

Kym Norman

Farm Visit Report

Arriving at the Farm

On a Saturday morning, we were driven to a farm in County Durham that supplies McDonald's beef. The approach to the farm was well kept and open fields were clearly visible. Some of these fields were being used for winter crops (which we later discovered were intended for the cattle) and others contained sheep and lambs. We arrived late in the morning and were introduced to the farmer, Chris. Chris and his family had been involved in cattle farming for a number of generations at the farm, though previous generations had predominantly reared dairy cattle.

The inspections begins

At the beginning of the inspection we were led across a stone courtyard to the cattle sheds. The courtyard appeared very clean and was free from any farm machinery. The cattle sheds were open to the elements at one end, which allowed lots of natural sunlight inside. However, once inside the sheds, the temperature, although chilly, was pleasant and tolerable.

The cattle were housed in open sheds and there appeared to be ample space inside. The cattle seemed to be comfortable within their living conditions. The bedding was of thick straw and was fairly clean. There was no evidence of excessive manure and the cattle we observed were very clean. We were informed that the straw bedding was changed at least every 48 hours and that when replaced with fresh bedding, this straw and manure was recycled for composting. We observed the compost heap later in the day.

The Cattle appeared strong and healthy

All the animals observed appeared to be calm and relaxed and naturally alert and inquisitive to visitors. Chris pointed out that the cattle were kept indoors during the winter months, as they did not have the benefit of thick fleeces. Chris also reared lambs and sheep and these herds were clearly visible grazing freely outdoors.

However, it was noticed that all of the cattle had been shaved from the back of the neck, along the spine and ending at the beginning of the tail. This was to prevent the cattle from overheating and helped them to sweat, whilst housed indoors. We were told that this shaving was not necessary in the late spring and summer months.

In general the cattle appeared strong and healthy and we witnessed no signs of stress or, more importantly for us, any sign of maltreatment i.e. no open sores, no matting of the eyes and no coughing. The hides were glossy and clean.

A great deal of paperwork

Chris prided himself upon knowing each individual animal, from whence it came, the breed and the cost of each. Chris explained that regardless of his own knowledge, each individual “beast” carried a unique identifying tag and passport. The tags and passport provided accurate information and traceability, tracking the animal from birth through rearing to slaughter. Each movement and sale of any animal was recorded and filed. We observed the records of all previous cattle reared and sold at the farm for the past five years.

Food, Glorious Food

We were guided through an entrance to the back of the pens, which revealed a holding area for silage. This silage was a mixture of beans, wheat and barley. This silage was mixed with farm-grown potatoes and when prepared for animal consumption, water was added. The ingredients appeared fresh and well stored, dry and free from rotting. We were allowed to take samples of this mixed dry feed for our own inspection. We were

informed that all the cattle feed was grown at the farm and was free from the use of herbicides and pesticides. We did not see any evidence of the use of either.

This “feed” was placed in troughs and was easily accessible for the cattle to graze upon as often as it was available, although we witnessed no forced feeding regime.. Chris informed us that an individual animal was capable of eating 12.5 kilograms of food every day and was expected to increase its own body weight by 2 – 2.5 kilograms per day. Though this seemed astonishing to us, I should point out that we observed no use of steroids or artificial growth enhancements and found no evidence of their use. We asked Chris if any were ever used and were told no.

The farm surroundings

We walked through this storage area to another farmyard. We witnessed the stockpile of potatoes and other open fields. It was explained to us that not all of the fields were used at the same time, to prevent over use. Both the agricultural and livestock operations were rotated annually in order to prevent overuse.

Towards the end of our visit we were guided back to our original arrival point and stopped to appreciate the wide-open fields and countryside

that Chris is responsible for. The farm estate houses many natural, lush green open areas and is bounded by woodland. Free roaming sheep and lambs were witnessed in some of these areas.

During our entire visit to the farm, we were encouraged to walk freely and to inspect any areas we wished and to satisfy our curiosity. Although subjected to some quite stern and sensitive questioning, Chris as our host was polite, courteous and charming and we left with the feeling that we had been very well received.

In conclusion

As the owner of the business, we found Chris to be extremely knowledgeable and displayed good husbandry towards the animals and a keen sense of environmental and sustainable stewardship of the farm and woodlands.

Most importantly, as a family, our concern was for the welfare of the animals before slaughter, to include living conditions, diet and general health and wellbeing. We can say, that after our visit to this farm, we are in no doubt that Chris has a respect and duty for his animals at all times in his care. We witnessed no suffering or cruelty and are satisfied that of all the animals we observed, each and every one leads as good a life as possible before its demise.