

Winter News 2019



As a grass based farm the weather has been mostly kind for us this year. As a farmer this is a rare statement to make. The spring and summer cuts of grass, which form our winter feed known as 'silage,' were of good volume and quality. There was no pressure on third cut silage, which was a luxurious state of affairs! The rain has been pretty reliable but not too heavy and the cows have grazed well on consistent grass growth. The warm sunshine in September kept a sweetness in the grass, which they and we like. Only in the first week of October did thoughts turn to soft ground giving potential mud problems. This coincided with a drop in overnight and daytime temperatures and the cows began, unsubtly, hanging around the sheds after their post milking feed, instead of rushing out to graze and wander around. Key to producing milk organically is to keep your cows happy, so we are now into the full winter routines which come with caring for 500 cows housed inside.



Another late summer job is organising straw for winter bedding. Co-ordinating and gathering this from many neighbouring farms was a challenge as Graham decided to break an ankle in mid August. The team (and extended family) spread themselves wide and all was gathered in. The straw for bedding is of mixed quality. Some of it was harvested and baled while still damp but we take this on the chin...as grass growth has been so good.

With less requirement to worry about how we will feed the cows this year, we have spent more time reviewing Acorn Dairy's role in the context of wider concerns and where we will be in 10-20 years' time. The least gloomy, popular, scientific opinion tells us we have ten years to act if we are to avoid irreversible climate change. Food production can take a lead role among human activities, in helping us achieve net zero emissions. It is all about choices and no, you do not have to go vegan. We are all bombarded by polarised views on all topics but are pleased there has now been acknowledgment and support of organic, grass fed dairy and meat production. Livestock are a crucial element in a crop rotation, recycling nutrients, adding organic matter to the soil, increasing soil fertility and sequestering soil carbon. Soil holds 3 times as much carbon as the atmosphere. Without animals, there is often a reliance on fossil-fuel hungry fertilisers, derived from oil which are often imported from abroad. There needs to be a cohesive plan. We personally have doubts about the viability of putting muck or crops into anaerobic digesters on farms, to produce (green) energy, whilst relying on petro chem fertilisers to provide nutrients in the soil for crops to grow... who is looking at the bigger picture?

"The only way we can actually take CO2 out of the atmosphere is to rebuild the soil carbon that 50-plus years of continuous arable farming has removed. To do that, we need to switch to mixed farming systems that include a crop rotation with pastures grazed by cows or sheep." Patrick Holden, Sustainable Food Trust.

Does the carbon sequestering on our farm balance the carbon produced by our diesel delivery fleet? No, in short. Our fleet is modern and have the ubiquitous 'Ad Blue' to convert toxic nitrogen oxides into harmless nitrogen and water vapour but this does not address Carbon Dioxide produced by (increasingly expensive) fossil fuels. With keen logistics we aim to reduce the fuel used: pints delivered ratio. At the same time, we watch developments in the electric goods-vehicle market closely and test drive when appropriate. Milk is inherently heavy and drains battery life. No unit yet can run a fridge unit as well as move a 3.5T vehicle far enough. Progress has been made on 10 years ago. We feel a major leap is imminent and are confident that we will be able to deliver our organic milk, in glass bottles, from electric vehicles, powered by our wind turbine in the near future.



With best intentions pushed aside, the window of opportunity for our regular customer Autumn open day passed us by. Graham was still hobbling throughout September. Straw gathering for winter bedding & third cut silage fell later than normal & at the same time as crucial bottling plant engineering maintenance. All substantial activities. The weather & day light are now against us. SO... we will be holding a Spring Open Day. You will be invited to come & join us for Spring Turnout. This is the best day on our farm. We expect to have a new & interesting project to show you as well as guided walks. This is your chance to meet the cows producing your milk, understand why we choose to farm organically & why it is better for the cows, environment, wildlife & us, as milk drinkers. To organise a private visit for your own school / catering team, email us. It was a pleasure to have Kings Priory School, West Park School, Riverford and Seaham Hall visit this summer.



Acorn Dairy,
Archdeacon Newton,
Darlington, DL2 2YB
T: 01325 466999
E: organic@acorndairy.co.uk
www.acorndairy.co.uk



Our heifer- grazing access to organic pastures at Clervaux Trust, Croft is reducing in acreage. The Trust are expanding their good work with young adults and need all the land for their own organic stock animals and garden school. We maintain farming links however- you may have seen the Facebook post of Clervaux's Gilberto coming to choose some of our heifer calves as the starting base for their own new herd.



So...in preparation for this, over the last year we have been discussing a potential partnership with a fellow farming family and we are now pleased to see this come to fruition. We would like to introduce the **Jacksons** who farm at Beningborough Hall, north of York. Alistair, Lucy with son Isaac and daughter Maisie have well appointed land and buildings, perfectly suited to 'bringing on' young stock to our own high welfare standards. They will be providing care to our heifers between the ages of 3- 24 months, in their idyllic setting on the banks of the River Ouse. To enable this farming link the Jacksons needed to convert to organic farming techniques in 2018. They are kindred spirits and grasped the mentality and attention to detail required to manage land organically, very quickly. With some support from Graham they passed their inaugural Soil Association organic inspection in August. The first group of our heifers joined them in early October and the first 'stay-cation' is going very well. One of our bulls is now also settling in before being expected to run with the heifers and sire their first calves late next year. Our heifers are the future of our business. Their care is in good hands with the Jacksons.

The positive effects of this collaboration are numerous: an additional 300 acres of land now being farmed organically due to demand for our organic milk- organic farms have 50% more wildlife; flexibility at our home farm to rest and rotate pastures to meet demands of excess/too little rain; availability of more grass per cow reduces the need for bought in feed; the positive energy and thought sharing that comes with a collaboration.



We know from talking with customers & the spectrum of consumer insight materials we receive that environmental impact is important but increasingly, personal health and trust in food is a worry too.

Graham, Barry & Colin have spent time researching & planning how to further reduce our need for antibiotics on the farm. Under the current organic rules, preventative routine antibiotic treatments are not allowed, & certain antibiotics are not allowed at all. If given to an organic cow, her milk is not allowed for human consumption for three times longer, than if she was producing non organic milk. This is a cost, so the organic principles are based around ensuring the animal doesn't become ill in the first place. More emphasis has to be placed on hygiene, mineral supplements, reduced stocking rates and ventilation. Obviously these things are not exclusive to organic farms but because we don't have the option of antibiotics they are more important to us.

We have found that the more we fine tune other aspects of the cows' environment, feed & milking procedure we have used fewer & fewer antibiotics over the years. We currently use, homeopathy, a lot of udder mint, iodine, disinfectants (for feet problems), various feed supplements (including seaweed & apple cider vinegar.) We are nicely into a trial on the use of vitamin treatments, which is looking promising. With the challenges facing humans regarding antibiotic resistance, we foresee this as critical to our relevance in the future.

With this in mind, we are taking steps now to drop antibiotics entirely. The 2018 "new" Agricultural Bill recognised the external benefits of some farming systems & looked well placed to effect significant change using both a carrot & stick approach to better food production. We hope current political wrangling doesn't lead to a re-write & a backward step for the environment, animals & next generations.



Price Increase

There is more farming detail in this newsletter than we usually aim to shoehorn in. The reason is simple. The dairy market is a challenging place to be.

In our region Acorn Dairy is a dairy rarity. We are not focussed on pushing for ever increasing volumes of milk gained from our cows, whilst reducing the cost of feeding them. For us that would lead to a downward spiral of standards and trust. Our farm is in a programme of continual improvement, producing the best milk we can, in the best way. We aim to convey this difference in production systems. The future of food is looking interesting and challenging. We will continue to provide you with milk you can be proud of. We hope you consider we offer you good, all round value.

Thank you for your custom.
 Graham & Caroline



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