

With so many of the UK's fishermen struggling to make a living due to quotas, rules and regulations linked to weather, and the cost of running an under 10m fishing boat, it's pleasing to hear positive stories that relate to those who try to overcome these hardships with determination. John Periam reports.

A fresh challenge later in life inspired by youthful memories, and an interest in the fishing industry is what helped Chris Veasey from Eastbourne set up his business as it is today.

"As a child I lived on the seafront opposite the fishing station where the town's fishing boats were launched.

"I spent my spare time helping out and occasionally going to sea for short trips during the holidays," Chris said.

"Many years ago, as fishing boats worked all around our coasts, it was always a centre of attraction for children to stop and ask questions and have their photos taken by their parents with their Box Brownie cameras as a memory of their trip to the seaside. Sadly something that does not happen now.

"Fishing is dying out. It does not attract young people to become fishermen - it is very difficult.

"Learning about life at sea can only be gained by getting first-hand experience, and with more boats cutting down on crews it makes that challenge even harder. I left school at 15 so I could become a fisherman, and here I am 35 years later still doing what I wanted to.

"You have to be passionate about it, to want to do it. It is not easy and of course there are times when many of us want to say enough is enough. Those are the days of cold mornings, dark nights and rough seas. I just love being outside and being at sea - it is my passion," Chris told *Fishing News*.

The price of fish has remained stagnant and untenable quotas and high fuel prices have made things even harder. Costs need to be looked at, and survival is important. That is when Chris decided to cut out the middle man. It was not going to be easy, but he wanted to sell the fish himself.

"I decided the best way would be to take the fish to the customer and the development of farmers markets across the region seemed like an ideal way to do it.

"East Grinstead in Sussex was one of the first and was very popular. It was situated



## From The Sea to the Shop



Stern of Le Belhara after unloading the day's catch



Chris Veasey with son-in-law Dan Howes at the Forest Row Shop



in the right area giving access for those living in the country the opportunity to see what I had to sell. Fresh fish alongside local meat, cakes and farm produce was different."

Chris son-in-law, Dan Howes, supported his idea after family discussions. There wasn't the money that they had expected from fishing whilst catches were getting smaller.

The market sales did start to attract a lot of attention and they decided to open a fish shop in Hartfield Road, Forest Row near East Grinstead.

"We knew it was going to be a challenge," said Dan.

"At the time I was a sous chef at The Star in Alfriston, and Chris asked me if I would like to join him. It was in April 2010 that Veasey & Sons Fishmongers was born," he told *Fishing News*.

It required a quick learning curve to gain as much knowledge as they could about health and hygiene regulations, presentation, stock control and self-promotion.

The shop was initially very basic, with a little counter and a table to which they added a

popular oyster bar.

"I went fishing most days," said Chris.

"Sometimes twice as the sales improved with us providing up to 60% of our own stock. We try to sell a wide variety of fish, with approximately 20 to 25 different kinds of fish during midweek, and double that on a Saturday."

Dan had some well-established culinary friends and he was joined in the shop by Dave Hussell, a chef who has worked with Rick Stein.

Between them they have built up a reputation for being able to give shoppers ideas on how to cook the seafood.

"I'd say that 80% of people between the ages of 25 and 55 do not know one item of fish from another, and they are missing out on so much," added Chris.

Chris keeps his Gemini Catamaran, Le Belhara, in Eastbourne Marina which has now been open some 20 years.

He said that he likes working from such a stable boat and it also has ample space to store the catch whilst give the crew a good working area.



Eastbourne fishermen have moorings at the marina built 20 years ago



The Gemini catamaran Le Belhara with crew Chris Veasey second from right



The shop always a copy of *Fishing News* for customers to read



A once-busy beach nowadays is only used by a couple of boats

A few boats still launch from the shingle beach but most are now marina based.

"Quotas still are a major concern for us and so mismanaged. Sustainably is paramount and the fact that we are governed by the EU is all wrong."

"Fish is not the cheapest form of food and we were very much aware of this when we first came up with the market and shop idea."

"We visited many markets across the region – some were better than others. We needed the support of the market organiser and it was at East Grinstead that we got the initial support. Location is so important."

"Presentation is a key factor

and we like to make sure what we have on show creates the right impression to the passing customer."

"Farmers markets can get very busy and they are not open long hours, so we need to make sure we catch their attention."

"Interest in our produce became so popular in the area and the shop in Forest Row became the hub of the village."

"People came in with wine and snacks whilst sitting at the oyster bar to have a dozen oysters and chat with us about the industry, the fish on the table, and what they might like at the weekend," he said, adding that back copies of *Fishing News* make their way into the shop which creates more interest about the lives

and challenges that fishermen continue to face.

People that come into the shop can pick a bit of fish and then ask how to cook it. The wealth of experience both Dan and Dave have makes such a difference. People shop with their eye and there are so many species now available twelve months of the year."

Another unique move was to offer to take customers out on their fishing boat to see first-hand how fish are caught and just what is involved.

Driftnet fishing is very popular as is mackerel fishing.

"We did our first food festival a couple of months ago which was called *Food Rocks*. The barbecue came with us and we showed customers just how to cook fish. We are going to do same again this time at Eastbourne."

There is definitely a food revolution going on, something that has led to Veasey & Sons whirlwind success.

"I never in my wildest dreams thought it would go the way it has gone," said Dan.

"If you had said this three, or four years ago we would not have believed you at all. Fishermen are always looking for new challenges and as it happens we have chosen the right one. It has been hard work but well worth it."

"Sitting back and moaning about the state of the industry does no one any good, it can bring you down, you need to get on with it and enjoy what you do."

"My wife Simone has been wonderful and she supported me when I was fishing and has been 100% behind this new venture. Taking on fresh challenges when over 50 can be a little daunting," he said.

All agreed it must be working as they have netted a whole host of awards.

"To win the *Sussex Food and Drink Awards* twice and then to win *Fishmonger of the Year* this year, as well as the BBC Radio 4's *Food and Drink* awards final was pretty amazing," said Dan.

Nigel Barden on BBC Radio 2 has chosen Veasey to provide recipes for the drive time slot. Their profile has been raised by winning so many accolades and they are now sponsoring an award for the *Best Sussex Food Shop*.

"People are starting to push away from supermarkets for the everyday products."

"There has been a big trend in eating quality and they realise it is not worth the cheapness."

"They want to know what is in their food, where it comes from and it is important for them to know that."

"We bring the fish to them and then show them how to cook it, and serve it so it can do this industry the due justice it deserves."

"Fishermen have had a rough deal over many years."

"It's our turn to prove to others that we are professionals who know what we are doing when we go to sea each day to earn that all important living as fishermen," he concluded.