



# Innovation and diversification have been hallmarks of this Norfolk farming family for over 100 years

Innovation and diversification are nothing new for the Mack family, who have farmed in Norfolk for four generations, spanning 111 years. Based at Grange Farm, Surlingham, close to the River Yare and Rockland Broad, they've constantly developed new ideas, adapted to changing times and introduced novel ways of working to take the family business forward.

Tim was the third generation to take the helm of the enterprise which his grandfather had started in 1913. After studying at Shuttleworth College, in Bedfordshire, and then spending a year in Australia, aged 21, Tim returned to the family farm. It was then a 500-acre arable and beef enterprise employing seven men. Now aged 74, and a Larking Gowen client for five decades, he's since added another 250 acres of adjoining land, so the family now farms across the villages of Surlingham, Bramerton and Rockland.

During the late 1970s, Tim purchased 70 acres at Surlingham for £400 per acre. In the 1980s, he began

sharing machinery with a neighbour, a concept which was new at the time, then, from 1985, the business diversified to include the production of daffodil bulbs for export to the United States. The venture finished some eight years later after the financial risk associated with growing and shipping such a delicate product became too high.

A year after buying another 120 acres at Bramerton, for £2,600 per acre, Tim decided to get out of cattle, in 1991, and, he says, it was 'pure luck' that the herd was sold just before the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis hit.

That year also saw the launch of what would eventually become one of the farm's most successful diversification projects. Born out of Tim's love for swimming, and built at a cost of £150,000, the 10m x 5m indoor pool was originally heated by a large straw-fired boiler with oil back-up.

As it was somewhat of a luxury, solely for his family's own use, Tim looked

to dilute its higher-than-anticipated cost by operating a time-share model. Having calculated that it would be necessary to sell 80 30-minute sessions per week to break even, he was somewhat disappointed when only half that number were taken up in the first month. That soon changed dramatically and now 150 slots are filled every week, making it a major contributor to the 'bottom line'. Between 6.30am and 4pm a one-off 30-minute session costs £15, with once-per-week slots on a three-month subscription priced at £133, £291 for six-months and £391 for a year, all payable in advance. Between the hours of 4pm and 10.30pm prices increase to £17, £166, £291 and £529.

"The timeshare pool provides the perfect place to unwind, so couples and families book it for a relaxing private swim in a perfect rural setting. For us, it has become an excellent business and, with low operating costs, currently is our most successful enterprise," Tim outlines.

Although once part of the overall family business, the pool now operates as a separate entity. Some time ago, Tim transferred ownership to his son William, 35, who joined the family business in 2010, after studying at what was then the Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, and working on a farm in Wiltshire.

That year, with the wheat price hovering around £70/t, Tim heard then NFU president, the late Sir Ben Gill, speak at a conference organised by the Anglia Farmers buying group. During one of the most difficult periods in the industry's history, Sir Ben suggested that farmers might be better to burn wheat as a source of heat energy rather than sell grain. That got Tim thinking.

With a farmhouse, six cottages and swimming pool all needing to be heated Tim invested £100,000 in a more efficient 200kW woodchip-fired boiler and ancillaries to replace the original unit. Since 2017 the Renewables Heating Incentive, a government scheme to support households and businesses to generate renewable heat for their buildings, has allowed the family to be paid for the heat which it produces on a 20-year contract under which the price per kW/hour is index linked.



## Making the most of everything

By 2013, the year when the Mack family celebrated 100 years of farming in Norfolk, Tim was busy developing the revenue stream from oilseed rape. Having considered how to make the most of everything on the farm, and not wanting to be completely reliant on selling commodity crops, he had begun crushing the seed to make cold-pressed rapeseed oil in 2007. Six years later, Yare Valley Oils' annual sales of cold-pressed rapeseed oil had reached 6,000 litres and, since then, have soared to 30,000 litres.

The oil seeds are mechanically pressed then filtered twice to deliver a pure, wholesome oil which is also used as the foundation for a range of infusions, dressings and marinades. High in omega 3 and vitamin E, with half the saturated fat of olive oil, the delicately flavoured oil is ideal for dressings, frying, roasting and baking. With a higher smoke point, rapeseed oil doesn't denature, physically or chemically, or in terms of its taste at room temperature. It's also much cheaper and can be used for frying and reused.

The oils business received a boost in 2017 with the development of a new purpose-built building, the cost of which was 40 per cent funded by a grant from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. This created a more efficient, higher output pressing and bottling site to produce cold-pressed rapeseed oil and related products.

After extracting the oil, what remains is a 'cake' which contains 30 per cent protein and this helps to feed the 100 cattle that are finished on the farm each year. Purchased as calves, they are fattened in a roundhouse building, this design being chosen as it makes it easy to feed, move and 'muck out.' The farm now has 70 Belted Galloway cattle which spend much of their time outdoors and eventually are sold through the farm shop or selected local butchers. The remainder are Belgian Blues which go to Dunbia for processing and end up on shelves of a high-end supermarket.

2017 was also the year in which the Macks invested £10,000 to turn, what had been a woodshed, into their latest diversification project, the Yare Valley Farm Shop.

Having grown steadily in popularity, it 'took off' after being mentioned in The Times newspaper as a must-visit venue for 'foodies' and then gained further traction in 2020 when lockdowns made travel difficult, and people needed to shop more locally.

Managed by Glenn, who's also responsible for managing Yare Valley Oils, the self-service farm shop is open from 8am to 9pm every day, including bank holidays and weekends. It stocks a wonderful selection of local produce, including 24-day-hung farm-reared beef, farm-grown potatoes and a wide selection of farm-produced, cold-pressed rapeseed oils and infusions, which are available on tap or pre-bottled. Other locally sourced produce include cheeses, prepared meat products, smoked salmon, seafood, frozen pizzas, free-range eggs, milk and cream, bread, handmade crumpets, chocolate, ice cream and seasonal vegetables. The shelves also contain cosmetics, soaps and balms, which are made using beeswax from hives on the farm.

Situated next door to the shop, in a former cow shed, is Teles Patisserie, a Portuguese café run by Joaquim Teles and his wife Ana, who rent the building and one of the farm cottages. The café provides an additional attraction for visitors to Grange Farm and serves delicious treats such as pastries, fresh bread and afternoon teas, as well as fresh coffee, tea and cold drinks to eat in or take away. As an additional incentive to encourage visitors, a fresh fish van visits every Thursday from 1.30pm to 3pm.

"Having a range of diversification projects has made a huge difference to the viability and profitability of our family business," Tim states. "With input from our solicitors and advice from Larking Gowen, headed by partner Steven Rudd, I've already passed on the timeshare swimming pool business and half the land to William. Steven has been advising us for the last ten years and his input has been critical in making the right choices. The Autumn Budget came as a shock and will make it even more important to have access to impartial, professional advice."



## Farm focus

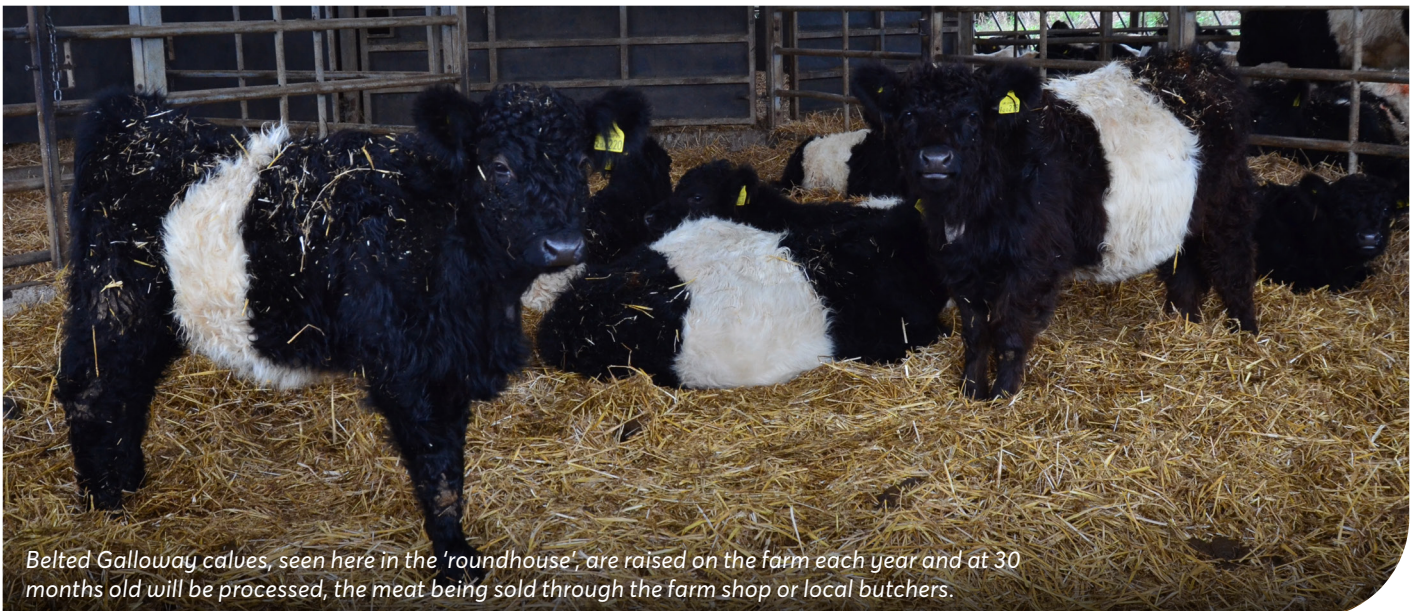
The Macks farm 800 acres, including 100 of grass and 700 of arable cropping, comprising winter wheat, winter barley, spring barley, oilseed rape, potatoes and maize. They also grow parsley for Camstar Herbs, a local company which is the largest producer of dehydrated parsley in the world. Although 'high-risk' the crop can deliver excellent returns, as in 2024 when it produced three cuts. Since 2007, 25 acres of less fertile land at Bramerton and Surlingham have been rented to the Winbirri Vineyard, which produces exceptional, award-winning English wine, bringing additional income.

Supporting a wide range of crops and livestock, the farm never has to grow two cereals together, which makes a huge difference to yields that average 9.8t/ha for winter wheat and 3.8t/ha for oilseed rape. To increase soil organic matter, ploughing is avoided where possible, most of the land being cultivated with a Kverneland DTX one-pass stubble incorporator and soil loosener comprising rows of tines and discs, followed by one pass with a disc-based Carrier implement.

Irrigation is provided through an extensive system of underground mains which draw water from a reservoir constructed at the highest point on the farm in 2000.



Yare Valley Farm Shop stocks a complete range of oils produced on site by Yare Valley Oils, together with a range of Yare Valley branded speciality products which are produced locally.



Belted Galloway calves, seen here in the 'roundhouse', are raised on the farm each year and at 30 months old will be processed, the meat being sold through the farm shop or local butchers.