



Clifford Freeman, with some of his herd of Gloucester cattle at Evers Farm, Redmarley

We are what we eat

Farmer Clifford Freeman is a passionate advocate of local produce. He tells Katie Jarvis why we should find out everything we possibly can about our food

◆ PICTURES: Antony Thompson

Clifford Freeman is a Gloucestershire farmer who believes we should know everything about the food we eat. “I don’t just want people to know that something comes from Gloucestershire. I want them to know the name of the farm where it was produced,” he says.

He keeps a prize-winning herd of

rare breed Gloucester Cattle on his farm at Redmarley, where he also runs educational sessions. Local primary schoolchildren visit to meet the animals, to see the onsite butchery, and to make their own burgers from the farm’s beef. Provenance is everything.

Clifford’s love of traditional farming began in his own childhood, on the

family farm at Little Cugley. “When everybody else was starting to get things in plastic packaging, we had halves of pigs hung up on the walls in the kitchen. We’d milk the cows and make our own butter,” he recalls.

His dad, Eric Freeman, is known as one of the visionaries – along with Joe Henson – who recognised the plight of

Gloucestershire rare breed farm animals, and helped save them from extinction. “Dad has always been interested in all the traditional Gloucestershire things people were sweeping away, which are now coming back into popularity,” Clifford says. “If it wasn’t for him, many of those things would have disappeared, including Gloucester Cattle.”

In 2014, Clifford co-founded Happerley Provenance, with fellow farmer Matthew Rymer, which aims to build the world’s most transparent food and drink network. The scheme enables producers to share with consumers the whole journey of the food they eat, from farm to plate, via a QR code that can be scanned by phone. It has just opened its first food store in the centre of Banbury.

Clifford has two children, Gabbie, 17, and William, 15.

Where do you live and why?

I live in at Everes’s Farm, Redmarley – my family have lived around this area for the last 100 years or more. My great-grandfather was a farm worker’s son from Minsterworth, who came to Newent in the early 20th century. He had various businesses in Newent, including a draper’s, before going on to buy his own farm. My farm is about five miles from where he had his.

How long have you lived in the Severn Vale?

All my life - though I now split my working time between here and the Scilly Isles. We used to go on holiday there as kids, and I took my own children back in 2009 for a visit. I’d just sold the family poultry business [Freeman’s] so I had some money to invest - and I ended up buying 90 holiday lets on the island, a



Clifford Freeman, holding the Supreme Champion trophy won at the 2019 Three Counties Show, just one of a collection of trophies won at the Show over the years, at home in Redmarley, Gloucestershire

hotel – St Mary’s Hall – a laundry, and a beach restaurant. I go over almost every week – a four-hour drive down to Land’s End, where I try to get the first flight of the day. It means leaving home at 3am. The island landscape, of course, is very different from the Vale, which means I get the best of both worlds. Having said that, last time I was over in Scilly, I was there for six days and never managed to leave the office once.

What’s your idea of a perfect weekend in the Vale?

Spending time with my children, as we prepare cattle for the Three Counties Show [a leading agricultural show at Malvern each year]. This year, the show

was cancelled, but we still tied up the cattle and taught them how to lead on a head-collar; how to behave in a show ring – all the things we’d normally do. Gloucester Cattle are a docile breed and very beautiful: mahogany in colour, with a white stripe running from mid-back to tail. I could sit for hours in a field with them. Craig is our stockman and he loves his animals. He’s the fourth generation working for our family. His great-grandfather started working for mine in 1911.

If money were no object, where would you live in the Cotswolds?

I’d stay where I am, but with more land around the farm to rear and improve the animals I’ve got so that they have a future. All the parts of my businesses are joined up with the aim of creating a market for Gloucester Cattle; that’s the legacy I want to leave. You buy meat from a supermarket and it doesn’t taste of anything. Everything here is grass-fed, slow-growing, and dry-aged, which gives it flavour. That way of producing meat is healthier for us as consumers and better for the environment.

Where are you least likely to live in the Vale?

Dad tells fascinating stories about going to Gloucester Market by train during the Depression when they didn’t have a car. But the one place I couldn’t live is a city like Gloucester. Even when I go to Scilly, I get cabin-fever. I’ve got blue all around me and I’m craving green.

Where’s the best place to eat?

It sounds crazy but my restaurant in the hotel on Scilly is all about Gloucester beef. That’s what we serve there. We did a complete refurb last winter and I went to buy a chargrill to put in. While we were looking at the equipment, the guy selling it told me I needed to try a broiler he had that sears steaks at 500 degrees centigrade. I said to him, “That’s not what I’ve come to look at!” It was about four times as much as the chargrill. But we took our meat, put it in... and it was amazing! I thought to myself, I haven’t spent all this time getting our meat absolutely right just to ruin it in the last four minutes. So I bought a broiler.

We also do a lot of lobster, a lot of crab; pork from Cornwall. Local food is important – and it’s mostly local – but good food is even more important.

What would you do for a special occasion?

Last year at Three Counties Show was our standout moment. We won every cup in our breed – eight cups – apart from



Not just Gloucester cattle on Clifford’s Farm



Clifford Freeman, at home

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one, which was the only one we hadn’t entered. I’ve been showing at Three Counties Show since 1974, when I was 10: that was the year we won Supreme Champion. Winning it in my own name, many years later, was a very special moment. I’ve spent my life being Eric’s son, and I remember saying that to Joe Henson [son of a well-known comedian, and dad to the *Countryfile* presenter]. He said, “Well, I used to be Leslie Henson’s son and now I’m Adam Henson’s father!” The perfect reply.

What’s the best thing about the Vale?

The Severn.

... and the worst?

All the building. I get that we need more houses, but it’s changing the character of the place.

Which shop could you not live without?

Happerley is opening its first shop at Lock29 in the centre of Banbury, on the old British Home Stores site. Happerley England will be a national destination to celebrate food and drink with provenance. I’m looking forward to

supplying meat to it.

Provenance is a problem, especially in the meat industry. We used to produce 15,000 free-range chickens a week in our poultry company, so it’s an industry I know well. When Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall campaigned to get people to eat free-range chicken, sales went up by 35% in one week. The thing is, there wasn’t 35% more free-range chicken in the UK! They were just being labelled up as free-range. Many chefs don’t know any different.

And the public don’t know what to look for, either. They don’t know when they’re having their legs pulled, which is one reason why Matthew and I started Happerley.

What’s the most underrated thing about the Vale?

It’s always seen as second best to the Cotswolds, yet it has its own charm and character which doesn’t make it lesser. It’s the way things have always been. When my dad was young, he looked down his nose slightly at the Forest. Each area was so proud of itself, and every area should be. They all have different quirks.

What is a person from the Vale called?

We’re from Gloucestershire. In the Vale, you don’t presume that the Cotswolds aren’t part of the same county.

What would be a three-course Cotswold meal?

I’m not a cook, but I like my food and food that’s done properly. I’d have Gloucester Old Spot pork, followed by apple crumble. Every parish had its own variety of apple at one time.

There has got to be a Gloucestershire cheese course at the end. You’ve got Single Gloucester, Double Gloucester, whatever. But whoever makes them makes them in different ways. That’s the amazing thing.

What’s your favourite view in the Cotswolds?

From the top of May Hill, without a doubt... Though I spent last weekend at my niece’s place on top of Pope’s Hill and that’s a spectacular view, too - right across the Severn.

What’s your quintessential village and why?

When I was a kid, it would have been ▶

Eastington, before it got built up. We used to visit a very old-fashioned chap there, Owen Harris, who kept heavy horses. I'm sure I remember it in a rose-tinted way but I still go there, to the abattoir, and it looks so different from the special place it was back then.

Name three basic elements of the Vale...

The river; the hills around the river – the Malverns and the Cotswolds - that create this bowl (and last night, I watched the thunder crashing around it); and then the Forest, of course.

What's your favourite Vale building and why?

Wick Court down at Arlingham, which is where the last herd of Gloucester Cattle was found. [The last-surviving pure-bred herd was discovered in the early 70s, kept by the Dowdeswell sisters, Ella and Alex. They lived at Wick Court, a traditional livestock farm with late 14th century farmhouse. The estate is now part of the charity Farms for City Children.] I remember going down there when I was about nine, and the two old ladies taking us round the house and telling us stories. We saw a settle with a hole in it where someone had been shot. A secret passage used by Queen Elizabeth I's lover when she had once stayed there. And a big oak tree that they said had been 1,000 years living and 1,000 years dying. It was hollow, and the sisters told of finding airmen in there during the war.

I was particularly fascinated by the privy... It had a plank with a big and a small hole, situated directly above the moat that surrounded the house!



Some of Clifford's herd of Gloucester cattle



Clifford with the collection of trophies from the Three Counties Show over the years

What would you never do in the Vale?

I'd like to say: Eat food without knowing its provenance. But I don't think that's possible, currently. I don't want to know that I'm eating Cotswold honey: I want to know which beekeeper it came from. I once was told by a local butcher that his meat all came from the South West. When I asked where, exactly, he said, "Argentina". I suppose it was south west of him!

Starter homes or executive properties?

Starter homes, without a doubt. I was driving round Ledbury and Ross the other day and all I could see were new executive houses. There must be a market but probably not a local one.

What are the four corners of the Cotswolds?

The one corner is Rendcomb because that's where I went to school. And that's my knowledge of the Cotswolds over in a shot.

If you lived abroad, what would you take to remind you of the Cotswolds?

A Gloucester cow.

What's the first piece of advice you'd give to somebody new to the Cotswolds?

Turn down lanes that haven't got signposts.

And which book should they read?

The Old Gloucester: The Story of a Cattle

Breed, by Adam Stout.

Have you a favourite Vale walk?

From the Glasshouse [Inn, Longhope] to the top of May Hill. As children, we'd ride our ponies up there.

If you were invisible for a day, where would you go and what would you do?

I've been lucky enough to go to Highgrove a couple of times but there are areas where I'd like a bit of an extra poke around. Imagine looking through the window and seeing HRH watching TV!

To whom or what should there be a Cotswolds memorial?

There are a lot of people, like my dad, who have done a lot for conserving what is great about rural Gloucestershire. Gloucestershire has a rich past – even the industrial part: the docks, the railways. That's what it was built on, and that's what has moulded the people, too.

With whom would you most like to have a cider?

Laurie Lee. I'm not a great reader, but he fascinates me. It's a shame my dad hasn't written anything like that because his memories are so similar. ♦

EXTRA COURSE

· For more on Happerley Provenance, visit happerley.co.uk

· Clifford runs grassfedmeats.co.uk, offering meat from national producers – including his own – whose animals are fed purely on grass