

News from Hall Farm

Issue no 9

December 2005

Following a successful Melton Mowbray Food Festival back in October, welcome to our new customers; I hope that those of you who have already purchased from us are enjoying your meat.

We will have fresh beef available at the end of January and, subject to sufficient orders, more in February, so please phone or email to book your orders in. Lamb orders for January and February are also being taken – please note we will have our usual gap in lamb supply from February to May, as we finish the old season lamb and await the new. We are now using Brumpton's at Cotgrave (about 15 miles from the farm) for slaughtering and he is able to accommodate mutton – so please order some if you would like to try this traditional meat, which is experiencing quite a revival.

After a mild autumn, we have had some hard frosts and foggy mornings, exacerbated by our low-lying situation next to the River Eye. So far we have just had a light fall of snow - but no doubt there is more to come. Although beautiful to look at, the frost and snow is not usually very popular with livestock farmers. It means additional time making sure that pipes to water troughs are not frozen, stock outside may need extra feed, tractors are reluctant to start on cold mornings and the circulation in hands and feet packs up too!

In common with most dairy farms, we have a tractor-operated generator which we can use to run the milking machine if we have a power cut – first priority is always to get the cows milked, followed by cooling the milk. In extreme cold and snow, preventing the milking plant from freezing up and ice from building up on the yards (which would be too slippery for the cows) are additional considerations, along with hoping that the milk tanker can reach us to pick the milk up!

Sheep

Ewes are now grazing around the farm to nibble the grass fields right down before housing after Christmas. The tups have been hard at work and before we know it we shall be lambing again.

The remaining lambs from this spring are being fed with additional supplement in order to fatten them.

Dairy

We had a few dry cows outside until mid November but all are housed now. All of the heifers and around a third of the cows have now calved and we have a nice crop of Holstein heifers as well as some tidy Angus calves. The remainder of the calves will be either Simmental – from Ian's AI - or Angus, more of Beefy's progeny. The milking cows are fed a concentrate feed in the milking parlour, and a mixture of silage (pickled grass), brewers grains, our own wheat and a blended feed in the cubicle house. This year we have very high quality silage, around which our nutritionist balances the ration. Our aim is to produce a good volume of milk whilst maintaining the butterfat percentage that our milk buyer requires (Dairy Crest pay us for butterfat as they make cream and butter), without wasting feed, but at the same time not compromising the fertility or health of the cows.

Whilst our milk price from Dairy Crest is not as high as we need in order to earn a decent wage and reinvest in the business, at least it has now stabilised and we have been told we will not have any further drops before the end of March. The cows are milking well, but we have many calving later than we would like, due to the injury to our previous bull 18 months ago.

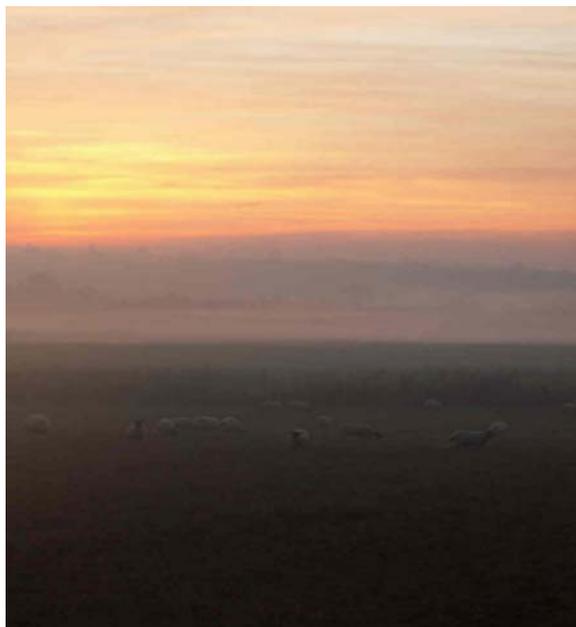
Beef cattle and youngstock

The first of our steers was taken to Brumpton's in October and the rest are now housed together in straw yards and are being fattened on hay and some supplement. The yearlings are housed too and Beefy Boy was put in with the dairy heifers on November 1st, so they will start calving next August.

This year's calves are in 2 groups, housed on straw in the sheep shed. After rearing on an ad lib formula milk, the calves are weaned at about 7 weeks, when they are eating solid foods, including straw, and cudding comfortably, an indication that their rumen has developed sufficiently to cope with a solid food diet. We have one group of the older calves and some which are still on milk replacer, to which we will add a few more of the later Angus calves as they are born, in order that we have a spread of birth-dates. This enables us to supply you with beef over a longer period.

Arable and grassland

After the mild, open autumn, the wheat and new grass seeds are looking superb. We were actually pleased when the cold snap arrived to slow things down; too much lush growth increases the disease risk for the crops.



An evening mist forms over sheep next to the river

All that remains is for me to thank you for your custom and support over the last twelve months. Your appreciative comments mean a lot to us and in all honesty, without the direct sales enterprise, it would probably not be worth our while to carry on rearing beef cattle. Due to changes in the support structure, we need that 'added value' to make any margin. Through supporting us, you are helping us to retain the Leicestershire landscape as well as the wildlife that thrives in an extensive grazing system – which is why I like to give you the full picture in these newsletters.

I hope that you have a joyful Christmas and wish you well for 2006.

Wildlife and Stewardship

Our hedge-layer David Smith started work a week or so ago. One of the hedges he is laying this year is the boundary between the parishes of Thorpe Arnold and Freeby, which is undoubtedly an ancient hedge. A listing of Thorpe Arnold glebe land (land owned by the Church) of 1601 mentions a field called Park Leyes, which is where a scrubby hunt covert now stands; this was butting upon 'Brentingbyhedge'; i.e. the boundary with Brentingby parish.

This year I am catching up with planting young hedge trees in any of the gaps left after hedge-laying. We have also planted several willows down by the river, which are fenced off to prevent the livestock from eating them.

I have seen most of our usual winter visitors – fieldfares and redwing in the hawthorn trees and on the grazing fields, assorted waterfowl, snipe and lapwing down by the river.



A superbly photogenic backdrop - the old chapelry at Brentingby, with silhouettes of Scots pines

Julia Hawley
Tel: 01664 562763
December 2005