

RURAL REALITY

Thornfield Farm Glamping, Stranocum, in North Antrim, situated not far from the famous Dark Hedges tourist attraction, is a brand new luxurious holiday camping pod site on a family sheep farm, run by Sandra McCrea, her partner Wesley Craig and her sons Harry and Jack. **Ian Harvey** paid a visit to the farm on a changeover day when some of the holiday guests were just settling in for an evening round their barbeque.

Luxurious holiday camping pods on a family sheep farm

WHO hasn't heard of The Dark Hedges, well perhaps a few!? This natural phenomenon is now a famous avenue of beech trees, originally planted in the 18th century to catch the eye of visitors to the Stuart family's Georgian home, Gracehill House as they made their approach by horse-drawn coach to the front door of the impressive manor house.

The now giant iconic trees are still as arrestingly jaw-dropping and almost spookily unusual two centuries later, which is precisely why they'd been chosen as a location to film a scene representing 'The King's Road' for the block-busting world renowned TV film series, *Game of Thrones*.

In 2017 it was also the setting for a scene in the epic *Transformers* film, *The Last Knight*, starring Mark Wahlberg and Anthony Hopkins, not to mention the charitable photographic winning image and front page of a recent BBC 1 TV 'Countryfile' series annual calendar!

Why tell you all this, well the simple answer is that its literally along the road only a matter of minutes away from Thornfield Farm Glamping, Stranocum, just off the Ballinlea Road.

I really hadn't been fully aware of quite how close this now famous tourist attraction is to the latest holiday glamping pod destination in North Antrim which only opened its doors when lockdown restrictions eased in July.

As I drove up the farm's main driveway with a tall hedgerow to my right and a sizeable grass-mown field on the left, I spotted four conical green pods tucked away in a rough semi-circle under tall leafy trees bordering the far side of the field.

With smoke from a cooking fire curling up to disperse in the calm early evening air and a few people clustered round the fire pit it looked vaguely like a scene from some medieval village.

Of course the closer I got to Thornfield Farm's glamping site units the more they materialised as modern, sophisticated 'glamorous camping' pods with impressive one-way mirror frontages!

Parking my car at the rear of a modern farmhouse beside a range of old traditional stone-built farmyard outbuildings, I was greeted with big smiles from Sandra McCrea and her two sons, fourteen year old Harry and twelve year old Jack.

I couldn't have been given a friendlier welcome and in no time at all I was taken on a visit to the glamping pods having slung a camera over my shoulder.

Walking round the four recently installed and occupied pods Sandra was reluctant to disturb the visiting guests except to wave hello and ask how the new arrivals were settling in.



ARRIVAL: Sandra McCrea greets one of the new arrivals to Thornfield Farm glamping to make sure they have settled in with ease. FW-1F.

The boys held back not wishing to interfere as I chatted to the glampers, asking if they minded if I took some shots. Everyone seemed pleased, cheerful and genuinely delighted to be there for a holiday break.

Without further disruption of their glamping experience Sandra offered to show me Harry's 70 strong sheep flock and the rest of the farm and buildings, so with the boys we walked to the first field at the rear of the farmhouse.

Harry was in his element with his Suffolk lambs and further away, a

Suffolk ram and also Suffolk ewes and Texel crosses. It turns out that both he and Jack are also members of Moycraig YFC a highly successful local



FAMILY: Sandra McCrea and her sons Harry and Jack at Thornfield Farm, Stranocum, Ballymoney, in North Antrim, now open for luxury glamping pod bookings. FW-1A.



CHECKING: Some of Harry's flock of 70 Suffolk sheep get the once over in the grazing fields at the rear of Thornfield Farm, Stranocum. FW-1K.

Young Farmers' Club.

Back at the farmyard I was shown the current project, the conversion of the former farm cottage which as Sandra explained had been granted permission this summer to become a self catering holiday let.

"My partner Wesley Craig and I are at advanced stages of preparation so you must come back again when it's up and running, part of our future plans to develop the Thornfield Farm holiday complex.

"Wesley is a part time tutor at the Northern Regional College in Ballymena teaching plumbing.

"He couldn't be with us today because he's driving a John Deere 5800 harvester for local farmer/contractor Robert Getty, cutting whole crop silage.

"He's been driving for Robert at harvest time for the past twenty years, but he's also been putting his considerable skills to best use on the farm, the boys and I are just his apprentices, although we all work together to do whatever job is necessary on the farm.

"I'm hoping to make use of the garden area on the other side of the yard where we've erected a polytunnel to grow some fruit and vegetables.

"I've always loved gardening and would like to create a walled garden and plant fruit trees with the intention of turning this into a place where visitors can be shown around and go for educational garden walks.

"One of the other farm buildings which we've partly roofed ourselves



OVERVIEW: Thornfield Farm Glamping Pods are tucked away in a secluded on-farm site with stunning countryside views and the famous Dark Hedges only minutes walk away. FW-1B.



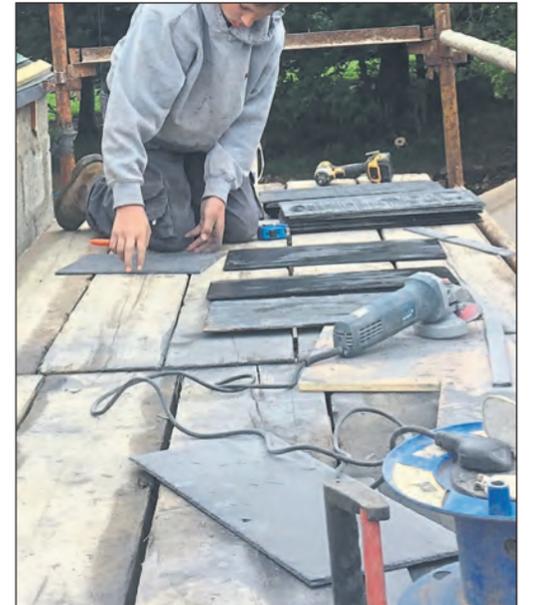
Leading agricultural journalist and broadcaster **IAN HARVEY** looks behind the scenes at rural community issues and how farmers are meeting the challenge of developing the farm business and supporting the farm family



BARBEQUE: What could be more fun than gathering round a barbeque in the evening to feast out of doors in true camping style, especially since Thornfield Farm pods can comfortably accommodate a family of four. FW-1E.



HAY HARVEST: Harry, Jack and dogs pose on the quad for a family snapshot having helped Wesley with collection before he drives the quad load of harvested hay to be stacked in a Thornfield Farm barn. FW-1H.



HANDS-ON: Harry gets down to measuring roofing slates ready to be cut to fit a farm building, helping Wesley whose considerable practical skill sets are being passed on to the younger generation. FW-1M.

and refurbished will shortly become a laundrette for the glamping guests and we'd also like to convert another farm shed into a workshop for craft classes.

"There's so much we can do here and we've achieved a lot in a few short years since we bought this farm and land."

Back in the farmhouse for a cup of tea at the kitchen table, Sandra filled in the background.

"I grew up on a farm at Killaloo, Claudy, Co. Londonderry which was a mixed farm and my father, Norman Thompson, was renowned locally for his kale and turkey production.

"I studied Business with Marketing & HR at the UU Magee Campus and worked for years for two businesses becoming Service Manager for Cowans farm machinery company, Eglinton.

"I was married to a farmer from Bready near Strabane, but sadly he passed away in 2011 when the boys were very young.

"In time I met Wesley and in October 2017 we bought Thornfield and then moved here.

"Since then I've been employed full time in the Service Department for R Kennedy & Co., Ballymena, agents for JCB.

"Both Harry and Jack as you've discovered are totally wrapped up in farming and Harry attends Ballycastle High, starting GCSE'S which



RELAX: Unwind and enjoy breakfast in bed with picturesque rural views from the comfort of your bed in luxurious glamping pods. FW-1D.



PRIVACY: The clever mirror construction of Thornfield Farm glamping pods, which is a partnership with the manufacturers, 'Further Space', Carryduff, Co. Down, offers guests privacy inside whilst unseen from outside. FW-1G.

includes agriculture as a subject both theoretical and practical, while Jack is a pupil at Dalrida Grammar but he's also a member of the school's Agriculture Club.

"To develop the farm and expand it we've bought some land near Ballintoy

which had to be drained, fenced and brought back into production as extra rotational grazing for the sheep and for cropping.

"Improving the farm, land and introducing glamping has been hands-on, we work as a team and the boys are

no exception, in fact they've proved themselves more than capable of tackling most jobs very effectively and not afraid to get their hands dirty.

"During this Covid-19 lockdown I've been off work and lucky to have been able to be here to get this glamping

enterprise off the ground.

"We are in a partnership with the pod manufacturers, 'Further Space', Carryduff, Co. Down, who have developed these pods to an extremely high level of creative comfort, practicality and best use of space.

"They really are excellent which has been reflected in the feedback which has been unbelievably complimentary.

"One family of four summed it up by saying, 'The pod was perfect for us, very clean and everything you would need, they've thought of everything'.

"They loved the setting which they described as 'scenic and calming' and went on to say that the free range hens and the lambs were lovely and the kids love the free space to run about.

"They even said they'd rethink staying in a hotel in future and would come back here again.

"It's really heart-warming to know that we're booked solidly until the end of August, so Thornfield Farm Glamping has struck a chord with potential guests and it's up to us to ensure that the momentum continues."

For more information

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PLASTERING: During the early stages of establishment and installation of the glamping site at Thornfield Farm, Jack lends a hand by plastering an essential field supply item. FW-1J.



FAMILY-FRIENDLY: Thornfield Farm glamping site, Stranocum, is laid out in a family-friendly way with lots of space to explore and farm animals grazing not too far away to add rural interest. FW-1C.



HARVESTING: Just finished harvesting a whole crop with a John Deere 5800, Wesley Craig [left] takes a break with farmer/contractor Robert Getty who Wesley helps by operating Robert's harvesters annually. FW-1L.