

Getting off to a good start

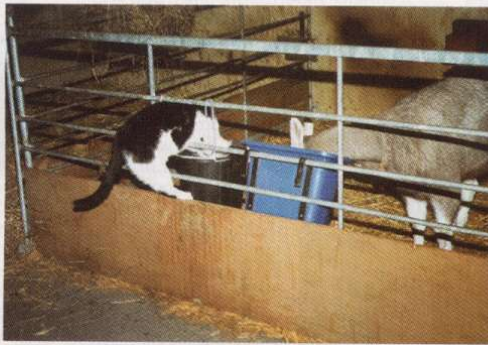
Paul Morris shares his secrets

My wife Janette and I have always enjoyed reading how other smallholders started, so we thought it was about time we related our experiences. In the past 20 years we had moved house four times to follow my career, but always kept to the south east. As we both enjoy gardening we managed to get houses with relatively large gardens for the price we could afford and the location (instead of a postage stamp size we got two postage stamps!). In the late 1990's the Independent on Sunday had a series running looking at properties around different parts of the country. What became very obvious was that prices were more affordable outside of the south east. We started off with "wouldn't it be nice to have an acre", then two acres then five acres then

In 1996 I decided to go freelance in my job. This meant that I could be working anywhere in the country so, if I am working away from home, home could be anywhere. This is when we seriously started looking at smallholding. To move we had two windows of opportunity as our youngest daughter was still at school, summer 2000 after her GCSE's or summer 2002 after A levels. We decided to go for summer 2000, but how?

First, we went on a two-day "Introduction to Smallholding" course held by Simon Jarrett in Neath, South Wales. We learnt a lot in our two days with Simon, including the saying "If you don't have to spend it, you don't need to earn it" - Janette got fed up with me repeating this as a mantra over the next few months

Two other lessons we learnt that we took to heart were "Get the house comfortable before you start on the land because when you come in from a wet cold day you want to be able to warm up and dry off in comfort or it starts to become a miserable experience" and "Do not do much to the land until you have lived with it for at least a few months so you can then decide how to organise it". One other bit of advice we were given, by someone who did not follow it much to their regret, "Get as much land as you can afford because if



you don't need it all you can always leave it alone or rent it out, but adding to an existing holding is more difficult".

For this course, and a subsequent visit to Wales for house hunting we stayed at the excellent cottage/B&B run by Roger and Jill Derbyshire near Brecon. They have a holding of five acres with goats, pigs and poultry and it was good to see how another holding was set up and run. In fact, they now run courses on pig keeping, one of which we attended in April 2002.

To cut a long story short, we sold our house in the south east in summer 1999, moving into rented accommodation for a year (this cuts out a lot of problems with the house buying chains) and bought our holding in mid-Wales in November 1999. Even though the surveyors report was less than complimentary about the property, we had to have more to it, sooner than we anticipated at more cost (such as re-roofing, replacing the central heating, even the multifuel stove needed a major overhaul). However, by the time we moved in during the summer of 2000, it was ready except for the kitchen where we had the Aga, an old sink on a base unit and a lot of boxes. However that was resolved by November when we had a new kitchen fitted.

The land

The property came with more land (27 acres) than we were looking for but we are leaving a large proportion alone for the wildlife. Most of it is on a gentle south facing slope so drainage should not be a problem - but it is! One of the

first jobs we had done was topping some of the fields. This was followed, during the wet winter of 2000-2001, with the digging of a new soak away for the septic tank - this was taken to a far corner of a field which is fenced off. We also had a duck pond dug in a soggy area of a field. This pond, together with about half of the field it was fenced off as the chicken/duck field.

We have had ditches dug (about 2000 metres!) most of which was reinstating the existing partially filled in ones.

Where possible, we used the spoil to recreate the banks alongside the ditches which will be planted with hedges and trees.

We have fenced off two larger fields and the other half of the chicken field. We used our agricultural contractor to put in the large posts for the gates and the corners, but we have put the fence posts in (hundreds of them) and put up the stock wire. As I am paranoid about stock escaping, and that we want wildlife corridors, most fencing is doubled. On the external boundaries, we are placing the new fence a few feet inside the existing fence, enabling the old hedges to re-establish properly. The existing internal hedges and the newly dug ditches and banks will be fenced each side, to both protect them from grazing and for the wildlife corridors.

We have had these three fields ploughed, rotavated, rolled, then seeded with wild meadow mixture. The first year it was left as it was still getting established. Last summer it had a good crop but the weather was so wet it was difficult to get it cut for hay. We did eventually get it cut after a couple of dry days - this had to be cut by a topper as the lane to our farm is too narrow for the contractor to get his normal equipment in. The next day we had heavy rain. The contractor managed to turn it a couple of times and get it baled in the following few days before the rain on the next day, although it could have done with a bit more drying. So we have over 100 bales of hay in our barn, but I would not call it good quality. An indication of how wet the fields were when the tractor

STARTING OUT

turning the hay got stuck in a wet patch and had to be towed out by another. This was the same place where I got my old Range Rover stuck, so I can now blame it on the ground conditions and not my poor off-road driving!

Vegetable Garden

To the rear of the house, behind the outbuilding, was a field that had an old polytunnel at the top and the rest was rough grazing. We had the rough grazing ploughed and rotavated and have been growing our vegetables on this. The first year we lost the battle with the weeds and had it rotavated a



second time. Last year was not so bad but it still needed a lot of weeding and my little petrol rotavator helped enormously. A big problem was the stones. I have got tons out, most of which are now in the gateways giving pathways over the mud. As a neighbour said, "Why do farmers always put their gates in the muddiest part of the field?"

Last year we noticed that the crops growing at the top ten feet of the vegetable plot were a lot better than the rest, in fact there was a distinct line across the field. We realised this was where the chickens run used to be, and so was better fertilised. This got us thinking, so we have not started fencing it off into pens. The first two are done and we have chickens fertilising the top pen and the bottom pen will be for the next lot of pigs. Year by year this will move across the plot so, in effect, we are putting pigs and chickens into our crop rotation system.

In the first year we put a new polytunnel at the top of the veg plot. We put the hoops in, dug the trenches then, guest what?, it rained and filled the trenches so we could not put the cover on for a couple of months. Even now, one end gets saturated with water. Here we have strawberry plants on ridges so at least they are out of the

water. They gave us a good early crop of strawberries, but this did not make up for our outdoor strawberries. One or two had ripened and the rest were coming along nicely when suddenly they were all gone - the magpies had stripped the lot.

Buildings

We had an old stone outbuilding that had been repaired with breeze blocks, but the roof was old leaking corrugated iron. This was OK for a small workshop and a store room but did not give us room for animals, equipment, hay etc, so we had a barn built. This was started in the summer of 2001. Some of the topsoil was taken off and 60 tons of shale was delivered to provide the hardcore for the base. Then it rained (is this beginning to sound familiar!). So the rest of the topsoil was taken off and we had to have 176 tons of stone delivered - ouch! The topsoil was taken to the bottom corner of the next field and the four wheel drive dumper truck got stuck - up past its axles in mud (in August and 20 feet above a new ditch!). The JCB had to pull it out and that only just managed to move. The barn was finally completed in December, along with a new roof over the existing outbuilding.

Animals Cats

From a local animal sanctuary we got a couple of black and white cats. Living outside all of the time they are free to roam and hunt where they have grown into effective hunters. Not only are they killing mice (which they eat) and voles (which they don't), they are also killing rats. Over the past few months we have had several dead rats around the outbuildings. A good investment! Sometimes they must catch so much that they are not interested in the food we give them, but always they enjoy a bowl of goats milk, it is important to feed and neuter farm cats.

Dogs

The first was a chocolate Labrador - Jasper. He is an intelligent friendly dog who loves a game of football. The biggest danger with him is getting lashed by the wagging tail. Next came Holly, a yellow Labrador. Although she

has a long pedigree, I am sure there is some greyhound and kangaroo in there somewhere. She is very fast, running like a greyhound and easily jumps ditches and other obstacles. When you ask her to sit she cannot as her back legs have enough spring tension to send her into orbit. She is not as clever as Jasper and sometimes cowers as if she was a beaten, ill treated dog (but obviously isn't) - we do not understand where this behaviour came from.

They have a tremendous sense of smell and love sniffing things in the fields and trying to dig the moles out, but cannot have any sense of taste. They love animal droppings and I have to protect the bean trenches where we are burying the straw and droppings from the chicken sheds. When we had pigs last year they tried very hard, putting their paws through the wire, to get at the pig manure - and that stuff is foul!

I now understand the phrase "wolfing your food down" because with these dogs it does not touch the sides, they eat so fast. I have also learnt the origin of "dog tired" - after a hard morning sniffing round the fields and chasing each other about. It is also quite amusing watching them find a place to sleep, one of Jaspers favourites is on a bale of hay with all four legs draped around the sides.

Chickens

These were the first stock we got and were (supposedly) Black Rocks from a local auction. They lived in an 8' by 4' chicken house I made (the size of a sheet of plywood). Although they looked good they were not the layers we expected, so we replaced these after a few months and got some cheap Warrens. These looked scrawny but laid very well. Our son-in-law gave them names (Warren Beatty, Warren Peace, Warrenty, Rabbit Warren). These lasted until we were given some pure-bred chicks that were hatched at the school where my daughter worked. She was also able to buy the incubator and "loan" it to us. Since then I have bought some more housing, converted some sheds to chicken houses (we bought a cheap 6' x 4' shed, strengthened the floor to put skids on it so it can be dragged, and cut a pop hole in the side). We now buy and sell some pure-bred eggs and chicks at a small local auction, we have had more eggs than we can eat, and of course had meat for the table.

We have been fortunate to have a very good neighbour Peter who, due to ill health no longer keeps any livestock,

STARTING OUT

has been a found of knowledge (especially with looking after chickens and helping us kill and prepare them) and has given us lots of assistance and has loaned us some equipment. Finally, in moving the chickens and trying to round them up, I have learnt the meaning of the expression "Bird Brain"!, and watching them "socialise" I now fully understand "pecking order" (not that I did not know having a wife and two daughters).

Ducks

When I was a child and I got into a mess, my mother used to call me a "mucky duck". I now know the origin of this expression. Although they were fun to keep and the eggs were good, they made a lot of mess using their beaks into the wettest parts of the land turning it into a quagmire. They were also destroying everything we were planting around the new pond. So these have been sold on and we will leave it a few years, allowing the pond to establish, before we get some more.

Geese

These were bought just hatched at an auction. Two went to our daughters

when she got her first house. That left us with two males and one female, so the surplus male we had for Christmas - the first time we have had goose and it was lovely - although the plucking was difficult. We will grow some more this year and include some in our Christmas hampers.

They are very good at keeping the grass down and are currently sharing a one acre field with a few chickens.

Pigs

We bought two Oxford Sandy and Blacks as weaners from Roger and Jill Derbyshire and grew these on to pork weight and had them slaughtered and prepared by a local butcher. Although one was a little fatty, they have given us some excellent meat. The leg joints, along with the chops and sausages, formed the bulk of the Christmas hampers to the family, and the feedback was "More!". For the first time, buying Christmas presents was easy - we did not buy any - we gave home produce and this was much appreciated.

Goats

We got two British Toggenburg goats from a local goatkeeper, one had

recently kidded and was in milk, the other we intended to put to the billy last year, but circumstances have changed so we are waiting another year.

Going back to fresh full cream milk was a wonderful experience, you forget what you miss. For those that have never

had goats milk, it does not taste "goaty", it is just a nice fresh creamy taste. We started making some cottage cheese, and at first it worked OK, but the last few batches have failed, we are not sure why. But yoghurt, I have got that sussed and it is wonderful. I strain the yoghurt through a cheesecloth so that four pints of milk leaves us with less than two pints of very thick creamy yoghurt. Plain it tastes like double cream with a hint of lemon (and it goes well on sweet puddings), but add a little honey and it is heavenly.

The future

We still have a lot of work to do in fencing the fields and planting the hedgerows. So far I have planted about 30 seedlings, mostly beech, but some oak and elderberry. I have another 30 ready to plant out, then it will be a case of buying in from local nurseries. We are not sure about keeping sheep, they seem too much trouble and the local butcher does very good lamb. We have thought about water buffalo, but need to get more fencing done before we look at that in more detail. The other possibility is horses, we would like Welsh Cobs and/or Suffolk Punches, but cannot yet invest the time nor money into this venture. Still, the time will come (but I am not so sure about the money).

So to those that are thinking about getting a smallholding, we would say go for it, but do your homework and plan accordingly, especially the finance side. It is easy to buy but difficult to make a living out of it, an alternative income is a necessity for most people. There is no fun living in "noble poverty" even though the TV programme makers seem to be looking for it (we followed up one of the adverts and they were not interested when we told them that I still work for a living).



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