

## Feeding the 300,000

With more than a quarter of a million visitors passing its door annually, the problem for the National Trust's first full-scale farm shop is not lack of footfall but avoiding a late-afternoon crush



**P**olesden Lacey, the late Georgian house and 1,400-acre estate in rural Surrey where George VI and Queen Mother honeymooned in 1923, will see around 300,000 visitors this year. Just 22 miles from London, it's the National Trust's fourth most visited property. And the first thing most visitors now see when they leave their cars and coaches is the new Polesden Lacey farm shop, a pilot for what could be a mini-chain across the Trust's top sites in England and Wales.

There are other farm shops run by Trust tenants, some just selling their own farm produce. But this is the first full-on farm shop owned and operated by the Trust itself. Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire, a World Heritage Site, looks likely to host the second, with perhaps nine or 10 more to follow. Each will major on food produced by local Trust tenant farmers but will also carry a full, British-led food and drink range, making these serious, commercially viable ventures.

That's provided the trial in Surrey is successful. "We've got to go through this learning curve first," says the Trust's head of commercial operations, Stuart Richards. "Then we'll try a roll-out."

So far, so very good. The Polesden Lacey store opened less than three months ago, part of a three-year, £3.5m programme of improvements to the visitor facilities at this tranquil spot on the North Downs. And already – get this – the farm shop has achieved sales of £14,500 a week from just 820 sq feet of floor-space.

No-one seems more surprised than Keith Jordan, the Trust's recently-appointed regional farm shop operations manager, who describes the narrow, rectangular space in what was formerly the gift shop as "a shoebox". With around 1,700 individual lines shoehorned into its chillers, freezers and

### POLESDEN LACEY MUST-STOCKS

- Polesden's own restaurant-made fruit and cheese scones



- Crosbie's cakes: lemon drizzle, carrot cake, brownies and flapjacks
- Green olive bread (Mantinga)
- Tomato & parmesan bread (local)
- Hog's Back Brewery beer
- Olives (Olives Et Al)
- Paynes Southdown Bee Farms honey
- Barkham Blue cheese
- Fresh asparagus
- Ouse Valley lime curd
- Cheese straws (local)
- Newitt's Black Ham
- Tea Pigs Darjeeling
- Abbott's Gold cheddar



shallow shelves, on-shelf stock is minimal and replenishment is already proving a "massive issue".

"There are two schools of thought about the range," says Jordan. "Some visitors like the fact it's really piled in, tight and intense. Some say they'd prefer fewer SKUs [stock-keeping units] and more facings so they can read the shelves more easily. You always over-range to start with until you find out what sells, but we'll take some SKUs off regardless. We're carrying seven or eight mayonnaises, for example. Arguably we don't need that many."

This stately home, with its 30 acres of garden to explore, plus separate gift shop, garden shop and 350-seater restaurant, also has very particular trading patterns that call for some retail ingenuity. Jordan explains: "We've realised that visitors arrive mid-morning, have a look round the farm shop, and then go off and spend a few hours looking around the house and grounds before they buy anything. Then, at about 3.30pm, the entire property seems to empty into the farm shop. In fact, when Polesden is busy the restaurant and shop are both swamped.

"So we've started a 'shop and collect' service to take some of the pressure off the tills in the afternoons. When someone says, 'I'd like a bit of that cheese but I'll buy it later', we'll point out that we might not have any later – and they might not physically be able to get into the shop."

Jordan was recruited by Stuart Richards from garden centre chain Wyevale, where as, food market development manager, he was part of a team trying – with limited success, as it turned out – to establish classy "food markets"



**Cheese – a ‘massive winner’ for the shop, according to Jordan – comes predominantly through distributor Rowcliffe**

Trust scones produced on site, and Mantinga bake-off speciality loaves – and at the end furthest from the entrance is the fresh deli, with one cabinet filled mainly with cheese, another with meat.

Cheese – a “massive winner” for the shop, according to Jordan – comes predominantly through Rowcliffe, while The Bay Tree and Cotswold Fayre provide many of the nationally-known ambient brands. But the point of difference is the local and regional selection.

Out of 80 suppliers to Polesden Lacey farm shop, 59 are local. That definition is naturally a bit loose, since Surrey is not over-burdened with speciality food producers, but true locals like condiment-maker Le Mesuriers and cake-maker Crosbie’s are given generous space. “Products like Chris and Claire Crosbie’s cakes are worth a lot at the till,” says Jordan. “We’ve sold 500-600 units of their lemon drizzle cake since we opened.”

Sussex, Hampshire and Kent yield more regional lines – brands like Pollen Organics and Bookham’s pasta sauces, as well as

Barkham Blue and Goodwood Smoked cheeses. Tessa Evans, the local sales agent for Cotswold Fayre, told *FFD*: “Although we’re supplying them with national brands, we’ve also been able to introduce them to local companies they didn’t know about, like Relish in Spice in Arundel and More Food in Chichester.”

Another key association is with Robert Wicks’ Westerham Brewery in Kent, which is located on a Trust farm and brews Little Scotney pale ale and bitter exclusively for sale in Trust shops and restaurants. It has just launched the first National Trust own-label beer: an India Pale Ale named after Lord Curzon.

In selecting and pricing his range, Jordan says he walks a tightrope between the commercial and agricultural sides of the Trust. “We have to operate as a business, we have to meet our KPIs [key performance indicators] and we have to turn a profit, but it also has to be ethically right.” Meaning he can’t screw the Trust’s tenant farmers on price? “Pretty much, yes. Also, if it’s fresh fruit and veg, we have to source that as locally as possible, and then within the UK if we can. So there’s a set of ethics that is a bit challenging at times – but I quite like that.”

Initial stock, he says, has been geared to impulse buying by tourists. In time, the shop will expand its everyday larder range for locals, but you can’t get away from the property’s power as a visitor attraction. Feeding the 300,000 will always be more about picnics and gifts than routine groceries. “It would be nice to think we’ll end up with both,” says Jordan. “But the Polesden shopper is essentially a tourist – I don’t imagine we’ll be selling a lot of fresh meat.”

With the estate (though not the main house) open year-round, it will take a full 12 months to really understand how the new outlet trades, and Jordan says the Trust won’t rush to create a chain. “For obvious reasons, the powers-that-be want to make sure everything is right before we move on.”

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**Westerham Brewery in Kent is producing the Trust’s first own-label ale**



**One side of the shop is lined by ambient shelving, the other is a hotch-potch of shelves, upright chillers and freezers**

at some of the bigger sites (see News p4). Jordan says he learned some serious lessons there about what not to do. “Where a few delis and farm shops fall down – and I think I fell into this trap – was to try to make it too premium. There’s a consumer perception that places like this are expensive.”

He has decided to grab this issue by the scruff of its neck. “I went to Waitrose the other day, looking at the prices on brands that we sell, like Union Hand-Roasted coffee, and I’ve decided we’re going to price-match them. And then we are going to advertise that we’re price-matching them.”

If Jordan talks the language of a mainstream retailer – SKUs, price matching – it’s not surprising, since “many moons ago” he worked in various roles at Sainsbury, including head of fresh food and head of bakery. He doesn’t reckon Richards employed him on the strength of Wyevale’s food selection, which was more Continental in flavour, but because it was a professionally run operation with good “customer service delivery”.

Jordan, in turn, was attracted by the pairing of the National Trust and farm shops, calling it a match made in heaven. “Stuart gave me a blank canvas and said, ‘Create a farm shop for me.’”

In a sense, the store he has created at Polesden Lacey is surprisingly ordinary. There’s nothing of the formulaic National Trust look about it (something the Trust is trying to get away from in its gift shops too). It’s modern but not over-slick, and the ‘shoe-box’ premises remind you that this, like so many farm shops, is simply a converted former outbuilding. It’s a proper shop.

One side is lined by ambient shelving, the other is a hotch-potch of shelves, upright chillers and freezers. Pine tables provide the central display space – including a mix of local bread, National