

Home on the farm



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Having set up a self-catering business without any hospitality experience, David and Felicity Brown have created a haven for all in the Peak District, finds *Zoë Slater*

They say that good things come to those who wait. That saying is certainly apt for David and Felicity Brown, the owners of Hoe Grange Holidays in Brassington in the Peak District. Back in the 1970s, David’s dad Gordon, who previously ran Hoe Grange Farm, decided to build log cabins on the land and start providing self-catering accommodation. Sadly, due to planning restrictions, Gordon wasn’t able to see his idea come to life but, 30 years later, his son and daughter-in-law realised his vision.

“Knowing of dad’s plans, the idea to build log cabins on our land was always in the back of my mind,” says David. “It wasn’t until 2004, when things weren’t going well in agriculture and our budgets weren’t looking good, that we decided to make a go of it.”

Although David and Felicity didn’t have experience of the hospitality industry – David has always been a farmer and

Felicity has had various roles in manufacturing and marketing – the couple were unfazed by the challenge of setting up the business. They also coped well with the mountain of paperwork it took to get planning permission and grant funding from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), which they were entitled to because they were diversifying a working farm.

“It was hard work getting the funding,” says Felicity. “I did all the applications, the form filling and the business plan and I put a lot of effort into it. It was time consuming, but well worth it.”

Hoe Grange Holidays opened for business in February 2006 with two cabins. Felicity says they would have only been able to build one cabin if it weren’t for the Defra RES 1 grant. She and David also have Defra and the planning process to thank for educating them about accessible accommodation, which has become a cornerstone of the business.

Accommodating all

Felicity says: “We didn’t really know anything about accessible accommodation when we got started, but we had to put on all the forms what sort of accessible features we were going to include in the cabins, so it got us thinking.”

Felicity spent a lot of time researching the accessibility market and found that there were very few places in the local area that provided accommodation for people with access needs. She and David decided it would make sense to broaden their appeal.

“We started at a basic level and put in a wet room in our smaller cabin,” says Felicity. “We still thought that the larger family cabin would outstrip it in terms of occupancy, but it was completely the other way round. Guests with accessibility needs are very loyal. Once they’ve found somewhere suitable for their needs, I think they are more likely to come back again.”

David says that about 60% of their business comes from the access market and about 30% of their total business is from repeat customers. “One chap from Liverpool and his disabled wife have been 19 times over the past four years and they’ve already booked for three more stays,” he says. “They’re even on direct debit now!”

Having had such success providing holidays for disabled people and their carers and loved ones, David and Felicity built two more cabins in 2010 and 2011, which both meet the National Accessible Scheme’s standards for mobility, visual and hearing. The couple also provide extra equipment, such as mobile hoists and profile beds, at no extra charge and assist with sourcing additional care services. And last, but certainly not least, they provide the only Boma 7 electric off-road wheelchair that you can hire in England, which gives their disabled guests the chance to explore the Peak District to the full.

Although Hoe Grange Holidays caters perfectly for disabled people, David and Felicity have cleverly made sure that the

accessible features are just part of the package they offer and are not intrusive, so that the business appeals to all types of guests, regardless of whether they have access needs or not. David says they have lots of families coming to stay during the summer.

The fact that they welcome guests’ dogs and horses and encourage walkers to stay means that they have a steady stream of different customers all year round. Guests who care about their carbon footprint are also well served at Hoe Grange, as David and Felicity have put in place a number of sustainable features, such as solar panels, a wind turbine and natural sheep-wool insulation.

Listen and learn

Over the ten years that David and Felicity have been in business, they have continued to expand and adapt. One of the key reasons for this is because they listen to their guests. “We give all our guests a feedback form the evening before they leave,” says Felicity. “It works really well as they’ll then write any issues or suggestions on the form, leaving them to write only the positive things on TripAdvisor. By giving people a form, it helps them to leave more direct feedback that they might not have said if you’d just asked.”

Felicity is keen to point out how important it is to ask guests for feedback in person too. “We go up to each cabin the day after each guest has arrived to check that everything’s OK,” she says. “This gives us a chance to solve any issues early on and means we can make someone a happy guest instead of a disgruntled one. We had one lady who complained that the shower room was cold and there was a draft through the door, so David fitted a draft excluder to the door and put a heater in the shower room and suddenly we went from being told that things aren’t very good to ‘this is the best place I’ve ever stayed in.’”

David and Felicity, who have been part of VisitEngland’s

> Quality Assessment Scheme since 2006, also find the feedback from their assessor really helpful. “Being assessed keeps you on your toes,” says Felicity. “We’re always so busy looking after everyday things with the business that we sometimes forget to take a step back and have a think about things you need to refurbish. The assessments make you focus on what needs to be done – they also give you a deadline to work towards.”

David says that their assessor has helped them to achieve a four-star Gold rating for one of their cabins that was originally a four-star. They now have three four-star Gold cabins and one four-star cabin that is simply too small to meet the requirements of the Gold award.

Felicity says they also benefit from being members of Farm Stay UK and Premier Cottages. “Although we are normally almost fully booked by the time we get enquiries through these sites, being able to network with local like-minded people who are also in the scheme and running forward-thinking high-end businesses is so helpful,” she says. “We make the best use of the opportunities our membership gives us.”

Rewarding success

Although David and Felicity have clearly always been proud of their business, when they entered their first competition in

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2007, they didn’t think they stood a chance of winning as they were a new business. However, they won Silver for Self-Catering Holiday at the East Midlands Tourism Enjoy England Excellence Awards and they haven’t looked back. As the winners of a host of titles, including Gold for Access for All in the VisitEngland Awards for Excellence 2011 and a Silver for Sustainable Tourism in the VisitEngland Awards for Excellence 2012 and 2013, Hoe Grange Holidays has made a great name for itself.

“Winning awards, especially the ones for accessibility, does help get you more business,” says Felicity. “For example, we got an article in *Disabled Motoring UK* and had at least three or four bookings from it. I’m sure other readers took note of our name and may well book in the future too. When we won Gold we also had a big piece in the *Mail on Sunday*, which brought in thousands of pounds of business and still brings in enquiries.”

In addition to the publicity that the couple has gained from winning awards, David and Felicity market their business in a number of ways. From placing adverts in disability magazines to being listed on the Visit Peak District website, they make the most of traditional advertising methods. In the past, they have also enjoyed success by doing targeted campaigns, such as

Images: (Top, left to right) the housekeeping team; produce from the welcome pack that guests are given on arrival; chickens on the farm; the view from one of the cabins; (Right) Felicity with one of her horses.



Images: Johanna Ward



All in a day’s work Felicity takes us through a typical changeover day at Hoe Grange Holidays

7AM We get up and walk our dogs Twix, Crunchie and Fudge – they’re very popular with the guests. David will then let the chickens out and feed the farm animals. Overnight we’ll have made fresh bread in the breadmaker for the guests, which I’ll get out to cool.

8AM We take our youngest son Elliot to school. In summer, we grow flowers for the guests, so I’ll pick these when I get back. I’ll also make a list of incoming guests’ requirements. I print off a list of local events for the week compiled by the local tourist board before checking emails and seeing if we’ve had any online bookings overnight.

9.45AM Checkout is 10am, so at about 9.45am we’ll start saying goodbye to guests to try and get rid of them! We then help them with their luggage.

10AM The housekeeping team arrive, and collect all the welcome packs and pre-packed bags of linen. I work with the housekeepers and we split into two teams of two and clean two cabins per team. The girls are great.

12.30PM We have a 20-minute break and discuss any issues or last-minute jobs for David (my Mr Maintenance!) that have come up.

1PM We then carry on cleaning and doing recycling and check the Swedish hot tub for chlorine levels.

3PM I do a final check of the cabins and make sure any pre-ordered access equipment is in the right place. Guests then start arriving and I give them a tour. We also tell people about places to eat, and local attractions that are accessible. If we have guests with horses coming, we’ll help settle the horses into the paddock.

4PM In summer, we have more children coming to stay, so we’ll give them the option to feed the animals, although, funnily enough, it’s often the parents who really want to do it. I also have to try not to forget to fetch Elliot from school!

7PM By this time, all the guests have normally arrived and are all settled, so we open a bottle of wine and relax. We go out some evenings, but generally not on a changeover day, as it’s just too tiring.

marketing to horse owners who want to bring their horses on holiday.

“A few years ago, we took a stand at the Your Horse Live exhibition,” says Felicity. “That led to a lot of people booking to come with their horses. We also advertise locally and we’ve done things like have an open house as part of the Friends of the Peak District Green Buildings Day. I know lots of business owners don’t see the point in advertising locally, but we get quite a lot of local business. If people have large families, they often don’t have room to let everyone stay in their house, so we pick up a lot of business that way.”

David and Felicity also use social media to publicise the business and maintain contact with regulars and other businesses. “David is in charge of Facebook – he posts photos on there and keeps guests up-to-date with what we’re doing, and it’s great when guests upload their own photos,” says Felicity. “I use Twitter as more of a B2B tool.”

Due to the success that David and Felicity have enjoyed with the self-catering side of the business, they have changed from dairy farming to less labour-intensive beef cattle, but that doesn’t mean they’re slowing down. “We’re always looking at what’s happening in the industry and thinking about what else we can tap into or incorporate into what we’re doing,” says Felicity. “We’re thinking about installing a sauna next to the outdoor Swedish hot tub.” ■