

This FARMING Life

Nestled on the serene shores of Lough Derg in county Tipperary, Brookfield Farm is an exciting and innovative mix of sanctuary, farm and enterprise.



Ailbhe's Irish honey is infused with the flavours of the flowers and berries of the meadow. (PHOTO CREDIT Photograph Liam Burke/Press 22)

An early interest in animals gave way to a career in construction until Ailbhe Gerrard finally settled on life in farming, creating a beautiful place to live and work. "When in secondary school, I wanted to leave and work with animals, but luckily my parents persuaded me to finish school. I did veterinary practice with two vets in my Leaving Cert year and I remember being fascinated during a caesarean section on a cow.

"Back at school I realised that the points for veterinary were eye wateringly high, so I focused on Arts instead. From there, I worked my way into construction project management, taking night degrees during full time work with architects and landscape architects. When I completed an MBA in Project Management for Construction, I decided to try out new skills and worked with the international aid charity, GOAL, as a reconstruction manager in Sri Lanka for six months. My project was to rebuild schools damaged in the 2004 tsunami, and it was a fascinating but tough time.

"For the next few years, I shifted between project management on large construction projects in Ireland, such as mixed use developments, bank headquarters, offices, and working voluntarily on projects in places like Pakistan and Ethiopia. When I felt in 2007 that the construction boom was over, I looked for an exit, and in 2008 retrained in sustainable development.

"The MSc in Environment and Sustainable Development at University College London was an eye-opening experience,



The beehives yield not only honey but beeswax candles and lip balms



Ailbhe has removed non-native trees from the farm, preserving Irish varieties such as the oak



A full hive has up to 60,000 bees in summer

“Wildflowers include flax, phacelia, Gold of Pleasure, crimson clover, cornflower, tree blossoms, mustard and white thorn”

studying and learning with post graduates from Africa, Asia, Americas and Europe. An integral part of the course was preparing for a study trip in Accra, Ghana, working with urban farmers to improve their access to land, clean water and markets. Following this experience, and researching my thesis on different forms of urban agriculture, I realised I had a deep interest in food production, global equity and sustainability. I made a life-changing decision to move back to Ireland from London and to try to buy a farm.”

In 2010, Ailbhe purchased Brookfield Farm, a neglected 26-hectare plot close to her family home and took on the challenge of turning it around through innovation and diversification.

“In order to learn farming and make a farm living, I studied Organic Farming in Scotland, which was invaluable in practical farming skills and the realities of farm enterprises. There is no similar course available in Ireland, and half the students travelling to Aberdeen were Irish.

“Today, the farm enterprises are a mix of livestock and nature. We have an organically-certified sheep enterprise,



Ailbhe planted hectares of wildflowers to keep the pollinators happy

honey bees, agri-environment – including three hectares of flower meadows, conventional tillage, with a plant to convert to organic, native woodland and broadleaf plantation.

“In 2014, I bought a further eight acres close to Brookfield Farm with a cottage, farmyard, couple of paddocks and a forest-covered hill. There are spectacular views from King’s Hill, and it’s been brilliant to have a building where I can offer hospitality to visitors. I’m doing renovation work to King’s Hill – first a quarter kilometer of

stone walls were repaired with help from the GLAS farming scheme and the Heritage Council, then the two-hectare wood had paths cut and non-native trees removed. We have just finished planting native oak, and will invite visitors to this native woodland soon.”

Ailbhe’s wildflowers are in bloom from April to November and include flax, phacelia, Gold of Pleasure, crimson clover, cornflower, tree blossoms, mustard and white thorn. “It’s a beautiful sight and satisfying to see the variety of pollinators

and wildlife enjoying the food and shelter. It’s really important to me that bees and insects are looked after: they are the basis of the food chain in many ways, and as a farmer, their welfare is critical for sustainability and biodiversity.”

Ailbhe launched a hiveshare scheme designed to connect people to how and where their food comes from. “Honey is really popular, and it’s hard to get raw Irish honey. I thought, as a ‘gathering’ mechanism, that offering a share of honey would be a great way to get people interested. And so it has proved – we have now a loyal band of Hiveshare customers, many come back year after year and we are now in the fourth year and are delighted at how it’s been received.”

Where there’s honey, there’s wax and Ailbhe produces beautiful hand-poured wax candles scented with botanical essential oils. “I really enjoy hand-dipping the dinner candles – it’s a pleasure working with pure beeswax. The dipping becomes quite meditative, it takes a long time to build up from the wick to the finished dinner candle. It teaches patience and the importance of this ancient craft. The scented beeswax candles are popular, and becoming more so, with our new scents of cinnamon, rosemary, and I love cedar wood and orange. Of course, the old favourites lavender can’t be beaten.

“We try to vary the events on the farm as we love having visitors for open days. Our Honey Celebration day took place in August for Hivesharers. The Taste Of Lough Derg food series has several events from Brookfield Farm every summer including yoga sessions on the lakeshore followed by delicious nibbles and elderflower drinks, and the ‘You can eat the view’ farm biodiversity walk along the shores of Lough Derg. It discusses biodiversity and bee-keeping and we offer a local honey tasting. The many acres of wild flowers on the farm’s beautiful Lough Derg lakeshore should be in full bloom, making for a beautiful sight. During Heritage week in late August we also have a badger watch and stargazing evening.”

Ailbhe’s efforts haven’t gone unnoticed and she has amassed a litany of awards to date including winning *The Irish Times* Artisan Food Producers’ competition in 2014, a scholarship to the Global Organic Agriculture Leaders’ programme in 2015, and the Nuffield Agricultural Scholar in 2016. This year, she has been shortlisted for the inaugural RDS Talamh awards for sustainable farming and the RDS Forestry Awards.



An array of wildflowers are planted in the meadows including flax, phacelia, Gold of Pleasure, crimson clover and cornflower.

She isn’t resting on her laurels and Brookfield farm has lots in store. “I want to renovate the farm yard and make facilities for more visitors to see candle making demonstrations, honey tastings, farm biodiversity walks and other events. We’d really like visitors to be able to stay and enjoy the amazing views and lakeshore and are looking at simple accommodation options.”

Visit the Brookfield.farm YouTube channel for a flavour of this unique Irish farm. www.brookfield.farm

Saving the Bees

The Brookfield Farm Hiveshare allows you to give a year of bounty to Irish country bees, choose from the Bee Friend, the Bee Sporter or the Bee Champion. The Bee Friend (€130) includes a giftbox with a pair of handmade beeswax candles, lip balms and a hiveshare certificate. You will receive seasonal updates on the hives and an invitation to the Honey Celebration event to view the hives and meet your beekeeper. At harvest time, you will receive a tasting set plus six jars of raw Irish country honey.



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