



News from Hall Farm

Issue no 24
March 2011

Tel: 01664 562763
Ianandjulia@brentingbymeadows.co.uk
www.brentingbymeadows.co.uk

It's been an awfully long time since my last newsletter, with many other things getting in the way, but at least Spring is on the way now. I am writing this on a glorious Spring day when I would much rather be outside working in the fields!

We had a difficult winter with many hours lost just spent keeping drinking water running for the cattle in the Big Freeze. Fortunately our milking parlour does not freeze up very easily, and the milk was picked up routinely although many other farmers had significant problems.



Dry cows letting us know it's time to come in!

I have been kept busy getting quotes and sorting the details of a few projects for this year, our expanded slurry storage and hopefully refurbishing our cubicle house. This will involve replacing the free stalls (bed divisions) and giving the cows new mattresses, as well as extending the roof to give more space and opening up the walls to improve the ventilation. All of this will improve cow comfort and welfare as well as reducing the amount of straw that we use. Straw has become increasingly expensive over the last couple of winters and we are also getting a build up of bacteria in the straw bedding which causes mastitis in the cows towards the end of the winter. As well as being not good for welfare, this also affects our milk price. Our new system will also reduce the volume of slurry and spoiled bedding entering our slurry store.

We had a bad outbreak of calf pneumonia this year, there has been a lot of it about, and we have also been investigating the herd health profile and as a result, although no cows tested positive, decided to start vaccinating against a disease called IBR, which can lead to a depressed immune system and a higher incidence of problems such as mastitis, pneumonia and infertility. We have started the spring vaccination programme for the youngstock for leptospirosis, IBR, and blackleg and the cows are receiving their boosters.

Although we have had no incidences of TB, and hopefully we reduce our risk of infection by trying to keep a closed herd, our TB testing interval has been reduced from 4 years to 2, which also means that before moving them off the farm, we have to test any animals over 42 days old unless they are being sold direct for slaughter. Fortunately this does not really make much difference to our system, as we don't normally sell store cattle (older than calves but not ready for slaughter) or breeding cows.

Feed prices as well as straw are very high this year, making it more expensive to finish the beef cattle but we are now despatching them to market.



We were delighted to get approval for our next 10 years of environmental work with a new Higher Level Stewardship agreement. Projects include enriching the hay meadows with plug plants grown from seed collected elsewhere on the farm and extending our network of field margins. The fantastic leafy hay made last summer has proved its commercial worth this year - feeding hay to the dairy herd as well as silage has helped to fibre in the diet and maintain butterfat levels which are an important element of our milk pricing.



Flowers and diverse grasses in the hay meadows

As part of our agreement we can continue to be funded for the educational work we do with free farm walks and visits/talks to schools and other groups and we already have many booked in for summer visits and other activities.

We are participating in another project called 'Let Nature Feed Your Senses' which encourages disadvantaged and disabled groups into the countryside and are also supporting a heritage project called 'Combine' which will engage with young people encouraging them to explore rural heritage, if the project is successful in obtaining lottery funding.

Our bird ringer was not able to visit much last year but he has made several visits since Christmas and it is encouraging to see how many birds have survived through the winter, despite us finding several in the very cold weather that had obviously succumbed to hypothermia.

As I write in late March, although it is wonderful to have such clement weather, we are beginning to want a bit of rain! We hope to turn out the cows in the next few days as it has dried up so much underfoot and we now have a good concrete sleeper cow track in the main grazing field, but the grass now needs some warm rain to really get it going.



Unloading sleepers for the new cow track

The cows can wander out into the yard next to their winter housing and they have been queuing patiently at the gate dropping not very subtle hints that they would like to go out. We are busy setting up the electric fencing in the paddocks, cleaning and refilling water troughs, checking fencing and getting spring mineral blocks. Then we will be busy with spring fieldwork, fertilising, establishing some of our new Stewardship areas and ploughing some grassland that needed reseeding. The swallows will be back soon and the first hawthorn leaves are opening up, showing that spring is moving on fast.

The ewes and lambs that Robert is purchasing at present would also benefit from faster grass growth, although we don't want it wet, cold and windy for the lambs - there's no pleasing us farmers!

**Julia Hawley
March 2011**