

Summer 2021
Newsletter No. 29

SOUTH YEO FARM WEST



www.southyeofarmwest.co.uk & www.smallholdertraining.co.uk

It's been a while...

What a couple of years it has been for everybody. Here we are, mid-summer 2021 and I felt the urge to write a very much delayed newsletter and make contact with all our friends, meat customers, course participants and everyone who just likes to keep up with what we're doing.

I don't know about you, but I feel as if we are all on a shaky axis these days. Our gorgeous island isolated like never before in some ways while being utterly part of the global terrors brought by Covid-19 and climate change. Watching the recent floods in Germany and Belgium and China, and the heat-wave in Canada is very scary indeed—and those are just the most recent examples.

We are incredibly lucky at South Yeo that the farm brings a sense of calm and continuity which is balm for the mind and soul, but there's no denying that we are seeing the consequences of extreme weather patterns impacting on our pocket of land. Ridiculously dry pe-

riods meant that for the first time ever we were feeding cattle and sheep forage in spring when the grass should have been at its most abundant and the livestock struggling to keep up with it. Then a madly wet few weeks meant we had to bring one group of cows back into the cowshed for a month—something we've never had to do before once they've been turned out in the

spring. This was followed by very warm days, so finally the grass started to grow, the cows went back outside, and we have made hay to replace what was eaten earlier in the year. There's still a bit of hay to be made, so if you listen carefully in the next sunny spell you may hear Andrew mowing Big Stone Horse Field and Lower Quarry Heads.



Some of our winter feed supply

Restoring our meadows

Back in 2016 we carried out some serious meadow restoration, over-seeding a seven acre field with a bespoke native wildflower mix and green haying another eight acres. Green haying is cutting the sward of the donating field and spreading it as soon as possible (within 24 hours) over the receiving field which has been harrowed to scratch up some bare patches as a seed bed to catch and nurture the seed that drops from the green hay. The overseeded meadow showed results immediately, the seeds taking firm hold with a show of common cat's ear, autumn hawkbit, common knapweed, yellow rattle, red clover, greater bird's foot trefoil, common vetch, tufted vetch, meadow vetchling, self-heal, yarrow, betony and more the

following spring. A couple of ox-eye daisies also showed themselves. Five years on the ox-eye daisies are in splendid profusion, as are all the other flowers. However, the green hayed fields showed no change at all, which was hugely disappointing as we had chosen the donor fields because of their rich bounty of orchids. But in June 2021, after a five year wait, we saw orchids all over one of the two receiving fields and are hopeful that next year some will appear in the second field too. It sounds like such a small thing, to count 35 orchids where none were before, but it created a great deal of excitement here, and a useful lesson that some things just take time, and lots of it.



Books

As you may know, I've been writing for a number of different magazines on smallholding and farm related topics for some years now. At the beginning of 2020 I was commissioned to write a book on keeping goats, and a few months later the publisher asked if I'd write one on keeping ducks and geese too. *Keeping Ducks and Geese* should be out in the autumn, and *Keeping Goats* will appear a little later, possibly early 2022, both published by The Crowood Press. They will be available in various bookshops of course, as well as direct from the publisher. If you are interested in a signed (or unsullied by my handwriting) copy of either title let me know as I'll be selling them direct from the farm too as I hope some of the people who come on our smallholding and livestock courses may want to pick up a copy when they attend; I don't think I can rely on any passing trade!

Both books are chockful of advice for the beginner and more experienced keeper, and there are hundreds of photographs taken by me and by livestock keepers from around the world. The absolute icing on the cake is the inclusion of some fantastic historical images chosen from the Beaford Archive taken by my favourite photographer James Ravilious. More info on price and availability will be on our websites in due course.

I've now started working on a third title... wish me luck!

Feral farm cats

We've been without cats on the farm for more than a year, since the lovely Claude finally left us. We determined that our next cats would be feral cats, rehomed from a wild-ish existence and able to spend their time happily outside. They'll have heaps of barns to shelter and snooze in, with plenty of hay and straw bales to climb up on to survey the world from a place of safety. They will still be fed and cared for, but it's hoped they will be our frontline in keeping the rats in check; we have certainly noticed an increase since Claude died and we avoid using poison as we won't put the precious barn owls at risk.

Noah and Moses have now been here for a week, in a double crate in one of the barns. Pretty, shy creatures, we feed, water and muck them out twice a day. The rescue centre who brought them included enough blankets, bowls, toys, food and more for dozens of cats, so I hope they appreciate their new home and will choose to stay with us permanently when released. The next step is to allow Mack the dog to get to know them through the safety of the crate.

Supply & demand

Lockdown has had a huge effect on health, education, employment and businesses of all sizes. It's hard to think of one aspect of our lives that hasn't been altered in some way, temporarily or more long term. At the very least it's made people reassess what's important to them and how (if they have a choice) they want to live going forward.

The first thing that happened to us was a massive growth in demand for our meat boxes. It's lovely to have new customers keen to buy great meat of absolute provenance, but we simply can't match demand. We are always keen to improve what we do but have no desire to grow our business; we know that doing more does not equal a happier existence. We are delighted that all our meat boxes find good homes quickly, and have to accept that not everyone will be able to buy what they like from us—luckily there are other great options out there too. So many, many thanks to our customers, old and new, who are enjoying what we produce.

As far as our smallholding and livestock courses go, they were inevitably postponed which gave us a chance to think how we could run them safely once

restrictions started to lift. We realised it would no longer make sense to have people eat in our kitchen but were keen to maintain as cosy and comfortable a feel as possible. We emptied the threshing barn and now use that as our seated training space, and whenever the weather allows we all sit outside to eat home grown lunches and Devon cream teas. We installed an additional outdoor loo (a compost toilet) and set up individual refreshment stations so everyone has their own water/squash and biscuit supply. It seems to be working well and we have nearly caught up with running the postponed courses, as well as running extra to meet the increased demand.

It's a delight to have people back on the farm, learning new things, contemplating whether keeping sheep, pigs or cattle might be for them, or if smallholding is truly what they want out of life. In 2020 after running lots of bespoke sheep courses and having regular enquiries, we started offering a new two day course *Sheep for Beginners* which is proving almost as popular as our *Introduction to Smallholding*.

If you're interested in any of our courses, details are all here on our website or we're always happy to answer any questions. <https://smallholdertraining.co.uk/>



SOUTH YEO FARM WEST

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Devon Ruby Cow and calf



Weaners for sale & retired Poppy is looking for a new home

We have been particularly productive on the pig front this year and have a lovely litter of Berkshire weaners available, ready for new homes beginning of September. £60 a head. In addition if anyone is interested in a very friendly older sow, not for breeding but to entertain you or your holiday cottage guests, our 2015 born sow Poppy might be the thing. She's happy to follow a bucket (or me) anywhere, is gentle and now retired. £125.

