

Real farming, real food

What does ethical, sustainable farming look like in the UK? **Andy Mellen** offers a personal perspective on some large trends and even larger challenges



I was born and raised on a small farm in Suffolk, in the “far east” of the UK. My parents kept cattle, a few sheep, pigs, chickens and (for some reason I’ve never fully understood), two grumpy donkeys. Exposure to this menagerie of farm animals and involvement in the daily tasks of looking after them developed a deep love of farming in me, and I was in no doubt that I wanted to pursue a career in agriculture. These animals were part of our lives – they could range freely over large areas of pasture and we did our best to provide for their needs: food, clean water, veterinary attention should the need arise, and shelter from the worst of the weather. However, these were not pets. We were in no doubt that the purpose of raising these animals was to provide us with food: rich creamy milk from our Jersey cow, eggs from the chickens, and meat. But we could sit down to our Sunday roast knowing that the animal that had provided the joint had lived well and healthily.

It wasn’t until I left home for agricultural college and experience in the wider farming “industry” that I began to

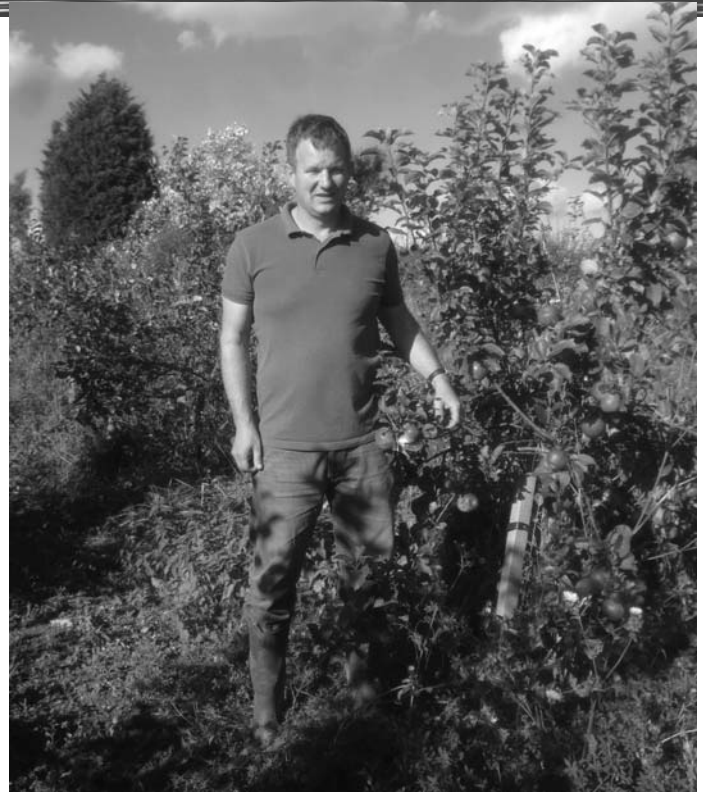
understand that not everyone farmed in this way. Over the years I have worked on several farms, and visited many more. Though farmers would shy away from using the term “factory-farming” of their businesses, as a rough description of some parts of the livestock industry, it fits. But let me backtrack and try to explain how this has come about.

The most significant event for farmers in the 20th century was the Second World War, when imports of food were sharply reduced due to the Nazi occupation of Europe and U-Boats sinking merchant ships bringing food to Britain. Rationing was introduced and lasted well after the war had finished and a huge effort was made to increase food production; both domestically with the “dig for victory” campaign, and on farms with the “war ag.” committees in each County. Their task was to increase the area of land under cultivation and the productivity of farms and this drive for increased yield continued long after the war had finished, and has essentially given us the industry we have today.

However it has come at a cost to our environment. Over a 100,000 miles of hedgehog have disappeared, vast areas of wetland have been drained, and high levels of productivity can only be maintained by the use of massive energy inputs – primarily fertilizer which is produced from natural gas. Along the way there have been many other changes: smaller farms have mostly disappeared as farms have consolidated, and the workforce has drastically reduced as bigger and more efficient machines have taken over much of the hard manual labour. The 1970s and 80s saw good profits being made, but also production surpluses and the beginning of the common market in Europe. Farmers who own their land are now very rich (on paper) as land prices have risen substantially. Another significant development has been the rise of the supermarkets, whose convenience we all appreciate, but who, with their dominant position in the market, wield enormous power over their suppliers.

Today, many sectors of farming are struggling to make a profit. In most cases, farmers are not producing “food”, they are producing commodities for a global marketplace, and are therefore subject to the vagaries of the market whilst the costs of inputs continue to rise. Or if supplying direct to one of the large supermarkets they are often in an unequal trading relationship where they are price-takers rather than price-makers. There are exceptions – farmers who are making a go of selling direct to their customers through farmers’ markets, box schemes and other innovative delivery systems, are farmers who value sustainability alongside productivity. But in general, the drive for food produced at the lowest possible cost has given us the industry we have today: efficient, large scale, productive, yet also mechanized and industrial, and highly dependent on inputs derived from fossil-fuels.

In this landscape animals are not individuals but simply units of production. The dairy cow, which might naturally live for twenty years or more, is usually worn out and discarded after six or seven years – and in some large units the cows will never set foot in a field but instead have all their food brought to them. The chicken reared for meat is now bred to grow so quickly that its legs don’t develop fast enough for its bodyweight, and it spends much of the time sitting rather than expressing natural behaviours. Even in egg production, where recent legislation has done away with the worst types of battery cages, so-called “free-range” chickens can be



housed in tiered units so large that they spend the greater part of their lives indoors. And yet the marketing of these products shows nothing of the grim realities of production – instead the packaging shows happy animals frolicking in daisy-strewn fields, with product names which point to an idyllic rural life.

Given this picture, should we be eating meat at all? Or milk? Or eggs? And as we are starting to see the impacts of climate change in a world where millions still go hungry, can we justify the environmental impact that farm animals make, particularly ruminants whose stomachs belch out methane, a potent greenhouse gas?

These are questions I genuinely struggle with, yet here I am, a farmer who continues to produce meat. For the last few years my wife and I have been developing a smallholding in another part of Suffolk. Starting with three acres, we planted apple trees, put up a polytunnel and a fruit cage, built some hen houses and grew vegetables. As opportunities have come along we have been able to rent more land, so that we now farm almost thirty acres, having added a small flock of sheep and the beginnings of a suckler beef herd in the last year. We started off as organic smallholders – following the very exacting Soil Association standards, against which our holding was inspected and certified each year. More recently we decided that, since we know most of our customers directly, we could do without the official “organic” designation and expensive certification fees, though we haven’t substantially changed how we farm.

The food writer Michael Pollan has summarised his advice on healthy, sustainable eating into eight pithy words: “Eat real food, not too much, mostly plants.” I find this a very useful place to start. Whilst I totally understand and respect those who choose to have nothing to do with the mess of animal production by being vegan, or those who



choose the halfway-house of vegetarianism, I do continue to eat meat, mostly that produced on our farm, or meat whose provenance and production is known (I go along with the writer Wendell Berry, who writes that “I dislike the thought that some animal has been made miserable in order to feed me. If I am going to eat meat, I want it to be from an animal that has lived a pleasant, uncrowded life outdoors, on bountiful pasture, with good water nearby and trees for shade. And I am getting almost as fussy about food plants”).

We should remember that all human activity results in the taking of life, whether we intend to or not. The blunt

biological truth is that we animals can only remain alive by eating other life, be it plant or animal. Even the production of a bag of flour or a block of tofu can only come about through ploughing, cultivating and harvesting a field to grow a crop – and in the process ending the lives of thousands of insects and small mammals. We can only choose non-violence in our diet by degrees. Harvesting animals for meat, on our farm, involves planning, effort, purpose and respect. It is not killing in the sense of a wasteful, thoughtless process, but the natural end for which these animals were domesticated, bred and reared. So here are some of the rough and ready rules that govern our eating habits:

- We eat meat less often and in smaller quantity, but ensure that we get meat which has been properly raised, which tends to be more expensive.
- We try to buy direct from the producer rather than through a supermarket.
- We are moving towards eating more grass-fed beef and lamb rather than farmed poultry or pork, as these can be raised on areas unsuitable for crops and so are not in competition with food with humans.
- We give thanks at the beginning of every meal that God has provided for our needs when so many in the world go hungry. ■



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Photos by Andy Mellen