

THE BARN STORE FRANCHISE IS GROWING...

Barn Store is a franchise currently with 14 facilities, based in farm buildings predominantly in the South of England. Let's start by taking a look at where it all began...

Martin Bazeley, owner of the Barn Store brand, is a second generation tenant farmer who joined his father and uncle on the farm in Southwick, near Fareham in 1982. Farming was then, and still is, a volatile industry to be operating in with the weather here and across the world having a huge impact on the supply of food products from year to year. Diversification has long been promoted as a means of supplementing farm incomes and Martin started down this route in 2000 by adding value to his barley crop by turning it into his own brand of beer. Suthwyk Ales supplies real ale in casks and bottles to pubs and shops in Hampshire and West Sussex, with four regular ales. One of them, Liberation, commemorates Operation Overlord, the D-Day offensive, which was launched by General Eisenhower from Southwick House 75 years ago next June. The amalgamation of the two dairy herds on the farm left a set of



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steel-framed buildings underutilised, (Martin never uses the word redundant), on the side of Portsdown Hill, only half a mile from the boundary of the City of Portsmouth. Noticing the emergence of some very brightly coloured building frontages in and on the edge of the City, Martin began to wonder if there was a market for rural versions offering a similar facility to the surrounding communities, who may prefer not to travel to the city to access their storage units. In 2003 the first Barn Store facility was developed at Offwell Farm in the 'Old Dairy' buildings.

At 8,000 sq ft, the first building was fitted out with shipping containers sub-divided into various size storage units with steel partitions and side doors. Alarms and CCTV systems were installed to give customers additional piece of mind and a door entry system allows entry with 24/7 access. Martin found it was possible to maximise on storage space within the building with 64/65% of the floor area as lettable space. The first customer moved in during August, while Martin was busy harvesting his 500 acres of wheat and barley. The key to the success of Barn Store has been Martin's sister, Jane, who recognised that Martin was straying into uncharted waters and needed help to develop the office systems.

She joined Martin from a background with IBM at their UK headquarters in Portsmouth. Within a year they were running out of space and more buildings at Offwell were converted, giving a total square footage of 16,500 today.

The next step, franchising the Barn Store model, was suggested to Martin by his best school friend who was a solicitor specialising in that area of business. In the best traditions of networking, the first franchisee happened to be a farmer who also sold his products at farmers markets, often alongside Martin selling his beer. With a large building which had been used to house his beef cattle in winter, great road frontage near Alton in Hampshire and little competition in the area, Martin felt the Butler family were ideal franchisees. With a large farm with several enterprises to manage, lavender growing and products to market, and a lavender shop on site, there is a lot going on at Hartley Park Farm, so the franchise route suited them as they could 'hit the ground running'.

Other farmers began to take an interest and territories have been awarded and new facilities set up from Cranbrook in Kent to South Petherton in Somerset, Pembridge near Hereford and Burton-on-Trent in Staffs. The current number of sites is 14, with one or two more always in the pipeline. Some of the locations are on farms which undertake the farming operations for neighbours in the spirit of co-operation. Indeed, Martin now uses the services of his neighbour to plough, sow, reap and mow his own crops, so he and Jane can concentrate on Barn Store on behalf of their franchisees. What is certain, after the drought of this summer, is that all the franchisees are glad that Barn Store is not so weather dependant as their farming!

Currently, the 14 Barn Store facilities offer units from 40 sqft up to 160 sqft at most of the sites, with the smallest facility in the franchise having 80 units, and the largest 225 units. Martin believes that franchisees must be given the opportunity to realise their full potential. The territory each one is granted is generous, so there is no impact from one on the other. Most of the south is now covered by territories, but opportunities exist in the West Midlands and further north. One new site awaits approval by the

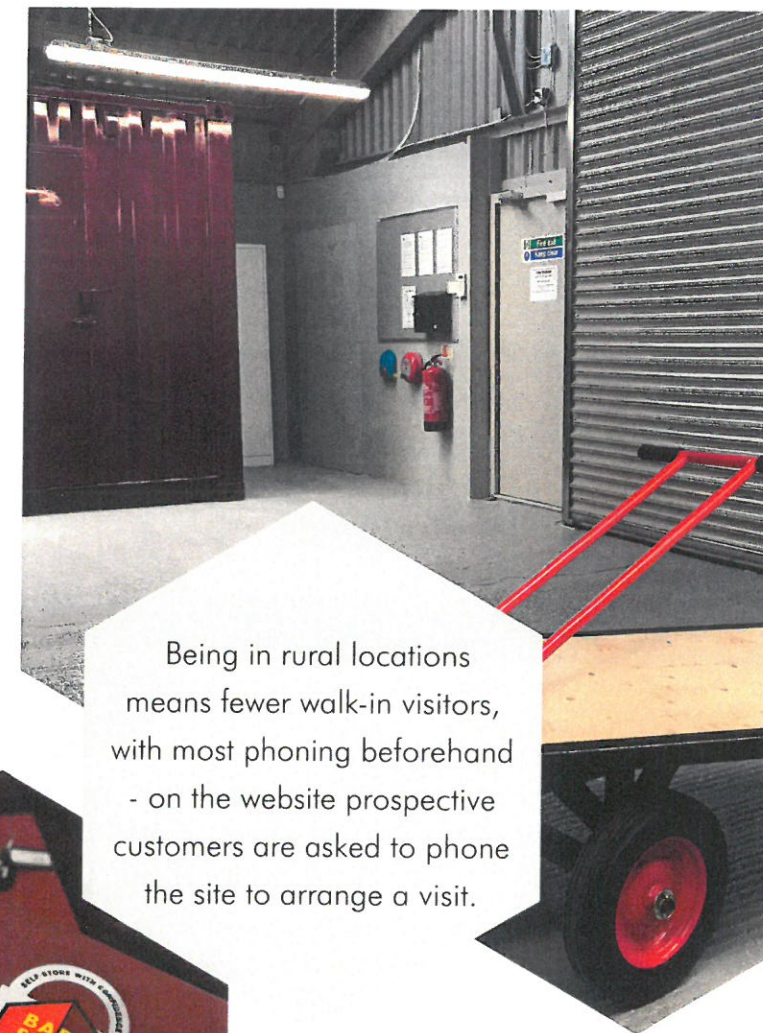
planners and three other potential sites are under consideration. When looking for new stores, location is important. Barn Store have adopted methods of assessing the potential of a site based on population, demographics and local competition. People are equally, or maybe even more important. The owner always lives on site, which customers find reassuring, especially ladies who will be visiting the store alone. Farmers tend to be known in the community and those who are active in the community will attract the business.

As with any build though, not everything goes as smoothly as you would like, and sometimes challenges in the development throw a curveball into the original plans. One Barn Store site had two lines of uprights down the centre of the building in just the wrong place. So, they cut them off! The roof is now supported off the containers, so the structure of the building was not compromised, and they still achieved an optimum layout! Another building had low eaves, so low that the containers slid in with the thickness of a Rizla paper to spare. The old saying about measuring twice – they measured that one twenty times! Often the building has been neglected over many years of underutilisation. The farmer has longed to find a profitable use for it to justify spending money on it and Martin sees the pride and satisfaction in their faces when the new concrete floors have been laid, the old cladding replaced, and the paint sprayer has performed it's magic.

Barn Store storage units are all of the same high-grade construction, painted in the strong Royal Maroon livery. This is the colour of the doors of the houses and cottages in the village of Southwick, all privately owned by the Thistlethwayte family for centuries. Martin always get quotes for the main elements of the fit out. His philosophy is to go local wherever possible and they have specifications that need to be met for the alarm/CCTV, the lighting and electrics, and the fabrication. New sites will use that specification to obtain quotes from local suppliers. In the process of obtaining quotes they will begin to build a relationship with the company, so when one is chosen and engaged to do the work the franchisee should get a great service, which continues to their future working relationship. Martin even sponsored the security company contact he uses to run the Great South Run dressed as Spider Man, who is the favourite character of the sick child he was running for. Martin firmly believe all business is about the relationships.

Outside of the storage units every Barn Store location is unique. The farm enterprises range from dairy to sheep, crops of wheat and barley are grown on lighter land and rapeseed or soya bean crops provide the break. Most are signed up to one or other of the Countryside Stewardship Schemes and Barn Store customers can often enjoy a country walk from the storage unit taking in the wild flowers, flora and fauna in the conservation areas or SSSIs. Being environmentally friendly is also important wherever possible. Some of the sites have BioMass heating, others have large solar arrays on the roof and LED strip lights are the norm for new fitouts now.

Barn Store is also involved in charitable activities, with most stores supporting local events including Open Farm Sunday, Lavender Teas, Nativity Services in lovely old timber framed barns, School Farm Visits, local Agricultural Shows and, in Martin's case the Southwick Revival weekend in June which this year raised



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£32,000 mainly for SSAFA – the Armed Forces charity.

While all Barn Store customers have access hours 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, office hours vary site to site according to staffing. Being in rural locations means fewer walk-in visitors, with most phoning beforehand - on the website prospective customers are asked to phone the site to arrange a visit. The rule is that answer phone machines should only be used in exceptional circumstances. Calls should be diverted to a mobile phone, so calls can be taken at any time; day or evening, weekdays and weekends. If there is no cover available, for example during holidays, then diverting the call to the franchisor means enquiries can still be handled.

So, what's next for Barn Store? Well one thing for sure is more sites being added to this growing brand, watch this space!

