want to destroy the character of the place. The challenge now is to manage it better and not to become complacent.

The creation of the garden began in 1978. My parents gave me the freedom and support to follow these interests. We managed at least one project a year. It is surprising what this can achieve over 10 years. Friends were generous with their advice, not least Arabella Lennox Boyd who made a design for three garden "rooms" joining the rest of the garden naturally to the house. We expanded into the field and created a pond and a maze. Our workforce grew. We are now trying to restrain ourselves and simplify. The garden groups who come each year also enjoy the restaurant, shop and wine.

## **Conservation**

Wyken is blessed with beautiful ancient woods and varied soils. We have tried to put thought and effort into conservation and are encouraged by the new farm support system and its emphasis on looking after the countryside. I believe that this will transform the future of wildlife.



**Beetle bank**

The flora in our ancient woods varies between that on the acid sands dominated by bluebells and that on the boulder clay with its greater variety. In the late 1960s we were persuaded by the grants and the fashion then prevailing to fell 25 acres of this woodland and to go for a mixed plantation. Mercifully we stopped there and not too much damage was done. We now have another grant to remove the conifers and the natural flora will return.

We manage the woods with English Nature, with plans for coppicing and the widening of the rides to let in the sunlight. Deer now pose a major threat and require an effective culling regime.



**Kiln Wood**

Like many farmers we are in Countryside Stewardship. We were one of the first to enter in Suffolk but we did so timidly. Part of the joy of the scheme is that you learn as you take part. Recently we have been bolder, with beetle banks dividing the bigger fields and six metre margins. However, we have had to leave enough to do to qualify for Entry Level Scheme. And, in due course, we hope to wrap up our Countryside Stewardship into the Higher Level Scheme.

We are especially keen on the efforts to save the grey partridge. The Game Conservancy under Dick Potts and his successors have, with scanty funds, undertaken brilliantly focused research on the grey partridge. This unlocked what really has happened to the countryside. They followed this up with practical advice. We do not have a formal shoot at Wyken but we follow their advice on winter-feeding, predator control and better habitat. Three years ago we only had three pairs of grey partridges left. This spring we have 12 pairs and the improving habitat will surely help in future.

Like other farmers we have also planted hedges and belts. Our heavy land has a number of farm ponds. We have sought to improve these. We have also built two lakes in the last three years and it is extraordinary how quickly they begin to look as if they have always been there. Last year we had a pair of hobbies which hunted dragonflies over the first lake all summer.

This conservation work has been greatly helped by the enthusiasm and support of our contractor Will Reed. The income from Countryside Stewardship goes into the joint farming account.

## The estate

The estate owns seven cottages. Five of these are on commercial rents. We have sold three cottages in the last 30 years. Our policy is now to retain the rest.

We have a number of farm buildings, including two listed barns. The largest is home to the Leaping Hare Country Store and Restaurant, as we call the restaurant and shop. In 1993 this won a CLA farm building award. We are in the process of restoring the second listed barn.

The other farm buildings are important for the future. We are gradually restoring and re-roofing them all. The profits from the Leaping Hare enable us to do this in a sustainable way from year to year.

Although we are a small estate, our place in the community is important to us. We now provide some 50 jobs for local people, and smaller local farmers benefit greatly from our weekly Farmers' Market. We have also sold land for 10 low-cost houses for local people; and have given land for some allotments and a Bowls Club. This has been easy to do without detriment to the estate.

I was lucky enough to inherit the estate free from any taxes and our aim is to do the same for the next generation.

## The future

In our eyes Wyken has a balance between its varied features and we want to guard this harmony. The farming must be made more robust. To this end we plan to invest in a reservoir for more extensive irrigation. The Leaping Hare must be run with ever greater professionalism and we need to retain its standards and freshness. The garden, which has finished most of its main development, must be contained so that it is not a burden for our successors. In the years ahead I think that it will be conservation and the environment which will see most progress at Wyken, fuelled by public demand and the pressures and encouragement of the new farming system.

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**Royal Agricultural Society of England,  
Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire CV8 2LZ  
Telephone: 024 7669 6969  
Fax: 024 7669 6900  
[www.rase.org.uk](http://www.rase.org.uk)**