

Suzanne & Julian Vaughan-Spencer

Oakwood Farm, Storrington Road, Thakeham. RH20 3QT.

In 2015 we purchased our 19 acres of agricultural land with the intention of creating an organic smallholding to grow our own food and develop a farm business selling produce to the local community.

We are now in a position to request planning permission to build a farmhouse. We own and live in a property, which we would have to sell in order to fund the farmhouse; thereby adding to the property market. Being at the farm 24/7 would mean we could develop our business further and eventually have enough income to employ a worker.

Progress on the land was slow at first. We registered with the Soil Association to start a 3 year conversion of the land to organic status. The soil had been degraded by intensive cereal farming and was devoid of nutrients. It was necessary to start building fertility into the soil, so that we could pursue the aim of running a mixed farm which could be nurtured sustainably, productively and organically. Our priority was to plant nitrogen fixing crops and trees. To allow frequent rotation of crops and livestock, we created “lanes” on the land, edged with Alder and Hazel trees, a means of agroforestry, which helps with fertility of the land, whilst increasing biodiversity.



Figure 1. Clover growing for fertility after the crop has been harvested

Our latest venture is a flock of 114 laying hens. This means keeping an eye out for any escapees dawn 'til dusk. We have trained our dogs to alert us if there are any foxes around.



Figure 2 Mixed breeds of organic egg-laying hens

Looking after hens is an all day long affair. Feeding, watering and mucking out are some of the daily tasks, along with collecting the eggs. The eggs are quality checked and boxed, ready for the machine twice a day. Everything is done by hand with care.



Figure 3 Collecting egg

We have built a sales kiosk to house a vending machine, so that the eggs are available to buy every day. There have been teething problems with the machine but because there is always someone available, we have been able to help our customers with the use of the machine, as necessary.

On Saturday mornings, we have been selling our meat from the kiosk freezer. This is proving to be one of the more profitable sources of income for the farm.



Figure 4 Sales Kiosk

Our aim has always been to be as self-sufficient and environmentally responsible as possible, by growing grain and cutting hay to feed livestock. This keeps our costs down financially and is helpful to the environment by reducing the carbon footprint of the farm. The different livestock of a traditional mixed farm, compliment each other and help to get the most out of the land, with the least amount of impact on the environment.



Figure 5 Some of our livestock

With livestock, comes responsibility; there is always a list of animal husbandry tasks to complete and it's a good day when things run smoothly and the sheep behave themselves.



Figure 6 Lambs waiting to be inspected

By building a barn with facilities we are able to store the machinery and hay. The barn has played a major part in our self sufficiency and sustainability, by providing us with all the water we need for ourselves, our livestock and our growing. We do not have a mains water connection. We have not drilled a bore hole or dug a well to tap into the water table. We also installed a sewage treatment plant which will take care of our waste indefinitely.

At present, we have capacity to store 40,000 litres of water, collected from our roof. The footprint of the barn is 270 m². With an average yearly rainfall in the Pulborough area of 780mm, this means our barn has the potential to capture 210,600 litres in a year. This would sustain a family of 4 with an average water usage of 140 litres each daily. A new building would also increase the capacity to collect more water.

Another source of water collection for consideration, would be the digging of a small lake, to act as a reservoir to collect run off in very heavy rainfall. The lie of the land lend itself to this idea. This would also attract a different array of wildlife to our thriving organic oasis.

If permission were to be given for the building of a farmhouse, the barn roof would also play another important & self-sufficient role. Solar panels would be installed, supplying electricity for house and barn together.

A desire to protect the environment is foremost in our plans to build a house made from Hempcrete. This sustainable way of building would create a carbon negative building, as lime absorbs the carbon dioxide released during its manufacture. The hemp component locks away carbon for the lifetime of the building. A house made by Hempcrete construction is a moisture-regulating and highly insulative material which eliminates the need for mechanical ventilation, reducing electricity usage and increasing the amount of green energy fed back into the national grid.

Our farm is a family affair. Both daughters are involved in the running of the business, albeit alongside their fulltime employment. Our elder daughter lives locally and is always an extra pair of hands in an emergency. Her help with the general poultry duties at the weekend is invaluable. She books her annual leave to coincide with lambing and is committed to take on the role of full-time farmer when we are no longer able to do so.