



News from Hall Farm

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Well, after a few false dawns, spring is well and truly here and the fields and hedgerows are full of abundant greenery and blossom. We are delighted with our new logo and web-site www.brentingbymeadows.co.uk, thanks to Jane at Yellow Duck Creative and the support of Leicestershire Rural Partnership. Why not take a look?

Sheep

Lambing is over for another year and ewes and lambs are all back outside, down on the river meadows. We were a little short of grass for a while, one of our main areas of sheep grazing had the (very gappy) hedge laid over the winter and we could not turn stock back into it until it had been fenced up. We will now have to graze it hard before the grass starts heading up, otherwise the sheep will then start to reject the stemmier grass and we will have to top (mow) it in June to encourage fresh growth. The first of this season's lambs are ready and will be available at the end of May, for which I have taken quite a lot of orders already.



Dairy

The cows went out a few days later than last year, due to the slower growth of grass and are now enjoying the spring sunshine, although they are still in at night. As usual there was a great display of jostling and galloping at turnout. The first field we let them into comes to within a few yards of our kitchen window. As happens each year, one of the cows spotted her own reflection in the large pane of glass in the window and started mooing, which brought about a dozen of them to the fence to join in. It is very comical watching them trying to fathom out these cows that seem to be peering back at them.

We are struggling against a bad mastitis outbreak, our vet has been helping us and reports that the problem is widespread this year. With sub-clinical mastitis, the cows have no visible symptoms, but the milk samples indicate that they are fighting a high level of infection in the udder. Ian's milking routine is taking longer as his hygienic routine has to be meticulous to reduce the spread of bacteria from cow to cow. Our milk price will be lower as a result of penalties imposed, which is even more of a disappointment when we have the costs of treating the cows and discarding milk as well.

In an ironic twist, as we changed 15 months ago from selling our milk for stilton cheese manufacture, Dairy Crest, our milk buyer, is now processing our milk at the Hartington stilton creamery in Derbyshire, rather than bottling it as liquid milk in Cambridgeshire. The requirements of a stilton creamery are quite different from those for bottling milk in terms of seasonality of supply as well as the balance of protein and butterfat. We may soon be offered a new contract, which will have appropriate incentives and penalties to encourage us to

produce to their preferred specification. As well as traditional blue stilton, Dovedale Blue cheese is produced at Hartington along with a white stilton, most of which is used in value-added blends such as stilton and apricot.

Beef cattle and youngstock

We have a few beef cattle to sell and will have fresh beef packs available over the summer, please let us know your orders so that we can book animals in. As well as attending the monthly Melton Mowbray Farmers Market on Nottingham Street, we had a stand at the County Show, a great success despite the rain. We will also be at the Melton Country Fair, on June 25th, a lovely rural event held on the Town Estate parks in town.

Arable and grassland

Wheat crops are shooting away now and have had a top dressing of nitrogen fertiliser; much of the nutrient that they require has already been supplied from the farmyard manure that we spread. The agronomist has walked the fields and contractors have applied herbicide and fungicide to reduce broad-leaved weeds and diseases on the basis of his recommendations. The grass seeds drilled in the autumn have come through the winter well, apart from where there are some patches of red dead-nettle, which will probably disappear when we take the first silage cut at the end of May.

Wildlife and Stewardship



I have a regular visitor outside the kitchen window, a superb dark pheasant (christened 'Mr Green'), who comes searching for grain under the bird feeders, usually with at least one of his two dark-coloured wives. He is very tame – often the case at this time of year – and will probably soon start attacking my shoes as he becomes more territorial. Unfortunately, hen pheasants are notoriously bad mothers and frequently abandon their nests, which are then plundered by magpies or crows. One of our areas of set-aside has a thick cover of annual meadow grass, which is attracting large groups of linnets and yellowhammers (one is pictured below), a pleasure to see.

Other recent bird sightings have included a female wheatear, the local buzzards, lapwing, goldcrests and a tree creeper. We see a barn owl near to the farmhouse most evenings and seem to have more skylarks than in recent years, I hope they manage to raise a brood before silage is cut as they are mainly nesting in the improved grass fields. Despite the cows decapitating them in the past, the cowslips obviously seeded as the numbers are multiplying up nicely. We have had several visits, most recently from Birch Wood School in Melton Mowbray. In May and June we are running several walks for the general public, details are available on a separate notice.



So, to summer – hope it's an enjoyable one. Please join us on a farm walk if you are able, and don't forget to ring or email us to let us know your orders.