

Client Focus: Bagthorpe Farm, Norfolk



Organic is dynamic

Situated in the beautiful, unspoilt countryside of rural North Norfolk, close to the county's picturesque coast and within an 'organic corridor' close to the famous Sandringham and Houghton Hall estates, the 640-acre Bagthorpe Farm hasn't looked back since going fully organic five years ago.

"Organic production won't be for everyone, but we feel it's the best way to make the most productive use of the light, free-draining sandy loams in this low-rainfall area," says Nick Walton, who manages the 300-hectare farming business.



Our Grade 4 land is ideal for growing vegetables, so over the last decade we have made them our focus."

After studying management accountancy at university, Nick followed what he describes as a well-trodden path in this profession by working for a range of companies

in the FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods) sector, latterly in London for an American multi-national.

Feeling like 'a cog in a wheel' and remote from the practical side of business operations, he longed to work 'at the coal face', being involved with customers, part of the sales and marketing function, running a business and being responsible for it. So, in 2007, Nick and his wife Emily, who worked in the music industry, decided to move back to her family home in Norfolk. Outlining the decision, he states:

"Bagthorpe was a mixed farm and partly organic, which interested me as I saw potential to develop that side of the business at a time when demand was growing."

Nick, who had no background in farming, admits it was a steep learning curve. "Most people who aren't involved in agriculture don't understand anything about it, how farms operate or how food gets to their table. They think that farmers just plant crops in the autumn, close the gate and spend the winter months shooting, but nothing could be further from the truth. Especially where livestock and vegetables are involved, as they are here, the involvement is full-on and year-round, so I never stand still and am constantly learning. Most people wouldn't want or be willing to make that level of commitment."

"Bagthorpe Farm had been operating a part conventional, part organic system since the late 1980s and my father-in-law's decision then to install irrigation across the farm was transformational, but it was always difficult to manage two conflicting systems. The Grade 4 soil here cannot generate the high yields and profitability required to only produce conventional cereals. We didn't have the scale or risk appetite to grow huge areas of one crop and neither did we want to go down the route of contract farming, becoming ever larger and taking on big overheads just to stand still.

"I felt that, as in most industries, specialisation was the key, so in 2016 we converted to a fully organic system which makes the most productive use of the land, continually improves our most precious asset, the soil, and allows different types of farming to be financially viable. This can only be done effectively through careful soil management, having livestock to put fertility into the soil, operating a long rotation which includes nitrogen-fixing clover leys, and eliminating chemicals and pesticides which harm the soil, wildlife and natural environment.

"Now, we operate a mixed organic farm, producing fantastic organic vegetables, cereals and beef cattle raised on grass, with two- or three-year multi-species leys playing a significant role in raising fertility."



its production systems, the business employs five full-time and up to twenty part-time staff.

"Nothing is sown without an end market and, based on experience, now we only deal with customers who specialise in organic produce to avoid wasting time explaining what it is and why it carries a premium.

"Packing and supplying smaller outlets generate the best returns. We specialise in onions, and a large investment in a specialist store allows us to grade and pack produce on site for a range of customers, from local box schemes, wholesalers and independent retailers to national box schemes and packer/supermarkets.

A changing approach

Until 2005, the farm had its own suckler herd, the cows calving during spring and summer. Now, Nick buys eight-month-old organic store cattle and takes them through to 28 months, finishing around 80 per year, although followers mean that there are up to 150 on the farm at any one time. Land is also rented to an owner/manager who produces organically reared pigs which end up on the shelves of a major premium supermarket.

Currently, the rotation comprises two years of arable crops after leys, usually potatoes or onions, followed by carrots or parsnips, then barley for seed which is undersown with grass and clover to continue the cycle.

In a good year, organic yields can approach those of crops produced conventionally, but every season is different. The exceptionally dry conditions in 2022 were good for potatoes and onions, although not so much for carrots, while in a wet year such as 2021, soil fertility, weed and disease challenges mean that yields and organic premiums can vary greatly.

"We grow a range of crops and varieties which best suit our soil type and climate, as well as the biological and cultural challenges. Because we don't subscribe to the 'bigger is better' philosophy, varieties are selected not solely on yield but primarily for fantastic flavour, overall quality and because they are packed full of vitamins and minerals.

"Our rotation consists of one-third vegetables, one-third grass and one-third spring barley. We produce 150-160 acres of vegetables, including 70 acres of brown and red onions,

mainly from seed, 30 acres of early and maincrop carrots, 30 acres of early, maincrop and salad potatoes, 30 acres of parsnips, plus beetroot and golden beet. Drilling begins in March with spring barley, carrots, onions and parsnips, late-sown carrots and parsnips going in at the beginning of June when lifting of early carrots begins."

Controlling weeds is one of Nick's biggest challenges. With no herbicides or pesticides to fall back on, he relies on cultural and mechanical methods. Requiring significant labour at peak times, the job of keeping crops clean also involves several different types of mechanical hoes and a thermal weeder, which is used to burn off weeds, and volunteers to leave clean stale seedbeds.

With Emily running the enterprise's glamping business, which comprises canvas-clad biodomes plus a completely custom-built and unique wooden cabin, Nick focuses on the farm, becoming even more technically proficient and making sure that Bagthorpe is at the forefront of the organic sector. Soil Association, LEAF and Red Tractor Assured Produce certified to ensure the integrity of



Our largest customers are Riverford Organic Farmers and Abel & Cole, who provide sufficient volumes to run our operation at the scale we do and have the confidence to invest in the future."

"The year 2020 brought a huge upturn in demand for our produce as the lockdowns made many consumers reluctant to go out for food, choosing to have it delivered instead. Box schemes really took off and it was good for our business, but demand is returning to more normal levels."





Nick Walton



Professional advice pays dividends

"Professional advisors are key to running any successful business, which is where our connection with Larking Gowen is very valuable."

Nick adds, "When I came into the business, the existing accountant was providing a good general accountancy service but, in my view, we needed a firm with specialist staff and in-depth knowledge of the farms and estates sector. Larking Gowen is that firm! It has a reputation for being the best in the sector and its scale of operation gives the wide reach and ability needed to provide us with access to the latest information and advice.

"Moving our business to Larking Gowen has been very beneficial. Bruce Masson and Laurie Hill participate in every aspect of our business, from advising on the legal structure and tax planning to day-to-day accountancy issues. They find the best solutions and take care of the behind-the-scenes aspects which ensure that we operate efficiently, allowing me to focus on the practical side of managing an increasingly complex farming business.

"Unlike government, where politicians change constantly and few have any detailed knowledge of the sectors for which they are 'responsible' and represent, farming is a complex, capital-intensive, long-term business

which deserves support. The original Agriculture Act 1947 came about because the post-war Attlee government wanted to achieve a positive balance of payments, lower the amount of food imported and maximise agricultural productivity. Yet, over 70 years later, when The Agriculture Act 2020 was first published in 2018, its lack of content on food production and food security was disturbing.



Paying money to farmers from the public purse is a hard-sell politically, but the Basic Payment Scheme has been a lifeline for our sector and the many associated industries which rely on it."

"There is no question that farming is being adversely impacted by this self-inflicted political uncertainty. The lack of long-term strategy makes it difficult to see a clear future, and the resulting knee-jerk reactions which some farmers have been forced into taking will result in a mishmash of land uses, such as biofuels and solar, detracting from food production. Surely, making sure that adequate food is always available to consumers at reasonable prices should be any nation's priority?"

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