



Sparked by an interest in archaeology, Dick Knight was one of the first farmers to diversify. **Sarah Pritchard-Williams** reports on how R W Knight and Son came about. Pictures by **Paul Stallard**

**T**HE website of the R W Knight and Son will tell you everything you need to know about heating your home, but what it won't tell you is the interesting story behind this family heating business based in Marshfield.

R W Knight and Son operates out of the family farm, parts of which date back to the 16th century. Founder Dick Knight's interest in archaeology and architecture led to a very interesting find in the 1960s when he was a young husband to Mary and father of three.

Dick Knight explains: "I was interested in finding out the history of the longhouse on our farm. The late Lesley Gore, of the Workers Education Association, recognised the structure to be a Monmouth-type longhouse – so-called as they had, up to that point, only been recognised in Monmouth.

"The building would have been used to house animals on one side and the farmer's family on the other. More of these longhouses have since been discovered on Dartmoor."

This unusual find, along with other medieval artifacts found on the site, such as Stone-Age arrowheads and thatching rope made from old man's beard, brought a lot of visitors from archaeological societies to Castle Farm.

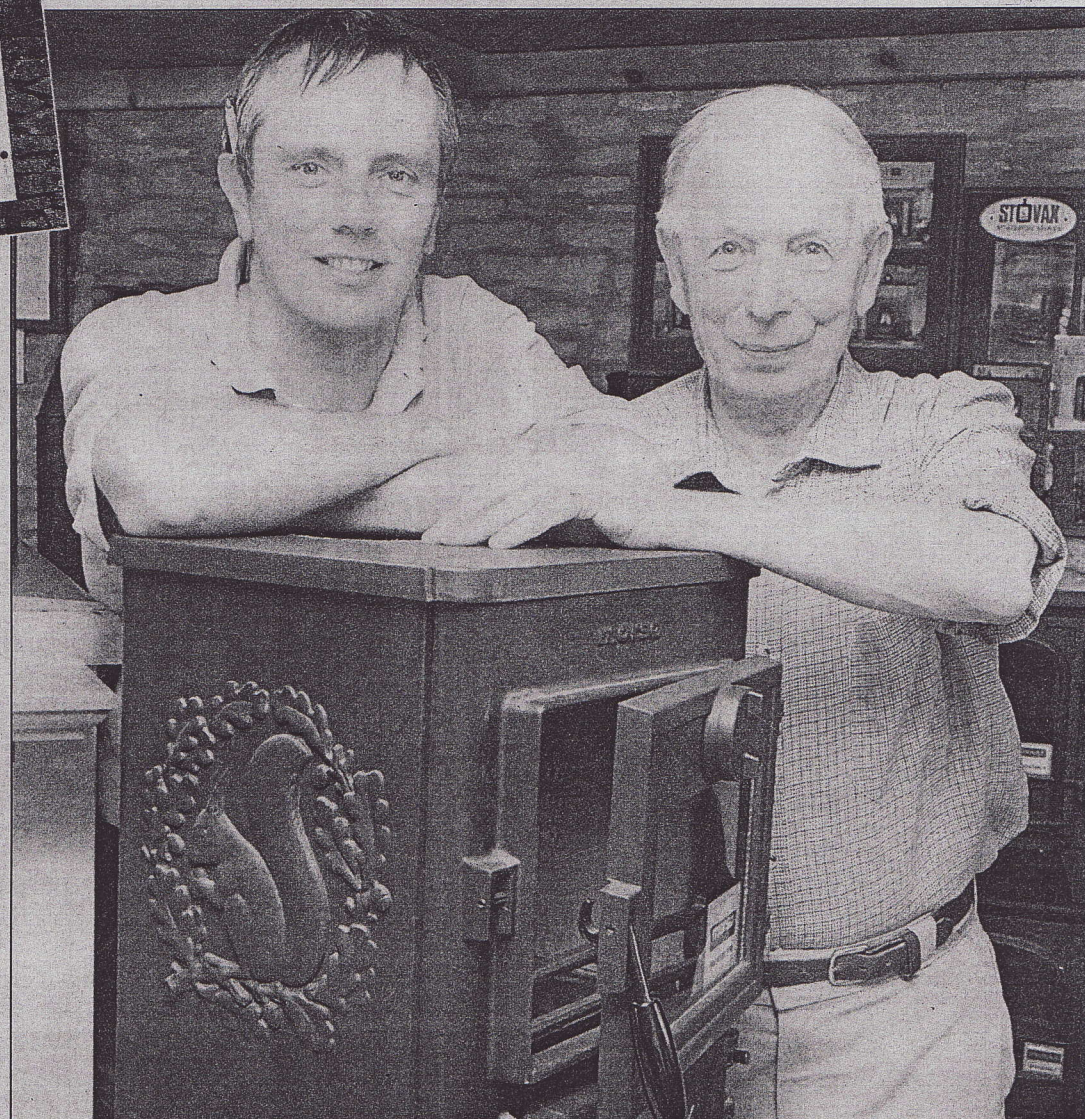
The attention led Dick to decide to open up a museum so that the general public could see for themselves how people had lived hundreds of years ago. To do this he had to get planning permission for the unusual and listed building.

The *Farmers' Weekly* got wind of this and thought it would make a good feature. The published article: "Mr Knight goes public" appeared on April 18, 1975.

Farmers diversifying was not heard of in those days and Dick was ahead of the times. This in itself led to a request for permission from the Civil Servants Union to write about diversification.

However, before either of the two articles above were published, the *Farmers Weekly* published a photograph of Mary Knight warming up beside her wood burning stove along with a caption.

Dick said: "The journalist Sally Smith who was writing about the opening of the museum turned up at Castle Farm on a miserable, rainy day. She was so impressed with the wood-burning stove we had that she wanted to



Keeping it in the family: Henry Knight with his father Dick, the founder of R W Knight and Son heating business in Marshfield, Chippingham

## A family firm that is doing a roaring trade

feature it in the *Farmers' Weekly*." The first wood-burning stove article in the UK was published on February 28, 1975.

"Sally was inundated with enquiries about the stove – people asking where they could get one from," Dick said.

"Sally bought us a bottle of sherry to thank us as, it was the most inquiries about a feature she had ever had," laughed Dick.

"We were also inundated with requests, receiving 40-50 letters a day – all with self-addressed envelopes," he added.

With the Folk Museum bringing in visitors – at only 10p per person, which wasn't a lot then! – and the museum shop stocked with wood crafts, Dick hit on the idea of selling

Norwegian wood-burning stoves. "A terrific boom for us was the fact that, at the time, oil was under Arab control and expensive and Dutch Elm was rife."

Dick remembers: "When we set up the business, CND were very big, and supporters came here with car stickers saying 'Split wood, not atoms'."

That was in 1975, today R W Knight and Son are doing a roaring trade and haven't looked back since. Dick's son Henry now takes care of the day-to-day running of the business.

Dick remembers: "When Henry was still at school, I was puzzling over a problem with a specific chimney Henry came in and came up with a suggestion that we hadn't thought of. I

knew then that he was a natural and he took to the business like a duck to water."

And Dick's interest in archaeology and architecture remains strong to this day. Dick said: "In the spring of 1998 Tony Robinson, Professor Mick Aston of Bristol University and the *History Hunters* television crew came down to film on the farm and the neighbouring area – in dry weather Roman and Iron Age fields can be seen in the valley across from the farm.

The programme went out on January 16, 1999. It was revealed through dendro-chronology – tree-ring dating – that the longhouse on the farm was constructed way back in 1540!"