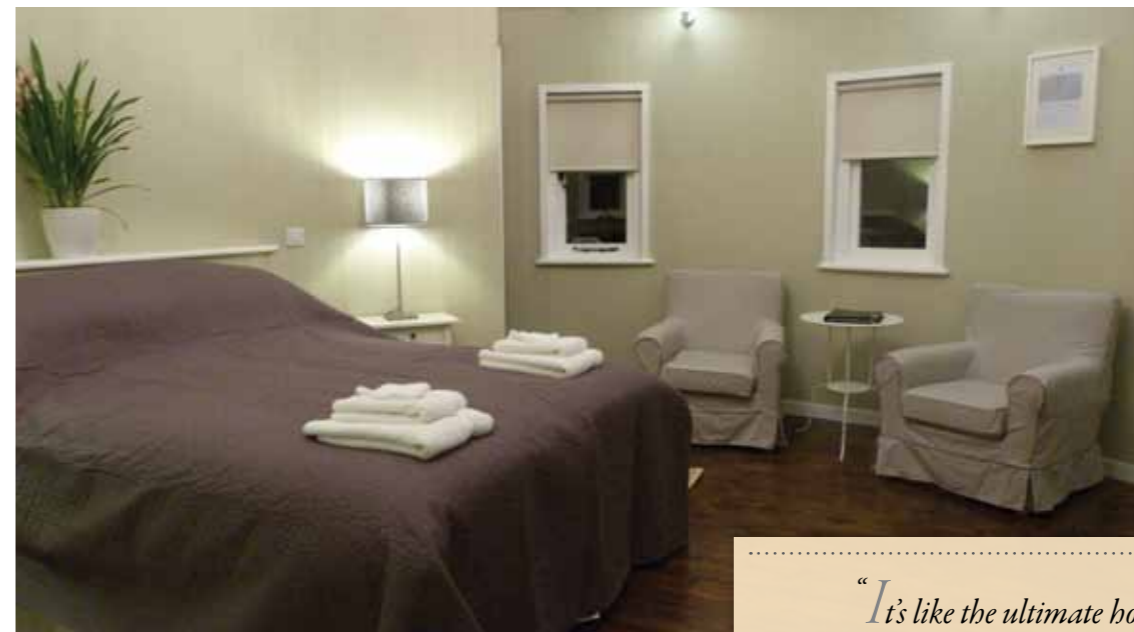




FRONT *of* HOUSE

Ian and Penny Ledger offer guests the perfect rural retreat in their sympathetically-restored Grade II listed farm buildings and luxury eco-lodge tree houses.

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"It's like the ultimate hotel room but in the trees on a country estate with uninterrupted valley views to wake up to"

With no experience of the hospitality sector Ian and Penny Ledger took a huge gamble when they invested their life savings into Fair Oak Farm in September 2006. Nestled in the Wealden Valley, and previously forming part of the Glynde Estate, it is a Grade II listed property surrounded by stunning Sussex countryside within a designated area of outstanding natural beauty. Ian describes his first impressions on viewing the farm: "I remember thinking "Wow!" when we were approaching through the country lanes and "Wow!" when we entered through the gates and saw the buildings."

At the time the couple viewed the property, the main barn was being used as a holiday let although, as Ian says, "the décor and the hand-me-down furniture were much to be desired and we were surprised it was even achieving 30 per cent weekend occupancy." But both Ian and Penny could see its potential and were confident they could create more luxurious accommodation that could double the occupancy levels. There was also another advantage, as Ian explains, "although it is a 12 acre estate, it is a mere pin prick compared to the three larger estates that surround it, one of which is owned by pop legend Roger Daltrey who has some stunning fishing lakes nearby. It means the surrounding land, including the woodland, is very well maintained."

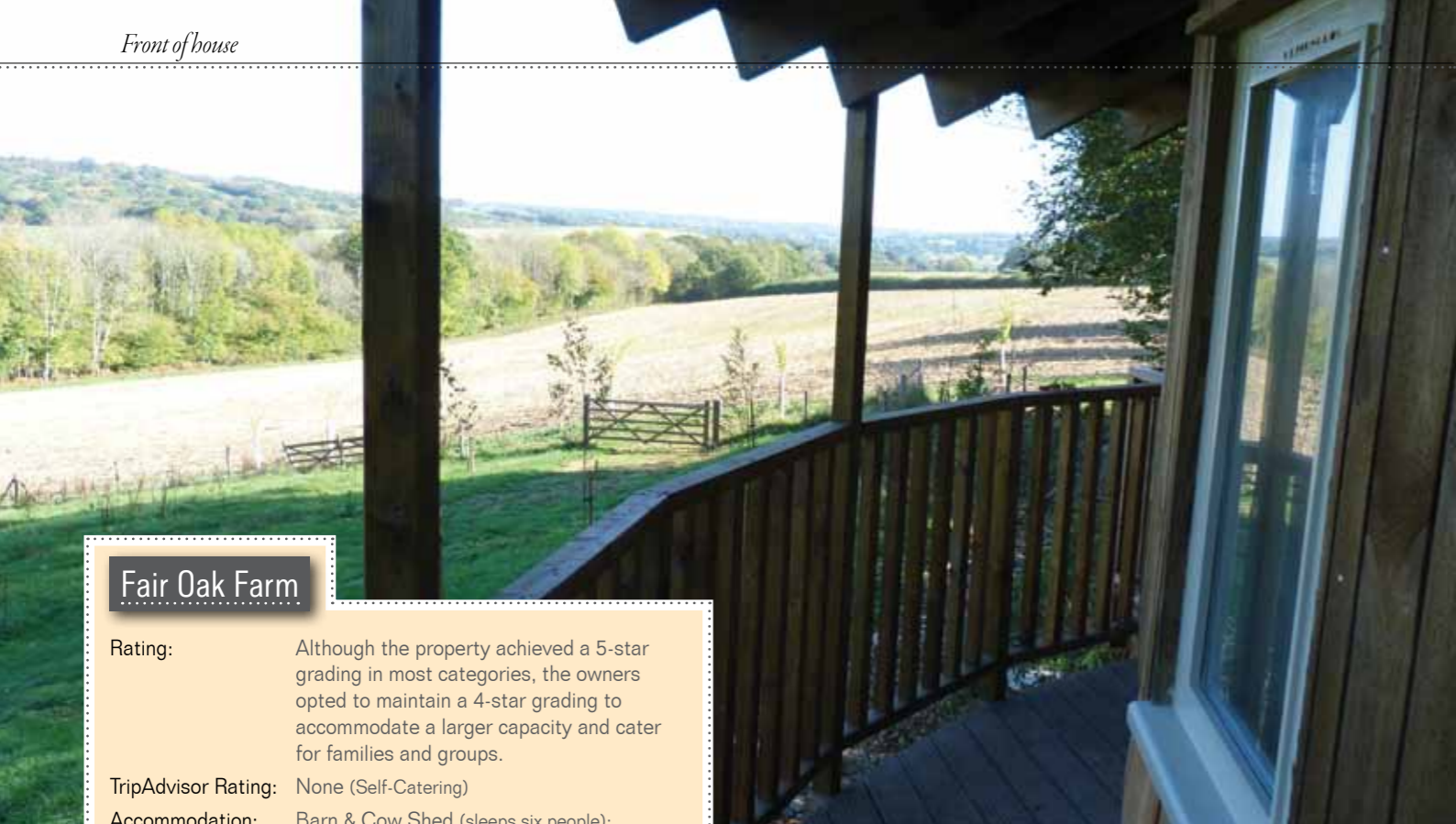
Although Ian and Penny had not worked in the hospitality sector before, they did have extensive experience renovating properties and gradually began transforming the farm buildings. Today, the self-catering accommodation they offer includes the Barn and Cow Shed; Stable Cottage, Grain Store and luxury eco-lodge tree houses. The Barn features beamed, vaulted ceilings, floor-length windows and a beautifully polished oak floor while the Cow Shed consists of two cottage-style double bedrooms both furnished with six-foot double beds. Stable Cottage is full of quality antique furniture and fittings – a feature of all the farm buildings – and the Grain Store offers spacious open plan living with stone flooring, exposed timbers and oak-framed windows overlooking the courtyards and gardens.

As the owner of a Grade II listed property, Ian was conscious of the legal requirement to retain its true character. The historic farm building was expertly converted using traditional methods incorporating clay peg tiles, oak weather boarding and original

sandstone plinth walls. Ian adds: "We knew when we purchased Fair Oak Farm, we did not want to be your average holiday cottage where you turn up and find the key under the door mat." They personally 'meet and greet' each guest, offer a range of outdoor activities such as falconry and archery and provide some additional services as Ian explains, "while the accommodation is self-catering we have various added extras for guests to enjoy if they wish including a chef, wine list, DVD library, cycle hire, games room with pool table and bow top gypsy caravan nestled in the orchard." Fair Oak Farm caters for large groups and families and not surprisingly, the authentic gypsy caravan proves very popular with children.

The idea of accommodating guests in a caravan may seem a little unconventional to some, but Ian is clearly not afraid of taking risks. He has also made a substantial investment into two eco-lodge tree houses that have been built "for grown-ups to fulfil their innermost childhood dreams." The idea for the tree houses originated the moment Ian and Penny first viewed the property but the couple were unable to start on such an ambitious scheme until they had dealt with the farm buildings. Ian says: "We knew that it had to be last on the list of our capital investment plan because we had lots of existing buildings to improve and renovate first and planning permission for the tree houses was likely to be a tricky process, if not impossible." However, after protracted negotiations with the local authority and the bank, and having secured the services of a local carpenter, work on the tree houses finally began. Ian says: "I had the design and layout in my head before we had even moved into Fair Oak Farm. I then prepared a detailed programme, schedule of works, cost plan, risk register and specification list." He and Penny then sourced all the materials from local suppliers as well as all the fittings and furniture.

The results are stunning with each of the tree houses offering luxury self-catering accommodation for two with amenities such as Queen-size double bed, en-suite wet room, fully-equipped kitchen and sheltered balcony. They also feature all the modern conveniences that guests would expect from 4-star



Fair Oak Farm

Rating: Although the property achieved a 5-star grading in most categories, the owners opted to maintain a 4-star grading to accommodate a larger capacity and cater for families and groups.

TripAdvisor Rating: None (Self-Catering)

Accommodation: Barn & Cow Shed (sleeps six people); Stable Cottage (sleeps two to four people); Grain Store (sleeps two to four people); Eco-Lodge Tree Houses (sleeps two people per lodge); All Buildings (sleeps 14 to 19 people)

Rates: From £340 per week for two people sharing an Eco Lodge Tree House in low season.

Further information: www.fairoakfarm.co.uk

accommodation such as flat-screen LED digital TV with integral DVD, wireless broadband and fresh white linen and towels. Ian says: "It's like the ultimate hotel room but in the trees on a country estate with uninterrupted valley views to wake up to."

Demand for the accommodation has exceeded all Ian's expectations as he explains: "The interest and excitement from people during the design and build was enormous and we have experienced year-on-year increases in demand but we have seen the biggest jump since the introduction of the tree houses." Ian also thinks that other land owners might want to consider this option adding: "Financially, it's a no brainer as an investment.

It helps if you already have an established tourism business that can be expanded, so you can evidence the benefits to a local economy." Working with his carpenter, Ian can obtain planning, provide a business plan, design, construct, market and manage the letting of tree houses in partnership with other land owners.

Looking ahead to 2012, Ian expects a busy and profitable year with staycations increasing as fewer people have the money go abroad. He says: "People will always want to be with their family in the countryside. This November and December we have seen more advance bookings than ever before for the year ahead and January is normally our busiest period for enquiries." Ian admits that making Fair Oak Farm financially viable has been a challenge and has meant he has had to juggle a multitude of roles acting as owner, investor, website designer, accountant, maintenance manager, IT trouble-shooter, construction worker and advertising manager. With most of the capital investment now completed, Ian says that his focus now is on, "keeping customer satisfaction levels as high as humanely possible and enjoying life on the farm."

