

# Discovering Farming in Britain

Farming is the age-old practice of producing crops and livestock for food, fuel and fibre. This fact sheet gives a simple and brief outline of farming in Britain.

## Development

The origins of human civilisation are closely linked to the development of agriculture more than 10,000 years ago, when the nomadic lifestyle of primitive hunter-gatherers was gradually replaced by human settlements producing the first domesticated plants and animals. Over many hundreds of years, the application of more scientific techniques and increasing mechanisation, have brought dramatic changes in the structure and efficiency of farming.

Modern agriculture is a highly competitive, global industry. It provides the first link in a sophisticated food chain serving the requirements of a world population which is increasing in numbers and in standard of living and demanding more and more food and better quality food – in particular more meat products.

At the same time worries about fossil fuel supplies are producing new farm enterprises like fuel for heating, light and transport.

Farmers also are adapting to climate change by growing new crops and using new techniques and by finding ways to cope with the increasing risks to their crops and animals which a more unpredictable climate is bringing about.

## Structure

In the UK, farmers manage more than 75% of our total land area. As the nation's biggest primary industry, British agriculture supplies about three quarters of the food we need which can be grown here. Farm businesses also stimulate employment and economic activity in associated supply sectors for inputs such as seeds, feedingstuffs, agrochemicals, fuel and machinery.

Today, just over half a million people are directly employed in UK agriculture on some 311,000 individual holdings and farming together with the food and drink industry accounts for some 14% of the British workforce.

Britain's farms are generally larger and more specialised than those in other European countries. In 2005 we were the largest producer of sheep meat in the EU 25, third largest producer of milk and fourth largest producer of beef

Geography and climate have had a major influence on our pattern of farming. Arable production is largely concentrated on the eastern side of the country, whose drier, flatter landscape is more suited to growing crops such as cereals, oilseeds, root crops and field vegetables.

The green hills and wetter conditions to the west of Britain are more suitable for grazing livestock, and provide the main centre for rearing beef cattle, sheep and dairy cows.

## Objectives

Changing priorities in the way food is produced and how our countryside is managed have also influenced farming practices in recent decades. In the years immediately following the Second World War, the need to reverse Europe-wide food shortages brought a dramatic

surge in agriculture's productivity as farmers were encouraged by Government support policies to increase the amount of food produced.

Farmers have been so successful in responding to this challenge that greater emphasis is now placed on meeting environmental goals, such as protecting areas of natural beauty and preserving countryside habitats for wild flowers, birds and mammals. In an increasingly free and open world market, the new challenge facing Britain's farmers is to produce safe, wholesome food at competitive rates while safeguarding the countryside as a haven for wildlife and a place for people to visit and enjoy.

## Types of Farming

Farming in Britain comprises many different activities, according to the region and its suitability in terms of geography, climate, soil type and accessibility of resources.

So, for example, grazing livestock such as cattle and sheep are mainly found in the upland pasture lands of Britain and the wetter lowland grasslands of the west, while the flatter, more fertile areas of the country are better suited to growing crops.

Many types of farming complement each other in terms of use of outputs and use of resources. For example by-product straw from cereal production is used as feed and bedding material for livestock. Poultry, for example, are fed on a grain-based diet, and are mainly reared in predominantly arable areas. Dairy units are often linked to cereal farms, with the crops providing winter feed and straw for the cows, and the livestock in turn providing manure to fertilise the fields.

Bearing in mind that several enterprises can often be found on the same farm, British agriculture can be divided into the following broad categories.

## Arable Farming

This is the large-scale production of crops for human and animal consumption. Arable farming accounts for more than a third of the total agricultural area in the UK. The main crops grown are wheat, barley, oats, oilseed rape, maize for animal feeds, potatoes and sugar beet. New crops are also emerging, such as linseed for oil and hemp for fibre production.

## Horticulture

This is the broad term applied to the specialist production of fresh produce. Horticulture covers a wide range of different activities, from growing salad crops in glasshouses to outdoor production of field vegetables, top fruit and soft fruit growing to the cultivation of ornamental flowers and pot plants.

## Crops for fuel

There is increasing interest among farmers in producing crops for bio-fuels and in growing energy crops for electricity generation and local heating systems. Government is committed to expanding production but the rate of expansion will depend on how the price of fossil oil moves over the next few years and on the value of the land concerned for growing food crops. Other papers in the 'Discovering' series explore crops for fuel in more detail.

## Dairy Farming

There are around 2 million dairy cows in the United Kingdom, producing an average of 6,800 litres of milk each every year and also providing a supply of calves for beef production. Some three-quarters of Britain's dairy farms are found to the west of the country, in herds averaging 84 cows per farm. Dairy cows graze outdoors for most of the summer months and are kept indoors during the winter.

## Beef and sheep

Cattle and sheep breeding for beef and lamb production is concentrated in the upland areas of Britain, with young animals often moved to lowland areas for finishing before sale.

## Pigs and Poultry

Production of pigs and poultry in Britain is a specialised and expensive business, with most stock reared in large, purpose built indoor buildings under carefully controlled conditions. The poultry sector mainly comprises the rearing of broiler chickens and turkeys for meat, and laying hens for egg production.

In order to reduce capital expenditure on buildings, and to meet the increasing requirement for 'welfare friendly' systems of production, there is an increasing interest in outdoor or free range systems. About one in three laying hens are nowadays free range and a similar proportion of breeding pigs.

## Hill Farming

Britain's hill and upland regions cover more than 40% of the nation's total agricultural area. They are important for their contribution to sheep and beef production and because they help sustain the hill landscapes which are such an important part of the national scene. Without farming these would disintegrate into rough untidy scrubby land which would not be nearly as attractive to visitors. Because of the difficulties they face due to the harsh conditions, farmers in our uplands qualify for special forms of financial support to help them manage the countryside and to maintain employment in areas where few alternatives exist.

## Sources and more information

All statistics above are for 2006 unless otherwise stated. For updating and more information about British farming statistics see the Defra website at <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/quick/agri.asp> and the Defra report 'Agriculture in the UK' at <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/publications/auk/2006/05%20Chapter%203%20The%20Structure%20of%20the%20Industry.pdf>

European statistics come from the EU's Eurostat website at [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?\\_pageid=1090,30070682,1090\\_33076576&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1090,30070682,1090_33076576&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL)

British Free Range Egg Producers Association,  
<http://www.theranger.co.uk/consumers/index.htm>

British Pig Executive <http://www.bpex.org/>

Updated by Alan Spedding, 03 September 2007