

“...and the best place is Trimley, in Suffolk's fair land,

Where the strawberries cluster like grapes in the hand.”

From the album 'Time out of mind' by Triangle



Diane Conroy - Site Supervisor of Goslings Farm Shop

It was the hottest day of the summer to date, with the temperature moving towards 33°, when I walked languidly across the dusty fields to Goslings Farm Shop to meet the Manager, Di. She doesn't require any introduction from me as everyone who has ever visited the Farm Shop will immediately recognise her. Di is one of the front of house faces, regularly greeting customers and dispensing vegetables, plants and food. My lassitude was about to be given a brisk shaking as we moved to some conveniently placed chairs in an unused, shady part of the field behind the shop. As Di settled down and prepared to talk about her work and Goslings, I knew the interview would flow with plenty of energising conversation, when she said,

“I'm a bit loud and I like to chat!”

Perhaps it would be better to say Di is a clearly defined person who speaks with confidence and authority about the place where she has worked for the last 18 years. And yes, it is true. She is a vibrant and chatty conversationalist.



Di is a true Suffolk gal who was born in Ipswich but moved to St Martin's village about 30 years ago where her three daughters were brought up. Waiting outside the school gates, she was once told by a well-established villager she would never become a recognised resident. There is a degree of irony in this unfulfilled prophecy, because with the arguable exception of the Postmen and Di's long-standing team members, she is probably one of a handful of people whose face is familiar to nearly everyone. Plus, Di knows just about everyone in the village and quite a few outside it. Prior to starting at Goslings, Di had worked in other large retail outlets but found corporate strictures did not suit her nor did they make her more productive. Quite simply they, *'drove me nuts.'* as she put it. By contrast, Goslings Farm Shop is a far more relaxed workplace with a happy team of people who have stayed for long periods of time. It has the added advantage of a rural setting, surrounded by fruit plants and bushes in Summer.

"It's a lovely environment. Sometimes when I arrive early for work I walk into the fields and look around me. I can see all varieties of wildlife, hear birds, listen to the Woodpecker. Although I prefer the summer, I love the bleakness of winter. People ask if we get cold in the winter. I just put on an extra layer. I'm using my muscles and it's cheaper than the gym."

Staff are quickly warmed up when the thermometer starts to sink. With plenty of heavy sacks, plants and vegetables to be moved around the shop, there is little time to stand around idly and freeze. But, as Di pointed out, not everyone can do it because they may lack the ability, physical strength or will-power. At Goslings, everyone shares the tasks to hand and no-one has a set job but it is Di who directs operations, for the most part and it is obvious she has a firm but fair approach to the business. She ploughs on impervious to all the weather has to offer.



The conversation moved towards the seasons, as inevitably it must in an organisation which revolves around fruit and vegetables. There is a different focus at different times of the year and as we are in now high summer, it seemed appropriate to begin by talking about the fruit for which Goslings is famous; The Strawberries. Other fruit, notably raspberries, blackcurrants and redcurrants are on offer but it is the strawberries which pull people in. Last year the Ipswich Star deemed Goslings to be one of the top ten P.Y.O. farms in East Anglia. There are extensive rows of strawberries with different varieties due to fruit at different times throughout the Summer. The season, which perhaps lasted four or five weeks when I was a child, now goes from early June until September. Di explained it is one particular group of people who make this possible; a small band of workers from Bulgaria, who arrive in April and stay until the start of the Autumn. They organise their work load and complete it to the highest possible standards. After travelling from their base at Friday Street, they starting work at about 5 o'clock in the morning. Working through the heat of the day they finish at about 3.00 o'clock in the afternoon before returning to their temporary home. In April, they plant out young strawberries into the polytunnels and then ensure they are fed, watered and weeded on a regular basis. All part of the same family, they work steadily and consistently, providing an object lesson in how deliver good husbandry through their horticultural knowledge and undiluted hard work. During the Summer their responsibility is to maintain the fruit plants in good order, providing the happy consumer with glorious, succulent fruit. They've been part of the Goslings team for eight or nine years but with the approach of Brexit, their future presence is under threat. This will be a real loss to the community if they go back to their homes for good and we can only hope they continue to come here. The excellent fruit production might not otherwise be sustained by such exceptional workforce and it is unclear if there are sufficient workers locally.



This year the strawberry yields have been outstanding and the abundant fruit has practically fallen into the hands of the pickers. Due to the very hot weather we have been experiencing, this bounty has been threatened by the heat as it has caused some of the fruit to melt on the stalk. But in the normal course of events, nothing goes to waste. Excess fruit is sent to “Fruits of Suffolk” who transform it into ‘Goslings Jam’ at Crowfield and very good jam it is indeed.

As Autumn approaches, Di will start to order in bulbs for planting as well as any bedding plants. By November the main feature will be the Christmas trees. These arrive by about the 23rd November and the first customer is usually Trimley Methodist Church. Over the short but intense season about 650 trees will be sold and at least 400 of those will be to local people. I mentioned I had bought one with roots about three years ago and it is tall and thriving. But Di sighed and said it is hard to acquire trees with roots as it is easier to chop them down, which firmed up my resolve to look after our healthy young fir.

By March, Goslings have a different focus. Bedding plants begin to arrive for those keen gardeners, although this year they ran out of plants fairly early on due to the bad weather we experienced. The person mainly in charge of the Garden Centre is Maggie, who is the person to consult about the best plants and shrubs should you require advice. Plants come from two sources, one of which is the local Grange Nursery at Newbourne and the other, WD Smith and Son Nursery near Battlebridge in Essex.



I asked Di about the popularity of their products and she immediately threw out an answer.

“Stemsters, the potatoes which are grown in Friday Street, in the winter. And our bestselling frozen meal is liver and onions.”

It seems almost unnecessary to mention the strawberries.

Di is someone who really knows what is popular with her locality and her customers. Having worked at Goslings for so many years, she marks the changes in some of the older customers with sadness. However, this is tempered by the excitement of welcoming new customers. Di is delighted to see an increased footfall, especially from our new residents in Cavendish Grove. One of their newfound delights, and indeed that of others as well, is the charm of walking to Goslings Café, where it is possible to have a full breakfast or just coffee and a biscuit. Some people like to start their day in the Café before going on to complete the chores of the day; others like to meet friends for a quick, or long, catch-up.



Di and her team have created a thriving and pleasant place to work and shop. But don't think Di lacks a sharp eye for the absurdities of life; she is certainly nobody's fool. As she observed, *"If you wear white shoes in a muddy strawberry field, we won't pay for you to replace them. So please, don't ask!"* Di always offers a kind face and genuine smile to her customers and it is her straightforward and honest approach to customers which makes you want to return to this green and fruitful outpost of our village. As one customer said to Di, *"If you ever left Goslings, it wouldn't be the same."* And indeed, it wouldn't.



I may be contacted at:

trimleystmartinrecorder@gmail.com

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