

Daring to be different

Twenty years ago tillage, sheep and horses were the main enterprises on Kevin and Joan Mahon's farm in Kilkenny. Much has changed in the intervening years, and today self catering, team building and forestry form the basis of the farm family income.

With the farm on the edge of Kilkenny City, it's a mix that works, but it's also a mix that's had its ups and downs, as Kevin Mahon explains.

"My father Ned was always open to change and innovation, so I was never afraid to suggest something new. We took the plunge in several areas of farm diversification with mixed results. But when it comes to enterprises that work, I believe self-catering has proved its worth."

The Mahon's first alternative enterprise was deer farming, which they started in 1988, and at the peak they had a herd of over 200.

"We've been in the business a long time, and in the early stages we were exporting to Denmark, but prices never moved, so we scaled back. We still keep deer on the farm, and they have a vital role in attracting guests to our self-catering houses."

In 1990, the family converted an old coach house into what is now The Gables – a three bedroom self-catering cottage in a traditional style. The investment paid off and, with lots of repeat business, many of the regular guests are now family friends.

Doing something different with their farm has never been a problem for Kevin and Joan Mahon. So what have they learned and, more importantly, which enterprise has been the most successful? Mairead Lavery reports.

GOING GREEN

Two years ago, the Mahons expanded their self-catering business and built an eco-friendly house with a serious wow factor. Longbowe is a stunning modern building with a huge expanse of windows that frame wonderful views of the surrounding countryside and the river Nore. What's more, it catches every ray of sunshine, and the light, bright interior would bring cheer to even the darkest winter's day.

"We knew the business was there, and we could have built two standard houses. But we wanted something different, and we wanted to offer real choice to our visitors," says Kevin.

And different it is, with a living roof of sedums and grasses, its geothermal and solar heating systems, marble and oak floors and extensive recycling facilities all creating an eco-friendly theme.

Since the Mahons started doing self catering, much has changed in how the business operates. The use of Internet, websites and credit-card booking is now the norm.

Lead-in times to bookings are much shorter, and most guests take short breaks rather than stay for a week or longer.

"We have to be flexible, especially when it comes to short breaks. We do more special offers and have introduced gift vouchers. While the recession is an issue, I'm glad to say that last year Longbowe had a 68% occupancy rate and The Gables came in at 59%."

HOTEL PRICES UNSUSTAINABLE

The Mahons are involved with the Irish Self Catering Federation, and Kevin says its members fear that unsustainable price reductions being offered by hotels will hit their sector.

"Hotel prices are falling like a stone and big businesses, which received plenty of tax breaks to build them, just want to keep the doors open and don't care what it costs. Unfortunately, people are using these prices as a yardstick to talk down prices for self catering, and that is a challenge we have to meet."

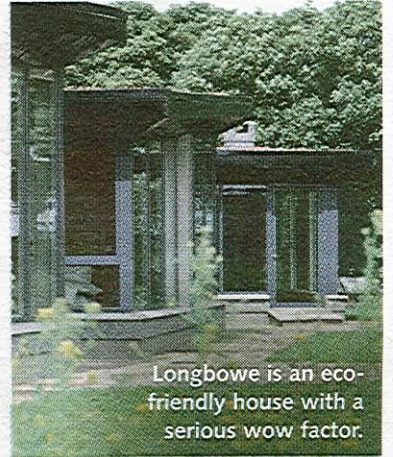
TEAM BUILDING

Team Dynamics Kilkenny is another on-farm diversification business that the Mahons established. It's an indoor/outdoor team-building adventure centre offering facilities such as abseiling, archery, canoeing, orienteering, a zipline and raft-building, to name just some of the activities on offer.

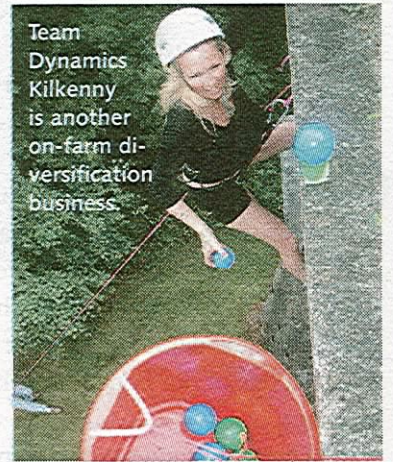
"We started this business in 2001, and during the boom years it worked great. It helped clear our debts – we could make as much on a good corporate day as we could from one of the houses for six months. The recession has hit the corporate business, but we find we are getting more social bookings. The hens and stags who used go to Barcelona or Berlin now come here."

With all this activity, there's plenty of work for the four Mahon children – Laura (18), Conor (15), Mary (12) and Eric (10). "It's all hands on deck – there's no lazing around or PlayStations on this farm. The children know where our family income comes from and have a role in bringing it in," says Kevin. Joan Mahon also holds down a part-time job as a nutritionist in nearby St Luke's Hospital.

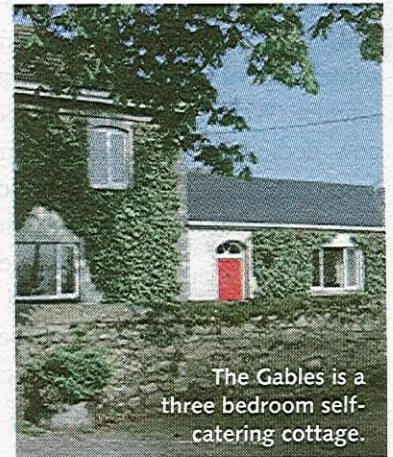
After almost 30 years farming and in business, Kevin Mahon has learned three things. "Don't be afraid to be different. Whatever you do, do it to the highest standard. And know your unique selling point – and in our case that's our family." Not bad advice for these challenging times. **CL**



Longbowe is an eco-friendly house with a serious wow factor.



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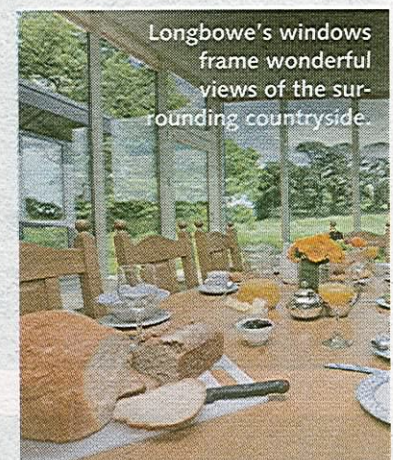
The Gables is a three bedroom self-catering cottage.



Kevin and Joan Mahon with their children Eric, Conor, Laura and Mary on their farm in Kilkenny.



Team Dynamics Kilkenny activities include abseiling and archery.



Longbowe's windows frame wonderful views of the surrounding countryside.

For further details visit www.longbowe.ie or www.thegables.ie | Prices start at €300 for a full week, but keep an eye out for special offers