

Family farm spans the generations

A traditional mix of farming enterprises has a bright future for Jim and Alison Norris in Shropshire.

An award-winning family farm in Shropshire is home to a traditional mix of enterprises – as well as providing top class hospitality for paying guests.

TG Norris & Son supports three generations of the Norris family at Court Farm, Gretton, near Church Stretton. Jim Norris and wife Alison farm 134ha (330 acres) here with sons Edward and William. Jim's father and mother are both retired but even at 81 Tom likes to keep his hand in.

"Our farming philosophy is simple and straightforward," says Jim, who looks after the beef, sheep and arable enterprises while Alison runs a farmhouse bed & breakfast. "We are a family farm and our goal is to make a living and hand the farm on to the next generation."

The Norris family have always been local to the area "for as long as records go back" – and it appears they have always been involved in farming too. "My great grandfather, Thomas Norris, took on the tenancy of the farm in 1898 and was later able to buy the freehold."

"We have remained a traditional mixed farm and we find this to be a sustainable way of farming in this area. There appears to be a recent swing amongst arable farmers to return to mixed farming to make their farming more sustainable. By having beef, sheep and arable and rotating grass with cereals, the three enterprises compliment each other and suit the farm, says Jim.

Soil on half the farm is clay loam topsoil over heavy boulder clay. The remainder is a more of a lighter, free-draining mixed loam over softer rock. "It needs to be farmed in the traditional way – which makes it expensive because it requires a lot of machinery and a lot of labour."

The beef enterprise comprises 90 head of Hereford cross steers sold to Dovecote Park who supply a major supermarket. These are bought in as weanlings in batches of 30. The farm went down with TB for the first time in December 2014. "The TB was a blow as we had built a new cattle shed and bought a diet feeder to expand to 150 but could not bring cattle on to the farm because of the TB restrictions.

"Fortunately we have just gone clear with our second test so we can build back up again. The next batch is arriving in May and another in the summer."

The sheep enterprise involves 300 breeding ewes, which started lambing on 1 April. Half are Welsh mules and the rest are Welsh mule x Suffolks. All are put to Charollais tups and resulted in a crop of nearly 500 lambs this spring.

"Most lambed in three weeks. We try to lamb with the grass and the weather to keep the costs down. It worked well this year and the lambs will be sold through Shrewsbury market."

Arable consists of about 60ha (150 acres) of winter wheat, barley and oats, with some spring barley and spring oats. Stubble turnips are grown for fattening lambs and ewes before lambing. Cattle are mainly forage fed with cereals for finishing. "We mill and mix our own feed but most of the cereals are sold."

Environmental schemes include a mix of entry-level and higher-level stewardship. Most arable fields include grass mar-

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Jim Norris (foreground) with Joe Collins.

>> gins and there is some sheep keep with over wintered stubbles and spring-sown crops, as well as hedgerow maintenance.

The new cattle shed built last year was topped with 10Kw of solar panels, it provides an additional income stream. “It is like having another beef herd but you don’t need to feed it. They’ve done better than forecast over the past 12 months although it was a sunnier year than usual.”

Non-family labour relies mainly on Joe Collins who is working three-days-a-week on the farm while studying for a foundation degree in agriculture. From a non-farming background, Joe plans to go to New Zealand next year before studying for a full agricultural degree.

“It will be a well-deserved achievement,” says Jim.

Veterinary students – this year from Nottingham University – help with lambing. Jim and Alison’s sons Edward and William, who are still at school, have also shown an interest in the business, helping out on the farm in the holidays and when they can.

Contractors are used for all silage work, which includes pit silage, bale silage and some maize, as well as for straw-baling and muck-spreading. Most other jobs are kept in-house, made easier with the recent purchase of a 12m³ capacity JF Stoll diet feeder.

The feeder has opened up more feed options, including wet beet pulp and maize silage. Using TMR has helped improve both herd and flock performance – and saved a lot of work, explains Jim.

The store ration for TMR is 12g maize, 8kg wet pulp, 1,25kg straw and 3kg protein pellets, including minerals. It is fed at a rate of 21.25kg/head/day.

“The cost to both rent and buy land in the area is not really viable for our beef and sheep enterprises. Over the past few years we have invested in our livestock buildings and the purchase of the diet feeder means we can use cheaper by-products to raise stocking levels on the land we have.

“It has made a big difference to the livestock. Before we fed silage top dressed with protein pellets down the troughs. We struggled to keep the cattle clean. But with more straw in the ration, now we have more consistent cattle that grow and perform better. They are cleaner



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too. Store cattle have recently been growing 1.4kg a day.”

Nutrition advice is provided by Liz Clarke. The diet feeder is also used for the ewes, with ration help from Kate Phillips, of Adas. “It is easier to feed the ewes,” says Jim. They are in better condition and more content – and it has reduced prolapses.”

Other machinery includes two Valtra tractors, one recently purchased from Edwards & Farmer. The combine is Deutz Fahr and the farm also has an Agribuggy sprayer.

Help and advice on animal health is given by Stapeley Veterinary Practice who also recently did a Flock and Herd Health Plan. They regularly do faecal egg counts which has enabled the farm to significantly reduce the amount of wormer used.

Zantra look after the agronomy and offer crop advice and management. They also provide a nutrient plan.

A cattle handling system installed five years ago has paid dividends. Designed with input from livestock handling expert Miriam Parker and praised by USA cattle specialist Temple Grandin, the permanent race allows a single person to move cattle through the system safely and calmly.

Ideally located for tourists visiting South Shropshire and the Shropshire Hills, the B&B

offers AA Gold Star accommodation within the main farmhouse but separate from the family. “My parents started it in the late 1980s and we have developed it,” says Jim. “We have evolved to provide the modern tourist with all of the contemporary comforts they would expect while maintaining the character of the original house”, says Alison.

Two further properties are rented out on long-term lets: a cottage next to the farm and another house – the Court House – away from the main farmstead. This was where the manorial courts for the Manor of Gretton were held. In later years, it was reduced to a farm worker’s cottage but eventually abandoned in the 1950s. The house was in a poor state of repair when Jim and Alison set about rescuing it.

The restoration project took seven years – culminating in an English Heritage Angel Award in recognition of the couple’s dedication and determination. “We didn’t cut any corners – we wanted it to be as original as it could be,” says Jim. “It was a long slog but we succeeded.

“You could say we’ve lots of small enterprises,” he adds. “But it helps to spread the risks associated with fluctuating commodity prices – and when you put everything we do together, we like to think it adds up to something special.”