

Welsh BorderLife

The country magazine for the Welsh Borders • September 2017

Make your own Cider

A COUNTRY
DAY OUT AT
**ARLEY
HALL**
CHESHIRE

A lofty
wander
on the
**Denbigh
Moors**

The inn thing

**REVEALED: the reality behind
running your own country inn**



BLACK SHEEP
On the long, long
grass of home

IOLO WILLIAMS
On lessons to be
learned from Mull



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Be our guest

Many of us have fantasised about leaving the rat race behind to run a country inn or hotel, welcoming customers and serving them food and drinks... but does the reality live up to the dream?

Words Karen Wilson

If there's one piece of advice Jonathan Greateorex would give to would-be country inn owners – aside from stocking up on industrial strength toilet seats – it would be never to mention the phrase “lifestyle business” in a meeting with your bank.

“I was told you'd be thrown out of the room,” laughs the owner of The Hand at Llanarmon, a 13-room country house hotel in the Ceiriog Valley near Llangollen. “Many people imagine an idyllic life of pulling pints and chatting to customers, but the reality is 18-hour days and unblocking toilets on Christmas morning.”

The former music teacher and his wife Jackie, an ex head teacher, bought the freehold of their favourite local in 2014 when Jackie's two-year contract in Oxfordshire was coming to an end.

They'd pondered buying the ancient hostelry in North Wales a few years previous but the timing wasn't right. So when it came up for sale again, the pair ended up selling Jonathan's family home in nearby Llanrhaeadr, which his grandfather had built in the 1930s, to part-fund the sale.

Six months was spent on due diligence and drawing up forensic profit and loss projections, but luckily the previous owners of The Hand wanted to buy Jonathan's house, so they negotiated a property swap deal. “You need to be realistic and the temptation is to presume business will be better than it was, but we were very, very conservative in our estimates,” he explains.

“At that time the banks were incredibly cautious and we felt we were battling with an institution that was very risk averse. However our business manager, Rose Morris from Barclays in Oswestry, was amazing and fought our corner every step of the way. It helped that we used a consultancy that specialises in the hospitality industry to guide us through the financial pitfalls, which was definitely money well spent.”

After moving from their rented home in Oxfordshire to a cottage on-site, Jonathan admits they were “like rabbits caught in headlights” during the first few weeks. “It was a vertical learning curve,” he says. “We went to a hoteliers' conference and felt like complete frauds as we didn't know what people were talking about.”

Thankfully the previous owners stayed for a handover week and staff members showed them the ropes to help them get to grips with the new venture. “The best thing we did was keep all the staff on, as they're our greatest asset,” he says.

From the start, the couple, who've been together for 20 years, gave themselves clearly defined roles. Jackie's organisational skills meant she was better at dealing with paperwork, admin and finance, while Jonathan's strengths were in marketing as he used to run a media company specialising in photography for hotels. However they both pitch in with everything else. ▶



THIS PAGE The Hand is now listed in the Michelin guide PREVIOUS PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN PICTURE): Llanarmon – The Hand’s idyllic rural home; owners Jonathan and Jackie moved from Oxfordshire; Grant Mulholland is the restaurant’s head chef

“We’re open 365 days a year and at first we made the mistake of trying to do everything,” says Jonathan. “However we soon learnt that it’s important to take a step back. Now we fiercely protect our two days off each week and always take a couple of 10-day holidays a year.”

Working together does have its challenges, though. “When you have a busy service you can end up barking at each other, but you soon realise what happens at work has to stay at work,” he admits. “The moment you bring work problems home, you’re in trouble.”

Over the last three years the couple have refurbished the place from top to bottom, as well as adding a spa treatment room. “It’s like the Forth Bridge so we’re already decorating again and have just spent £1,200 on a new Wi-Fi system,” he explains.

Their investment has certainly paid off. With their head chef, Grant Mulholland, the restaurant now has two AA rosettes and is listed in the Michelin guide. They’ve also been approached by a publisher to create a recipe book.

“We’ve seen tremendous growth, outperforming anything we imagined,” says Jonathan. “One thing that’s made a massive difference is spending £3,500 on getting a professional video made for our website. The feedback’s been amazing. Only last week there was a man from Bermuda at the bar who recognised me from the video and said that’s why he booked. It paid for itself within six months.”

For those who want to follow in the couple’s footsteps, Jonathan says you need to be flexible and “genuinely like people”. Having a good sense of humour undeniably helps, too. “Unlike tax collectors or parking attendants, we work in an environment where 99.9 percent of people come here to have a good time and are happy to see you,” he says. “However you’re at the mercy of TripAdvisor. Most of our reviews are very positive but every business gets bad reviews. One lady threatened to take me to court, but another customer told me they’d come to stay because my replies on TripAdvisor made them laugh!” ▶

