

*January 2013*

I am writing this from snowy Somerset, where we are staying with Dave's family. My plan of getting organised on Thursday evening and then leaving at a leisurely hour on Friday was ruined by the rather dramatic weather forecast, so at the last minute we did some high-speed packing and bolted down here before the snow on Thursday night. It is rather lovely now we are here, playing out in the snow with Wellie and watching Millie tottering about in her tiny red boots, trying not to fall over!

Later on to-day we are heading to Cornwall for a week's holiday with my sister and parents. We are looking forward to long walks on the beach with all three dogs and watching the little cousins charging about on the sand.

The farm is relatively quiet at the moment, hence why we are all able to have a holiday at the same time. There are quite a few lorries coming in to collect grain and on Thursday we had four at the farm simultaneously, taking away a total of about 120 tonnes of barley. Pigeon patrol is another task that is proving frustrating as usual. Our oilseed rape is being attacked by them constantly so we have been spending quite a lot of time chasing them off the fields. Some of the rape had a bad start to the season because of all the rain in the Autumn. The fields that we sowed early in the warmer weather were able to get established well, but those that were drilled later are struggling. The slugs were a major issue initially (slugs thrive in wet conditions) and then the pigeons seemed to attack those plants that had survived. Timing is crucial when planting oilseed rape and it is interesting how just a few days can make an enormous difference to how the crop grows.

We are getting our teeth (quite literally) into an exciting new diversification project on the farm. The oilseed rape that we harvested last summer is in the barn being stored carefully ready to be loaded out. We have saved a few tonnes, however, to be crushed and bottled as cold-pressed rapeseed oil. The first batch has nearly all gone and we were thrilled with the look and taste of it. It is golden in colour and a beautiful and yummy addition to the kitchen.

It is fascinating how the crop that we see in the field can produce a pure and healthy oil so simply. Through the year the fields are green, bright yellow and then brown, and these are all crucial stages in the development of the plant and therefore the oil content of each tiny, jet black seed. All fieldwork is planned precisely and the rape has to be combined when the crop is perfectly ripe. This is why you might see a field only partly harvested, because there might be areas that are less ripe, for instance along the edge of a wood, that need to be cut at a slightly later date.

The oil is pressed out of the seeds at temperatures below 40°C and then when it has settled it is filtered once and bottled, creating a pure, crystal clear oil. The by-product from this process is in pellet form, made from the compacted, crushed seeds. This is not wasted but is used as cattle feed.

Starting from scratch with a new business venture is quite a daunting prospect but one that we are thoroughly enjoying. My sister has the crucial role of doing the PR and I am having to learn fast about the uses of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Although alien to me, I can see just how important they are and since only launching the product around 6 weeks ago we have found some fabulous contacts. It is amazing how the various aspects of farming now all link up. Basic methods of farming and environmental work can go hand in hand with fast, new technology and the internet. Who would have thought that we would be sending instant, electronic messages to chefs, farm shops and other local foodies with regards to what started out as just a handful of little black seeds?

