

## News from the Lowlands also known as Holland and The Netherlands

Just a little bit about us first, I am Taco (43 & Dutch), my wife is Liz (39 & British) van der Louw and we live in the Netherlands with our two children Sam (11) and Eloise (8).

In 1997, I came to the UK to study at Harper Adams University College in Shropshire, where I studied International Agriculture and International Agri-Food Marketing. After my study, I worked for over 8 years in the Fresh Produce industry with the major multiples. In that time I met Liz and in 2005, we decided to go to live in the Netherlands and start a farm. We had a large Poll Dorset sheep farm with 500 breeding ewes. In fact, we introduced the breed into the Netherlands (I imported 300 ewes from the UK). In 2010, we sadly had to sell the farm due to the pressure from diseases such as Blue tongue and Q Fever. Since then, I have worked for various agricultural businesses in the Netherlands, including working with apples and pears, and also in packaging for Fresh Produce.



But last November, it finally happened. We had the opportunity to buy a house with some land. I couldn't resist going back into farming, but this time a smallholding which I can combine with my full-time job and where I have the perfect work-life balance.



We bought a plot of 4.5 acres of grassland with a run-down, battered old house on it in the middle of the countryside, but it has great potential! All winter, we have been working on the willow coppicing which had not been done for 10 years or so (therefore a very substantial haircut required). These willows are a common sight in the Netherlands and they help to drain our soggy soil and are inhabited by little owls. A lot of work, but it has provided us with a lot of firewood and wood chip for the garden. After that, we started to convert a section of the plot into a large veg garden, planted a

full-standard orchard and built pens for chickens, ducks, pigs and sheep. The idea is to be almost entirely self-sufficient in 10 years' time.



We are also committed to keeping special breeds of animals, especially Old English breeds. I am also busy setting up training courses for people that would like to know more about smallholding, keeping animals, nature preservation etc...



We currently have Poll Dorset sheep (pure-bred and registered with the Poll Dorset and Dorset Horn Society in the UK), Oxford Sandy and Black pigs, Aylesbury Ducks, Shetland Ducks, and in the spring we will start with some British chickens (Cornish/Dorking Cross) and also Norfolk Black Turkeys. We provide meat for ourselves and also for people that want good free-range meat. As they say, if you want to keep a breed, eat it! The other advantage of having these breeds on the continent is that the genes will be maintained elsewhere in the event of a disease outbreak in the UK.



#### Oxford Sandy and Black

We have chosen the Oxford Sandy and Blacks because of the way they look, the way they behave, the possibility of keeping an old breed alive and also just because we want good quality meat.



We have now got two sows and two boars in the Netherlands, a sow and a boar on our own smallholding and a sow and a boar on that belonging to Pieter Miedema. The idea is to breed with them and to make other people over here and in the surrounding countries such as Belgium and Germany enthusiastic about the breed. So far we have had more enquiries about the pigs that we can cater for and we have created a long list of people wanting to start breeding them or using them for meat production.

I believe the future is bright and the chances are enormous, as more and more people over here are keen to share a pig for meat. The smallholdings like you have in the UK are very limited in number here as land prices are extremely high over here, so people share these things with someone that has some land. The typical Dutch style is to have a small house with a small mortgage, but have all the day-to-day luxuries, like expensive holidays and top quality meat. That equals opportunity! In Belgium and Germany, this is different and some tend to live in a more “old-fashioned” way where you have a pig or some cows for your own meat. Each country has its own characteristics and opportunities for the OSB.

We are starting our breeding programme now and I will have a maximum of 4 sows as I am limited in the space I have, but I will be looking for another boar in 12-18 months’ time again in order to keep as many lines going over here as possible. Both Peter and myself are members of the OSB society in the UK with a view to keeping the breed as pure as possible. We will limit the amount of animals available as breeding stock in order to prevent wide spread breeding without control, hence we will castrate males that are not up to breed standard and females that do not meet the breeding standard will go for meat production.



We have high hopes for Oxford Sandy and Blacks in the Netherlands. As a family though, we have already enjoyed a lot of benefits from this lovely breed – watching the sow give birth, scratching their backs, feeding them apples and of course, cuddling the piglets!



