

Promising start for new contracting business

With a little luck and an awful lot of hard work, Oliver (Olly) and Hannah Arnold have achieved much in the last few years on their farm and expanding the contracting business. “We started Spring Farm Partnership in 2000” said Olly, who at that time was working for a nearby large arable farmer and contractor. Whilst Olly now manages the farm and contracting business, Hannah still fits her consultancy work for Samuel Rose, managing farm land and obtaining grants, around the ever expanding mountain of farm and business paperwork and motherhood – the couple are the proud parents of two and a half year old Jack and seven month old Kate.

The business began with 30 heifers which were fattened in a rented shed using a digger and beet feeder bucket. “We took over Spring Farm, near Taverham, Norwich the following year which allowed us to buy younger steers to graze before finishing” continued Olly “and a large purposely built livestock shed now enabled us to expand the cattle numbers and finish young bulls.” The couple had hoped to be up to 300 head of cattle by this stage but subsidy changes have caused them to limit the finishing at about 200 head a year, but there is a possibility of them starting a suckler herd to try and help control variable costs. “The uncertainty caused by the subsidy changes will give opportunities to the young”

Jack’s birth, soon after the move to Spring Farm was the catalyst for Olly’s decision to leave his full time job and launch his contracting business – making a future for his family and giving him more opportunity to enjoy them. Olly has been involved in contracting work since leaving Easton College with an NDA in Agriculture. “I’ve worked for contractors and farms in this country and on harvesting gangs in Australia and Russia” continued Olly “this experience, and the many contacts we made whilst running the farm, including buying and selling cattle, silage and haylage has been a huge advantage in starting the contracting business.”

After being let down by a local contractor, Olly began silage contracting producing square bales which he believes are best. “A square bale’s structural strength is immediately destroyed by the removal of the string, causing it to fall apart, making grazing and mixing easier and quicker. For our haylage customers, the ability to produce 3 foot cubes and the bale falling apart in wedges are a winning combination.”

Using a TMR system mixed in the Peecon Feeder wagon the Partnership looked towards maize. “We found it to be a valuable feed source and I took the opportunity to work with Peter Barrell and learn more about maize production”. The Partnership looked at buying a forager harvester, but felt Norfolk could not support an additional forager. Therefore, when due to family commitments, P&A Barrell and sons (Shipdham) decided to scale down their business to one forager Olly purchased the John Deere 6850 from them. “With silage baling taking a knock due to the rising cost of plastic and the proposed waste regulations, some larger producers are looking to clamp their first crops” said Olly.

This year also sees the business running one of their tractors with a potato gang. “It’s pulling a de-stoner. The work fits in very well as the tractor won’t be busy until the beginning of May.” said Olly “We are lucky with all our operators, their experience is a great asset to the business. “We’ve also begun ploughing an increasing acreage” said Olly “as well as taking on the contract farming of a neighbouring farm.”

Starting a new business is hard. “We appreciate the risk our customers took when they used us in our first year. The trust and confidence they had in us will not be forgotten – such as Trevor Child whom we also buy many of our cattle from.” Further Olly has a great deal of respect and praise for local dealers who have helped and supported them whilst establishing the business. “Randell NFM and Ben Burgess Norwich Depot have been particularly helpful” said Olly “along with Agricredit’s Alex Shulver whose professional and practical advice has been invaluable.”

The future looks bright for this hard working young couple. “We’re not greedy, we would like to continue to build up our business and offer a sensibly priced, quality service” said Olly who helps keep costs down by carrying out some fabrication work and most of the servicing. “The fact that we were using silage for ourselves gave us an advantage over some contractors as we have first hand experience of what the end user wants. Also, our light land allows us to concentrate on customers requirements – we often find ourselves doing our silage in the rain” laughed Olly.

Initially as a customer I have learnt the key points needed to be a good contractor are:

- ✓ The owner must always be operating within the team where possible
- ✓ Communication with the customer is everything – and tell the truth to the customer even if it is not what he or she wants to hear
- ✓ Small acres are just as important as large
- ✓ Always remember bad news travels faster than good

The business has in the past followed where the cattle enterprise has led us – this will always continue.....

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