

BUSYTODAY: John Kissane, sheep adoption agent

'It's not an easy life but I could never give it up'

THE road that sweeps from Moll's Gap down towards the Lakes of Killarney is spectacularly beautiful, with the Black Valley on one side and towering crags on the other. What it is not, however, is good farming country. Those who try to wrest a living from the land in this part of the world have never had it easy.

John Kissane is one of that few that remain. He is the fifth generation to live and work this harsh countryside and in so doing is carrying on an unbroken tradition. But it isn't easy these days.

"It never was easy I suppose — in this kind of countryside you're pretty well limited to sheep, as the grazing isn't good enough for cattle really."

John and his family were able to run a reasonably profitable sheep-farming business for many years, but now ever-proliferating European regulations, rising costs of food and medical treatments and dropping prices for lambs, sheep and wool, have made it almost impossible to continue in the old way.

Simply giving up wasn't an option for John Kissane.

"If I look back at our family history, and see what they all came through, how they survived, how can I give up? There has to be another way."

And so, together with wife Anne, qualified in marketing and PR, he devised a new approach which would address Ireland's increasing urbanisation as well as our tourism industry. Today, when you first see the farm, the only one of its kind for miles in either direction, where once dozens of homesteads would have existed.

Then you see the bright



Jo Kerrigan

sign: Adopt A Sheep.

Adopt a sheep? Yes, you can now adopt — or perhaps sponsor would be more correct — a sheep or orphaned lamb for a year, helping to cover its feed and medical costs. You get a certificate with your name and the tag number of your sheep. Not surprisingly, visitors from abroad have been delighted with this idea, adopting not only for themselves but for friends and family back home as a unique gift. However, says John, it's proving a winner with Irish families too.

"Back a generation ago, it was quite common for boys and girls to have a relative still living on a farm, and they'd maybe spend the summer there enjoying themselves and learning about the countryside and its ways. Today that's pretty rare, and often you'll find parents bringing their children here, not just to teach them the old traditions but to take a trip down memory lane themselves."

On a typical summer day, you will find not only tour buses and school outings but family cars pulling in at the Kissane farm to enjoy a shearing display followed by an exciting session on the hillside as one of the dogs rounds up a scattered flock and guides them unerringly to a pen.

It's a hard enough life still and the hours are long — especially at shearing time when John is up before 5am to collect the sheep, and they don't usually finish until after 9pm. But John is determined to make this

new style farming work.

"It makes sense in today's Ireland when people have moved away from the land and the old knowledge is in danger of being forgotten, that there should be somewhere they can come to see it still practised. And there are children out there who don't realise where the sweater they're wearing originally came from." If things go well, they hope to introduce workshops in spinning, perhaps produce booklets on the old crafts.

It is a rare thing indeed to find an unbroken line of farming stretching back five generations in these beautiful but inhospitable hills. Kissanes have weathered flood and famine, rain and regulation.

And John is determined that the tradition will continue.

● Kissane Sheep Farm, Moll's Gap, Kenmare, Co Kerry. Open Tues-Sun, 10am-5pm. Phone: 064-34791 or visit www.Adopt-A-Sheep.ie



John Kissane: determined to continue to make a living on the land.

Picture: Jo Kerrigan