

DEVON LIFE

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October 2012

Riverford a family business

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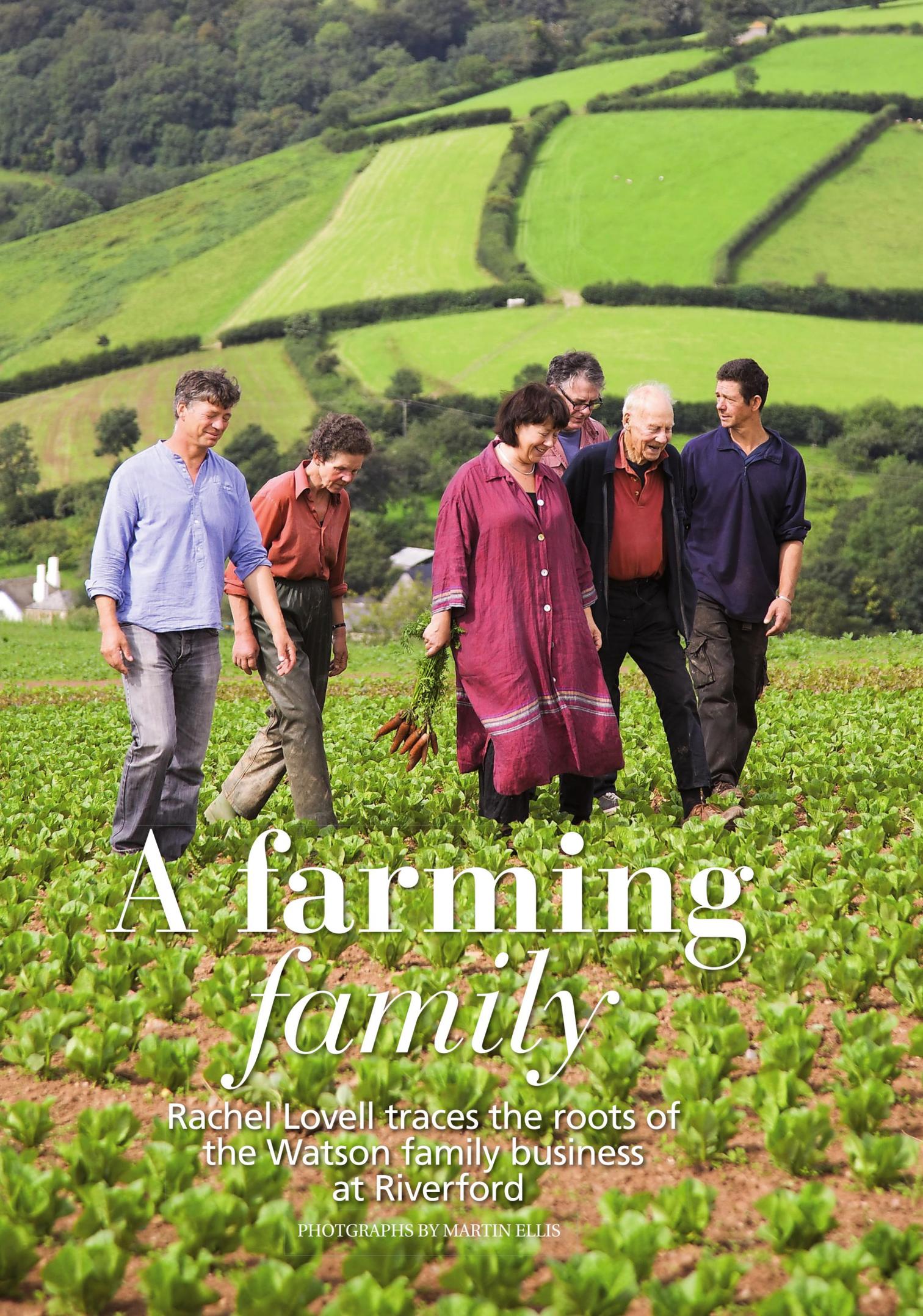
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A farming *family*

Rachel Lovell traces the roots of
the Watson family business
at Riverford

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN ELLIS



Photos courtesy of the Watson family

Facing page: The Watson Family

Left: Rachel, Oliver, Ben, Louise and Guy

Above: John and Gillian Watson on their wedding day

In 1951 a steam train pulled into Staverton station in south Devon and unloaded a rather unusual cargo: 36 Ayrshire cows clattered down the ramps, horned and kicking, and were walked a mile up the road to Riverford Farm. Bought with the lion's share of a £2,000 loan, they formed the new beginnings of this Church of England tenancy farm, now in the hands of a twenty-something John Watson.

The following years saw John marry his childhood sweetheart Gillian Hickling, introduce pigs and chickens to the farm and start growing corn to feed the livestock. Most importantly, he and Gillian produced five children who would each influence the future of the farm, turning it into one of the most successful rural businesses in Devon.

Today, Riverford is best known for pioneering direct sales from farm to customer, first through its farm shop and then through its vegbox scheme after the farm converted to organic status in 1987. A brief spell as a management consultant in London and New York sent youngest son Guy back to Riverford determined to do something more useful, and build a business on a scale that could give organic growers a sustainable outlet and customers a direct link with farming. The result is the country's leading vegbox delivery business.

“We grew up in a house where the creation and enjoyment of good food was an integral part of daily life”

“Exposure to international business life taught me a lot about the brutality of the marketplace,” he explains. “I was ambitious but uncomfortable with a life dominated by greed and short-term gain. Above all it made me determined to produce something genuinely useful and to remain independent. My first brushes with unscrupulous wholesalers and then supermarket buyers taught me the importance of controlling the route to market.”

Strong ethical standards remain central to how Riverford operates today, as a glance at the awards lining the shelves of its Devon offices testify. But it's his family that Guy credits with the real success of the business.

“Our father was an inventive and progressive farmer (and still is at 87) who became increasingly disenchanted with the way conventional farming had developed since the war. Perhaps even more influentially, our mother was a fantastic cook and gardener who drew her culinary inspiration from what grew

around her. She baked her bread, made butter, cured bacon and regularly fed 15 family and staff for lunch.

“It was a huge privilege to grow up in a house where the creation and enjoyment of such wonderful wholesome food was an integral part of daily life. A desire to grow and share good food is at the heart of Riverford and all our businesses.”

Guy was not the only one to be inspired by this farmhouse upbringing. All four of his siblings left the farm to try something different, before its pull had them back with their feet firmly in the Devon mud. Louise and Oliver took over the dairy herd in 1986 after Oliver had studied agriculture and worked the dairy scene in New Zealand, and Louise had spent a few years working with horses. They expanded the farm, improved the breeding stock and began processing their own milk, yoghurt and cream, now sold across Devon and nationwide through the Riverford home delivery business.

For middle son Ben, it's meat that has always got his juices flowing. After



Above: Pumpkin harvest at Riverford

“Growing and sharing good food is at the heart of Riverford and all our businesses”

dabbling with a law career, he returned to the farm in 1984 to help his father make some kind of a profit from the pigs. The award-winning Riverford farm shops (now in Totnes, Staverton and Yealmpton) were the result, followed by the meatbox home delivery business.

“I started the shop by accident – it was a bit of a sideline to the pork processing,

and farm shops didn’t really exist back then. We tried making a few sausages and bacon the traditional way; at that time, high street butchers were all copying the supermarkets’ claggy sausages and wet bacon, so it wasn’t hard to make something better. Then there was an article in *The Telegraph* about us and people were queuing at the door.”

Today, Ben is as obsessed with cooking and experimenting as ever, working on new ideas for the farm shop range, but always with the Riverford principles of provenance and minimum adulteration in mind.

“I’m always playing around with food at home; I’m working on a saucisson right now, and I hope that we will be selling some soups or sauerkraut-inspired fridge pickles soon, along with some preserving kits that we will be offering to the box

scheme customers. My daughter once said, when she had a friend coming around, ‘Can we have normal food tonight, Dad – at a normal time?’”

Rachel was the last of five to return in 2002, after a marketing career in London.

“Returning to the farm was like coming down to earth, in a good way, though working with family is by turns infuriating and exhilarating! They are powerful characters with strong views and a great deal of real knowledge about food and farming and the politics of food. It makes for a powerful mix when it works, and is as painful as most families when it doesn’t. At the moment we are in a positive phase; long may it last. The next generation forms a clan of 14, with gloriously mixed aspirations and attitudes, so who knows what will come next?” ■

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