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## Dairy farmer quits milk before collapse

West Sussex dairy farmer John Robinson quit milk production in July just before United Milk's collapse.

He estimates he will have only lost about £3,000 on his milk cheque as a result. But he thinks he will never see his £75,000 investment in the plant again.

"We sold the dairy herd on July 7 but I am still owed seven days' milk," said Mr Robinson, of Iford Farm, near Lewes in West Sussex, who had been supplying milk to United's stricken Westbury plant.

Mr Robinson decided to stop dairy farming for a number of reasons: the milk price was falling; his dairy buildings were concentrated around a labour intensive site dating back to 1895; and the Environment Agency were proposing to break the banks of the nearby River Ouse as part of their flood control programme.

The farm has shed staff and increased the arable and sheep side of the business. Mr Robinson said a cynic might think the rest of the dairy industry had effectively bankrupted the Westbury plant by starving it of milk supplies so that they could buy it "...on the cheap."

## STAND TOGETHER

● Dairy farmers are being urged to stand behind United Milk's processing plant which is in the hands of receivers.

Farmers across the South East who were either investors in or suppliers to United Milk were waiting anxiously for the result of take over talks as South East Farmer went to press.

An emergency meeting organised by the NFU decided everything should be done to keep United Milk's processing plant at Westbury in Wiltshire open rather than allow it to go into complete liquidation.

Farmers' main priority was that their milk should continue to be collected. The

receivers announced another week's worth of collections at the end of August to give the three co-operatives - Dairy Farmers of Britain, First Milk and Milk Link - trying to buy United Milk some breathing space.

But the fear was that the longer the negotiations continued, the more likely it was that farmers would turn to other buyers for their milk. "The least unsatisfactory way out is for people to stay," said Mathew Ware, policy adviser for the NFU in the South East. "The whole point of this plant producing skimmed milk powder is that it takes out the downward pressure on price during the spring flush of milk." Last spring, the price for liquid milk did not drop in the usual manner.



Harvesting wheat at Lees Court Estate near Faversham in Kent. The grain is being used in a highly unusual way: the germ is extracted and a revolutionary process is used to produce oil for a range of beauty products under the label "Seeds, The Countess of Sondes" named after the woman who stewards the estate. See the full story on pages 31 and 32

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# Turning wheat into scent



Milling wheat from a Kent estate is being used to make a range of special beauty products which are already on sale in top American stores.

Lees Court Estate is having oil extracted from the wheat germ to be turned into creams, sprays and other treatments.

All the products are the brainchild of The Countess Sondes, who hopes to have them on sale in British stores by Christmas.

"We needed to diversify to make sure the farm had a future in the light of poor wheat prices," said Liz Deen-Sly, the estate administrator. "We looked at lavender and evening primrose but decided the market for those crops had

been saturated." As most of the estate's land is grade one and wheat is the best crop, the Countess decided to find an alternative. She knew the germ was used in beauty products, and used her American contacts to begin talking about some possibilities.

"I did some research into the wheat extraction process," said Miss Deen-Sly. "The Countess was determined to avoid using chemicals." Eventually, a specialist process was chosen, and the estate is now pioneering the use of this for extracting wheatgerm oil in Britain with Springdale Crop Synergies Ltd. "What surprised us was the quality of the oil," Miss Deen-Sly

added. "It was clear and did not seem to go rancid as quickly as oil from other processes."

One aim was to create a scent to accompany the oil which would remind consumers of standing in a corn field. Lees Court went to Quest, America's biggest manufacturer of beauty products with clients including Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent and Chanel. "With the Countess' story behind it, Quest jumped on the idea and developed a scent which evokes the countryside."

The estate grows the variety Clara and wheat from this crop has been sent to the United States where it is gild-

ed in gold, scented and used in the bottle caps and packaging for the products which are sold under the heading "Seeds, The Countess Sondes." The complete range of eight products now includes a body lotion, body wash, body polisher, soap, seed potpourri, a candle, essence and moisturising seed oil.

Lees Court is a 4,500 acre estate with four main tenants - one dairy, one mainly arable and two arable and vegetables. Gosmere Farms is 800 acres farmed in hand and includes the 400 acres on which wheat is grown for the beauty products. The rest is 200 acres of oilseed rape and

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The shots on this page were taken during the harvest of milling wheat for "Seeds, The Countess Sondes" range of products.

## EAST KENT PLOUGHING MATCH ASSOCIATION PLOUGHING MATCH

WEDNESDAY, 1ST OCTOBER 2003

Lees Court Estate, Gosmere Farm, Sheldwich, Faversham

By kind permission of The Countess Sondes

Ploughing commences at 9.00 a.m.

Presentation of Awards 3.30 p.m.

Tractor, Vintage Tractor and Horse Ploughing Classes  
Grain, Roots, Vegetables and Potatoes • Sheep Dog Trials  
Tossing the Sheaf Competition • Women's Section • Cookery and Crafts  
Trade Stands

Entries close: 10th September 2003  
Hon. Secretary: Mrs P.H. Harland  
(01227 700231)



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about 120 acres of spring peas.

Gosmere Farms pays for the oil extraction in the UK. The oil is then bought in barrels by Seeds LLP, a company set up by the estate in the United States to add value to the process. Last year, 200 tonnes of the milling wheat variety Malacca was sent to Haygate, one of the biggest millers for the UK flour industry. They extracted two tonnes of wheat germ, and from that Gosmere had 254 litres of oil to send to

Seeds LLP.

Countess Sondes was born Phyllis Kane in America and took over the estate when her husband, Earl Sondes, died in 1996. In future, she intends to develop products based on other non-food crops, and has already planted small areas of purple vipers bugloss (echium), pot marigold (calendula) and sweet quinoa.

The estate is involved in a range of projects, including one which will increase biodiversity over the pheasant shooting area.



Some of the products in the "Seeds, The Countess of Sondes" range made from Lees Courts Estate crops

## Estate projects

Conservation and other work on Lees Court Estate will feature in a series of talks during this year's East Kent Ploughing Match.

For the first time, the estate is hosting the 58 year old event on a 200 acre plot between the villages of Sheldwich and Selling.

Countess Sondes, who stewards the estate, has invited scientists involved in the estate projects to come and give talks and advise some of the 2,000 to 3,000 visitors expected to attend.

Conservation, farm diversification and the cultivation and use of non-food crops should be of interest to farmers faced with subsidy changes under the Mid Term Review of the common agricultural policy.

The expert speakers are David Bird, national co-ordinator of the Farmers Conservation Group, who advises on farmland habitats for game and wildlife; Will Gemmill from Strutt and Parker, who is the estate's farming partner specialises in arable business management and agronomy; Nigel Leader-Williams, director of the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology, who specialises in biodiversity and conservation issues; Clifford Spencer, founder of Springdale Crop Synergies, a company which links research, industry and agriculture; Rhodri Thomas, also from Strutt and Parker, a partner in land management who specialises in estate management; and Peter Thompson, field officer for The Game Conservancy Trust, who advises farmers on practical conservation methods based on the trust's research.

The estate has taken part in DEFRA's countryside stewardship scheme and the experience gained will be discussed.



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