



News from Hall Farm

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We've had our fair share of snow this week, which was about 6 inches at its deepest. We had another 3 inches before all of the first fall had melted and it's snowing again as I write and more is forecast.



Brentingby in the snow

So far we have only had to pull the milk tanker up the road once, but we also had to milk on the tractor-powered generator one evening due to a low voltage fault on our power supply which was exacerbated by the snow.

The snow certainly makes things look beautiful, but it doesn't make the farming any easier. At least we have no oilseed rape - our neighbour's crops are being decimated by pigeons at present, visible as a great grey smudge on the snowy landscape. My purple sprouting and kale in the vegetable garden have taken quite a hammering and I think most of the scratching corn I put out for my chickens is eaten by doves and pigeons too. After the wet autumn, our grass reseeds and the wheat went in very late and although the crops are up, they are not really thriving and this prolonged cold spell will not really help.

The cows are now milking well and for January were on forecast production - we are still pleased with constituents in particular - but the bad news for us is that milk prices are dropping due to pressures on world commodity prices.

On 1 April, we start supplying Long Clawson Dairy, so our milk will only be travelling about 10 miles before processing. The last few cows are calving so our daily production is still rising.

We have a new Angus bull - another marvellous name here - Baron! There is obviously a knack to naming bulls for breeding. Young Baron came from the farm where he was born and reared near Alfreton at the start of November and started work immediately with the bulling heifers. He's a friendly young chap who likes having his forehead scratched and he will be moving on from the heifers to the cows soon.

Robert is not lambing sheep this year but has sold off most of the old ewes and will be buying fresh ewes with lambs at foot over the next couple of months. We have the last of the 2008 lamb crop and some cull ewes yet to go, which are currently being fed down by the river.



Fat lambs on the river grazing

Last year, vaccination against Bluetongue kept the virus at bay in the UK and prevented it spreading, so we will again be vaccinating our sheep and cattle in 2009. The cost of the vaccination is small but it is yet another job to fit in at a busy time of year in the Spring.

The fattening cattle are growing well, snug and warm in their straw yards. We will be sending them to market or for direct sales over the next few months.

Changes in legislation mean that we will have to store our cattle slurry for longer periods and we are investigating our options regarding separation of 'dirty water' (from the milking parlour and collection yards) from slurry to minimise the volume that will need to be stored. Many dairy farms which are starting with minimal storage capacity will find the investment requirement too great and are likely to sell their cows - even fewer dairy herds in Leicestershire.

We are nearing the end of our Stewardship capital works programme, with a couple more seasons of hedge-laying and a pond to extend. In the meanwhile, there is general tidying up to finish off, replacing young trees that haven't made it and completing some fencing work.

Our bird ringer has been working with us for a year now and he is still finding plenty of fresh birds to ring, including winter visitors - redwing, fieldfares, brambling and lots of chaffinches, blackbirds and greenfinches from Europe. Our local year-round residents include several families of long-tailed tits, often caught as a group in the nets around the bird feeders in the stackyard.



Long tailed-tit

I was fortunate enough to see some Bewick's Swans on the flood waters near Stapleford a few weeks ago - apparently there are only about 50 recordings of these beautiful Siberian visitors in Leics and Rutland most winters.



Bewick's Swans

Although we have not run any winter walks for the general public, I have been pretty busy with photographic talks for a variety of groups including several gardening clubs and natural history societies. We will start our walks programme in March when hopefully the weather may start to improve and things green up in the fields and hedges. In the meanwhile, there is plenty to see tucked away if you look carefully, including these beautiful catkins on the hazels and the spectacular red stems of our native dogwood.



Hazel catkins

Although it seems hard to believe it now as we struggle with the frost and snow, spring is just around the corner.

**Julia Hawley
February 2009**