

Changing face of farming: the new beasts of old England

These may be hard times for Britain's farmers, but one part of the agricultural sector is thriving. Emily Dugan reports on the continuing and lucrative boom in alternative livestock

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Alpaca, West Sussex

The snootier sibling of the llama, the alpaca has become the must-have animal to farm in Europe. This week their soft, strong wool has attracted the investment of the former Young's pubs man James Young, who plans to rear the animals deep in the Sussex countryside. Not content with a bog-standard alpaca, the former brewer has plumped for a £1m collection of suris: the most desirable – and most potentially lucrative – breed.

The suri alpaca has wool of such high quality that it is bred to pedigree standards. With monitored bloodlines, the animals are in short supply. Young's herd of just 250 is already the largest in Britain. But any hope of a boom in the alpaca trade is hampered by their breeding habits; the suri gives birth to a paltry one baby a year.

They are, however, tipped as Britain's next great luxury wool provider. Young's business partner in the venture is Tim Hey, whose parents have been farming alpacas in Tasmania for the past 15 years, knew that the suris had luxury potential.

"The fibre is very lustrous," says Hey. "It's softer and warmer than cashmere and more hard-wearing. The Japanese even spin it into silk and the finest suits on Bond Street are already made from alpaca fibres."

Crocodiles, Cambridgeshire

A croc is probably the last animal you would expect to see at a family farm in the Fens. But the Johnson family disagree. Firm in the belief that there is an untapped market in Britian, the farmers have started a crocodile breeding programme. Beginning with just eight of the sharp-toothed reptiles, they plan to sell the meat in their farm shop.

The largest of their reptiles so far is a fearsome 8ft monster known as Cuddles, and they hope to breed many more. Farmer Andy Johnson believes business is on the up. "Crocodile meat is a small market now but I think the demand for alternative meats will grow in the next few years", he says.

Elk and bison, Wiltshire

They used to stampede across the plains of the Wild West, but bison are now a common sight in the distinctly tamer fields of Wiltshire. Lord and Lady Seaford run the country's oldest bison farm, Bush Farm Bison Centre, and have bred the beasts for 15 years. They have also stocked elk venison for 10 years.

"My husband is a conventional farmer but he fell in love with bison when he watched Vanishing Prairie at the age of eight", says Lady Seaford. "He made a bet with his friends at agricultural college that by 50 he would have a herd of them, and he has."

The Seafords even breed raccoons but they are mainly to delight children visiting the farm.

Wild boar, Somerset

No longer confined to the pages of Asterix books, wild boar have made a comeback in British cuisine and farmers are cashing in on the trend. Spit-roasted boar is back in vogue, often as the centrepiece at weddings or medieval-themed parties.

Wild boar meat is a top seller at Barrow Boar Farm in Yeovil and co-owner Allen Ward says it is because of its unique taste. "It is a completely different meat from pork", he adds. "It has more of a gamey flavour and less fat."

Locusts, South Yorkshire

Their association with plagues is unfortunate but breeding locusts, right, has proved lucrative for the Live Foods farm near Sheffield. The insects are bred in giant tanks at a rate of 120,000 a week, before being shipped off (still alive) across the country.

Live Foods also rears one million crickets a week. Its major clients are pet shops, which use the bugs to feed their reptiles, and Chinese restaurants, where they are considered a delicacy.

Ostrich, Leicestershire

The tender meat and precious skins of ostrich have made them a popular choice for European farmers, and they are reared as far north as Poland.

Steve and Cathy Brewin have farmed the birds at Bisbrooke, near Rutland, since the 1990s. "I read an article in Farmer's Weekly that gave me the idea", said Mr Brewin. "They're not too difficult to farm and the meat quality is incredible. You just have to give them appropriate shelter, and then it's not that different to other farming."

Water buffalo, Hampshire

Long before Jamie Oliver raved about the joys of its flavoursome mozzarella, the water buffalo was becoming one of the most sought-after bovines in Britain. The venture was so promising that former Formula One driver Jody Scheckter decided to raise them, breeding more than 1,000 on his farm at Laverstone Park, Hampshire. He sells buffalo milk to Waitrose and makes his range of ice cream and mozzarella.

However, he reckons running a buffalo business is more exhausting than racing. "It's a faster pace here than it ever was on the track," he says. "Now I'm a team manager at the farm. All I had to do then was drive."