

“Over the Grid”
PONDHEAD FARM

Pondhead Farm is a traditional New Forest holding at Beaulieu Road Lyndhurst. Its current owner, Pat Mabbutt, is the third generation of her family to own the Farm. Each month Pat writes her farm diary for the Community Centre Newsletter.

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2005

October saw the Pondhead pony “drift”. Ponies in the vicinity are rounded up and driven to Pondhead Farm for their annual health check, worming and tail marking. Tails are cut in a particular pattern to indicate the area which the pony normally inhabits. This year over 50 ponies were rounded up for their “haircut”. Some foals born in April and May were weaned off to be sold.

The pigs are still out on “pannage”. The Pannage Season, each autumn, is when pigs are let out onto the Forest to eat the fallen acorns (so poisonous to the ponies and cattle). This year there are fewer acorns than recent years and the pigs go out each morning searching, but are often back at the farm gate by mid afternoon. At least we shouldn’t have the trouble we had last year when we didn’t see them for weeks on end, wondering what mischief they were getting up to. Mischief they did; they had got into someone’s garden and after clearing the man’s acorns and leaves decided to eat the plants around the swimming pool, then went into the pool itself. Fortunately for us (and our insurers) we heard nothing more of it. Presumably the owner remembered the old Forest “lore” that one should fence to keep the Forest animals out.

The 48 piglets born in August and September continue to grow rapidly with ravenous appetites. As cross-breds they are a whole array of colours. It is almost time to wean the youngest. On commercial pig farms this is done at 3 weeks old; preferring a more “natural” approach I wait until the piglets are 6 weeks old. The sows usually indicate the correct time by refusing requests of the piglets to drink and encouraging them to share the sows hard feed.

Our spring born calves are now out on Forest with their mothers and are thriving. Their mothers teach them the ways of the Forest, where to find food and water and (hopefully) traffic sense. They return to the farm each night for supplemental feed and I am making use of the grass left in the fields to conserve our silage for the forecast cold winter ahead.

Having moved from rearing calves to sell at 8 months to growing them for direct sale as beef, the first “finished” beast has returned from the abattoir at a very creditable weight and

conformation. Uptake for locally produced free range meat has been very encouraging. We have been surprised how local people are so discerning about the quality of food and its production. The hard work and investment created by conversion from “calf rearers” to “beef producers” now seems worthwhile.

November and December are busy months with 3 calvings and a trip of piglets due. Rosa our ex-dairy cow is due to calve shortly. She wasn't producing enough milk for commercial purposes and being over 30 months old was bound for the incinerator. Not all sentiment, she will have to work, provide milk for 2 calves and for us. Prize winning Charolais heifer Daisy is due her first calf by an Aberdeen Angus bull. Daisy is pure white and the bull jet black. Normally, calves follows the genes of the father, but a white cow with a black calf on the Forest will no doubt raise a comment or two.

With recent rains, dung spreading the fields has been put on hold. Our soil is sandy and “hungry” for nutrients. Driving a tractor on wet land causes soil compaction and damages the drainage system. This will have to wait until it is dry with suitable ground conditions.

We have had a great many questions about how a Forest farm like ours functions, prompting us to arrange some Farm visits over the school Christmas holidays.

Details are

Monday 19th December 2005 starting at 10.00am and

Thursday 22nd December 2005 starting at 10.00am

Entry is free but with a collection for “*Children in Need*”.

If you wish to come please ring us on 02380 282003 or 07752748687

PLEASE BRING WELLIES AND WATERPROOF CLOTHING