



News from Hall Farm

Issue no 14  
February 2007

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We have had such a mild winter to date, that Nature is a little confused, as you will see in the newsletter. The high winds brought down some branches from the scots pines which surround the farmstead but other than that, we had no damage other than a few loose sheets of tin on the sheep shed, which Ian soon fixed.



The recent cold snap was in fact very welcome, to hold things back a bit. The hard frost also enabled us to do some hedge-trimming, without making too much mess on our heavy land, now that the birds have eaten most of the berries. Sharp, crisp mornings present beautiful views of a frozen landscape, although extra work is created with frozen water supplies to some of the cattle and sheep housing.

We missed the worst of the snow, only having a couple of inches which soon melted. However, even this was enough to swell the flow of water on the river, which has been in flood.

## Sheep

We are now just starting lambing and with the mild weather, there is already a healthy growth of fresh green grass on some of the pastures awaiting the ewes and lambs. Except in the most extreme weather, they will be turned out within a few days of lambing, as soon as we are sure that the lambs are suckling properly and that Mum has plenty of milk and is in good health. The last of the fat lambs from last year are now being sold and the last batch is booked in at the abattoir. We will probably buy in some ewes with lambs at foot if the price is reasonable, to use some of the surplus spring grass that we always seem to have.

## Dairy

Cows are settled into winter routine and we just have a handful left to calve. Now that we are paid on a constituent contract, the butterfat and protein content is critical to our milk price. The silage made last year was not such good quality, as the first cut was a whole month late and the second cut was affected by the extreme heat and drought. Grass silage is the mainstay of our ration and supplementation is built around the laboratory analysis of the silage, which tells us its nutritional value. We have been pleased with milk proteins, but are struggling with low butterfat, despite taking further advice from our nutritionist. Just the drop in butterfat took over 1p per litre off our price last month, which may not sound much, but it is when you consider

our subsequent price was less than 17 pence per litre for January! Nationally, milk production is down, partly due to the weather conditions last year, but also as more dairy farmers sell up their cows as a result of the continued low prices.

### **Beef cattle and youngstock**

We are selling finished cattle, some through the market at Melton and some of the Aberdeen Angus as direct sales. We will have beef available to order until around June. Beefy has been taken out from the bulling heifers (which have hopefully now graduated from bulling heifers to in-calf heifers!) and is in with the cows, so Ian's AI duties for the season have finished.

### **Arable and grassland**

The wheat is looking well and has not yet needed any spray for pests or diseases. Most of our wheat is used on-farm, with the rest sold to another farmer for animal feed. On the wider market, future arable markets are looking interesting as there will be increasing demand for oilseeds and other crops for biodiesel and bioethanol. At present, palm oil is one of the main sources of biofuels and this has contributed to the destruction of natural habitat in third world countries as the area under plantations has expanded. Utilising more locally grown arable crops will make a lot more sense and there is now considerable investment in the processing sector to enable this to happen, although there is still not enough of a price differential to the end-user to really boost the sector.

### **Wildlife and Stewardship**



Lines in a landscape, ancient and modern

The mild weather has caused all sorts of anomalies. Some of the hibernating butterflies around the house and outbuildings have been waking up intermittently on warmer days. I spotted blackthorn breaking both leaf and flower buds in a sheltered spot at the end of January. Our wild primroses have been flowering for several weeks and the birds have been singing away as if Spring was already here. Our neighbours found an injured barn owl here, impaled on a thorn twig and took it to a local rescue centre. Within a few weeks it was reported as fully recovered and was released again near the sanctuary, at Exton about 12 miles away. Since then we have seen two owls here - so perhaps he has flown back again, or a new one has moved in.

The low winter sun always highlights the rich patterns of the ridge and furrow as well as our other 'humps and bumps' in the landscape. We have had widgeon down on the river again this winter and plenty of herons, although there do not seem to have been so many snipe. We are already planning ahead for this year's Farm Sunday, which is on June 10<sup>th</sup>. We and many other farms will be having an Open Day - more details in the next newsletter.

Please remember to give us a ring or drop us an email if you wish to place meat orders.

Best wishes, Julia Hawley