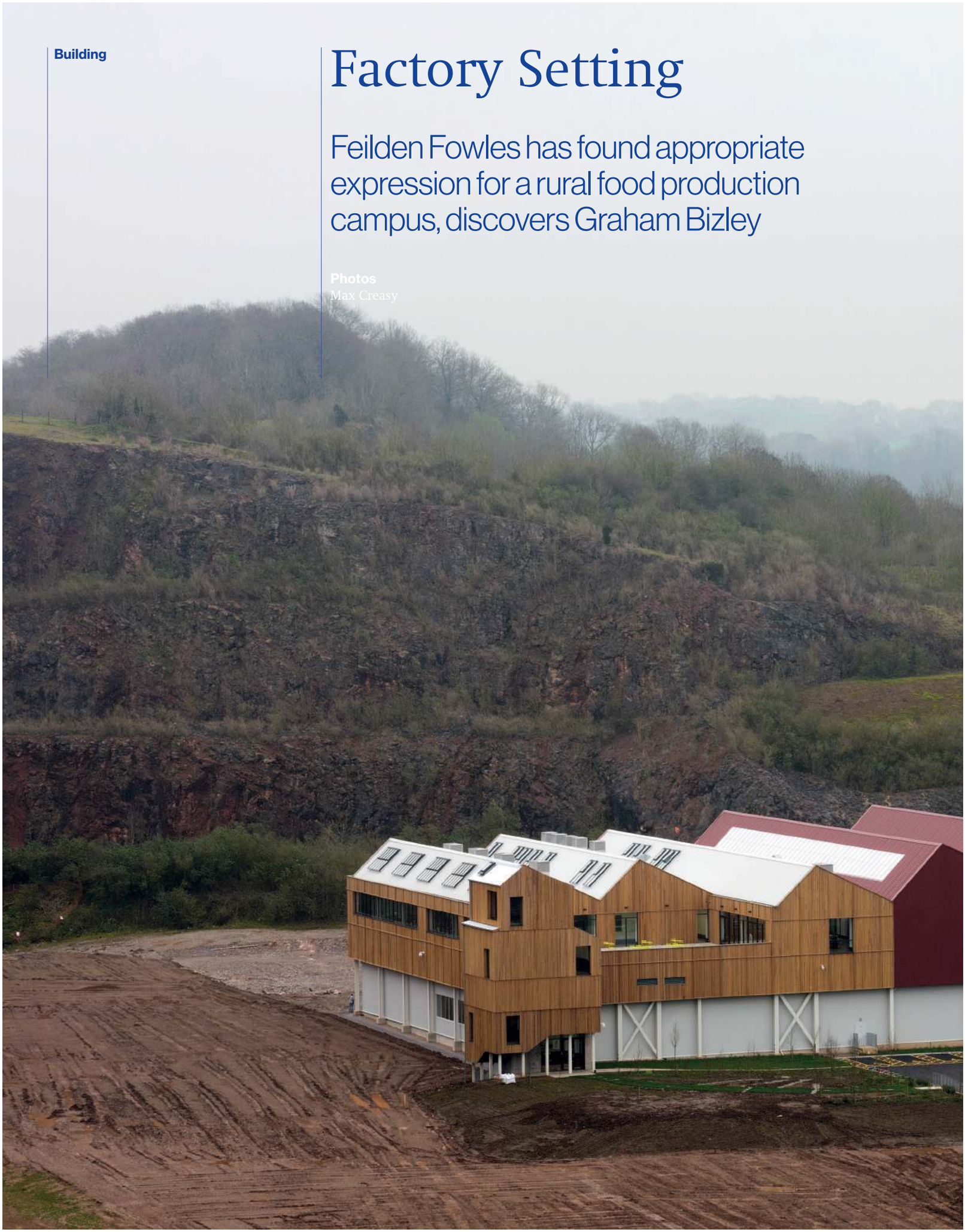
# Factory Setting

## Feilden Fowles has found appropriate expression for a rural food production campus, discovers Graham Bizley

**Photos**
Max Creasy



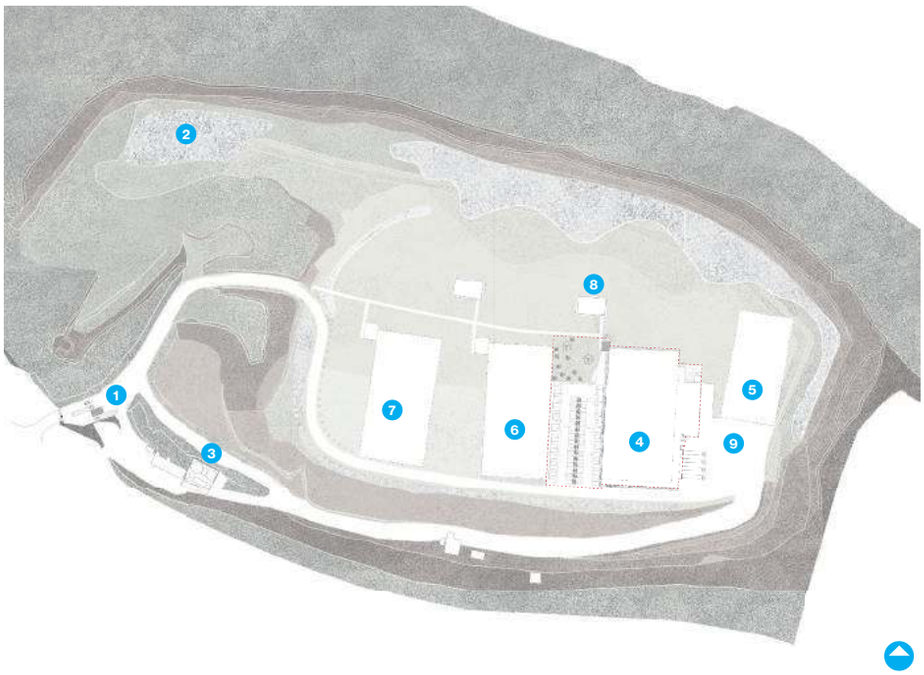
The Mendip Hills stretch east to west across Somerset, from Weston-super-Mare on the coast, through the kast landscape around Cheddar Gorge and on towards Frome. As across most of rural England, the ground is hidden beneath crops or woodland, so where bare rock protrudes it has a dramatic effect, like something primordial breaking the genteel surface veneer.

At Dulcote Quarry, near Wells, limestone was extracted from the hillside from at least the mid-nineteenth century until the 1990s, mainly for crushing into aggregate. The excavation has left a roughly rectangular pit surrounded on all sides by high banks and a 50-metre-high sheer cliff on the north side. Wildlife has adopted the quarry, including Somerset's largest colony of great crested newts in a pond in the north-west corner and a pair of peregrine falcons nesting on the cliff above.

In 2015 the quarry was bought by food producer Charlie Bigham's to create what it grandly calls a 'food production campus' for its oven-ready meals. The site already had planning permission for light-industrial and office development, but working with architect Feilden Fowles, Bigham's has come up with a much more ambitious 20-year masterplan, the first phase of which is now complete.

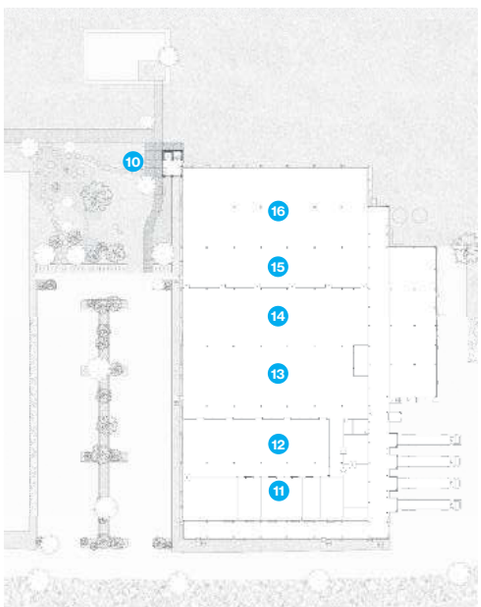
**Right**
Masterplan, ground- and first-floor plans and section through kitchen one. The masterplan anticipates the growth of the business on the 18-acre site over 20 years.

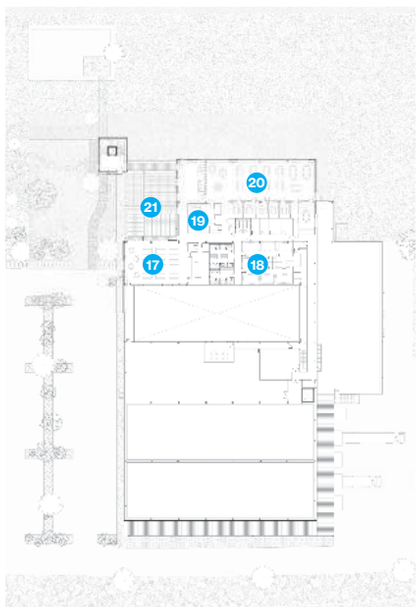
**Below**
The quarry in use in the 1960s.

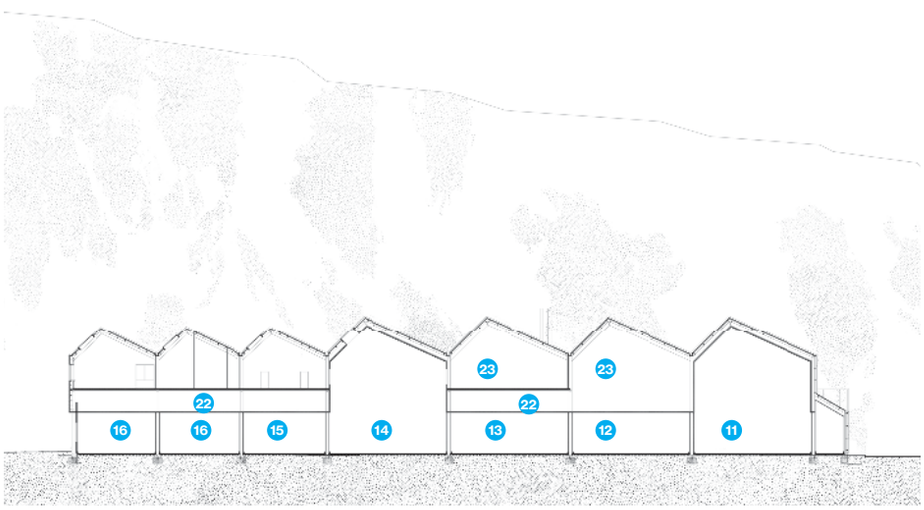



## Key

1 Quarry entrance and gatehouse
2 Existing pond
3 Water treatment plant
4 Phase 1 kitchen
5 Phase 2 dispatch
6 Phase 3 kitchen
7 Phase 4 kitchen
8 Cafe pavilion
9 Yard
10 Main entrance
11 Storage
12 Preparation
13 Cooking
14 Assembly
15 Chill
16 Packaging
17 Office
18 Changing
19 Development kitchen
20 Cafe
21 Terrace
22 Service void
23 Plant



**Below**
The external form is a composition of asymmetric roofs which shift in size, material and colour to reflect varying internal activities.

Constructed from a steel frame and insulated panels, the ground floor production area is clad in a grey micro-rib insulated panel. Red sinusoidal panels clad the plant and storage space. Offices are overclad with rough sawn Siberian larch.

Windows at the end of each primary axis through the production floor provide connections to the landscape, while rooflights allow daylight deep into the plan.

It is a remarkable project in several ways — not least that an architect was involved at all. It is accepted by planners and the public alike that light-industrial sheds are what they are, and that employing an architect would impose an undue cost burden on businesses trying to minimise overheads and maximise flexibility. Company founder Charlie Bigham has a longer-term vision, in which the distinctive location and purpose-designed building reflect the company's ethos. "We won't make our food in a factory or shed", he says. "High quality food can only be made in a high quality environment".

Feilden Fowles' masterplan divides the site in two, placing all the buildings on the south side and leaving the north side free for the existing ecology to expand and thrive. Four large buildings are proposed — three containing kitchens and offices and one for dispatch — linked by a pedestrian 'street' or path along the middle of the site.

Near the path the landscaping will include social and community spaces such as a cafe and pavilions for workers to eat lunch, becoming wilder towards the cliff where it culminates in a series of linked ponds. Cars and HGVs are kept separate on the south side of the buildings, supressing their visible presence on the site.

**Left, below**
The generously scaled timber entrance tower provides visual links into the quarry and to the landscape beyond.

A single entrance reflects Charlie Bigham's desire to encourage a collaborative and non-hierarchical relationship between the office and production staff.

The first phase is a kitchen building for 300 production staff and 50 office staff, and a little gatehouse at the entrance from the road — the only part of the development that is visible from outside and the only building with any view beyond the site. With its thin metal sheet roof the gatehouse has the form of a simple hut that might have been found in the working quarry.

Rounding the corner, the kitchen building swings into view. Its saw-tooth roof suggests a factory, and is clad in red metal that tones with rusty iron staining in the surrounding limestone. A horizontal shelf half-way up the cliff is reflected by a mid-height division below which a steel exoskeleton protrudes.

The most distinctive feature though is the kitchen's entrance tower, a four-storey structure pulled outside the volume of the main building and clad in rough-sawn larch. Like the gatehouse it has a distinctive angular form reminiscent of the functional industrial structures that once inhabited the quarry.

Cladding them in timber rather than corrugated metal softens the forms and signals the change of use while still making a strong, easily understood connection to the history of the place.

It was important to Bigham that office staff, production workers and visitors all enter the building in the same place, so they all go in via the tower up to a second-floor reception. Offices, a cafe, a roof terrace, development kitchen and the staff changing area are clustered around the reception, all of which are light, airy spaces with rooflights in the north-facing roof pitches and great views out into the former quarry. A polished concrete floor runs throughout and timber screens divide the spaces. Custom-made shared tables rather than individual desks make the office area an informal and collaborative place, and I certainly wouldn't mind it as my studio.

**Above, below**
Cafe with acccess to terrace; reception.

Deliveries, preparation, cooking, packing and dispatch happen on the ground floor. The internal planning is driven by the production process, but the architects worked hard to break the mould of the standard shed by providing natural light throughout and views out into the landscape, even in the production areas.

The size of the bays varies to reflect the functions going on inside, larger at the south end for food preparation and smaller at the north end where the offices, cafe and staff facilities are.

Buildings offer a means for a company to project its values, both to the people that work there and to the public. The richly detailed facades of Victorian buildings like Glasgow's Templeton Carpet Factory represented the craft that went into their products. In the 1920s and 30s factories like the Hoover Building acted as giant advertisements on the arterial roads into big cities, and the imagery of technology has been harnessed to express precision design and manufacturing in buildings like Foster & Partners' McLaren Technology Centre. Branding is increasingly projected virtually, so the architecture of a physical building might no longer be seen as so relevant. On the other hand the experience of the workplace is increasingly important in the competition to attract the best employees and companies find real productivity benefits in a positive working environment.

Feilden Fowles wisely avoided trying to express the quality of Bigham's ready meals in built form and instead have produced a building that embodies the holistic values of the company in its relationship with the outdoors and its generous, considerate working environment.

So how much more does it cost if you let an architect have a go at your shed — and most importantly, is it worth it? "We think the overall cost is probably 10 per cent higher than a typical light industrial development", says Bigham, "but if we pull it off it would be something unique in the food world".

The first phase currently stands alone, but it is intended to be one of a group of structures set in a landscape, where the elevations define spaces between them and direct views into the surrounding greenery. Future ambitions include a visitor centre, a Bigham's Academy for training and cookery courses, and nature walks around the rim of the quarry connected into the local public footpath network, making the site more accessible to the community.

As a model for development in a rural area, Bigham's West has much to commend it. It provides local employment without losing greenfield land or adding another generic shed to the edge of a town. Noise and views are limited by the quarry walls so its impact on nearby houses is negligible, and it is close to Wells and Shepton Mallet, so cycling and public transport are realistic options, and car journeys should be short. Sadly the vision that enabled it is rare and expectations in rural areas are often low. If we want rural and urban areas to remain distinct, and not just to merge in ubiquitous suburbia, we need to think imaginatively about where development occurs and how it can be made specific to its place.

Feilden Fowles has achieved a dramatic transformation of the standard shed through relatively simple means: some well-detailed timber cladding, distinctive forms and strategic choices of what aspects of the building to express. Good design is as much about seeing what is there already as creating something new.

## Project team

**Architect**
Feilden Fowles
**Project team**
Edmund Fowles, Elli Farrant, Rory Allen, Ben Higham
**Structural engineer**
Structure Workshop (pre-planning), PEP Civils & Structures
**Services engineer, QS, building contractor**
TSL Projects
**Civil engineer**
PP Construction
**Landscape designer**
Grant Associates
**Client**
Charlie Bigham's

## Selected suppliers & subcontractors

**Timber cladding**
Norclad
**Insulated panels**
Kingspan
**Rainwater goods**
RWP Clearflow
**Windows**
Value Windows
**Roofing**
Kingspan
**Rooflights**
Brett Martin
**Lighting**
Lightnet, Whitecroft
**Office furniture**
Timber Workshop