

Norfolk contractor puts quality before quantity

A NORFOLK farming couple are reaping the rewards of a business strategy which puts quality before quantity.

Oliver and Hannah Arnold, who trade as the Spring Farm Partnership, started farming seven years ago. As well as finishing 200 store cattle and recently purchasing a suckler herd, they run a successful contracting business.

Mr Arnold looks after the practical farming side of the business at Felthorpe, about nine miles north of Norwich. He is also in charge of the contracting, while wife Hannah looks after the accounts and the billing.

“I’ve always wanted to be a contractor – ever since leaving college and travelling the world,” explains Mr Arnold, who has worked on farms in Australia and Russia.

Each season Spring Farm expands into new ventures. They have recently bought an artic lorry. “We use lorries quite a bit throughout the season so it was quite a natural step to own one.” Explains Oliver “Also we have purchased a self-propelled Terra Gator for spreading solid manure. This machine has numerous benefits over other spreaders, low ground pressure, variable speed spinning discs, full gps and weighing. “I believe muck-spreading on this sort of scale is the way forward,” he says. “It means we can offer a full NVZ-compliant service to the farmer with GPS-guided applications and a computer printout showing exactly what has been spread where.”

Oliver & Hannah have 4 full time staff and up to 5 casuals working for us at peak times of the year. “We have a great team of men and we’re constantly expanding into different areas. But everything we are involved with has a connection to what we farm ourselves, because it gives us an understanding of what our customers want and expect of us.”

This philosophy has stood the contracting side of the business in good stead. It now looks after about 450ha (1100 acres), which consists mainly of grassland but also some cereals and sugar beet.

The Arnolds are also involved with a feed company called Feedmix, which specialises in livestock feed supplements, concentrates and minerals, managing the firm and its transport across the East Anglian region.

“Again, what we do with Feedmix dovetails into what we do with our own livestock on the farm so it works really well. We run and service three lorries out of our own premises which visit farms where they mix bespoke rations for pigs, sheep, beef and poultry.”

Machinery repairs are mainly carried out in house. “I’m quite proud of the workshop. So far as I’m concerned, to be a good contractor you have to have an excellent workshop. It helps to keep down costs – and we can pass on that benefit to our customers.”

With soaring fuel costs, the correct choice of tractor has also been important. Mr Arnold is a big Fendt fan and has recently purchased a Fendt 936. Not only are the Fendts reliable, they are also economical to run, he says.

“Since starting contracting we have owned 6 Fendts and between them they have never let us down in the field, despite doing more than 16,000 hours between them. They use less fuel and I reckon we save about 100 litres a day over some other tractors. NFM are our local dealers and we get a first class service from them. At the moment we own 3 Fendts and 1 Fastrac. The latter is a good tractor but uses old technology and has a drinking problem (diesel)!”.

Contracting services on offer include maize drilling, square baling and wrapping, silaging using a self-propelled 7500 John Deere forager, straw baling and carting, muck spreading, ploughing, 360 work using a 14t machine, general haulage 44t lorry and bulker, equipment hire of topper, trailers etc.

Oliver tries as much as possible to do whole jobs but we still do some man and tractor work for some farms because either it fits in well with our seasons or they have treated us very well in the past or both. One such job is de-stoning for B & C potatoes for about 6 weeks before the start of grass.

But the most unusual customer is Norwich Airport. “We do a lot of work for them, including all their grass management. This involves much more than merely making sure the airport grass is kept neat. While farmers are encouraged to manage grassland and cereal crops to attract birds, the opposite is true of grassland management at an airport.

In fact, the sward height at Norwich Airport is maintained at a strict height to make it less attractive for birds. Also clover etc must be discouraged from growing as flock birds will land to graze this causes serious problems for planes during take off and landing. “Whenever I go there, I have to take my farming hat off and put my airport hat on,” says Mr Arnold.

The airport has had to modernise its operational procedures and has changed since Mr Arnold first took on the grass management contract some four years ago. “It was much smaller then but today it is busier and run along the same lines as Heathrow or Stansted. There are more rules and regulations.” This has meant that we are undertaking tests and training so we can operate teams around the airfield with out the need for a constant escort.

This winter they have also converted an old piggery into a cattle shed and also undertaken ditching and hedging work on an old derelict farm in addition to maintaining the Feedmix lorries, machine maintenance and stock work etc.

Too much work, though, can be a bad thing, says Mr Arnold. “Anyone can be a busy fool. We try our hardest never to let customers down and communication is the key – which doesn’t necessary mean telling people what they want to hear.”

He is eager, though, not to run other contractors down. “There are some extremely good contractors out there. But some of them chase huge acreages whereas we don’t, which means we can offer our customers the best service.”

When it comes to forage maize, for example, doing a good job is vital. “You can’t just get bigger and bigger, looking after customers 50 miles away if it means neglecting loyal local customers on your doorstep. It doesn’t make any sense.”

On this score, quality always comes ahead of quantity. “We don’t ever aim to do huge amounts. We limit ourselves because it means doing a good job. It also means we don’t rush on to do the next job. We’ll stick around to complete what we set out to do.”

That said, contracting is a young man’s game, believes Mr Arnold, who is 32. “If you’re good at it, you work hard. I love it although I can imagine that in 20 years or so I’ll want to quieten down a little. It’s not the sort of thing you’ll want to do forever more.”

For now though, farming and contracting are very much here to stay. “I love meeting my customers – they span the complete rural spectrum and I enjoy keeping them happy. The key to success is to make sure you enjoy what you do. If you don’t, you’ll never do it well.”

To contact Oliver Arnold, call 01603 866226 (office) or 07768 766742 (mobile) or email oliverarnold@btconnect.com

Farmers Guide March 2008