



Case Study: Mercer Farming, Burton on Trent, Staffordshire, UK



The brothers Robert and Alec Mercer, are highly motivated to demonstrate that a viable business, animal welfare and sustainability lead to a better product for the end consumer. Drawing inspiration from their great-grandfather Percy, they combine traditional farming methods that respect both the livestock and land with an approach to business that sees them value the long term for themselves and their customers. Alec sees one of the

advantages of being a family farm is the confidence it brings to customers, “you can make those longer-term decisions, which gives customers the confidence that you are not just there for quick gain”. Their whole approach is driven by an ethos of combining the best in farming, innovative use of technologies such as solar power, that sees an integrated approach to the farm reflected in the product, Alec continued:

“Does someone buy pork from us because of our carbon [neutral] status? Do they buy from us because of the high welfare standards? No, they want to buy a tasty, ethically sourced product that doesn’t mean just the high animal welfare, it means everything that goes with it, it is not just one element.”

The brothers’ approach to agriculture has been shaped by numerous experiences. Both spent time studying agriculture at Newcastle University and are also Nuffield scholars. This academic background has also been combined with insights into the importance of low

density, high welfare as the future of pig and poultry production. The focus of the industry has changed over time, as Rob reflected, “myself and Alec have focused the business on high welfare and environmental aspects, whereas when Dad was farming, he was focused on low cost of production.” As well as supplying multiple retailers they also supply local butchers and direct sales to customers. Their approach has seen industry awards, recognition in the ‘Great Taste’ awards of their pork and regular visits by celebrity chefs. In line with the family ethos of the brand, Pip and Sally (Alec’s and Rob’s wives) have a section on the website dedicated to providing recipes and inspiration of what to cook with Packington Pork and Poultry.

Animal welfare is central to the Mercer’s approach, and they are part of the RSPCA’s ‘Freedom Food’ scheme to ensure high standards throughout the life of the animal. Their commitment has been acknowledged in industry awards as well as by Compassion in World Farming. The pigs are born and raised in small outdoor paddocks, with appropriate shelter and access to the sow. Once weaned they are moved to more protective enclosures and finally into when hardy enough they move to larger paddocks. They spend their entire lives outside, with freedom to move around and express their natural behaviours. The poultry spends the first three weeks of their lives indoors, as they are prepared for the outdoors by a gradual lowering of temperature. They are then given access to go outdoors and graze on established pasture, with enhancements such as shade shelters, perches, as well as food and water. All the birds are returned to the shed at night to protect them from predators. Alongside this Rob has stopped using antibiotics in the pigs’ rations, sourcing all the soya for it from sustainable sources and adding selenium for pig and consumer welfare. This is a combination of ethos and pragmatic business for Rob:

“A lot of this is driven by ethos and how we want to do things, the antibiotics thing, I think we should stop feeding pigs antibiotics altogether, but if in the meantime, I can use that to my market advantage, well happy days. But it is fundamentally driven by how we want to do things as opposed to are we going to get any direct reward.”

Through extensive use of PV solar the farm is carbon neutral, and through being involved in agri-environment schemes for more than twenty years the biodiversity has been significantly enhanced, with over 80,000 trees planted and a tripling of the number of bird species observed. Alec explains that they see this as part of the role of LEAF Marque, providing independent verification of the impacts their approach is having:

“There are a lot of companies out there with these statements about their high ethical standards but there is nothing behind it, but if we can demonstrate that we are going to these levels with the environmental and the renewables you don’t do that unless you genuinely believe that.”

As Rob adds, “it is important to us that we do what we say we are doing” and LEAF Marque provides that opportunity. Both Alec and Rob argue that customers view the product in an integrated way, which is mirrored in their approach, Alec explains:

“People care about the welfare of animals that is a given, but if you can demonstrate that you are being proactive in other areas, carbon credits what have you, it adds more weight.”

Alec continues, that after four years of LEAF Marque certification, “we have never had the discussion that LEAF needs us to do this, so we’ve got to do it” rather the LEAF Marque reflects and accredits initiatives that they want to take. Although with so many enterprises:

“We are quite diverse, so we can be a little bit sporadic in what we are doing, and it does help tie it in a little bit better, to give a us a more whole understanding of what we are doing.”

In this way, LEAF Marque forms an important part of the portfolio of schemes and initiatives that are helping take the Brothers’ vision for the farm forward.

The farm receives over 90 school visits a year, involving over 6000 children, highlighting the significant commitment to education made by the Mercers. During Open Farm Sunday, they host some of their farming neighbours on the Packington Pork site, and Rob notes the pride it engenders in his team “the guys really enjoy getting the farm looking absolutely bang on for the big day and that has a positive effect”. For Rob, this is part of their wider commitment to education:

“I think that farmers often have a view that the general public and don’t know what happens on farms, but in our example, we have had 3500 people come and want to learn what happens on the farm, I think that people would like to know more but don’t have the opportunity to learn.”

As Alec reflects, this openness to the public and transparency is part of their approach to business and is central to building their approach to agriculture, he notes that many other businesses are:

“Wanting true continuity of supply from a credible source who is not just giving you good healthy pigs but is doing everything else and who they can align with. On each of our farms we have the attitude that we would like people to come and see it, it is always open because we will stand by our product any day of the week, which gives people a lot of confidence.”