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Future Farmers of Wales Autumn Visit 2015.

On the 4th and 5th of September 2015, a group of Future Farmer Members travelled to the Gloucester and the north Somerset area to visit three different businesses. The trip was kindly sponsored by NFU Cymru.

The first visit of the trip was to Lydney Park Farm where we were welcomed by farm manager Mr Gavin Green. The farm forms part of the Lydney Park Estate situated between Gloucester and Chepstow. The farm is run in-hand as part of the estate which also incorporates forestry and sawmills, spring gardens and roman ruins, activity centre, commercial property, residential property and corporate events.

The dairy farm is located alongside the river Severn and is protected by man-made flood defences which prevent the farm and the local villages from flooding. The farm incorporates approximately 1,000 acres of productive fertile land although a train line splits the land in half with the farm homestead located in the centre.

The farm is run as an in-hand farm on a privately owned estate. Once a diverse farm with arable crops, sheep, beef and dairy, however over the last 15 years, the farming practice has changed completely. In 1997 a new 32 point rotary parlour was installed at the farm to milk the 450 pedigree Holstein cows three times a day. Their diet consisted of mainly arable and maize crops grown on the surrounding farmland and all of the livestock was housed at the homestead.

In 2000, it was decided that they would drop the beef and sheep enterprise and concentrate on the dairy enterprise. Over the years to come, they were aware of fertility issues within the herd and were looking at different systems such as grass diet and converting to organic.

In 2007, the decision was made to convert the farm from a high input high yielding Holstein herd to a low input grass based system with cows going out to graze. The majority of the land was re-seeded to grass with tracks and water troughs installed. TB was a big issue in the area and therefore a herd sale was not possible. Gavin Green did state that if TB had not been an issue, they would have sold the whole herd and bought in Jersey cross cows.



From 2008, the cows were out grazing and being milked twice a day, all the cows were put to a NZ Friesian bull initially and Jersey bulls thereafter. The herd calved down in two blocks, spring and autumn until 2011 when the whole herd (600 cows) converted to spring calving.

In 2013, 400 cows were being milked twice a day with the remaining 200 on once a day. By 2014, the whole herd being milked once a day. The milk was being sold locally on a cheese milk contract. Currently, there are around 1,000 cows in the herd which is split between two farm managers, each managing circa 500 on separate parts of the farm. Majority of the herd is housed over winter with roughly 125 out wintered.

During our visit, we went to look at one of the two herds, what was noticeable was some of the pedigree Holsteins from 2007 still being milked. Kiwi cross bull or Jersey bull semen are used for insemination, Hereford Bulls are then used for sweeping. All the bull calves are sold when weaned and the heifer calves are sent to another farm on the estate to be reared. All calves are given two doses of tested colostrum when born as a standard protocol. Cows identified with Johnes disease are calved separately and colostrum disposed of and all calves sold.

The farm currently has 8 labour units, with an aim of 170 livestock units per labour unit in the next few years. All of the foot trimming and insemination is done in hand. All cows not in calf are sold, this is estimated to be between 7 and 11%.



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The afternoon on the 4<sup>th</sup>, the group were fortunate enough to have arranged a tour of the Thatchers Cider Brewery factory in Sandford, Winscombe. We were privileged in having Mr Martin Thatcher, the Managing Director for the company taking us around the entire processing and manufacturing factory.

The Thatchers family began making cider in 1904 and continues to be managed and run by the same family. Today over 25,000 tonnes of apples are pressed into that liquid gold each year, these apples are mainly grown on contract by farmers and growers to include 360 acres of their own land.



The visit began with a whistle stop tour of the ever increasing manufacturing of cider. The apples are delivered and tipped into collection pits when harvested, here the apples are pre washed and sent through to pressing.



Once the liquid has been collected, the apple juice is subjected to pressure with all air removed to prevent oxidation. The liquid is sampled, tested and stored in mixing towers where other liquids and sugars may be added before fermentation. The fermentation process takes up to three months and takes place in the towers seen in the pictures. All waste products from processing the cider are sent to an anaerobic digester.



The company has the ability to fill barrels, bottles and cans at the factory before distributing across the UK and further. Following our meeting, Martin Thatcher was speaking to a number of people from Australia about expanding their distribution further.



It was apparent that the scale of manufacturing was enormous and the company's drive to be the biggest manufacturers of cider. The company are expanding their holding capacity of cider which was seen by the construction of a building to store 16 x 200,000L tanks.



Martin Thatcher informed the group that they were continually looking at developing different means for storing and distributing cider locally and globally. The company has also recently been re-branding the Thatchers Gold cider and the Somerset Haze along with investing £6.5 million into a marketing campaign.



The company also purchased the local pub back in 2005, and has renovated the building to a high standard. We were fortunate during the day to make use of the company owned pub for lunch and further cider sampling at the new bar.



On the second day, the group visited Mr John Alvis of Lye Cross Farm, a family owned business involving dairy production and cheese making located at the foot of Somerset's Mendip Hills, a few miles from the village of Cheddar. Along with the cheese processing, the family run an award winning farm shop which was busy on the day of our visit.

The farming activities which are run by the family are revolved in a large cycle:

Dairy cows produce the milk,

The milk is made into cheese,

The whey by-product is used to feed pigs,

The pig manure is used to spread on the land,

And the arable crops are grown on the land and fed to the dairy cows.

The farmland comprises of 4,500 acres of productive farmland, 500 acres of which is organic. 1,000 cows milked conventionally with 250 organic milking cows. The beef and young stock are reared on farms before replacing the herd, the bull calves are reared and sold finished in TB units. 18,000 pigs are finished on the farm each year, these are supplied in batches of 6,000 three times a year by a pig producer, the pigs are reared on a contract basis based on a weight gain.

In 1952, John Alvis began making cheese at Lye Cross Farm, the business making the cheese produces enough for the market demand, using supply chain partnerships with the motto 'Profit with Integrity'. The company produce 4,500 tonnes of cheese a year from circa 45 million litres of milk. 24% of the produce is exported to various countries including South Korea and America.

When the milk arrives, the product is tested before it is taken, if there are any antibiotics the milk would have to be dumped, a low cell count is also preferred as it effects the curding of the cheese. The milk is then pasteurised before being activated with starter culture and rennet before it is made into cheese. The product is then run onto cooling tables where the whey is separated from the curds. The curds bind together and are packed into cheddar stacks before being fed into a machine to mill. The next process is salting and mixing before being pressed in towers to form the cheddar blocks. These blocks are packed before storing then graded at two months of age.

Depending on the maturity of the blocks, the cheese can be left to mature for up to 18 months before it is cut and packaged for distribution. The company currently make a range of organic and conventional cheese which can be identified by the 'Lye Cross Farm' logo, although you might also find some of their cheese in your local Aldi store.

During a presentation, John Alvis showed the community work the business has been doing with schools, a 'Farmlink' charity was set up which allowed school children from the surrounding area to come and learn about farming, where the wool, milk, bacon, cheese and beef burgers come from "A classroom in the countryside". This has been increasing in support over the years and has a fantastic reaction from all the school children and teachers.



On behalf of the Future Farmers of Wales, we would like to thank Gavin Green of Lydney Park Farm, Martin of Thatchers Cider and John Alvis of Lye Cross Farm for kindly showing us around their businesses. Also a big thanks to all those who came, hope they enjoyed a good night out in Bristol and we look forward to the next outing.

