

Diversification that takes a lot of bottle

They say an entrepreneurial spirit is essential for agricultural success, but Somerset farmer David Urch has more of it than most people, as **David George** finds out

FROM THE front door of the Urch family's farm at Carscliffe, 600 feet above the Somerset levels, you can survey a vast sweep of countryside – a landscape redolent with history and with farming running through it like 'Weston-super-Mare' through a stick of rock.

Impressive as that vista is, it almost seems narrow in comparison with the kaleidoscopic career of David Urch, who runs the farm – and various other enterprises – alongside his wife, Ginny, and their grown-up children Tabitha and Duncan and their families.

An energetic 61, David is living proof that being successful in the world of agriculture requires a definite entrepreneurial streak, something he has certainly brought to his varied career in farming, veterinary practice, business consultancy and property management – to mention just a part of it.

"We have tried to diversify and it's like anything, if you want to keep your family together and keep the youngsters on the farm you've got to go into something else to achieve it," says David.

Although his career has taken David all over the world, he is a local boy at heart. His father's family farmed in

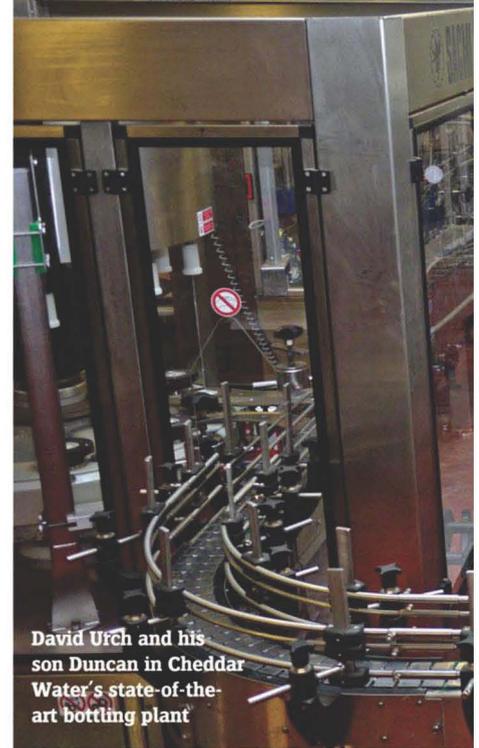
Axbridge for generations and his mother was from Cheddar. It was assumed he would follow his father onto the family farm but instead he pursued a career as a vet, qualifying at Cambridge in 1980 after an academic career which included 12 GCSEs, four A levels, a BSc in physiology and nutrition and a Masters in medical science, thus comprehensively contradicting the advice given to his parents that he was unsuitable material for a career requiring formal qualifications.

David's first job as a vet was back in Somerset with Duncan and Nicholson, a well-known local practice.

After his father died in 1981 he started to take over the family businesses which, thanks to the Urch entrepreneurial spirit, now included dairy farming, poultry, eggs, and shops in Axbridge and Bristol selling everything from farm produce to china and handbags.

At the same time, he set up his own veterinary business specialising in horses – eventually it became the biggest equine practice in North Somerset.

"It was getting quite busy, but I've always tried to have a number of things going on together and hopefully there's



David Urch and his son Duncan in Cheddar Water's state-of-the-art bottling plant

always one which is doing alright, keeping the others going – usually supporting the farming," David recalls.

In 1991 he had a serious car accident which kept him off work for two years and led to him developing arthritis, which meant he had to abandon his work with horses.

Most people would have been completely floored by this, but he fought his way back to health, resumed his veterinary practice and even found another business opportunity in it, thanks partly to the healing powers of aloe vera (see panel).

He has written a book about the use of aloe vera in veterinary practice and even grows it on one of his farms in Cornwall. Today he spends a lot of his time working as a consultant to Forever Living Products, an international company that markets aloe vera gel.

"It's a multi-level marketing business and I was very, very wary of those things because people used to think 'pyramid marketing' and everything, but it's now highly regulated, there's no front-loading so it's very good way of people earning some additional money. Most of the people who join the company have another job.

Step out of the Urch's front door and this is what you see





The plant can produce 8,000 bottles of water an hour

"We now farm nearly 500 acres. We've got two small farms in Cornwall, but the main part of it is the 300 acre farm we live on here. We went into stewardship fifteen-odd years ago, more recently we did the higher level and went into organic as well. We've been organic for about eight years which is why we're one of the only waters in England that can say it's organically sourced."

The water in question is Cheddar Water, from the farm's own spring. Although 'cheddar' is a word more usually associated with cheese, it is derived from the Anglo-Saxon for 'brilliant water' making it an entirely appropriate name for the company, which was established in 2005.

The farm doesn't have its own water supply, instead using spring water which has percolated through the Mendips over thousands of years for their pedigree herd of North Devons and flock of Exmoor sheep. Ginny came

up with the idea of bottling it when the Urches were looking for a business they could run alongside Duncan and Tabitha.

Cheddar Water, which is supplied to local shops, restaurants and regional Tesco and Asda stores, is bottled on site in a state-of-the-art plant capable of producing 8,000 bottles an hour which was part-funded by a grant from the RDPE and runs on electricity produced by a 50kVa solar array.

David is determined never to lose sight of his goal, which is to give his family a viable future in the countryside, where jobs and opportunities for young people are often scarce.

"I came from a close family and we've developed as a close family so we work everything as a family concern. We very much wanted to keep the family together and that's what we've tried to achieve."

● For more information, email info@cheddarwater.com



If you want to keep your family together you've got to go into something else

Aloe vera: nature's gift that's good for what ails you

David first came across aloe vera when he was recovering from serious injuries sustained in a car accident in 1991.

"I was taking quite a lot of drugs to keep me going. That caused me to have gastric ulcers and then, because I was pushing myself, I ended up with chronic fatigue syndrome.

"I'd never heard of aloe vera before and I only took it really to stop the distributor pestering me. She kept coming in, so I thought 'this company offers a 60 day guarantee; I'll take it for six weeks and get my money back'. I didn't think it would work, even though I had used homeopathy, acupuncture and some herbs in the practice before.

"Anyway, I took the dam stuff and I found it did settle my gastric ulcers down and it seemed to be helping a bit with my arthritis."

Eventually he became fit enough to resume his equine work and began to look further into the plant's medicinal properties to see if he could use it in his veterinary practice.



Aloe vera is grown commercially in huge plantations across the hotter parts of Europe, like this one in Spain, and South America

He discovered that aloe, which was known as a healing plant by the ancient civilisations of Sumeria, Rome and Egypt, arrived in the UK in 1693 and had a long history of therapeutic use in animals. It was so widespread in the 1800s that when the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons was granted its royal charter in 1844, an aloe plant was included in its coat of arms.

But gradually aloe vera slipped into obscurity and it's only in the last thirty years or so that the plant has started to be used again.

"It's used for chronic conditions, rather than acute ones, and is particularly useful in building up the immune system and sorting out problems that affect the skin or the gut – I've had a lot of success treating gastric ulcers in racehorses with it, for instance.

"I'm very strong on taking the integrated approach. Modern drugs are very useful but we should save them for when they are really needed. A lot of the time it is entirely possible to use more natural products that don't have the same side effects and don't cause problems with things like resistance to antibiotics."