

CASE HISTORY



Date:	21 st September 2004	Ref:	UK-004
Title:	One man and his electronic watchdog		
Subject:	AlertBox in use for rural businesses		

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A Chew Valley farming family which has been using traditional farming methods for the past 400 years is trialling cutting-edge technology in a bid to provide better security for the farm.

After falling victim to a gang of robbers that specifically targets isolated farmhouses, farmer Colston Gay from New Manor Farm in West Harptree decided to take action to provide better security for the farm. He has now installed digital radio AlertBoxes, which broadcast warning or help messages.

Set in acres of stunning, peaceful countryside, the traditional agricultural and livestock farm is the last place where one could imagine criminals in action. However, the farm buildings, including the house the family lives in, are quite isolated and potentially vulnerable.

Colston's one brush with the criminal element was in fact a lucky escape. The gang, over the course of a couple of weeks, had already broken into around 10 farmhouses before they tried New Manor Farm – in some cases making off with valuable antique furniture including a dining room table! One night, unable to sleep, Colston went downstairs at around 4.00am – and fortunately disturbed the robbers before they could do any damage.

His close shave prompted Colston to have an alarm system installed, but going by the old adage 'prevention is better than cure', he felt some kind of early warning system would be even better. This was particularly important for the commercial buildings on the farm. Colston is one of a growing breed of farmers who sell farm produce direct to the public from an onsite farm shop. The New Manor Farm Shop, stocked with organic and fresh produce, runs successfully alongside the popular Stables tearoom some yards from the shop. With the public milling around the shop, tearoom and farmyard, Colston felt a greater degree of vigilance was needed to spot potential 'bad lots'. Accustomed to using working dogs on the farm, he was delighted to discover a type of electronic watchdog, which could be used to raise the alert should there be a potential problem.

The new AlertBoxes, which have been dubbed 'neighbourhood watch in a box', are electronic boxes about the size of a paperback book, which use encrypted digital radio technology to communicate with each other. By pressing a single button, a help or warning message can be transmitted to all AlertBoxes within an approximate hundred-metre radius.

Colston has installed one AlertBox in the farm shop and another in the teashop. At the slightest hint of suspicious activity – Colston says you often instinctively know when you see someone who could be trouble – he or a member of his staff just needs to press a single button to summon help or alert a colleague.

"Having disturbed burglars in the house, we realised that we needed to take security more seriously," said Colston. "We alarmed the house but also wanted to put something into the shop and teashop that would give our staff peace of mind when they're working – sometimes on their own. We have a lot of female staff and they in particular feel that there's safety in numbers. The AlertBoxes are great because if one of the staff is worried about someone who looks a bit shifty, they can discreetly press a button and know that a colleague will be with them almost immediately."

In an increasingly tough commercial climate many farmers nowadays are finding the challenge of making ends meet too difficult, and choose to leave their profession. With this in mind, Colston knows that every decision he makes is vital. Like all farmers, he is extremely alert to external conditions, whether they're economic, climatic or social. This level of awareness coupled with a healthy degree of caution has so far held him in good stead. He hopes he won't have too much cause to use the AlertBoxes, but he says: "One day they might make all the difference." Presumably this perspicacious streak runs in the family – for around 400 years or so.