

Waterside Country Barn—A Business Transformation



When Georgia Price-Bates (later to be Venn) saw the riverside field at the Mill House Equestrian centre, home of the Venn family's Riding and Livery business in 2010, she was immediately attracted by its beauty and tranquil atmosphere, a refuge from her pressurised life as an events organiser in London, guaranteed to lift her mood. Little did she know then how central it might be to her future.

Mill House held other attractions. In 2015 Georgia married Alexander Venn, and they made their home on the family farm. They held their wedding at the farm, Georgia drawing on her hospitality skills and contacts to make it a special day, with a wedding breakfast prepared by a Michelin starred chef.

The experience confirmed her belief that they had the skills and the riverside setting to create a fantastic venue for weddings and other events that offered something a little different from the norm.

Experiencing a financial downturn in the riding school business Georgia's father-in-law Barry has always given his enthusiastic support in the search for a more financially viable diversification to the business.

Alexander's company, Outbuild, which employed his brother Cameron, provided the construction expertise to create the impressive barn, completed in 2019, that provides the fulcrum of the venue.



A small lake was reborn after some long overdue maintenance (now home to all manner of wildlife), four small lodges (more of Alexander's creations) added over time and over 500 trees planted. Red tape entanglements were eventually unknotted, and the plans started to come to life; modestly at first with a yoga retreat, ideally suited to such a tranquil venue, and a handful of weddings for friends and family.

Then, with the future beckoning, disaster struck in the form of Covid. Beyond the ultimate tragedy of the many lives lost, the effect of the pandemic on small businesses throughout our country was profound (as I know from personal experience), potentially catastrophic for those in hospitality and compounded for a start-up business.

With events and holiday rentals virtually impossible, bar one tiny covid compliant wedding for a relative, even the family riding school no longer viable, and two young children to consider, things looked bleak. With the help of government small business grants they managed to keep their heads above water and look forward to hitting the ground running in 2022.

Happily, these trials and tribulations have substantially passed. The Lodges are in demand,



and whilst there are a few spaces left, wedding bookings are coming in for next year. The lake now has resident swans that venture from the safety of their nesting islet into the Tone, as well as Ducks and Moorhens, whilst Canada Geese are seasonal visitors. There is even the occasional glimpse of a Kingfisher.

This year the Barn hosted Musgrove Park Hospital Junior Doctors' Ball and the organisers were so impressed that they promised to recommend it for next year's event.

Outside of events the lodges are exceedingly popular with people looking for a quiet escape or a staging post for a few days before heading further west.

As dog owners and regular riverside walkers, we witnessed from the other side of the Tone first the creation of the lake, the appearance of the first and second lodges and the barn itself, curious, as village folk often are about changes to their status quo and perhaps a little nostalgic for the sights and sounds of the riding school.



Therefore, we were delighted to receive Georgia's call with the opportunity to look around the venue, satisfy our nosiness and write a piece for NFTV!



Georgia met us promptly for our visit, squeezed between work duties and the school run, showed us around the beautifully appointed and surprisingly spacious lodges as well as the vast barn. It is clear she relishes the challenges of getting the business on its feet and feels she has found her vocation.

I ask her about the challenges that entails, not least juggling the organisation with a very hands-on approach (you have to do everything in a small family business), to managing the compliance issues around venues, not least the noise regulations. “We are constantly monitoring the decibel levels of music with noise meters, as there are extremely strict limits, and keeping a keen eye on the time as we have an equally strict 11pm cut-off” she explains. So, if you hear loud music and general raucousness, it is almost certainly not coming from Waterside Country Barn!



What of the future?

Ideally Georgia and Alexander would like eventually to be able to host a few more weddings each year, maybe 12 or so rather than the current 8. There is also the opportunity to add more lifestyle events and retreats, such as Wellness, Yoga, Tai Chi.

They would like to contribute to the larger and local community, having partnered with Wedding Wishing Well, a charity organising and funding weddings for terminally ill people across the country, to donate one of their wedding slots to the charity.

Georgia is keen to host an event for the village next year, perhaps a village fete that could become an annual fixture; “the field and Barn would be a perfect venue, and we would love our neighbours to experience the charm of our venue in person.”



There has also been local interest in hosting a Classic car show at the Venue.

We left Georgia charmed by the location, impressed by her resilience and keen to sample one of her events sometime soon!

If you are interested in more information, the following links useful:

<https://watersidecountrybarn.com/> - wedding venue

<https://www.millhouseequestrian.com/accommodation> - holiday accommodation

<https://openairbusiness.com/waterside-country-barn/> . – Case study

[\(https://weddingwishingwell.org.uk/\)](https://weddingwishingwell.org.uk/) – Wishing Well Charity