

In my usual style, I start with my comments on the weather. What a marvellous mild autumn, until this most recent cold and wet spell. The grass kept growing and we even took a cut of big bale silage in the first week in November! Having said that, it was nice to have had a brief spell of proper autumnal weather, we had a couple of hard frosts and some misty mornings down here in the river valley but now we're back to wind and rain and on our heavy clay the fields are sodden.

### Beef and sheep

All of the cattle are now indoors, we had a gang of three being fed in the home paddock before final dispatch, but they became a bit adventurous (partly in pursuit of apples which they could just not quite reach over the fence into the vegetable garden, tantalisingly bobbing out of reach of their probing tongues) so we were quite glad to see the back of them. Our local badgers, in a sett 150 yards from the house, have also been enjoying hoovering the windfalls.

In search of apples....



The rest of the beef cattle are indoors in a straw-bedded yard, where they have hay or silage and some extra feed, as there is less nutritional value in the grass now and it is much too muddy for them out of doors.

Lamb growth has been slower this year as there was less grass in the middle of the summer, but we are selling again, gradually reducing the number left to fatten. The breeding ewes are up near the farm yard grazing off the dairy fields before being housed in the new year prior to lambing.

### Dairy and grassland

Whilst the weather remained dry, the cows were still out for a few hours in the middle of the day, but all are now permanently inside for the winter, although they can wander into the yards in the daytime to use the cow scratcher or enjoy some sunshine on brighter days. We have a handful to dry off and have just had a healthy cluster of good strong Aberdeen Angus calves. All of the cows receive a pedicure at drying off - but a heavy duty approach is required as their hooves are a bit bigger than our toenails, with an electric grinder part of standard foot trimming equipment. We have all of our Holstein heifer calves now, the final score was 13 heifer calves, two bulls and one pair of mixed sex twins. This gives us enough females to enter the herd in two years

time. Cows are unusual in that if there are mixed sex twins, the female, known as a freemartin, is usually infertile, which is a disappointment, so the female twin was sold along with the bull calf, to be reared for meat.

Following the difficulties that we had in the spring, we are pleased that at present we have no mastitis problems and so we are receiving maximum hygienic bonuses for our milk - let's hope it stays that way.

### **Arable**

We managed to drill the wheat just before the first heavy rain in mid October - once our clay becomes waterlogged the contractors cannot travel on it without really damaging the soil structure. The crops are looking very well but not too succulent - too much lush growth increases the risk of disease. The grass that we drilled is also growing away nicely.

Wheat prices have increased and are well up on last year, which is good news, we have not sold our harvested crops yet.

### **Wildlife and Stewardship**

There has been a superb show of berries this year, plenty for the birds to help themselves and the hawthorns are aglow with colour still. We erected 2 barn owl boxes in the summer so they are spoiled for choice for nesting sites next season. I saw my first clouded yellow butterfly this year and with the mild weather, I recorded a red admiral in the first week in December in the garden - amazing! We have had confirmation that long-eared bats are using one of the outhouses as a snack stop (they are fussy eaters and don't eat the wings on the butterflies that they catch, so have to stop flying and hang out somewhere whilst they sort out the bits to spit out, because their sonar doesn't work with a butterfly wing across their face!). In addition, we have great crested newts in the cellars, so with our barn owls and badgers as well we have our fair share of protected species! Who says that wildlife can't survive in modern farming systems?

In November, we had a few days of minor flooding on the river meadows, bringing the waders and seagulls inland and adding to the interest in the landscape.

We had a great time at the Food Festival in October and were pleased with the meat orders that it generated, as well as new enquiries about farm walks and talks.

The year starting in September 2007 has been designated a National Year of Food and Farming in Schools, so we are looking forward to this great opportunity to engage with schools.



Angus cattle and sheep grazing the river meadows

By visiting schools or inviting them to the farm, we can help them to learn how food is produced and how we can manage land for wildlife and production at the same time - and it doesn't have to be an organic farm to support lots of wildlife.

All that remains is for me to wish you a great Christmas and a happy New Year; we are taking meat orders for February delivery so please get in touch if you wish to order for early 2007.

Julia Hawley