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STAFFORDSHIRE'S BEST-SELLING COUNTY MAGAZINE

From city to farmyard

Rupert and Emma Evans have given up high-flying careers in London to live the good life in rural Staffordshire. Jenny Amphlett found out how they are converting an old dairy into the hub of the community in the village of Denstone.

Just a few months ago Emma Evans, 37, was working as an international buyer for high street clothing chains Monsoon and River Island.

Jetting around the world from India to China and back, with a long haul journey at least once every four weeks, she was responsible for spending millions of pounds on behalf of her employers.

Husband Rupert, meanwhile, worked for a well-known advertising agency, helping to mastermind high profile campaigns for household brands.

The couple had a lifestyle many would envy, owning their own home in an area notoriously difficult to step onto the property ladder, and enjoying all the social life benefits of living in the capital.

But they found themselves hankering after something different, something

more. Something which a quiet corner of Staffordshire, and not London, could offer.

"Such busy careers took their toll," Rupert, 35, explained.

"All that travelling meant we weren't spending enough time together and we wanted to start a family, which we didn't really want to do in London.

"We always said we'd never bring a child up in London because of the crime and the schools. We both had a really nice upbringing and we wanted our children to have the same."

Rupert is a farmer's son and had always wanted to follow in the family footsteps, but been put off by the desperate state of the industry.

"Dad talked me out of it," he said. "He said there was no money in it and so I

ended up in advertising instead. Life has gone full circle.

"In the back of my mind I always had in mind that I wanted to go back to the country. London is a chapter in our life that's come to an end, and now we've moved on to something else."

On their first date Rupert and Emma discovered they were both farmers' offspring.

"We nearly ran a mile from each other when we found out," he joked.

It is Emma's family's farm, Denstone Hall Farm at Denstone, near Uttoxeter, that the couple have now moved back to and where they are creating their new business.

Unlike Rupert, Emma couldn't wait to escape from the farm as a teenager.

"She left as soon as she possibly could ➡

Rupert, Emma and young Archie Evans



From city to farmyard



The dairy buildings before and during the transformation



“because she hated stinky cows,” Rupert said. “She studied fashion design in Birmingham, which couldn’t really be further removed from farming.”

“Her dad always said she’d marry a farmer’s son, and she always said never.”

So 18 months ago Rupert gave up his job in London to start working on their future, temporarily leaving Emma continuing her career in the capital to help finance their plans.

Rupert found himself commuting up and down the motorway several times a week, spending much of his time staying at the farm with his in-laws between meetings with builders and planning officers.

The couple’s vision was centred around the farm’s old dairy, which was still kitted out as a milking parlour and was something of an eyesore for the local community.

But the buildings were in greenbelt land, so they knew they could have a battle on their hands to obtain planning permission.

They wanted to create a farm shop and cafe, with future plans for a children’s nursery and play area and an animal petting area.

Rupert successfully bid for a Rural Enterprise Scheme grant, which provided a large chunk of the capital needed for the project.

Their creative career backgrounds proved invaluable, each of them having an input into the business layout, colour schemes, logos and literature.

Building work began in September 2006 and continued through last winter. The team battled on through all the weather could throw at them, including rain pouring in through the roof.

They had originally hoped for an Easter opening, but the deadline slipped back by six weeks.

As I chatted with Rupert over a mug of steaming coffee in the new cafe it was hard to imagine cows being milked in that very same space.

What they have managed to create is something that will no doubt be cherished by the local community, and attract in passing trade and tourists too.

Previously the pub and church were the main hubs of the Denstone community, but now villagers can also pop to the cafe for a slice of homemade cake - picking up a joint of



Denstone Hall Farm beef or perhaps some Staffordshire cheese or local organic vegetables too.

All of the beef sold comes from the family farm and, whilst they don't currently grow any of the vegetables, that is an ambition for the future.

It is important to Rupert and Emma to keep things local, not only to reduce food miles but also to support the local economy.

The business has created around 15 new jobs for local people, a mix of part and full-time, including a master butcher.

The business transformed the old dairy building and transformed the Denstone social life, but it has also transformed Rupert and Emma.

The couple, and newborn son Archie, have moved into Emma's gran's house on the farm so they are just a short walk from the cafe and shop.

They are currently renovating the property, juggling a new life with a new business, new baby and having the builders in.

Added to that they have a constant throng of weekend houseguests, as their London friends are all so keen to sample the good life in Staffordshire.

"We left London for a more leisurely lifestyle but I don't think I've ever worked so hard in my life," Rupert said. "But it's so much more gratifying.

"All those skills we've learnt over the years to make money for other people, now we can put them to good use working on a future for ourselves."

One of Rupert's first projects for his graphic design degree was creating design ideas for an organic farm shop, 15 years later he was doing it for real for his own farm shop.

"People come in every day and say how lovely the shop is and how lovely it is to have something like this in the village.

"In many ways this is the culmination of a dream for us. We're quite foodie people, we used to go to all the food shows in London. And here we are now, achieving something we never could have dreamt of in London."

Of course there are always going to be some drawbacks of any change of lifestyle.

"I miss the holidays," Rupert said. "We had a really nice lifestyle in London. We had a nice disposable income because we both had professional jobs.

"We bought our house in London at the right time so we benefitted from the house price rises, selling it freed up some of the money we needed to invest in our own future."

He admits it was a gamble to sell their home to help fund a new launch business venture, but one which is already starting to pay dividends. ■



The farm shop and cafe have already become a thriving business



Photography by Staffordshire Life's John Aris. Before photographs of the dairy supplied by Rupert and Emma Evans