

# Ty-mynydd

HEREFORDSHIRE



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Up in the hills, on the borders of Wales, there are people restoring the old stone walls and putting heart back into the countryside.

John is one of them. He took to building walls and damming streams with stones when he was just eight; his brother, a carpenter, gave him twenty yards of stonewall to build when he was fourteen. That was it; he left school to build dry stone walls. The walling soon led him to farms that needed him, then to buying and doing up houses and selling them on, then, finally, to this: "I had a hankering to run my own farm." He lived on his own up here, busy, active, outdoors in all weathers, content... but alone. So he sent his photograph in to *Country Living* magazine and advertised for a wife. About seventy candidates replied; Niki's letter, declaring that she would be quite happy sitting in front of a fire with a glass of wine ("mind you, we've never done it!") won him over.

They have taken with passion to this remote mountainside place, strewn with grazing sheep and raw, green views. Up here, you feel you are on top of the world. These are the Black Hills, brought to us by Bruce Chatwin in his novel *On the Black Hill* – a bleak tale of two brothers on an isolated farm. The Victorian vicar, Francis Kilvert, whose diaries have become worldwide classics, also walked these hills and coaxed them into the affections of millions. But they remain largely empty, a demanding yet beautiful corner of Britain where England and Wales meet in gentle amity.

Niki wrote a letter to us about this book; it says more about their lives than we could.

"Our lives, along with our organic farm and B&B here in the Black Mountains, run along 'slow' principles. Our animals graze freely (cows, sheep and Oxford Sandy and Black pigs) over acres of ancient organic pastureland, with hardly any human intervention. They live and grow at their own natural pace, calving and lambing where they choose. Being organic, they are fed no artificial foodstuffs at all. When the time comes to slaughter, the animals undergo a thirty-minute drive (minimum stress) to a local abattoir/butchers.

"Our meat is then hung and matured for a month and believe me, it is worth the wait. Our eggs are supplied by my chickens, so B&B guests, at breakfast, get to sample produce born and raised on the fields they view from their window."

The farm is a joint effort between Niki and John. Stonemasonry is still his first trade, and he is sympathetically restoring an old 17th-century farmhouse in the historic Llanthony valley nearby. John's dry stone walling can be seen around the farm; keen to pass on the craft, he is considering running weekend courses sometime in the future.

"People come mainly from London and Bristol to chill out and get back in touch with the rhythms of nature and it is so lovely to get feedback from our guests, especially the ones with young children who have run wild, safe and free. Last summer John took

two boys out on a sheep-rouding exercise and showed them how to work the dogs, Floss, Susie and Bracken. Their parents are eager to come back again

**"The vegetable patch up the hill is bursting with wholesome stuff and very often gets invaded by fat hens"**

this year. That tells us that we are successfully sharing our way of life with others; what more do you really need? Good fresh local food, healthy clean mountain air and lots of space."

Add unspoilt views and stunning sunsets and you have the perfect life.

These 130 acres of unspoilt pasture and woods with the Blaendigeddi brook running through are free for guests to explore. Follow the bridleway, once an old road, through the land and down the valley into the village of Llanigon, and, if you are feeling fit, on to Hay on Wye. In Hay (six miles as the crow flies) are pubs, restaurants, cafes and second hand bookshops by the score. And in May and June Hay hosts the celebrated Festival of Literature & Arts, described by Bill Clinton, memorably, as "the Woodstock of the mind."

It was Niki who wanted to do it all organically, in spite of organic farming being a relatively unusual concept at the time. Breakfasts here are delicious and the only item that has to travel to the table is the milk; bread is homemade, by hand not machine. The water is from their own spring and tastes as only spring water can. The vegetable patch up the hill is bursting with wholesome stuff and very often gets invaded by fat hens – not so much free range as all over the place.

She and John are also undergoing an agri-environmental scheme (Tir Gofal) which enables them to rejuvenate old hedgerows and fence off an ancient bluebell wood from the grazing animals, something that hasn't been done for nearly a century. Now beautiful carpets of bluebells appear every spring.



"People are fascinated by our lifestyle, and sit and stare out of the window at breakfast time – not talking, just winding down and taking it all in." At night, Niki lights candles in the windows and by the door so you can find your way in; but linger a while to watch the bats. You'll sleep well – the only sound is sheep – in two sweetly restful bedrooms on the ground floor, with proper eiderdowns, shared country bathroom and green views.

It is not always easy, especially in winter, and there's no extra money for holidays. But they feel that the faster the world gets, the slower they want to go; it is so much more enriching and fulfilling. And it is a life only dreamt about when as a lass from the industrial North East, armed with an English degree and all her belongings crammed into a Nissan Micra, Niki turned up at this Welsh mountain farm on a freezing March day.

That is the sort of energy and enthusiasm that changes lives – and places. At the end of the long, bumpy track, the once-dull bungalow, cheaply built and with aluminium windows and hardboard doors, has been transformed by John's vision. When he first came here, there was little birdsong. Now the farm is filled with it, house martins swooping over the fields and into the nests under the eaves. The collies are real characters, including the unstoppable Floss with only three legs. The children, Daniel, five, and Madeline, three, are sweet-natured and at home in the winter mud and muck.

Altogether, the family and their farm are enough to persuade the most hardened urbanites out of their rural 'denial'. John and Niki are the architects of their own lives; it may be hard work but they avoid much that overwhelms the rest of us.

**Niki Spenceley**

- Ty-mynydd,
- Llanigon, Hay-on-Wye HR3 5RJ
- 2 doubles.
- From £70. Singles £50.
- 01497 821593
- niki barber@tiscali.co.uk
- www.tymynydd.co.uk