



# westward

“ Well, we can trace the family back to the 1750's on St Agnes, through official records, but the farmhouse is of Elizabethan origin. It might well have been built by a Hicks back then. The family has been here for a long time anyway... ”



Mike Hicks scratched his beard and picked up an ancient looking sickle from the bench in his shed. The steel was dark with age, apart from a thin, silver line that traced the innermost curve of the hooked blade.

"I've no idea how old this thing is. I found it the other week and gave it a quick sharpen. It took an edge straight away. It's come up like a razor."

Mike tested the sickle's keenness, brushing it with his thumb. He passed it over to me. The wooden handle was cool and smooth as porcelain from a lifetime of use. The sickle was sharp indeed. Mike continued:

"It's proved pretty useful cutting the lavender. You can get the hook right into the centre of the bush and gather a good handful with it..."

The fifteen acres of Westward Farm have been looked after by the Hicks family for hundreds of years. Of all the generations of Hicks on St Agnes, it would be safe to say that Mike is probably the first to be harvesting lavender from their windswept fields.

Westward Farm certainly remains a typical Scillonian farm in many ways. Tightly bound with pittosporum hedges, the narrow fields contain plenty of daffodil bulbs, ten or so beef cattle and some potatoes. However, in the past few

years some less predictable crops have begun to appear: chamomile; geranium; rosemary; clary sage; agastache and, of course, lavender. So far, ten percent of the farm has been given over to these particular plants but the hope is to expand their use further. Since 2004, Mike and his wife Christine have been experimenting with aromatic oils.

After an initial harvest of rosemary was donated by Borough Farm on Tresco, production has gone from strength to strength. All the cut plant material is processed on the farm, in their specially made still, to produce high quality oils. This is by no means the end of the operation. Since 2005, Westward Farm has been making its own soaps. All hand made, no batch being larger than twelve kilos a time, the soaps are of a clear glycerine base. Each soap is gently coloured depending on the essential oils used and hand packaged under the label of twentyeight. The twentyeight in question relates to the number of miles from mainland England. Clary Sage and Geranium, English Chamomile, Agastache, Rosemary and Lavender are some of the beautiful fragrances available. One of the essential oils is even wild collected. Samphire from the shores of St Agnes provides a superb deep, citrus-alpine fragrance to its soap. The use of samphire oil in this way appears to be unique to twentyeight and Westward Farm.

The Hicks' soaps are now available in a number of outlets on Scilly. Production is on the increase with half a ton the expected total for this year. Alternative crops are something of a speciality of Westward Farm. In 1991, Mike mentioned to a bee keeper on St Mary's that he was interested in starting a hive on St Agnes. Mike was promised a swarm, just as soon as the bees made one available. After a couple of months of waiting, impatience got the better of Mike and he went off to Cornwall to fetch a colony of bees home. Mike and his new bees flew back into Scilly by helicopter, the bees being a somewhat novel cargo for British International Helicopters. The very next day, the long awaited swarm occurred on St Mary's. There were now two hives of bees to deal with at Westward. Mike had never before so much as looked into a hive. The learning curve was precipitous.





Mike clearly relishes a challenge and set about mastering the art of beekeeping.. In 2003, the visiting Bee Inspector of the South West (a much coveted title) was very impressed with the standard of the beehives at Westward. Such was their quality that Mike was asked if he would like to fly to the mainland and pass on his skills to Cornish beekeepers. Adulations from Bee Inspectors aside, the honey from Westward's hives is very much in demand. Orders are placed well in advance by visitors and islanders alike. Requests and cash in envelopes are slipped under the farmhouse door every year to ensure an annual fix of Westward honey.

One long time customer of Mike's is a regular visitor from the mainland. An inveterate traveller, this gentleman always returns home from wherever he has visited in the world with a jar of local honey. His kitchen cabinets groan with pounds and pounds of cosmopolitan honey. This global honey connoisseur once told Mike:

"If, in the winter, it's grey, cold and miserable, with the rain pelting on the window panes, and I'm feeling a bit down, I know exactly what to do. I go straight to the honey cupboard and ferret out my jar of St Agnes honey. Starting the day with St Agnes honey is starting the day with a dose of summer sunshine. I don't think I could make it through winter without it!"

Honey and handmade soap may not be the traditional commercial avenues taken by farmers on Scilly. Changes, of social, economic and, increasingly, climatic natures, are ever present. It has been many years since potatoes and flowers alone were able to sustain Scillonian farms. Westward Farm and the generations of Hicks, who have lived and worked there, have seen many changes in the past few hundred years. So it will go on. Few markets are constant and adaptability has to be an important attribute for farmers anywhere in the world. Mike's imaginative approach to the problems faced by farmers on Scilly proves that change does not have to occur at the expense of quality. It is important, also, to acknowledge that adaptability is not only a useful skill in running a farm. As with Mike's old sickle, adaptability is also the foundation of continuity. In particular, the continuity that exists between a place and its people: between, for instance, Westward and the Hicks. ■

**Mike Hicks**  
**Westward Farm**  
**Westward, St Agnes, Isles of Scilly**

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**Beef, eggs, soap, honey, potatoes.**

