



Sarah with their Berkshire, Star



Tim in the shepherd's hut

Living the dream...



Above from left: Rowan McDonald, who works on the farm, Tim, Alfie the draft horse, Martin Swindell of Chesterfield College and farm helper Lorna Ellsmore



Penny Bunting's daughter Millie with the lambs

Ask any child to draw a picture of a farm and what will they come up with? A green field with grazing sheep and cows, a sturdy stone farmhouse and a farmyard with pecking chickens are likely to feature strongly. There'll probably be a tractor somewhere, too, and perhaps a horse peering over a stable door.

Visiting Garden Farm, just outside the village of Lea in the Derbyshire Dales, is a little like stepping into that child's drawing. Hens and geese free-range around the 57-year old Ferguson tractor standing in the farmyard, while Alfie the Percheron draft horse waits in a nearby paddock, ready for action.

The 48-hectare, organic, mixed livestock farm is run by Tim and Sarah Sidaway. They raise a variety of animals for meat: pigs, ducks, chickens, guinea fowl, sheep, cattle – and, at Christmas, turkeys.

"We have chosen to raise rare breeds as much as possible," says Tim. "We find that customers are increasingly asking for rare breed pork, beef, lamb and hogget: it tastes better, and has a better texture."

The rare breeds raised by the Sidaways include Manx Loaghtan and Norfolk Horn sheep, Berkshire and Tamworth pigs and Shetland cattle.

"Raising rare breeds is an important step towards protecting our food heritage – many traditional farm breeds are becoming rare or extinct," says Tim. "All our animals are raised outdoors, and rare breeds are much better suited to these conditions than new breeds."

Meat can be bought directly from the farm, or from farmers' markets at the nearby towns of Matlock and Wirksworth. Tim and Sarah also provide meat for the recently established DE4 Food, a Matlock-based food co-operative.

VIRTUAL ANIMALS

Customers can also opt into one of the farm's 'virtual animal' schemes. "Lots of people would like to raise their own animals for meat, but don't have the space or time," explains Sarah. "So we started the Virtual Animal scheme, which has been hugely popular. People can buy a lamb or piglet, which we'll look after. The animals can be visited at any time, and we arrange butchering and packaging when the animal is mature."

As well as the usual cuts of meat, bacon and sausages, Tim and Sarah produce a range of meat products such as lamb burgers, spicy pork meatballs and turkey sausages.

"With the recent horsemeat scandal, people are becoming more and more concerned about where their meat comes," says Tim.

With around 450 separate interactions in the food supply chain that brings some meat products from farms onto supermarket shelves, it's hardly surprising that things can go wrong

In just two years Tim and Sarah Sidaway have created an inspirational smallholding. Penny Bunting reports

sometimes. "When we supply meat there are just three interactions: from here to the abattoir, back to the farm for processing and packaging, then straight to the customer," says Tim.

The Sidaways took over the tenancy at Garden Farm in January 2011, moving up to Derbyshire from the south of England with their children Emily, 13, and Frank, 10. Tim was a graphic designer and director of a successful creative agency. With no previous farming experience, the challenge of setting up a mixed livestock farm was huge. But Garden Farm has gone from strength to strength, and Tim and Sarah's passion and enthusiasm for farming and the environment has meant that each new project they tackle has been a success.

"Farming is a tough job that doesn't follow normal hours, but I love every minute!" says Tim.

A converted shepherd's hut is one of these projects, offering simple bed and breakfast accommodation in a rural setting. Wedding receptions are another new venture: a barn has been converted to provide a rustic reception venue, and, of course, organic, rare breed meat is always available on the wedding breakfast menu.

LOW CARBON FARMING

Caring for the environment is paramount for the Sidaways, and every activity that takes place is planned carefully to keep the farm's carbon footprint as small as possible. The farm is organic, with no use of oil-based fertilisers or chemical pesticides. There is a composting toilet for visitors to use and the farm is managed carefully to conserve wildlife habitats, such as a large badger sett.

Alfie plays a very important part in reducing the farm's carbon emissions – the draft horse is used to transport materials around the farm. "We even use him to transport ourselves, sometimes," laughs Sarah. "Not many other kids turn up to school in a horse and cart!"

Alfie's contribution was particularly important during the farm's most recent environmentally friendly project: the construction of a straw bale barn nearby, which were then used for the barn's roof timbers.

Lorna Ellsmore, a carpenter who regularly works at the farm, built the barn with the help of teenage students studying sustainable building at Chesterfield College.

Forging links with the community in ways like this is very important to the Sidaways. Since taking up the farm tenancy, they have become involved with Transition Matlock, a community group working towards a low-carbon future with less dependence on fossil fuels. From this relationship, DE4 Food was born – a food cooperative that provides easy access to locally produced meat, fruit and vegetables,



Tim built the straw bale barn with help from students from Chesterfield College

Caring for the environment is paramount and every activity is planned to keep the farm's carbon footprint as small as possible

dairy produce and bread.

"Farmers can play a vital role in the community," says Tim. "We've been working closely with local primary schools by providing them with incubation equipment so they can raise their own hens. Schools visit the farm too – it's fantastic to see the kids interacting with the animals."

Simon Gostick, head teacher of nearby Lea



Millie with the goats

Primary School, agrees: "As a Forest School, we already appreciate how good it is for children to be learning outside as much as possible. The visits to Garden Farm add an extra element to that learning – and when the children return to the classroom, they're buzzing."

CARE FARMING INITIATIVE

Tim and Sarah are particularly proud of Garden Farm LIFE, part of the nationwide Care Farming initiative to help vulnerable people – such as those with mental health problems – through the use of therapeutic farming practices.

Garden Farm LIFE works with all sorts of people, from adults and children with learning disabilities, to those with drug or alcohol addiction, offering them opportunities to experience a range of farming activities in beautiful surroundings.

"Being involved in activities at the farm helps people to relax, and improves their general health, too," says Tim. "The connection with nature, the interaction with the animals, and just being out in the fresh air creates a real sense of wellbeing."

Tim and Sarah actively encourage members of the public to visit the farm, too, and regularly hold open days so that people can look around, meet the animals, and sample some of the meat products that are available to buy.

The open days are great fun – especially for children, who get a chance to hold a chick, cuddle a kid, stroke Alfie or ride on a tractor. Garden Farm is what a real farm should look like – and will probably feature in countless children's drawings for years to come.

For more information about Garden Farm, visit www.gardenfarm.org.uk

Penny Bunting is a smallholder and writer living in the Peak District. She also runs award-winning environmental project Little Green Space www.littlegreenspace.org.uk

