

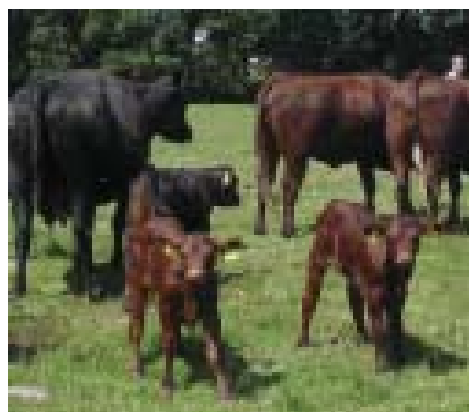


PLUMPTON COLLEGE AT NETHERFIELD

The Farms - 2009

The Farms

The four farms managed by Plumpton College at Netherfield (Ivyland, Netherfield Place, Homestead and Perch Hill) form a collaborative partnership known as the Wealden Farmers Network with a combined area of 82 hectares (450 acres). The partnership has been forged by the College to increase the individual viability of these typical small Wealden farms. Each farm has its own herd and flock and financial management arrangement. Together they share a cutting facility and supply a direct marketing enterprise. They also share labour, forage, equipment and facilities. Netherfield Place, Ivyland and Perch Hill farms are registered organic. Importantly, the four farms share similar production principles including rearing native breeds, maintaining low stocking densities, implementing clean grazing, making high quality winter fodder, applying few external inputs, minimising stress to livestock, protecting wildlife and the landscape and direct marketing naturally reared and fully traceable beef, lamb and pork.



Stock

Breed	Quantity	Farm
Suckler Beef Herd		
Sussex and Angus x Sussex	26	Ivyland and Netherfield Place
Pure Sussex	18	Homestead
Pure Sussex	8	Perch Hill
Sheep Flocks		
Suffolk x Mules (Texel Rams)	150	Ivyland and Netherfield Place
Suffolk x Mules (Texel Rams)	130	Homestead
Romney ewes (Romney Ram)	40	Perch Hill
Pig Herd		
Sows (all native breeds),	6	Homestead
Duroc Boar	1	
Weaners/Finishers	120pa	Ivyland and Netherfield Place
Saddleback Sows	2	
Weaners/Finishers	40pa	

Suckler Beef Enterprise

Netherfield Place and Ivyland Farms run a suckler herd of pure Sussex and Angus x Sussex. The Angus was introduced to increase the number of naturally polled calves and to add weight to the finished carcass. The farms breed from their naturally polled heifers to reduce the stress of 'debudding' calves with horns. The stocking densities on all the farms average one cow or yearling per acre. Calving takes place outdoors between May and October to produce finished beef throughout the year.

The calves are not weaned but stay with their mothers until the cows calve again the following year. Since introducing this husbandry practice over ten years ago, the farms have not experienced any loss in productivity and have successfully removed a normally highly stressful part of suckler herd management. Finishing cattle have access in the summer to a barn with hay so that when they are brought in for selection they are familiar with their surroundings, again reducing stress in the management system. The cattle are housed in the winter to prevent them poaching the waterlogged fields (on well drained ground such as up on the Downs these native cattle will thrive outside all winter). Sussex cattle have natural fat marbling throughout their muscle which helps them keep warm and also gives their meat a special cooking and eating quality. An average of 13 finished cattle a year from Homestead Farm are sold through the cutting room. The rest are sold through an organic farm shop, a local butchers shop or through the Organic Livestock Marketing Co-operative.



Sheep Enterprise

The flocks are lambed from early February through to late April to provide finished lambs throughout the year. Gone are the days of trying to get maximum production from each ewe. Lambing rates have been deliberately dropped from over 200% to nearer 160%. This has been achieved by careful management of their grazing, keeping the sheep on grass and hay without additional concentrates until the first flock is brought in for lambing in January. Ewes that are scanned for triplets, twins and singles are divided and fed on quality fodder, concentrates, and high energy licks according to their needs. The result is healthy lambs and mothers. After lambing and until the lambs are weaned, the flock is 'set stocked' on traditional, permanent pasture. This method of grazing has been chosen to allow the flock access to a number of fields over a large area and to reduce the stress caused to the flock by moving it onto new territories every few weeks. After weaning, the ewes dry off on stale ground and the lambs are fattened on hay or silage aftermaths. About ten finished lambs are selected once a fortnight to supply the cutting room or to sell to farm shops.



Clean Grazing

The cattle and sheep are managed in a 'clean grazing system' to prevent parasite problems, reduce medication costs, and maintain good health in the livestock. Parasites are species specific. If sheep follow cattle in a pasture they will remove the cattle parasites. The animals are moved around the farm in a three year rotation of cattle, sheep and hay or silage production. This important management system is one of the



reasons for the low stocking densities on the farms which is compensated for by high health status and low costly inputs.

Grassland Management

Most of the pasture on the farms is permanent, traditional Wealden grassland. Wealden soils have a tendency to go acidic. Soils are regularly analysed and limed to ensure a neutral soil pH. Good care of soils and pasture is essential to the businesses. Increasing evidence shows that the meat and fat from animals grazed on old grass and herb mixes is of a different quality, rich in essential fatty acids and antioxidants, to that from animals grazed on new leys or cereal feeds. The pastures are harrowed and rolled each spring and thistles and docks are kept at bay by regular topping throughout the year. At Netherfield Place Farm, high yielding short term forage crops are also grown on about sixty acres including herb rich mixes, fertilized with well rotted farmyard manure.

Forage Production

Hay and silage are cut and conserved for winter feeding. The forage is analysed each year. Forage analysis is a vital tool in forage based farming systems, providing important information on the nutritional content of the feed. This is particularly critical at certain times. It is important, for example, to know the quality of feed given to ewes before lambing. The cattle and sheep are 'buffer' fed all year round with hay. This helps the animals to adjust to changes in diet when they are turned out in spring or brought in for the winter, it also supplements nutrients when grass is nutritionally poor in the autumn and winter.

Pig Enterprise

Six sows are kept at Homestead Farm. They are a mix of native breeds including Large Black, Middle White, Tamworth and Gloucester Old Spot, one Saddleback sow and one large Black sow are kept at Ivyland Farm. The sows farrow indoors in open pens on straw. The piglets are weaned at seven weeks and if the weather allows, go outdoors. The weaners are deliberately grown slowly to produce a firm, quality meat, and are finished at around 8 months. As soon as the sow is in pig again she also goes outdoors. It is a low intensive system aiming for twenty pigs per sow per year. The enterprise supplies two porkers a fortnight to the cutting room, porkers for the butchery courses, and weaners to other businesses.

"Financial viability is an important goal for these four Wealden farms. Records are kept for all the different enterprises and targets are set each year. Problems and losses can be quickly identified and practices adjusted to improve management and gradually manage the financial return." Simon Bishop



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