

# Dedicated to green causes

Andrew Weir is living proof that every farmer has to learn to juggle.

Among his skills can be found shepherd and shearer, land and livestock manager, property restorer, conservationist, teacher and much more, even before his role as landlord of Europe's largest eco-festival, the Big Green Gathering, appears on the list.

By inviting 20,000 people to visit his 163-acre farm just outside Priddy on the Mendip Hills, Mr Weir's commitment to green causes could bring him a little of the recognition Michael Eavis gains from staging the Glastonbury Festival.

Although Glastonbury is taking a breather, the Big Green Gathering has no plans to step directly into its muddy wellies, since its focus is not rock stars but the sweep of green concerns from wind energy to permaculture, although the event on August 2-6 will include music, film, debates, health issues and even a funfair.

The environment is a cause Andrew Weir values all the more highly since he and his wife Jennifer had their son, Kyle, just over a year ago. The couple both come from farming families; she from Lancashire, though she now works part-time at Bristol's City Farm, and he

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from Somerset, being born nearby in Butcombe.

Mr Weir took on the "semi-abandoned" farm on the Mendips nine years ago and found fields infested with bracken, gorse and thistles, as well as a farmhouse needing restoration.

While the work continues - "I do sometimes scratch my head and ask myself why I did this" - he has restored five kilometres of hedges, installed 10km of new fences, and manages 70 Angus cows, pigs and 1,000 ewes while protecting sensitive environmental areas and conserving rare grasses, flowers and wildlife.

The Big Green Gathering is another example of farmers diversifying to find new forms of income. Mr Weir says the pressures on farming mean "you've got to get off your butt. Farmers need to adapt, and some of them are finding it difficult to change".

Economics also affects eco-festivals, and Mr Weir said: "Last year's event, though wonderful, didn't make any money.

"Hopefully, it will this year. The gathering has got to be sustainable within itself."



Keen on green: multi-skilled farmer Andrew Weir says Europe's largest eco-festival is "an experience... it's all great fun"

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And the future? "We'll have to see what the impact is this year to tell if we can run it here every year. We need to consider if it could expand, such as by having more day visitors like the Royal Bath and West Show."

He says the gathering's value is in the thousands of young people learning about conservation, sustainable development, renewable energy and - a key issue for Mr Weir - food and farming, which he has helped make an im-

portant part of the event. Despite protests about the event from some local people, Mr Weir says he committed to protecting the environment of the Mendips, and will help the organisers make every effort to reduce problems, from better fencing to tighter car parking controls.

So what is it like to wake up with thousands of new neighbours? "It's an experience. It feels like a bit of an invasion, and there's a sigh of relief when the tide recedes, but it's all great fun."

## £2,000 from parking offenders

It took only 16 parking offenders to produce more than £2,000 for Mendip coffers on Friday.

Road, Wells; Ryszard Borek, Cowl Street, Shepton Mallet; William Demarvell, Silver Street