My experience of rural life:

I write in my capacity as a person born to a farm worker in the house where I still live. I am a former farmer for 20 years and now I have been operating a holiday accommodation business for the last 22 years. I diversified into a tourism when family circumstances changed. I am also a campaigner in favour of the shale gas industry in the UK. I therefore have a very mixed and knowledgeable experience of 3 rural industries which I feel could work extremely well together.

Background

I live in the farm where I was born, my father was just the farm worker there at that time. Eventually buying the farm with a huge mortgage we worked hard and know full well how tough life in a remote rural location can be. Once my father died we diversified into tourism converting the barns into a range of holiday cottages and bed and breakfast rooms. That was in 1996. I have seen the good times and the bad. In the boom years rural tourism was very popular. The busier the cities were such as York, and the market towns such as Pickering, the less accommodation there was available and people then had to find accommodation further out and this encouraged people into the countryside.

Once the recession came, life changed. From a long season which would run from February until the end of October the season is now very much shorter. You are lucky if you are truly busy from end of May until early September. You only have to look at the official figures and rural tourism is in decline. The city of Yorks’ recorded bed nights this year are at a 10 year low. If York is not full then you can be sure that the rural businesses will be really suffering.

The rural economy is not good. Yet people think because you live in a rural area you must be affluent. We face many challenges that urban dwellers don’t for example, no bus services, poor broadband, lack of investment and few opportunities for any industries to develop and therefore few opportunities for young people to find work and remain living in the area where they grew up. We are left with an aging population who do not want to see any development, all they want is a very quiet life at the expense of becoming a ‘single generation’ occupied area.

How does this affect a rural businesses? If our only options are farming and tourism we are now stuck in the situation where we have such a short season. You only have a few months in which to raise enough revenue to pay bills all year round. This is a struggle, business rates don’t stop if you are empty, the government still wants you to keep paying them all year. Heating and energy costs are still accruing as even when empty properties still have to be heated in the winter. I can easily have 6 months with not one guest staying. How can I continue paying bills for 12months on only 6 months labours? In short it is nigh on
impossible to make a living with a rural tourism business in recent years especially if it is your sole income which my business is.

Another reason for a drop in bed nights, young people may take day trips to the countryside but their idea of a holiday is far removed from a farmhouse B&B or a holiday cottage. They are so used to being entertained with modern technology that they are not used to amusing themselves in the wilds of the countryside. Some will of course, but it does account for a certain decline in numbers as the different generations come forward and have very different ideas about what kind of holiday they would enjoy.

What now?

It is perhaps foolhardy to encourage more tourist accommodation to be available in rural areas. That just decreases the market for existing operators. That was what happened in the mid 1990’s when farming was in decline, farmers were encouraged to diversify into tourism. Many did, and next came the boom years and all was well. The problem is rural tourist areas in North Yorkshire are over subscribed for provision of accommodation as previously stated and vacant properties abound even at the height of season. The last three years have been a struggle with declining occupancy rates and for the last 3 summers I have had vacant properties throughout the main season only rarely being fully booked. This cannot go on.

What could change rural fortunes?

Help with basic costs such as business rates.

Better promotion of rural areas.

Encourage other types of businesses out into rural areas apart from tourist ones.

Make our countryside more than just farming and tourism, but a place where people can find skilled employment (shale gas industry jobs)

Where my business is situated I am 1 mile from the nearest village which comprises only houses, there are no amenities. The nearest village with any amenities is 4 miles away. I have no access to any other trade apart from tourists. That was until a gas company started to use my accommodation. Then my business changed.

Shale Gas and the benefits to the rural economy.

My business is in the Vale of Pickering which is a massive gas field. There are already 10 well pads in the region and a gas powered generating station. All are well screened by trees and invisible, people struggle to find them. They DO NOT ruin tourism as anti gas people always like to claim.

In 2013 Third Energy the company that owns the Generating station drilled a gas well at Kirby Misperton. I accommodated some of the workers involved. This opened my eyes to a third industry which could work easily within a rural community and benefit so many different people. I have since worked hard to encourage the gas companies to use my
accommodation. That is taking advantage of an opportunity which came my way. That’s business, I have been condemned by the anti fracking movement for doing so. That is easy for them to say either from their comfy urban lives or from affluent pensioners who moved to and retired in the area. The poor never complain in the same way. Endless of my suppliers have benefitted and I have also been able to enjoy all year round trade and to employ staff for the last 2 years, all year and not just seasonally. This is something I am hugely proud of.

I formed a group in favour of the shale gas industry, Friends of Ryedale Gas Exploration (FORGE) and have worked hard to promote the benefits knowing full well we need the gas anyway. Home grown gas would be most beneficial for our balance of payments. It would create many jobs in the industry but also in the wider rural economy. The very areas where they will be working will be rural in nature and what an opportunity this could be for the rural economy. I can think of no other industry which could come into a rural area and boost it in the same way that the shale gas industry could. My frustration is that few others seem to visualise this in the same exciting way that I do.

Unfortunately we have an anti-fracking movement in our area who are led by people who don’t even live in locally, they live in London. What do they know about the challenges we have? They don’t suffer the same lack of opportunities for our young people, poor wages and no real hope for a decent future and yet they come telling us how to live our lives. They want the countryside to be their playground and cannot see that it has to be a working environment for the benefit of the people who live there.

What can you do?

The government needs to ensure it creates a marketing campaign that promotes rural areas. Welcome to Yorkshire has led an amazing campaign to promote Yorkshire but for a while it was very city orientated. Even after all the publicity of Yorkshire hosting the Tour de France, bed nights are in decline, day visits aren’t but gone are the days of full beds.

We need to encourage other industries into rural areas. People forget that there has been mining and quarrying for centuries in rural areas, these are what make people move there. Can you imagine how vibrant the rural economy would become with a shale gas industry. The influx of many diverse businesses which would be required in the supply chain. The people who would need to come to live and work in those areas. It would be all year round trade, heads on beds 12 months of the year not just for 4 months. Cafes, shops, supermarkets, petrol stations, hairdressers, you name it would benefit. I even bought a funeral plan for my mother from gas money!

The gas industry does not have to ruin the region, it can be very positive for our rural economies and I could go on and on about it until I am blue in the face. I have such a vision for the future but am being stifled by ‘anti-rural economy’ rhetoric by people who do not understand what it is like to live on the breadline when they enjoy a 12 month economy and an urban existence.
Foot note:

In my capacity as a very high profile person in favour of the shale gas industry I have had to suffer intimidation, threats and abuse by the anti-fracking movement. When life is tough enough and a rural business hard enough to exist you should note that the anti-fracking owners of the broadband company which supplied my business cut off my broadband supply! This was purely due to my stand on shale gas. I battle on though, because I do love my beautiful rural location and I know that this third industry would be a step in the right direction to bring prosperity to the region and hope for the future of our young people.

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