

WELCOME

As we gear up for our annual bout of festive feasting, spare a thought for the army of farmers and producers who make it all possible. For many of them, December is one of the busiest months of the year. Meeting consumer demand is no easy task, but small and large growers and producers will be going all out to ensure we celebrate a cracking Christmas. Our

region, as ever, will be at the forefront of operations, providing everything from chipolata sausages to Brussels sprouts. In this edition of Farming Insight, we meet up with some of them. Essex pig farmer Fergus Howie contemplates a season which helps to rebalance demand for a cut of meat which is more difficult to shift at other times of the year through our midwinter passion for hams. Catch up with goose producers Nicola and David Chapman and turkey producer Ian Wylie and see what goes on behind the scenes to provide the festive table centrepiece. We'll also get the inside track on some of this year's lucky winners at Suffolk Agricultural Association's annual awards. What does it take to make a great farm or a great farming diversification? Meet the men and women who really know.

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Inspired into

Goose producers Nicola and David Chapman, of Carr Farm, Burgh St Peter, Beccles, have stepped up from smallholding to small farm. **NICOLA CHAPMAN** explains the charms of bird-rearing in the lead-up to Christmas.

We moved to Carr Farm in the summer of 2011 – quite a step-up from our three-acre smallholding near Dickleburgh in south Norfolk to 108 acres in the Waveney Valley at Burgh St Peter near Beccles.

We'd wanted to make the big step from smallholding to small farm for a number of years, and Carr Farm fitted the bill. In a lovely location, with the house and a useful mix of modern and older buildings in the centre of the landholding, and a variety of land uses including arable, marsh grazing and woodland.

The first change we made was to put the arable fields back to grass, and we now supply up to 3000 small bales of hay and haylage to horse owners in the area. We planted over a hectare of new woodland under the Woodland Grant Scheme and new hedges around the fields.

All the land is within the Entry Level Stewardship Scheme. The majority of the holding is drained marshes adjacent to the Waveney. In recent years it was cultivated for arable crops but more recently has been returned to grassland for summer grazing of beef cattle.

We've had geese for over 20 years, always in the past as pets and 'guards' but with the added bonus of delicious eggs in the spring and early months. They do make the most marvellous scrambled eggs.

We were inspired after reading a newspaper article about well-known goose producer Judy Goodman in Worcestershire. It seems she started rearing geese when goslings were given to her as a present and has developed a substantial business in Christmas geese.

The next step for us was to try raising a small number for Christmas. This was in 2012, then last year we were sufficiently encouraged in the venture to try 30 birds for

the festive market. We sold out by December 6 mainly to local customers.

Geese are fantastic birds, but we don't believe you can successfully keep them if you don't have an affinity for their quirky nature. They seem to have something of a "marmite" reputation - people either love them or hate them, and there is no doubt in the breeding season the ganders live up to their aggressive reputation.

We simply love them and they provide us with endless entertainment over the year. They are creatures of habit, the smallest changes to their routine can upset them for days, even something minor such as someone different taking care of them or a different colour feeder.

Norfolk Geese at Pulham Market supply us with Legarth cross goslings, and they've also provided us with some good practical advice. The goslings arrive to us as day-olds in May and June. We get them out on the pasture as soon as possible as this is their natural environment and they'll always favour new grass to any other feedstuff.

Once they are off starter rations we feed them wheat supplied by our neighbouring farmer. They could live out all year round once fully feathered, but we have a high fox population here and so their field is electric fenced but we also bring them into the shelter of a straw-bedded barn at night.

It's been an interesting experience marketing a seasonal produce. We have garnered a loyal following among our customers who place their orders early in the year, with the remaining birds selling principally in the second half of November and early December.

Positive feedback from customers has in particular related to allowing sufficient hanging time for optimum flavour; feeding wheat, bird presentation and high welfare standards. This year we have started marketing through social media sites such as Facebook and upgraded our website to

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taking a gander



allow customers to purchase birds online either for collection from the farm or with local or overnight delivery. This is already bearing fruit with more than half our geese sold already.

It's important to present the geese well and we supply them with spicy plum chutney made locally as well as herbs. And customers will find lots of information about cooking and recipe ideas on our website.

In the future we hope to expand the goose operation and are busy fencing a further hectare of grazing for them next year. However, we anticipate it will remain a relatively small operation of up to 150-200 birds.

We also keep rare breeds of chickens and sell hatching eggs. Table ducks are being introduced with the aim of expanding into a product with a year-round market. At the British Goose Producers' farm walk in Bedfordshire last month we were encouraged to see pigs and geese happily co-habiting and so now we're hoping to introduce pigs to the farm in the New Year.

■ Goose producers Nicola and David Chapman from Carr Farm, Burgh St Peter.

Picture: NICK BUTCHER



FARMING LAW

Opportunities in renewable energy

SIMON CUNNINGHAM,
partner at Ashton
KCJ solicitors



Notwithstanding the continual reduction of the rates available for generating electricity from renewable sources, there continue to be valuable opportunities for owner/occupiers who are considering installing such projects. On any project, you will need to consider a number of issues.

Planning permission and other consents

Consider whether planning permissions will be required or whether there are any permitted development rights. If there are buildings involved, such as with roof mounted solar panels or biomass boilers, are there any listed building or other conservation issues to consider.

Grid connection

Where the supply is to be connected to the Grid, you will need to consider whether there is the ability to connect into the grid or whether you are looking to use this as a self-contained supply. Self-contained supplies are less usual since there will be times when you will be generating more electricity than you are using. However the availability of a grid connection may be an issue both in terms of capacity and location.

Restrictions on Title

Are there any restrictions or limitations in your title deeds as to the use of your property or any access to the property? Are there any third party rights over your land that may be affected by the proposed project such as shooting rights? Do any of the electricity cable routes or the grid connection point lie on third party land? Will you need to separate consents or easements?

Funding

Although, the intention of any

renewable project will be to pay off the initial capital outlay as quickly as possible so that any benefits from feed in tariff and generated electricity are mainly profit, short term finance may be required. On smaller scale projects, it is more usual for funders to require security from existing assets such as land and buildings rather than the kit and the project itself but most funders now have specialist advisers who will be able to discuss any available options.

The Supplier

Consider the length of guarantees/warranties in relation to any kit or work; the track record of the supplier including any references from their customers and the possibility of site visits to view up and running installations. Speaking to other landowners, banks, local land agents or other professionals will also be a useful source of information.

These are only a handful of the considerations when considering a renewable project and you should always consider seeking professional advice at an early stage to avoid costly issues later on.

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