

We had our first frost last night, it is always a little colder down here next to the river. Autumn colours fill the hedges - they seem particularly vibrant this year and perhaps a little earlier than usual.

You will no doubt be aware of the difficult harvest this year. In August it rained and rained. As we rely on contractors there was nothing we could do until the combine arrived on the farm. Fortunately our wheat is for animal feed not flour; so loss of quality was not too much of an issue. We always choose a stiff-strawed variety so most of it was still upright and few of the grains had started to sprout. When, eventually, we harvested on September 18/19th, we were fortunate in that as the weather was fine, the grain was dry, below 15% moisture, so we did not have the expense and worry of drying it. We have no heated drying facilities on our farm, and can only draw ambient air through the bins.

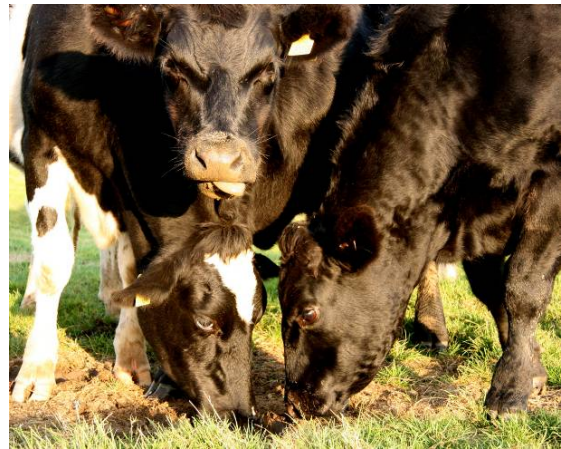


Wheat waiting (and waiting...and waiting) for harvest

Many harvest festivals took place this year before harvest was finished!

We also had a difficult start to calving, with some large calves creating problems. Things are now running more smoothly and we have some great-looking calves which are growing well.

All of the milking cows are now housed at night but are still grazing between 10 and 2 on fine days. The dry cows and fattening beasts are still out, but have grazed off all the river pastures and are now closer to home. Cattle are such funny creatures. When I recently went to look around this latter group, half a dozen of them were determinedly digging out a small hole in the ground with their noses - I think it was where the salt lick had been and they were after the last remnants of salt which would have dissolved into the soil.



Salt mining?

We are pleased with our milk quality (butterfat and protein), all Ian's efforts on the breeding side are paying off and lovely rich milk brings us a better milk price. Our production is below forecast though, in common with much of the country. In our case, we lost 3 heifers around calving and 2 heifers are not in calf but are being bulled to calve as three-year olds.

The poor late summer weather depressed yields and silage quality has also suffered, making winter feeding more expensive. We are currently looking for a replacement for Beefy Boy to start work soon.

Although grass has grown well over the summer time with all of the rain that we have had, the grazing fields down by the river are starting to look quite bare so we have moved the cattle off to leave more for the sheep. These old grasslands are surprisingly fertile although structurally they can be a bit of a nightmare. This sample was dug from our main (ridge and furrow) cow grazing field - about 3" of quite nice topsoil and then solid yellow clay!

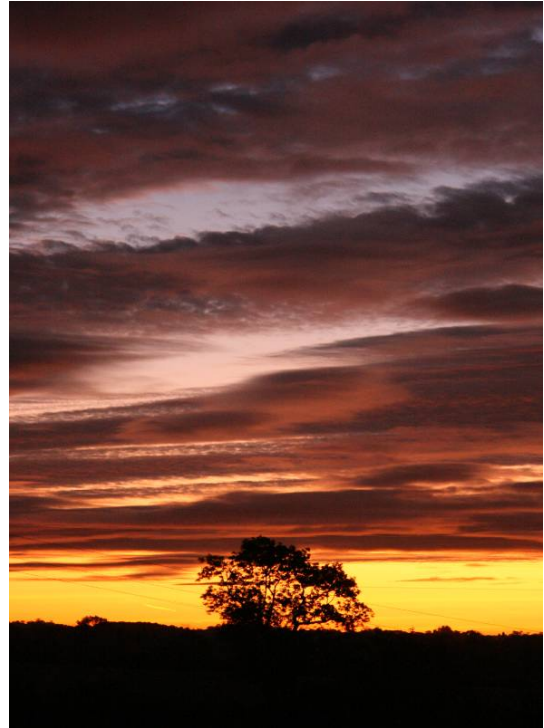


We have had a good range of school and adult group visits this summer, including U3A and various social groups, as well as over 60 children from East Goscote who unfortunately came on a wet day in mid-October. Getting wet is part of life and they remained quite cheery although one worried child asked me if it was true that if you got wet you then died of pneumonia.

A visiting natural history group added another rare find - a fern growing on the railway bridge to our farm records, amongst other sightings - there's always something new to see!

We are delighted that our barn owls successfully reared their 2 young this year. There have been some very late broods - a fluffy house sparrow fledgeling sat on the feeders this morning and we still had the last swallows with us in the third week in September. There seem to be an awful lot of goldfinches about and at the weekend I counted 19 long-tailed tits flitting along a hedgerow, they are always such a delight to observe.

The clocks change this weekend so it will be a welcome return to getting up in daylight again, even if only for a few weeks - the downside is of course the dark evenings.



October sunrise at Brentingby

We gave the food fair at Brooksby a miss this year, the stand fee is not cheap plus it's over 2 days of time commitment, so we will be doing some local leaflet drops by way of marketing instead. It also meant that I was free to help a friend on another stall with educational activities - so I was on the butter-making on Sunday if you saw it!" Although the Year of Food and Farming in Education is now over, in the East Midlands there is still plenty of activity carrying on with the important task of educating our young consumers about food and farming issues - with lots of interest from older folk too!

All that remains is for me to wish you an enjoyable autumn/Christmas - gosh how time flies!

Best wishes, Julia Hawley
October 2008