



Case Study: Ragley Home Farms, Warwickshire, UK



The Ragley Home Farms are part of the wider Ragley Estate. In addition to over 40,000 annual visitors to the historic hall, it has a sawmill, a range of properties and a butchery. Farm Manager, Hamish Stewart argues that it is important to understand that, “we are a profit-making business, if we don’t make a profit then none of the rest of it will happen”. Farming over 1400 hectares the farm focuses on arable crops and sheep. Although an early adopter of LEAF Marque its status had lapsed, and in the last 18 months Hamish has "re-ignited it".

Business impetus

The opportunity to supply Jordan's with oats was the impetus to renew LEAF Marque, but equally the synergies became apparent as in areas such as biodiversity “we were already doing it, and LEAF Marque gives us the recognition that we were doing it”. Although there are "sideline" benefits as well, as it encourages “looking at parts of the business that we would otherwise have overlooked.” Initial quick wins such as looking at improving continual usage of electricity in lighting and grain conditioning to improve efficiency has evolved into a more integrated review of this mixed farm. It became apparent that one aspect of the farm was close to the other and improvements would come in unison:

“In terms of fuel of usage ideally, I would like to reduce our cultivation intensity, we need to get our soils in a better state to make that work properly. Cultivation are done on a field by field basis rather than a broad brush across the whole estate; I actively avoid what I call recreational cultivation.”

To improve the soils, Hamish and his team:

“Have started to use a lot more organic fertilisers, and we are trying to kick-start the soil biology a bit more, almost feeding the soils to get them to perform better. I think that by taking that approach I would like to think we will increase our yields without increasing our input, so the efficiency will improve, diluting our carbon footprint as well.”

This integrated approach carries over into questions of crop protection:

“We take our advice from independent sources, doing our agronomy in-house gives me more of an informed outlook on the whole input side of things, and we probably take more of a critical approach as to how we are doing our pest and disease control.”

In part, this perspective stems from a change in the rotation of the crops on the farm:

“We are going to extend our rotation with longer gaps between crops and a wider range of crops, during the winter there will be less applications and oats are a low-intensity crop. with regards to LEAF Marque it is a bit of a chicken and egg situation, which came first?”



About 30% of the lambs produced on the farm go to the Butchery on the estate, although at present LEAF Marque is not displayed. The rest are sold through a co-operative group. Central to their production is high welfare standards:

“We have a full-time shepherd who looks after the stock. In order to maximise the output of your flock, you can't have animals that are sick or who are lame, keeping animals to the highest standards and profitability are pretty tightly linked as far as I'm concerned.”

Long term environmental commitment

The long-term commitment of the Farm to the improvement the environment means that there are sixty miles of field margins which have been established for between ten and fifteen years. In recent years, these have been enhanced with flowers and a broad range of birds are now thriving. Hamish notes that part of the success is that, “For LEAF Marque, like all of these things to really work, you have to be enthusiastic about it.” Part of being on the estate means that there are often members of the public passing, and that “The wider estate makes us quite conscious of what we do”. To balance that scrutiny is the opportunity to show to visitors what the farm is achieving, and “if you get them right, it is quite pleasing to show those features off.”

A LEAF Demonstration Farm

As the manager of a LEAF Demonstration Farm, Hamish feels he benefits from the opportunity to network with his peers, “as part of being a LEAF Demonstration Farm there are regular events, so I have more contact with other farmers, and so you are probably more specifically discussing ideas with others who share the same goals.” Recent training from LEAF has reinforced to him the support LEAF provides, “there is more support in speaking to people beyond farming, help in singing the song of what we do.” In using Twitter and plans to communicate with visitors to the Estate in new ways, Hamish argues that:

“The countryside looks how it looks because of agriculture, how agriculture goes on and the environmental schemes for example, what we do has a huge impact on how these things look.”