

**Louise Burton**

## **QUALITY SCOUT REPORT**

### **Visit to a farm in Cambridgeshire - 23 September 2006**

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Andrew and I went with our children, Emily (5), Hannah (2) and Isaac (7 months) to one of the farms that supplies McDonald's with beef. We started our day by meeting everyone for breakfast in McDonald's in Cambridge. It was quite daunting as there was a cameraman filming us – I think Andrew and I were quite nervous, but the children loved the attention! We met Chris and Teresa, third-generation farmers who owned the farm that we were going to visit that day. They have 250 head of cattle and farm 1200 acres of arable land.

We drove for about 30 minutes to a rural area in Cambridgeshire. This is where Chris and Teresa keep one of their herds of cattle during the summer months from April to November. I must admit I was expecting metal cowsheds – not anything like what we saw.

The cattle have three fields to roam freely in. Chris explained that this is so that the animals always have access to fresh grass – each head needs to eat approximately 20 - 30kg a day!

One of my main concerns was about the space that they have to roam. I was worried about cramped conditions. I didn't even need to ask any questions. It was obvious on sight that the animals have a huge amount of space to roam freely. Chris explained that each mother and calf pair has one and a half acres.

I will admit that I was very pleasantly surprised. I tried to go with an open mind, but was expecting something a bit more grim.

It was lovely. My children all had a fantastic time there. They certainly made use of the wide expanse of land by running about! Emily rushed off to collect acorns and conkers. She had plenty to choose from, as there were several huge trees dotted about. These also help to provide shelter for the animals.

Hannah was determined to try to catch a cow. I am pleased to report that she didn't manage it! Isaac was a bit young to do much, but I think he enjoyed being out in the fresh air. Speaking of which, we were totally away from the road, located in gently rolling hills. The air was so clear and the views were amazing.

Something I wanted to find out about was what actually went in to the animal and therefore into our food. I saw the animals eating the grass (which is not treated in any way). They also eat hay (grass cut, left to dry and baled) and silage (grass cut, baled and covered in plastic). Neither of these is treated, and no additives are added before baling.

As Chris is an arable farmer he also grows potatoes and sugar beet, which the animals like to eat, diced up as a treat. The calves all have access to a special food mix, which is

made of molasses, wheat and straw with added natural minerals. Chris assured me that no chemicals or hormones are added to the animal's food at all and that they have a vegetarian diet. This was a relief, as I had heard horror stories about animals being fed chemicals to boost their growth.

We then travelled back to the farm to have a look around. The farm was very muddy, as there had been a torrential downpour the day before. The huge puddles and sloppy mud seemed to please Emily and Hannah though – cue much jumping and splashing about!

The animals are brought to the farm in November and stay until April. This helps to make Chris's job a bit easier over the bad weather and also keeps the animals close by during the calving season. Chris explained that he allows nature to take its course and only intervenes in the birth if an animal is in danger or distress.

I was very surprised by Chris's attitude to the animals. I was expecting a very commercially led, almost cold person, but both Chris and Teresa really impressed us with their respect for the animals and their welfare. For the record, I asked them if they eat the beef they produce – and was encouraged by their answer that they do!

We went to look at the cowsheds used in the winter. If I am honest, I'd admit that they were a lot less glamorous than the rolling hills of lush grass with ancient trees, but they were comfortable. They had obviously been designed with the animals comfort and needs in mind. I was not concerned at all.

Although obviously smaller than the fields, the animals are still given plenty of space to move about. The sheds were wooden, and covered half of the area, so I was pleased to note that the animals still had access to fresh air all year round. Chris explained that if an animal is unwell and needs treatment, they have to follow a directive which prevents the animals entering the food chain until all traces of the medication has left their system.

Chris and Teresa have been awarded a CMI certificate for their beef that shows that they conform to strict standards for quality meat production. Very impressive!

All in all we had a wonderful day. Emily and Hannah enjoyed the wide-open spaces, the animals and the muddy puddles. Isaac had lots of fun watching the trees in the wind, whilst Andrew and I had an insight into the origins of the food we eat and feed our children with.

We were pleasantly surprised by the things we found out and were totally impressed by the standards and the commitment to animal welfare.

One friend asked me if it had changed my view of McDonalds at all, and if we would still eat burgers. My honest answer is that my view *has* changed – McDonald's have demonstrated a true commitment to producing good quality beef and I have been truly impressed. I think if anything, I would be more likely to choose to eat a burger than before."