Dates for your Diary

- **AGM**, early June, date to be confirmed
- **Barn Dance at Brookthorpe**, 9th June, Saturday

We are planning on a return to a summer barn dance this year! As well as a barn dance with a live band and a caller we will also have a BBQ selling farm produce, a bar with local beer and cider, kids dances, tractor trailer rides and camping! It should be a great occasion and fun for the whole family.

More details to follow.

Join us on the Farm!

Farm days: **every Wednesday** morning, and **first Saturday** of the month. Come along and help out on the farm, meet new people, have some fun.
Firstly, how can I not mention the weather! We call this the “Spring Newsletter” and I’m writing this on the spring equinox but it has felt distinctly like winter of late. We have had a couple of snow falls this winter the last one being in mid March!

Last year when I wrote my Spring Farm Report on the 16th March, we had had lambs and it was warming up and grass was growing and buds were swelling.

This year everything is later, we are still awaiting lambs due any day now but it doesn’t really feel like spring yet. There are patches of snow still lingering in places and the grass is reluctant to start growing.

In early March we packed the veg in Hawkwood packing shed in -4.5 degree temperatures. Harvesting was slowed a bit by snow flurries and frozen ground. It was cold enough that all the pipes froze in the barn and we had to water the plants with buckets of water collected from the only place with running water, my house! Hopefully all the cold has killed some bugs and pests.

As mentioned the sheep are due to lamb any day now, in fact by the time you are reading this we will probably have lambs born. (Sam was indeed right - the first lambs came into this world on the 22nd of March! - see below - ed.).

The sheep have access to the barn and can come and go as they please. It is cleaner and more natural to lamb outdoors, however with the weather as it has been I have given them the option to lamb indoors if they please. This year we are lambing more sheep than ever before. We have 16 sheep that went to the ram, some are young and may not lamb this year, but there should still be lots of lambs running around Easter. Please feel free to come and visit them, they are in the back of the Brookthorpe barn, as always please supervise your children on the farm and keep dogs on a lead please.

We are due some calves soon too, the cows stay in the barn over winter but will be heading out onto the fields in April.

We have done a lot of fence repair this year. Last year we bought a new post driver that goes on the tractor and makes the job a lot easier. We have healthy bank reserves, and are currently planning on investing more in the farm. One area is our machinery. A lot of it is either old, not fit for purpose or we simply don’t have what we need.

We have recently bought a little Massey Ferguson tractor that will be used in the vegetable fields to cultivate, weed and plant veg. The other area is securing a new water supply to our Brookthorpe farm. This will enable us to have an increased water volume and pressure - something we have not had up till now.

I hope by the time I write my next newsletter article spring has sprung and its a lot warmer.

Farmer Sam
I guess the big talking point of this winter is the severe cold snap, the “Beast from the East”. Well I was away that week and missed it all, so I’ll leave it to Sam to describe how they struggled on through the arctic conditions to get the veg harvested and packed and keep on top of things. They worked hard and managed everything, well done guys! We took extra precautions beforehand to cover any vulnerable crops and we seem to have come through relatively unscathed. Generally it has been a cold winter, plenty of frost, not too wet, a good healthy winter.

Some of our winter crops have run out now, beetroot and celeriac for instance. Some are starting to finish but we still have tons of carrots, parsnips, and swede to keep us going through the spring. I think that we will be putting parsnips in the share every week for a while now as they grew so well last season and we have so many still in the ground. There are cauliflowers, cabbage and purple sprouting broccoli in the field yet to mature, and the salads and chard in the polytunnels are starting to grow after their winter stasis during January and February. As these winter crops end we will begin to buy in veg from warmer climes to fill what is known as the “hungry gap”, that time when all of the winter crops have finished and the spring crops have yet to mature.

The greenhouse at the farm in Brookthorpe is full of newly sown seedlings. Most of these are on heated benches to encourage them to grow that bit quicker. These will be ready for planting out at the beginning of April. Some will go into the polytunnels and some will be planted out in the fields. We sowed the first outdoor crop just before the big freeze, broad beans at Oakbrook... they weren't too happy about that. We had enough of a dry spell in the middle of February that we had to get on and sow them while we still could get onto the land. Other crops sown include carrots and radish in the polytunnels.

We will be hosting two other enterprises on the farm this season. The first is the Starter Farm (maybe it should be called the Restarter Farm) which will be managed by Kit, who as I have written before, is returning to the Starter Farm after a years break. We have erected a small greenhouse at Oakbrook for the Starter Farm and hopefully will cover the new polytunnel soon. The second enterprise will be managed by Jess Marcham who will be growing a bed each of peas and beans to produce seed for the Seed Co-operative (a business set up to encourage the production of seed in the UK).

Here’s to a warm and settled spring,
Plastic Packaging... Plastic Waste

The use of plastic for food packaging (and other uses) has come to the fore of public consciousness recently, and we have received a few comments about the use of plastic on the farm. We use plastic in many ways on the farm: to pack some of our veg produce, to package meat, to wrap silage (those large round black bales of cattle feed), to cover the polytunnels, and our potting mix comes in large plastic bags.

If you ignore the issue of what to do with it after it has been used, plastic is a fantastic material. It is strong, flexible, waterproof, robust, lightweight and cheap. Delicate leafy vegetables keep best wrapped in plastic and stored in a cool place. A ton of wet grass can be stored and transported around when wrapped in nothing but a few layers of plastic film. Plastic is such a versatile and very useful material. However, the disposal of plastic is a serious issue and, as has been highlighted by such programs as The Blue Planet, can be quite toxic to the environment.

There are three main areas where we use plastic on the farm.

**Vegetable packaging.** This is one of the most noticed uses of plastic on the farm and one that is most commented on. We pack our mixed salad leaves in plastic bags to maintain freshness. Currently there are no biodegradable alternatives. The bags are specifically designed for lettuce and leafy greens. They come on a wicket of 200 bags that hang on the edge of the bench and are easily opened to make packing much more efficient. We currently pack 350 salad packs a week so efficiency in this operation is very important. The bags are reusable and we encourage people to bring them back and use them again. It has been suggested that we let members weigh out their own mixed salad but this would be unhygienic. We occasionally use these bags for other vegetables when necessary for hygiene reasons or to preserve freshness. For those of you who collect from the farms we are going to trial leaving the lettuce unpackaged this season, but we will still need to wrap lettuce in the delivered veg shares.

**Meat packaging.** As with the vegetables, we are unaware of any biodegradable packaging for our meat. We are a small customer of our butcher and so have to fit in with the materials and systems used by them. For hygiene reasons our meat has to be wrapped.

**Silage wrap and potting mix bags.** Larger farms can bulk handle silage and potting mix, thus reducing the amount of plastic used, but we are of such a small size that currently this isn’t a viable option for us.

On a positive note, Sam arranged for all of our farm plastic waste to be collected from the farm this year. This used plastic silage wrap, old polytunnel covers (we have recovered 3 of our tunnels in the last 13 years) and used compost bags etc were collected from the farm (at a cost of £100) by a firm from South Wales. This company, Birch Farm Plastics, recycle the waste plastic to be manufactured into plastic timber and garden furniture. You can see their website at [http://www.birchfarmplastics.co.uk/](http://www.birchfarmplastics.co.uk/). They collected 800kg of plastic from us, which we had accumulated over the past 8 years. (On a less positive note, at the same time we sent a large skip of non-recyclable waste to landfill).

We are very conscious of the amount of plastic that we use on the farm, and continually look for ways to reduce it or find more environment-friendly alternatives. We have yet to find any suitable alternatives for the plastic we use. Another consideration is that there are often environmental issues with the manufacture of any such alternatives (paper or cellophane for example). It is a complex issue and hopefully more sustainable alternatives will become available soon.

Mark
**Chickens at Oakbrook Farm!**

We are looking forward to the imminent arrival of the chickens at Oakbrook Farm! They will be coming at the beginning of April so do come and see them!

For the first week they will be kept inside the coop. It might seem a bit mean to not let them out immediately but it will help them get used to the coop and recognise it as their home. As we will be moving them regularly this is especially important because it will be the one fixed thing in their environment.

After the initial week, they and the coop will be kept within a large fenced off area, which will be moved around the farm. At night they will be shut in, but from dawn til dusk they will be free to do what they want to do and go about their business outside. I wish it didn’t have to be but it is essential that the fence is electric to keep Mr Fox out.

They will be arriving at 16 weeks old. This age is known as point of lay, although it may be a few more weeks before they start laying as they will need to settle in to their new home.

When they do start, for the first month, the eggs they lay, known as pullet eggs, will be about 1/3 the size of an average egg. Due to this, as a product they are not desired by the supermarkets and normally just go for processing into powdered or liquid egg. However, there is nothing wrong with these little guys. In fact many say they are tastier, richer and have bigger yolks compared to whites than normal eggs. Therefore, we can’t wait to sample them and be able to offer them to you too. They will be cheaper than the normal sized eggs to come, so look out for them and see what you think.

When the eggs get bigger, they will be available in packs of 6. The reason for this, as opposed to being on trays like the current situation, is that the eggs will be a mixture of small, medium and large so this ensures everyone gets a fair share of all.

Unfortunately at the moment England is in an Avian Flu Prevention Zone. This means we will have to take certain precautions around the chickens, like keeping food and water inside so that wild birds can’t get to them and disinfecting boots on going in and out. In the future we would love to invite you in to meet the chickens properly and collect eggs together, but with the bird flu regs it is best to keep the access to the enclosure to a minimum. Fingers crossed it won’t continue for long!

**Ellie Price**

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**Community building update**

The work on the community building is still progressing steadily. Recently we have been working on lighting. We are installing 12v LED lights which are powered by a battery charged by a solar panel.

Other jobs that still need doing are: installing a wood burner (any HETAS approved installers out there want to help?), applying the final coat of render and a white wash inside, making a wheelchair accessible ramp, sanding and treating the floor, etc.

We will be organizing a work day soon to tackle some of the work, if you have any time or skills you would like to offer please get in touch. We will still need to furnish the inside once done too.

I'm am very happy to announce that we have several groups already using the building on a regular basis despite it's still being worked on.

We will announce the work day via email soon.

**Sam**
Everyone is welcome to join in and enjoy the farm, including non-members.

For almost a year now we have had a long waiting list to join the farm, but now we have the starter farm up and running we have spaces for new members. Please tell everyone you know about us. If you know of an event or somewhere that you think would be good for us to promote the farm, please let the core group know. We work to the following principles:

- To support organic and biodynamic agriculture.
- To pioneer a new economic model based on mutual benefit and shared risk and ensure that the farmers have a decent livelihood.
- To be fully inclusive. Low income shall not exclude anyone.
- To be transparent in all our affairs. To make decisions on the basis of consensus wherever possible. To strive towards social justice.
- To encourage practical involvement on all levels.
- To offer opportunities for learning, therapy and re-connecting with the life of the earth.
- To network with others to promote community supported agriculture to other communities and farms and share our learning (both economic and farming).
- To encourage Stroud Community Agriculture members, in co-operation with the farmers, to use the farm for their individual and social activities and celebrations.
- To develop a non-exclusive sense of community around the farm.

Core Group
The core group meets one evening a month. For dates, venues & times, contact Mark Harrison.

- Mark Harrison 07891 615103 mark@plumtucker.co.uk
- Adam Biscoe 01453 759241 a.j.biscoe@gmail.com
- Francis Goby 07890 042877 francis.gobey@phonecoop.coop
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