

## Posthumous award at Businesswoman of the Year event

SUFFOLK magazine publisher Janette Phillips, who died in July last year after a lengthy battle against cancer, was among those honoured last night at the East of England Businesswoman of the Year Awards.

Janette, who began her career with Archant Suffolk before launching her own publishing business, was named winner of the Beatrice Wilkinson

Award for her contribution to business in Suffolk.

More than 180 people attended last night's ceremony, organised by the Institute of Directors' Suffolk branch with Lloyds TSB Commercial as main sponsor, and held at the Radisson Blu hotel, Stansted.

The overall title of Businesswoman of the Year was won by Jane Osbourn,

director of Cambridge-based MedImmune Ltd.

Linda Baston-Pitt, co-founder of The Old School House Nursery and TLC Ltd, at Stetchworth, near Newmarket, was named Businesswoman Entrepreneur of the Year, while the Young Businesswoman of the Year award, sponsored by Adnams, went to Rachel Ducker, of Halesworth-

based Apparition Marketing & Design Ltd.

Steve Elsom of Lloyds TSB Commercial said the line-up of winners and finalists showed "what an incredible wealth of talent and drive is out there within the business community."

■ For picture coverage of the awards, see next Tuesday's BusinessEast supplement.



AWARD: Janette Phillips

# Shock as Birds Eye axes peas contract

**APPEAL:** National Farmers' Union urges company to reconsider

By Duncan Brodie  
Business Editor

THE National Farmers' Union yesterday urged frozen food group Birds Eye to reconsider its decision to axe a multi-million pound contract with pea growers in East Anglia.

Anglian Pea Growers, a co-operative of 180 farmers who have previously grown around 30,000 tonnes of peas a year for processing at the Birds Eye plant in Lowestoft, has been told that the contract will not be renewed for this season.

With the crop worth an estimated £5million a year, the decision comes as a major setback for the growers, particularly with some having already purchased seed.

Birds Eye, which blamed the move on the loss of a major contract in Italy, now plans to concentrate pea production in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, plus a smaller operation in Perthshire.

The ending of the pea processing business at Lowestoft, which began 64 years ago, is not expected to

have any impact on jobs at the Birds Eye factory in the town, which currently has about 700 workers, although around half a dozen agricultural advisers are likely to lose their jobs.

Farmer Richard Hirst from Ormesby, near Great Yarmouth, who leads the growers' co-operative, said the news from Birds Eye had come as "a bolt from the blue".

"I was due to meet Birds Eye to carrying on negotiating the 2010 contract," he said. "There'd been absolutely no indication this was likely to happen. It is a bitter pill to swallow and what the long-term implications are, it is just too soon to tell."

Mr Hirst added that the announcement was so unexpected that the co-operative had been discussing whether to buy two new pea harvesters, costing £320,000 each.

NFU regional director Pamela Forbes said yesterday: "This is devastating news for the growers. Pea growing has rightly been celebrated as a success story in our region, with growers working in partnership with Birds Eye to pro-

duce a high quality crop with low food miles and low environmental impact.

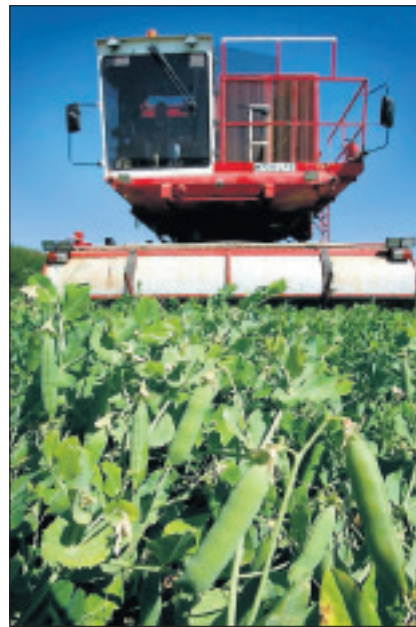
"That partnership now appears to have been ended with a single phone call to Anglian Pea Growers. We are urging Birds Eye to think again and will offer the growers all the support we can in the days and weeks ahead."

Anne Murphy, managing director of Birds Eye, said the loss of a "major export contract" to Italy had left it with no choice but to take action to safeguard its frozen pea business.

"We were only notified of the decision in December," she said. "It is important to us that we make a considered judgement on what is the right thing for the business."

"As soon as we finished that work we have got to the growers as fast as we possibly can. Obviously, the timing is a challenge in the context of the pea season but we have worked as fast as humanly possible."

The company had now "entered into a dialogue with the growers", she said, adding: "We need to let that process run its course."



FROZEN OUT: Birds Eye has told its East Anglian pea growers it will not be renewing their contract  
Photo: CONTRIBUTED

## Willis hails rise in sales and profits

GLOBAL insurance broker Willis, which has a major presence Ipswich, has reported increased turnover and profit for 2009, in what the company's boss termed "a momentous year".

Total reported revenues for 2009 were US\$3.3billion (about £2.1bn) compared with US\$2.8 billion for 2008, an increase of 15%.

The increase was primarily due a full-year contribution from the business of US rival Hilb Rogal & Hobbs, which Willis acquired in a US\$2.1bn deal in June 2008. This

more than off-set a negative impact from foreign currency conversion which reduced reported revenues by 4%.

Organic growth in commissions and fees was 2% up compared with 2008, reflecting net new business won of 5%, offset by a negative 3% impact from declining premium rates and other market factors.

Net income from continuing operations for 2009 as a whole came in at US\$436m (about £274m), or US\$2.58 per share, up from US\$302m, or US\$2.04 per share, the previous year. Excluding exceptional items

relating to the acquisition of HRH and a cost review in 2008, adjusted earnings per share from continuing operations rose from US\$2.55 to US\$2.67, an increase of 5%.

The reported operating margin was 21.3% for 2009 compared with 17.8% in 2008.

During the final quarter of 2009, Willis, which employs around 1,200 people in Ipswich, also completed a reorganisation of capital at French partner company Gras Savoye, giving it a 31.8% stake in the new holding company and 33.3% of the voting rights.

Joe Plumeri, chairman and chief executive of Willis Group Holdings, said the company could be proud of the results, adding: "2009 was a momentous year. We began in the midst of integrating our transformational HRH acquisition, facing a difficult global economy and soft insurance market.

"We responded with 2% organic growth in commissions and fees, disciplined expense management, successful merger integration, completion of the Gras Savoye transaction and a much stronger balance sheet."

### BUSINESS BRIEFING

## Jobs threat at turkey producer

UP TO 160 jobs are at risk at turkey company Bernard Matthews as part of a drive to improve efficiency.

The firm is consulting with staff at its frozen whole bird operation in Great Witchingham, Norfolk, which could see 160 posts go over the next 12 months.

The redundancies will affect salaried and process workers as production of frozen whole birds is relocated to more modern premises in Holton, near Halesworth, next year.

The announcement follows a review which warned that frozen whole bird production was unprofitable.

Jeff Halliwell, Bernard Matthews UK managing director, said: "Rather than exit the frozen bird market we have carried out a detailed review of the operation, and have developed a plan that ensures this part of the business returns to profitability."

## Adnams pegs prices

Southwold brewer Adnams said yesterday it was supporting the pub industry by keeping its beer prices on hold for another year.

Following a price freeze throughout 2009, the decision to peg prices until the end of 2010 means that, apart from duty increases, Adnams' prices to its tied and free-trade customers will have been held since March 2008.

"Whilst others in the industry have this year increased beer prices, Adnams has pledged to continue the price freeze to support our customers," said Adnams' commercial director, Rob Flanagan.

"We are committed to supporting licensees throughout this economic downturn," he added. "We know that 2009 was an extremely tough year and anticipate that 2010 will be just as difficult for many in the pub trade."

## New deal for 'Hen'

Greene King has extended the sponsorship link between its Old Speckled Hen premium ale and digital TV channel Dave, with a deal covering the new series of comedy panel show *Argumental*.

The Old Speckled Hen brand features in advertising for the new series which currently appears on billboards and London Underground posters.

It follows the success of the brand's "Seek out Something Different" campaign on Dave, which features an inquisitive fox on his quest for an elusive "Hen".

*Argumental* airs at 10.20pm on Tuesdays.

## Aviva feels the chill

Britain's biggest insurer said yesterday it faced a £100 million claims bill following the severe weather and flooding seen at the end of last year.

Flood and storm damage in Cumbria in the final three months of 2009 cost Aviva up to £20 million, while claims relating to flooding in Ireland generated around £80 million, the group said.

Aviva, which last year rebranded its Norwich Union insurance arm under the Aviva banner, said the claims would impact its 2009 combined operating ratio, which measures how much is paid out in claims and costs as a proportion of money earned in premiums.