

*“Over the Grid”*

**PONDHEAD FARM**

**DECEMBER 2005/JANUARY 2006**

It has been a noisy couple of weeks at Pondhead. We have weaned eight of the spring born calves from their mothers. They had grazed out on the Forest with the cows. As the cows are in calf again and feed on the Forest is now getting low we do this to ensure the cows keep condition and their unborn calves grow healthily. With last years calves in the beef barn the mothers stand outside the holding calling for them and vice versa. The mothers continue to produce milk for a few days so it is vital we inspect them frequently to ensure they do not develop mastitis. Fortunately, there is no sign of them doing so.

The calves themselves seem to have adapted to their “new” surroundings well enough (they had of course spent their early days in the beef barn last spring) and have taken to their ration of grass silage and “Grower” feed.

Next month will see the start of calvings for 2006; we have four due. Two of these are heifers (first time calvers) and again vigilance is the order of the day. Recent experience shows that these young mothers pay little regard to the day their calf is due and with some arriving surprisingly early and others up to two weeks late, it is vital that we inspect them frequently. We try to arrange all calvings to take place on the holding since bitter experience shows that if the cow has her calf on the Forest it is often difficult to find her and assist should she run into difficulty.

Tractors also dominated December – or more particularly problems with them. In my Grandfathers day the work was done by horse. When we moved here we found many of the old horse drawn implements and machinery, which we donated to enthusiasts for restoration. In my Fathers day the farm shared one 25 hp tractor between this farm and another he owned at Bartley. We currently have an old 65 hp Ford and a (not quite as old) 90 hp John Deere. The reason for this increased power and mechanisation lies in the facts that labour is costly and everything is so much larger these days. With repair bills seemingly arriving daily the question was should we replace the two with one new one. Hours were spent with brochures and we began to convince ourselves that we “couldn’t do without” all the electronic gizmos that modern tractors possess. Time for a reality check! In the end following a thorough inspection of the

existing tractors by the engineers, we decided to grin and bear the repair bills and stick with the two workhorses that have served us so well.

New to the farm this month are eight geese. These are an inheritance from my late uncle who sadly died on Christmas Eve. This is the first time I have ever kept geese and any reader who has knowledge of these birds is invited to call me. Any help and advice will be greatly appreciated.

Sadly Babe lost her three piglets. She went into labour on the coldest morning of the year and despite our best efforts to maintain their body heat (which included not only the infra-red lamp but hot water bottles) we were unsuccessful.

The remaining 43 pigs born in August continue to do very well. At their age they are each eating almost 2 kilos of feed per day and gaining body weight at almost the same rate. With the pigs now being indoors mucking out is now a time consuming task. We continue to hope that all the hard work will be worthwhile. Particularly, the lean meat percentage on these pigs should be very high since they are fed on a special "Grow Lean" ration formulated by our feed suppliers.

We have, once again, decided to do some small scale DIY livery – aimed at pony owners – and have taken on two ponies for a local enthusiast. This has proved beneficial since, being in walking distance of the village (for the energetic at least) we can provide local facilities and access to some of the best and varied riding in the Forest.

Following the success of our two previous open days we have been asked when we will hold another. Provisionally, we have planned the February half term week – more details in next month's Newsletter.

Pat Mabbutt