

# The Tenant Farmer *by Thomasina Tarling*



**T**he first hurdle for prospective farmers to overcome is usually to find a property to rent – becoming a tenant farmer. Obviously, training, learning in various ways and probably working for an established farmer comes first, but, unless there is a family farm available or a considerable amount of money, establishing a tenancy is the best way into farming. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to obtain one, and for every tenancy offered, there are hundreds of applicants.

Visiting James Willcocks in Washaway, Cornwall, who is the Southwest representative of the Tenant Farmers Association (TFA), we discover a great deal about the organisation and how it operates, for both tenant and landlord. It was founded in 1981 by a group of farmers who did not consider their interests were sufficiently represented by existing organisations. The relationship between landlord and tenants in agriculture, as in the property world, had altered

with time, throwing up problems and requiring clarification in various ways. Since then, it has grown steadily, covering the enormous changes in all aspects of farming and agriculture generally. Introduction of the Farm Business Tenancy in 1995, a radical change in the balance between the two, has seen an increase in membership, and also of the amount of detailed work necessary for harmonious contracts. The Association has a list of all the necessary experts, such as chartered surveyors, solicitors, accountants and financial advisers, available for its members to consult, and operates throughout the country. It is divided into eight regions of England and Wales, each having a regional chairman, and they meet four times a year in London. This provides an excellent forum for the exchange of ideas, discovery of new methods and generally enjoying a proper farmers' gossip. Family members are encouraged to go along and some do, adding to the general broadening of experience. Many

farming families are quite isolated, and almost all have different lives, depending on their land and acreage, so a chance to look at other people's ways and systems can prove helpful. The Association's members range over a wide spectrum and level, with a hugely diverse area of skills and expertise; many belong to ancillary branches of the agricultural community and can provide a useful exchange of views. Their website is first class, intelligible to an outsider as well as helpful to members and those considering becoming so.

Another way of finding out more, organised by the TFA, is through Farm Walks. For these, families and friends are encouraged to meet at different farms; these occasions are popular as well as instructive. Would-be tenants, students, people working in different aspects of agriculture and animal husbandry are all welcomed, and everyone learns something besides enjoying themselves. Newcomers to the countryside are always surprised by the friendliness, conviviality and

## A Country Life

general jolliness of farmers. The stereotypical gloomy farmer, forever complaining, is constantly proved wrong, despite the huge difficulties so many of them face.

James Willcocks came to his present farm 24 years ago, first farming with his father, then taking over when his parents moved nearby. He milks over 250 cows and is building up the herd to 300, the number required to make a living. He points out how many neighbours have been driven out of milk production by the recent difficulties – in 1986 there were five dairy farms in just their area alone; now there is only one. This despite the fact the land, aspect and growth of grass is ideally suited to dairy, and the Westcountry has traditionally supplied large amounts of dairy products all over the country, and indeed still does. His sheltered Cornish valley offers the classic grazing needed for milk production, with the 120 acres he owns combining perfectly with a further 370 acres rented from a nearby estate. His agreement under the Farm Business Tenancy (FBT) is for 23 years, allowing him to plan and manage the business properly. Modern tenancies with County Council or other landlords often average five or six years, allowing first-time renters to make way for those following on, but making it difficult to plan or invest in proper buildings. As all farmers know,

these costs are huge, particularly when combined with machinery, animals and overheads, thus making the assistance of the TFA in negotiating agreements particularly valuable.

Landlords' agents, in this case Savills, look for experience, qualifications and reliability in their tenants, and all of these are difficult to acquire early, with the result that few obtain tenancies before the age of about 30. Sons of tenant farming families may be in a strong position to take over

permission for alterations to the house – installing solar panels, for example. Shooting rights for game are due to a landlord, as is a percentage of any bed and breakfast undertaken in the farmhouse. Family income from agriculture must make up 70% of total family income. Agreements traditionally were renewed on Lady Day or Michaelmas; nowadays they can be from any date, but, of course, Michaelmas is still the favoured time, after harvest and before winter sets in.

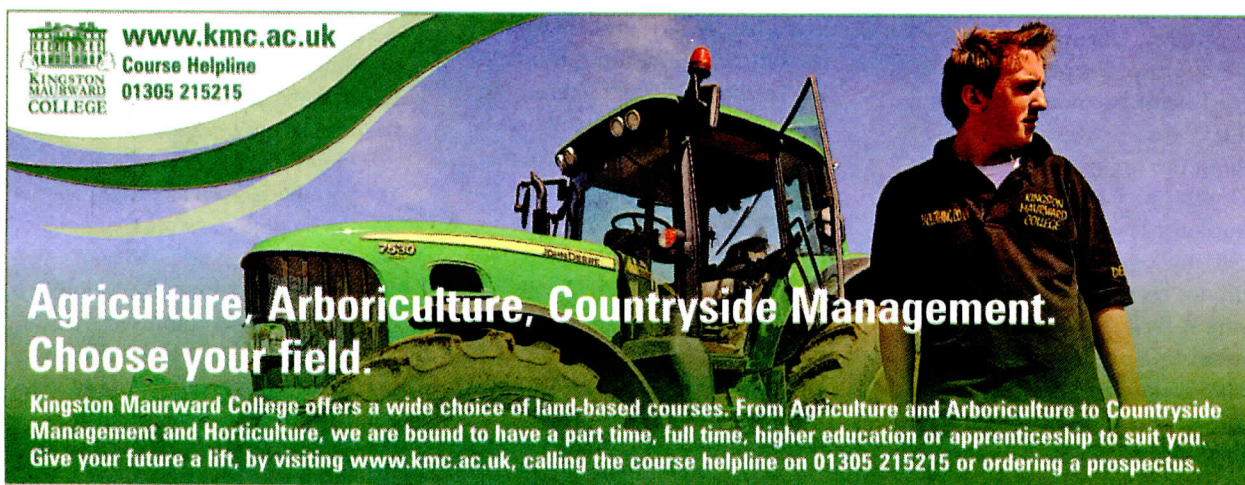
James and Kiki, his wife, with their three children, three dogs, three pet pigs, three sheep and almost 300 cows, seem to lead an idyllic life. Lovely Cornish countryside, particularly attractive cows (predominantly

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from a retiring father, but still have to prove themselves. The old days of tenancies passing from father to son and onwards are long gone. The FBT does not have a rigid set of rules; each tenancy is negotiated individually, depending on the circumstances, acreage, type of ground, range of buildings etc. and, again, the Association's experts are invaluable for their members.

It is good to discover that banks have a reasonable reputation locally for lending to tenant farmers as well as to landowners. Tenants have to pay for any necessary buildings, but must obtain the landlord's

Brown Swiss crossed with Holstein, but working towards a pedigree herd), an impressive range of first-class buildings and a pretty, comfortable farmhouse; even the added pleasure of his parents across the valley. But, as with most things – particularly farming, behind all this lies extremely hard work, a great deal of planning and skill, good training and knowledge and the business ability of a skilled CEO. Plus, perhaps, luck in his family and in finding such a special wife, who was involved in farming when they met.



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