

Pastmaster Jeffery Lockett wears a check shirt and corduroy trousers and has the ruddy countenance of the countryman. His wife Anita busies herself around house and village in the best Cheshire tradition. Their home is comfortable and welcoming, with a well-lived-in feel to it. As we chat in the conservatory lounge, a hare lollops by outside.

For Clonter Farm really is a farm, and although it is known in the music world as a unique place where singers gain training and performing experience, and to its audience as "The Glyndebourne of the North", to Jeffery Lockett it is part of the operation of his 230 acres – home to 140 dairy cattle.

His theatre is still basically a barn, part of the outbuildings attached to his farmhouse, which include the Clonter Opera Theatre offices and backstage facilities. But it is hard to tell exactly where the theatre stops and the farmhouse begins.

"I suppose I spend a couple of hours every day, one way or another, on the music Trust, and the rest being a farmer," Jeffery Lockett says. "Audition and performance days are extra, of course. I've had to delegate: my farm manager is left to carry on the daily business without too much interference, but I do try to keep in close contact."

Lockett has developed the theatre-in-a-barn from its original form, where the audience sat on straw bales, into a respectable auditorium with comfortable tiered seating. Last spring it had its most splendid upgrade yet, raising the roof level over the stage and adding a proper proscenium arch and a small orchestra pit.

It all began 25 years ago, based on a tradition of performances in the country which Lockett inherited from his parents. His mother was the singer Betty Bannerman, an exponent of French song, Hebridean melodies and oratorio. Lockett's father Derek, a stockbroker from a Liverpool wine importing family, decided to return to his family's roots in Cheshire and bought a 60-acre farm in 1949 – Clonter Brook House, adjacent to the present Clonter Farm (which he also later bought, and which became Jeffery Lockett's home).

Former Treasurer and Pastmaster Derek Lockett built a music room, and began to invite friends and neighbours to informal concerts.

Jeffery Lockett was brought up with music, and his mother encouraged him to have singing lessons. He studied with Dino Borgioli, and did some recital work before National Service and Cambridge, where he read agriculture. But Betty Bannerman was not content that her son should be lost to music.

"She said to me 'Why aren't you singing?'" Lockett recalls, "and I said 'There's not much point when I'm under a cow's udder 24 hours a day!' But she encouraged me to have

another go, and I had lessons with Ellis Keeler at the Northern School of Music, and appeared with the Abbey Opera Group in London.

"Then, in 1974, I got the notion to bring the Abbey Opera Group up here and put it on in a barn on my farm, in aid of Cancer Relief. That's how it all began."

Early programmes at Clonter featured direction by Patrick McGuigan and accompaniment by John Wilson. Singers included Alison Hargan, Alan Ward, liveryman Christopher Underwood, Jeffrey Lawton and Jeffery Lockett. Timothy Reynish conducted in 1979, and Anne Dawson and Sandra Dugdale sang. John Ayldon, Donald Maxwell and Linda Ormiston were among performers in 1982, and Valerie Masterson in 1983.

But from 1984, when the late Leonard Hancock became head of music staff, the list becomes more and more impressive: Simon Keenlyside, Justin Lavender, Ida-Maria Turri, Judith Howarth, Linda Richardson, Kathryn Harries, Sara Fulgoni, Amanda Roocroft, Jane Eaglen, Julie Unwin, Julian Gavin, Mary Plazas, Pamela Helen Stephen, Sally Burgess, Susan Chilcot, Ann Taylor-Morley, Claire Bradshaw, William Dazeley, Susannah Glanville, Katarina Karneus, Linda Kitchen, Rosa Mannion, Lorna Rushton and Joan Rodgers are just a few who have appeared at Clonter since.

By 1993, programmes had shifted from being largely excerpts to productions of whole operas, presented after intensive three-

'We just want to provide an opportunity for emerging artists'

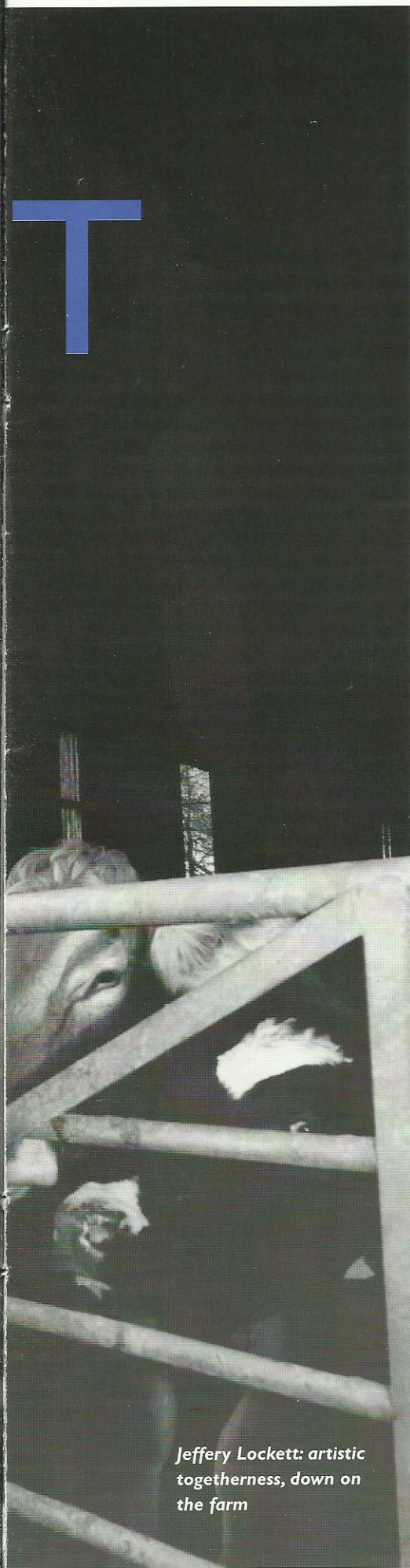
week rehearsal periods twice each year. There is also an annual, public Clonter Opera Prize competition, and in 1997 a miniature orchestra was used for the first time.

"At first the audience sat on straw bales in the silage pit," says Lockett. "We put railway sleepers on concrete blocks, with blue plastic sheeting on the top, to make a stage. There were no loos. The men went and peed on the roses, and I think the women just crossed their legs. After three years I built some lavatories, and since then it's been a gradual improvement every year."

Today, the front-of-house facilities at Clonter are among its most attractive features. Not only are hot meals served at the interval, but picnickers are provided with tables and seating, all under the same roof as the theatre – a sensible precaution against English summer weather that even the new Glyndebourne cannot entirely equal.

How easy is it to put on opera in the heart of rural Cheshire? Clonter is a couple of miles from the Jodrell Bank radio telescope, which users of the M6 will know is visible near Junction 18, but you have to negotiate a five-mile maze of lanes to get there from the motorway.

"There are points for and against, really," ▶



Jeffery Lockett: artistic togetherness, down on the farm