



News from Hall Farm

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Well what a summer we have had; after the floods came disease.... with Foot and Mouth and then Bluetongue movement restrictions, we are still not back to 'normal'. Although we are a long way from the outbreaks, restrictions on animal movements affect us as they do all other livestock farmers and the added combination of poor stock prices and high feed costs will have quite an impact on all livestock businesses. We are within the Bluetongue Protection Zone which has severely reduced the outlets for our finished stock and it has been extremely difficult getting abattoir slots, particularly as we start the run up to Christmas. All of our meat available before Christmas is now sold, but we are taking orders for FEBRUARY delivery - so please let us know your requirements.

At least with the currently dry autumn, we have been able to keep most of the stock outside and all field work - wheat drilling and grass seeding - has been completed.

The youngstock have grown well this summer, although we lost one young Angus calf from a mystery ailment. The cattle look a picture on these cold, bright mornings, their long winter coats have a glossy shine as they stand contentedly dozing with their sweet breath steaming on the frosty air.

We have brought a few of the finishing animals up from the river meadows into straw-bedded housing.

Calving is passing without too much incident; we have a good batch of replacement heifers to enter the herd in 2 years time and Beefy Boy, who has matured into a fine-looking fellow, has given us some strong Angus calves for the beef enterprise.



Heifers grazing earlier in the summer

After all of the rain this summer, it took an awfully long time for the land to dry out. We eventually managed to catch up with cutting silage, although not without getting tractors stuck in August! By the time we were ready to harvest the wheat, our land was a lot drier and we managed without the contractor's combine making too much mess. In July/August, farmers harvesting oilseed rape and barley had lots of problems with combines sinking up to their axles or ploughing their way through the fields, some needing several tractors to pull them out. For a few weeks, a 'spoof' picture circulating in the agricultural press of a bogged-down pea viner (harvester) being hoisted out by a helicopter caused much wry amusement in farming circles and there were more than a few who were taken in by the hoax due to the problems everyone was having.

Lambing may be a bit 'disorganised' next year. Due to the movement restrictions, we have not yet sourced replacement rams for those that were culled during the year; we are hoping to buy some in the next few weeks, in which case all will be well. We may choose to keep ewe numbers lower over the winter and buy in some with lambs at foot next spring.

I was delighted to see a barn owl using one of the nest boxes that we put up a couple of years ago. Several of our old ash trees, currently providing nesting and roosting sites, are losing rotten branches and parts of their trunk, so it is good to know that our alternative accommodation has been approved of. The rest of the wildlife appears to be thriving; we have a buzzard on the farm most days and have seen several stoats this summer too; our rabbits are currently suffering from 'myxi' and they are no doubt clearing up the sickly ones.

We seem to have particularly good skylark and meadow pipit populations this year and it is yet again a fantastic year for hedgerow fruit, I have already heard the first fieldfares starting to tuck in to the bounty.



Children from St Francis School, Melton Mowbray

We have been very busy with walks and school visits, topics being explored including food and farming, history and rivers. We hope that the recently launched **Year of Food and Farming** will stimulate greater interest in growing, cooking and eating good quality food; certainly the schoolchildren that have visited us so far seem to have enjoyed themselves and learned a lot. We helped at the Education Day at the East Midlands Food Festival when around 1,200 children visited - a tiring but rewarding experience! We were also proud to host a visit earlier this month from Government Food and Farming adviser Sir Don Curry, who came to join St Francis RC School on their visit to investigate the river and its features.

If you have children - do encourage their school to register and then to do something - there is funding available to support growing, cooking activities or to help with a farm visit or to get a speaker into the school. More details are available at www.yearoffoodandfarming.org.uk

We are planning to attend the Education Day at Spalding Food and Drink Festival and will also be at the new event, 'Grow it, Cook it, Eat it!', which will be held at the cattle market in Melton Mowbray in April. We have some school visits booked for 2008 but scope for plenty more, or alternatively we can come to the school.



YEAR OF FOOD AND FARMING

We will be planning some walk dates for next year, and in the meantime I am available to give illustrated talks on farming and conservation topics to groups - a sort of 'virtual farm walk' from the comfort of an indoor venue! Although it seems a long way off at present, do have a good Christmas, let us know your orders for early 2008 and we will be back in touch.

Best wishes, Julia Hawley