



JOHN EDGAR TRUST

Spring 2021 Newsletter

A welcome from the chairman

Welcome to the Spring edition of the JET newsletter.

Following a challenging winter, the (slightly!) warmer and drier weather has kickstarted springtime. With livestock prices holding strong and most crops well underway there is continued positivity in the industry, a cheering thought in an otherwise challenging time.

With the pandemic still very much present, the roll out of the vaccine brings hope of starting to return to some kind of new normal this year. Whilst a completely COVID clear life still seems a little way off, the government roadmap for the re-opening of hospitality and travel is now well underway and running on schedule, which I am sure is welcomed by everyone.

I would like to wish everyone good health and an enjoyable summer!

George Hood, Current Chairman of JET Organising Committee





We will not be defeated!

JET Course Update

Despite the ongoing uncertainty surrounding Covid, the positive news regarding vaccine role out has helped to add a little more clarification with regards to the way forward. The committee have made the decision to plan to go ahead with this year's course and the course will run over the winter 2021 – 2022 period.

It is hoped that by the time the next course starts Covid rules will have been relaxed, but if Covid restrictions still remain in one form or another the committee will adapt the plans for the course to ensure we fully meet all Covid guidelines and regulations. Our main priority is to keep delegates, speakers and course tutors safe whilst delivering an engaging and educational course.

The provisional dates for the next course are as follows:

- 6th – 10th December 2021 to be hosted at RAU
- 10th – 13th January 2022 to be hosted at RAU
- 7th – 10th February 2022 to be hosted in Hampshire (venue to be confirmed)

The application deadline is **7th June 2021**, with interviews to be held on **Wednesday 7th July 2021** at the RAU.

We would strongly encourage anyone interested in applying for the course to contact us to register interest. We would also encourage alumni to signpost potential candidates to the website for full details on how to apply.



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Talking and Walking into success

By Edward Gibbon

I arrived in Cirencester in an old Clio, which had belonged to my Grandpa, who had died a month earlier. I found myself sitting in a room with my new course mates, each introducing themselves and their career backgrounds. I sat there with a sense of guilt. I had no defined career, no business to step into, I had no direction and to make things worse I now had no job. I had been sacked from the job I loved a week earlier something which hit me hard as I had not seen it coming.

As it grew closer to my turn, I sat wondering whether I should hide my own shame and tell everyone I was in a stable job and had clear ambitions or be open and honest about my situation. The current emptiness in my life had left me feeling insecure and unsure of myself – would I be laughed at for my situation or worse kicked off the course for it? I chose to be honest and open, what did I have to lose? This is after all the point of this course.

One skill JET taught me was the art of reflection. The ability to take a step back and look how far you have come and the things you have overcome allows you to continue to move forward and drive for continued success. I undertook the JET course at a dark and difficult time in my life, something I now recognise, and I am so grateful that these two events coincided as the support of my course mates helped me to gain clarity, heal and move onward and upward. Looking back at my time on the JET course I am now able to recognise the barriers I had built up and the false impression of stability and togetherness I portrayed both before and during the course. In short, my mental health at the time was not good, but through honesty and firm but understanding support my course mates really helped me to grow in confidence and find clarity. Our course, like many others, contained a group of delegates from a range of backgrounds all facing their own challenges and battles, but one common trait amongst us all was the ability to give a frank and honest opinion when needed. I remember one course mate offering a stern but fair quip one evening whilst out in Cirencester ‘You need to start walking the walk, not just talking it!’ That comment resonated with me for many years afterwards and still drives me to take opportunities and give something a go, even today. Sometimes the truth hurts but shying away from it can be far worse. My only regret is that I wasn’t more open with the group, perhaps that would have helped speed my recovery.



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During the course I saw examples of people who had overcome their own struggles or business challenges to grow successful farming or diversification enterprises. This, combined with the support of my course mates helped me grow in confidence and I finished the course with a huge range of skills, a clear understanding of business and the belief that I could achieve whatever I wanted.

Despite the renewed enthusiasm, I found myself wondering where life would go from here and how things would come together. I still did not really have a clear plan. A conversation with a close friend was the start of 'how things would come together'. My friend had an exciting idea regarding developing a small contracting firm which specialised in small holder and small estate paddock care and maintenance. A niche idea, but one that had scope to grow if we pushed it hard enough, he had identified the need and we had a solid plan, now we just needed to 'walk the walk!'. Whilst my parents were not overly enamoured with the concept, they were supportive of the venture as they could see I had drive and enthusiasm and this was helping to improve my mental health. I had direction and confidence for the first time in a long time.

My friend and I started the business the same month I finished the JET course. As with many start-up businesses year 1 was challenging and work was slow to build, so I took on additional summer work to keep things going. By year 2 our reputation for good quality work and a reliable service had grown and the business began to grow and move forwards. By year 3 we had outgrown our own driveways and moved into a purpose built premises on the farm, in a disused quarry. In addition to this move, we also began selling firewood. The business had been in a permanent state of growth and in order to enable that growth to continue rapidly, neither of us took drawings from the business. At one stage this stretched for 18 months. The rapid growth period was particularly tough, but worth it. Cash is king so anything we could do to improve our cash situation we did. Debt collection from customers remained our biggest headache, as many businesses will attest to!

The firewood business has proved so popular it has now overtaken the contracting element of the business and offers better returns for less hassle. Our focus has been on well organised deliveries and good quality stock and we have built our customer base around this.



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On the back of the success of the contracting and firewood enterprises, we decided to explore another niche opportunity and began selling woodfired hot tubs in 2016. We are now the main importers and distributors of Kirami, the largest wood fired hot tub manufacturers in Europe. The business has seen rapid growth and now rivals the firewood business in terms of success.

I felt the quarry was underutilised and have turned it from a bare quarry floor used for manure storage to a mini-industrial estate with 3 businesses using it as their base. Alongside The Log Company there is also a wood pellet distributor and as of 2020 a Wigwam Glamping site. The Wigwam site is my own personal venture and is owned by me, but my partner runs it on a day to day basis. In year 1 we started with 6 fully wheelchair friendly Wigwam cabins, all of which obviously have a wood fired hot tub! We had originally scheduled to open in March 2020, but due to the pandemic this was delayed until July. Whilst it was a knock to the new venture, when we did open in July we were full from until November, which offset any initial lost revenue. We were delighted by the demand for the Wigwams, particularly given the unforeseen challenge of Coronavirus. With foreign travel looking to remain difficult for the foreseeable future and 'staycations' gaining support we have opted to order another 6 wigwam cabins allowing us to double capacity for the coming season. These will be in place ready for us to open as restrictions begin to lift. Fingers crossed for another busy holiday season.

We have tried to keep things simple and target investment on items that will help us to maintain an efficient, well run business. We felt that investment in a good website would allow us to provide a professional service, whilst reducing the need for full time admin support. We now have part time admin support, but this has only been a recent addition and only when deemed necessary. Our business now supports both myself and my business partner as well as 10 full time staff and 3 self-employed staff.

As we pass the 10 year anniversary of our JET course and also the business, I have taken time to reflect on how far the business has come, but also how far I have come. I look back on my time on the JET course warmly and am thankful for the help and confidence it gave me to move on from a dark and difficult place and into my own business. I hope and feel confident the course will continue to inspire and help develop the next generation entering rural enterprises.



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5 Minutes with.....

Geoff Elliott

Geoff is one of the new JET course tutors and we asked him for 5 minutes of his time to tell us a bit more about himself!

Brought up in a large family on a tenanted farm in Warwickshire, Geoff chose a different career path on leaving school. Brief spells in engineering, banking and accountancy, led to several years as a travel agent, which brought excellent fringe benefits. After a particularly expensive jaunt to Australia in 1976, Geoff urgently needed to supplement his income. A chance encounter with an Oxfordshire farmer led to some extra work, and it quickly became clear to Geoff that his day job no longer held much fascination. Having missed out the conventional stages, such as gaining a qualification, he decided on a career in agriculture. After all, how hard could it be?

Seven years as tractor-driver, then foreman, on a Worcestershire arable farm, led to Geoff gaining a working manager's position on 1,100 acres in Hampshire, which formed part of a larger estate. This in turn led to management of the diverse 6,500 acre estate, and during this job Geoff joined the JET scheme as a scholar in 1989. A change of generation in the estate owner's family in 1992 caused a change of direction for Geoff, and he went into partnership with a former employer to create and manage a new arable farming enterprise. After five successful years and significant expansion, Geoff left to start his own business.

Based on a 335 acre FBT at Micheldever Station, and with a contract farming agreement on a further 750 acres some twenty miles away, Geoff finally bought his own toys (with a little help from Barclays Bank and a few finance companies) and started farming in his own right. To supplement income in the early years, he also carried out consultancy, dismantled grain silos, became an ACCS inspector, and constructed grain driers.

After twenty years he had more toys, about 4,000 acres, more contract farming partners, and more staff; all diversifications were dropped after 2004 as the arable business grew. All expansion was from farming profits, and nearly all came through recommendation. He still had an overdraft, though; this last point was finally addressed when he decided to retire from contract farming after the 2019 harvest. All equipment was sold at auction, and Geoff assisted each of his farming partners to identify suitable replacement contractors.



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5 Minutes with.....

Geoff Elliott

Retirement isn't completely idle, as Geoff now oversees the in-hand Hampshire farming of an overseas landowner and is mentoring the working farm manager on some 1,600 acres of this, including the original 335 FBT acres. Old habits die hard, and he can sometimes be found lending a practical hand on the farm!

Geoff has had a long association with several agricultural organisations. He was an early member of Arable Research Centres in Hampshire, becoming a director, then chairman of The Arable Group when it merged with NIAB, of which he was a director until 2012. He was the founding chairman and is still a director of Hampshire Training Providers and is currently a director and chairman of Thames and Kennet Machinery Ring. He has been involved with JET courses for the last 20 years, on the interviewing panel, as a visiting speaker, and more recently as an assistant tutor in 2019. He looks forward to developing this role for the next course.

Geoff and his wife Sheila live in Broughton; they have two married daughters, and three grandchildren to date. He is vice-chairman of Broughton parish council, which has dampened any enthusiasm he may have had for a wider political career! Retirement plans include more travel, though recent circumstances have precluded this.

We would like to welcome Geoff to his new position and thank him for his contributions to the course. He brings a wealth of experience to the JET programme and we feel confident that the delegates will gain a lot from Geoff's involvement with future JET courses.



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JET – Diary Dates & Information

Time for a change!

We are excited to announce that the new JET website is now up and running. We would encourage you to have a look; it is unrecognisable and brings a fresh new look to JET. We hope you like the improvements and will find it easy to navigate and a useful reference point going forwards.

We are going virtual!!

With some restrictions still in place, the traditional farm walk used to launch the course will sadly not be possible. Therefore, the committee (with some expert help!) are putting together a promotional video to launch the next course.

We will share this with you when it is complete and ask that you circulate it to any potential applicants.

Course Application deadlines

Course application deadline: 7th June 2021

Interview date: 7th July 2021 at the RAU



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