



Mine host: Keith Geoghegan at the public entrance to the mine on his farm at Glengowla, Oughterard, Co Galway
PHOTOS: RAY RYAN

Farm diversification: Keith Geoghegan

‘You have to be very health and safety conscious when you’re bringing people 40m underground’

Was planning permission required?
Planning permission was a hurdle — the amount of environmental reports and paperwork involved was intense. We wondered if we would ever get to put a shovel in the ground.

Are you required to register with anyone?
We’re registered under the mines inspector so they can come any time to give you an inspection.

They are practical and smart, they know how a mine operates and a lot of them are mine engineers so if they look for something, you should have it.

Mine inspectors are a great resource to have and they’re always there to help if you have a question.

Was insurance difficult to get?
Insurance is unpredictable — you never know when you’re waiting on the renewal quote to come in the door in June and whether you’ll be open in July — there’s always the possibility you won’t even get insurance.

It’s a huge cost and very few places do the insurance cover that we need. It’s a unique type of business when you’re bringing people 40m underground, because of the health and safety aspect.

It holds us back from being able to expand or do other things because the insurance is so expensive and it’s hard to know whether we’d even get it anyway.

That’s why I was always cautious about borrowing money for this — if insurance



Added attraction: Keith and his dog Jess do sheep-herding demonstrations for visitors

costs are too high and you can’t afford to pay back what you’ve borrowed, you risk losing everything.

What has been your biggest challenge?
Insurance. Also, it’s a small business so you have to do everything yourself — from payroll, health and safety paperwork, payroll, marketing, booking — it’s tough going sometimes.

It’s like farming in some ways — you have to keep on top of the paperwork

and regulations to do it right.

Was it difficult to get clearance from a health and safety point of view, to open to the public?

Once we had the mines surveyed properly and we did all of the work that was required, the mine inspectors were happy.

We’ve always been very health and safety conscious — you have to be when you’re bringing people 40m underground.

putting ‘mine collars’ on them — these are like concrete slabs that can be opened by mine engineers.

Keith also put in steps, platforms, handrails and lights to make it safe for visitors to go 40m down into the mine.

In 1998, seven years after the work was started, Glengowla Mines were ready to open to the public. Word had spread around the community about what the Geoghegans were doing, and the first bookings were from locals.

A year after opening, Keith and his parents converted the stables which once housed the working mine horses, turning them into a small museum, which showcases all the tools and equipment found

when clearing out the mines. Today Glengowla Mines is open five days a week from March through October and is operated by Keith and his wife Marett, along with their children Seán, Orlaigh and Darragh.

Visitors enter the mines through a cave-like entrance and descend via a staircase.

“The mines aren’t claustrophobic — it’s not like walking down through a long narrow corridor, they are six metres wide at some points,” Keith says.

“There are like rooms dug out where the miners would have mined.”

What is left of the silver, lead and crystals in the marble walls of the mines can be seen and felt

by visitors, along with an original ladder and platform used by the miners in the 1800s.

Above ground, Keith has always kept a flock of blackfaced mountain ewes and cross-bred lowland ewes on the farm and uses his dog Jess to work them.

‘At the time there were no mines in Ireland open for tours so we thought we had found a niche market in terms of making the farm more viable’

Over the years he found some visitors, particularly those from outside Ireland, were curious about how a dog could be used to round up sheep on the farm, and he started offering sheep-herding demonstrations.

“I tell the story of how invaluable a dog is on these hill settings when you’re farming and I show people what they can do and how the dog responds to different commands,” says Keith.

“For someone who doesn’t know anything about sheep or farming, it’s fascinating.”

Much of Keith’s land is peatland and he also offers turf-cutting demonstrations for tourists.

“I’d often tell the people on the

tour about cutting the turf — people from other countries are amazed that we have this natural resource that we can dig the ground, dry it and burn it to heat our homes.”

During a demonstration, Keith tells his visitors how the bogs on his land were formed, what their make-up is and what was there before the bog.

“We show people how turf was traditionally cut with a *sleán* and we show them the technique of stacking the turf and bringing it home, saving the turf.

“People can then hold the *sleán* and try cutting turf with it themselves.

“It’s very popular with our foreign visitors.”



Sideline: Much of Keith’s land is peatland and he offers turf-cutting demonstrations for tourists



Working farm: Keith keeps a flock of blackfaced mountain ewes and cross-bred lowland ewes