



It started with a quad

There are certain things that simply can't be taught at school or college, as the success of James Forknall's contracting business clearly demonstrates.

James has taken the business from a teenager with a quad bike to a well-respected supplier of a range of services including combining, forage harvesting, drilling, share and contract farming and muck spreading.

James' established and experienced team of operators provides a reliable service to a number of long-standing customers across Kent using modern, reliable plant and machinery – all as a result of determination, hard

work and impressive networking skills.

After an undistinguished school career, 16 year-old James decided not to prolong the suffering by going to agricultural college, although he has fond memories of joining the parties thrown by his friends at Hadlow.

Instead of going back to the classroom, he accepted his father Peter's offer to take him on at the family farm in Chart Sutton, near Maidstone.

Working at Pleasant Farm gave the teenager a bit of cash, but after a year on his father's self-styled 'YTS scheme', James revealed his entrepreneurial

spark – and launched his business - by buying a quad bike for £1,200, together with a slug pelletter.

"I decided I couldn't live on £25 a week, so I saved up for the bike and then hired myself out to my dad and neighbouring farmers, initially doing slug pellettering," he recalled.

James knew plenty of farmers because he used to go to market with his father and often bought odd lambs for 50p or so, rearing them on the family farm and selling them on in the spring.

That ability to make and keep contacts has served him well over the years and still plays

a big part in the success of the thriving contracting business he now runs as JPF Farms.

While he is quick to pay tribute to the help of his father and the loyalty of customers who helped him get started when he was a teenager and continue to use his contracting business, it is clear that he has put considerable effort into the relationships on which he depends.

A former chairman of both the National Farmers' Union in Maidstone and the Weald of Kent Ploughing Match, James is a director of both the RAMSAK machinery ring based just outside the county town and the

Kent County Agricultural Show.

While that would be enough to keep most people busy, his contracting business is continuing to grow and he also farms around 1,300 acres of land, either owned or under contract or shared farming agreements.

James, 43, now looks after the whole of the arable operation at Pleasant Farm, leaving his father in charge of the 180-strong milking herd he has built up over the years. All the milk from the dairy herd is sold to Freshways.

It was James' grandfather John who bought what was then a 40-acre grass, potato and arable farm, together with a farmhouse and outbuildings, in 1953. His son Peter, who was still at school at the time, persuaded his father to buy some cattle, which was the start of the dairy business he runs to this day.

Over the years the farm has grown steadily to the significant size it is today, with Peter and James working closely together but not in any kind of legal partnership. "My father has always wanted to keep things simple from that point of view, but in every practical sense we work hand-in-hand," said James.

"He was encouraging in the early days when I was doing work for him and on neighbouring farms and now I run the arable side and he looks after the cows he has always loved." One

of James' current ambitions is to take on more arable land to add to the 1,300 acres that JPF Farms now owns or rents.

One of the many original customers who supported James in his slug pellettering early days was Jonathan Tipples at Reed Court Farm, Marden. "I have built up a pretty loyal customer base and in return I do my best to make sure that I deliver a quality service when each of my customers needs me," commented James.

A few years after he began to work for himself on a small scale, James began to help his father with foraging work and after visiting Australia and New Zealand on a six month trip that combined work with pleasure at the age of 24, he invested in a Claas 695 self-propelled forage harvester that he bought from Howard Pullen at Southern Harvesters in Petworth.

"It made a real difference to the service I could offer," he recalled. Jobs that used to take a week with the old forager could be done in two days. Nick and Colin Leggett at Thurnham Court and Ian Kemsley at Hook Farm, Sittingbourne were amongst the neighbouring farmers to take advantage of the new contracting offer.

From maize foraging, it was a logical progression for JPF Farms to move into maize drilling, now a major part of James' opera-

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tion. It was about this time that James' people skills found him another customer who has remained loyal over the years.

"Roger Scutt at Badlesmere Court Farm was using a contractor who was bringing in a forage harvester from Sussex, but it broke down, leaving him with a crop that needed harvesting. I stepped into the breach and did the job and have been working for Roger ever since."

Then, as now, James stuck to a tried and tested team. His two main drivers are Neil Lavis and Ian Matthews and they are

supported by Damien Arthur, who works part time driving and maintaining the new John Deere forage harvester.

"I have a regular and reliable team because I know they are good at what they do and will deliver the right level of service to my long-standing customers," explained James. "They know the farms and the farmers they are working with and they know what they are doing."

Owner/driver Seth Nesfield also helps out on the trailer for maize and grass silaging, while Harry Lingfield and LC Farming Services also lend a hand when things get busy, but James never

trusts a JPF Farms contract to an untried worker. The teamwork also extends to a useful reciprocal arrangement with Burden Bros Contractors, based on the Isle of Sheppey.

The company has four John Deere tractors and can borrow a fifth from Peter if necessary. Alongside the new forage harvester, JPF Farms operates a Vaderstad Tempo F8 drill and a locally-built Alanco Spray-ranger and will be taking delivery of a new New Holland CX7090 combine harvester in June.

Other equipment includes a new Claas Quadrant square baler and two Rolland 12-tonne rear-discharge muck spreaders that are available for hire from JPF Farms. The machinery allows JPF Farms to offer a complete stubble-to-stubble contracting service.

James and his team use John Deere's high end GreenStar GPS systems to provide highly-detailed information about the fields they are cropping and allow inputs to be regulated and used to maximum effect at minimal cost.

"We get incredibly-detailed feedback from GreenStar which allows us to pinpoint areas that



Above: James Forknall.
Right: Tractor driver Neil Lavis.
Middle right: Ian Matthews.

need more or less inputs and gives us a detailed reading of the amount of crop harvested from each part of the field," said James. "It's a very advanced system and delivers very useful information."

James' wife Michelle looks after the books and provides valuable back-up in the office, as well as being mother to the couple's three children, Imogen (12), Joshua (10) and Isaac (8).

Like all children these days, they lead busy lives, and that keeps James busy – or busier – too. In some of the little spare time he has left he volunteers as a junior coach for Cranbrook Rugby Club.

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