

Raising both dairy and meat goats



Feeding carrots to Curds and Whey

Jack Smellie looks to adding Boer goats to her mini dairy herd – not as straightforward as it should have been

Going from one-acre to ten, has given Jack Smellie and David Chidgey the opportunity to consider raising different types and breeds of livestock. In their article 'Increasing your livestock' (Spring 2017), Jack described developing a mini flock of Badger Face and Shetland sheep. In this second article, the focus is on goats and the idea of raising and selling their own Boer goat meat (something which is gaining massively in popularity), in addition to continuing with dairy goats and making their own cheese

Going from one-acre to ten, has given Jack Smellie and David Chidgey the opportunity to consider raising different types and breeds of livestock. In their article 'Increasing your livestock' (Spring 2017), Jack described developing a mini flock of Badger Face and Shetland sheep. In this second article, the focus is on goats and the idea of raising and selling their own Boer goat meat (something which is gaining massively in popularity), in addition to continuing with dairy goats and making their own cheese.

This is a tale fraught with massive difficulties and some very tough decision-making... It seemed like such a good plan: buy in more goats and start a dedicated and specific breeding programme where we were very clear

about the outcome of all the kids. We had NO idea what an emotionally complicated journey this was going to be and so before we even start to talk about the goat meat and how and why it can be raised, we have to get through some other issues first, including the rights and wrongs of rescuing and rehoming goats and the responsibilities of livestock keepers to do the 'right' thing!!

Our first goats: milk, cheese and being totally smitten

We acquired our first goats back in 2009 when, via a friend, we ended up rescuing two dairy goats through the RSPCA. We had only had our smallholding (one acre in Cornwall) for four months and yes, we were finishing off their field shelter, right up to the day they arrived. Even worse,

the transport arrangements went belly-up TWICE and so we ended up putting two 70kg goats into the back of our Saab!!!!

It did not take us long to be totally smitten. As a smallholding animal, the goat ticks every box for us: friendly; entertaining; adept at learning their names (Curds and Whey); happy with a small-ish space (though we always wanted to give them more); provider of meat, milk and skins; and, contrary to all those clichéd expressions of 'yes but goats just escape all the time' easy to look after and contain. Seriously, we never had a problem with our goats escaping: we got our fencing sorted from day one and with twice daily feeds, endless trimmings of willow, fabulous hay and treats from the polytunnel, why would our goats want to escape anyway?? The worst that ever happened was a kid crawling under the field shelter and then keeping really really quiet whilst we and her mother were neither quiet nor calm as we frantically looked for her!! We sourced a billy that autumn and every year we bred: milking the nannies,



The very affectionate Curds



Curds and daughters Cheddar and Gorge, happy memories



Pickle an adorable madam



Welcome to Garlic and Onion

making cheese and sending off various male and female kids to fabulous new homes..... except sometimes they were not all that 'fabulous' as in: 'sorry but that lovely kid you sold me is now a strapping male adult (albeit wethered) and we cannot look after him anymore'. Our first lesson was to learn that selling on male goats as pets was not always destined to work!

From the excitement of moving to heartbreaking decision-making

When we moved to our ten acres here in North Devon, we were so excited to bring what was by then our FOUR goats with us - we had kept a daughter one year (Pickle) and sold her mum (Whey) who was becoming rather a bully (another story...) and then the following year we kept TWO daughters (Cheddar and Gorge) from Curds. At last we could give them so much more space, access to proper browsing and we could progress our plans to buy in a couple of Boer girls and a billy and raise cross-breeds and pure Boers for eating/selling on. No more adding to an already flooded goat pet market with yet more 'cute' males!!

Not that goats don't make fabulous pets, they do, for all the reasons outlined in paragraph two. It's just a fact of life that amongst livestock, there will always be more males than are needed. Why is it that alpacas started to be sold as fox guards and indeed, you can now buy alpaca meat too!

“ with twice daily feeds, endless trimmings of willow, fabulous hay and treats from the polytunnel, why would our goats want to escape anyway? ”

The day we moved, Gorge became lame. Curds, her mum, had feet and joint issues which we (and our vets) had always put down to inadequately trimmed feet before we rescued her. Gorge and Cheddar's feet had always been hard work to keep on top of, which we felt was due to the very wet land we had back in Cornwall. We could not tell whether Gorge's lameness was down to feet or joints

but when Cheddar began hobbling, alarm bells started to ring. And so began several rather protracted weeks of vet visits, medication, supplements and ultimately a phone consultation between our vet and David Harwood, a renowned goat vet specialist... And the result: two goats who were walking less and less and beginning to spend more time on their knees than their feet. The conclusion was that this was a genetic weakness of some sort and whilst mum, Curds, seemed to bounce back from any lameness incidents, her daughters were not able to. And so to a gloriously sunny day in October and one of the most distressing times in our smallholding lives when we euthanized both goats on welfare grounds. A very, very grim day!

Trying to progress our plans

We emerged from our tearful farewells determined to progress our goat breeding programme and so purchased two Boer nannies (Onion and Garlic) and a billy (Pepper) although we decided not to include Curds in our plans. We weren't sure that even if we were to eat her offspring, whether breeding from



A rare moment of herd harmony

Curds ever again was a good idea. She was eight/nine years old anyway and so a happy retirement seemed her best option. The only issue we then had was a slight worry that not having Curds in kid, may lead to a repeat of two years previously when she stole one of her 'grandchildren' so successfully, she came back into milk to feed it!!

In the event, this was the least of our problems as we were now faced with a growing bullying issue: Pickle and Curds were to prove deeply unhappy about the new goats in their lives and their bullying (or pecking order behaviour, depending on how you like to look at it) was intense. We tried all sorts to restore harmony but just as we thought we might be getting somewhere, the situation worsened. Pickle was somewhat relentless: one minute she would not let the Boers into the barn and then she would not let them out; at feeding times they all had to be segregated and at night we felt it best to shut them in their stalls till morning. Pickle was the worst offender and in reminding ourselves about her mother's behaviour, once again we began to ask questions about what sorts of genetics had been passed on.

Matters were not helped by the fact that we could not get Pickle into kid. Pepper had done the deed (several times) and the Boers seemed to be pregnant but Pickle kept returning and worse, it then got to the stage where he showed



Pepper, our Boer billy

“both bullied goats and goats that bully are not happy animals”

zero interest in serving her again!! After various examinations and discussions, the conclusion from our vet was that we had a very stressed goat (the bully suffering more than the bullied?) and that getting Pickle into kid was probably not going to work this year.

Goat bullies and bullied goats

By this stage the Boers and the Dairy goats had been living (un)happily together for six months and as the Boer pregnancies developed, our worries for them and for kidding time increased. We talked things through

with our vet (again!) plus various goat-keeping friends and we decided that keeping the two sets of goats together was just not going to work long term at all. For a while we wondered whether we should not abandon our Boer goat keeping plans and sell all three of them. The other 'extreme' conclusion was to euthanize both Pickle and Curds on the basis that they were 'of no use to us' anymore. We found both of these to be unpalatable but realised that both bullied goats and goats that bully are not happy animals and so on welfare grounds something had to be done. The only reasonable conclusion we were able to reach was that we should try to find a new home for the dairy girls where they could end their days as much loved pets.

The ethics of re-homing livestock

We did have a bit of a problem with our thinking though: we had by now come to the realisation that in rescuing Curds and Whey all those years ago, we should never have then gone on to breed from them. Their history was a total unknown to us, the RSPCA and even the previous owner. In rescuing them, they should have become pets, nothing more and nothing less. In the highly emotive world of rescue animals, dogs and cats are usually spayed and castrated in order to prevent further unwanted births. Obviously this was not possible in livestock in quite the

same way but our view now is that in handing over the responsibility of looking after animals like this, the RSPCA should perhaps stipulate that breeding from them is not at all recommended!! Do they ever do this? Not in our case!

And how can such a thing be enforced? Moreover, if 'we' now wanted to rehome, how could we possibly be assured we could a) find a good one and b) then attempt to impose a no-breeding rule?

But in the end that is exactly what we did. We know of goat-keepers who would not bat a single eyelid at the decision to euthanize goats they no longer had a use for and we also know others who would have kept Curds and Pickle totally separate from the Boers for the rest of their natural lives (no matter at what cost and difficulty) as having taken them on the

first place, they would feel they had a moral duty to care for them no matter what!!

We were lucky - the home we found was first class and ticked every box. We were once told that if ever we wanted to find a good home for goats, then horse owners were always a good bet! This lady was (is) a horse owner as well as a dedicated -'rehome' of goats and five months down the line we are still in touch (thanks to the wonders of Facebook) and although it took a while, Curds and Pickle are now very happy and stress-free!

Moving forward?

And now, ten months after we began our dream to keep a mixed dairy and meat herd, where are we? Well, we have tripled our numbers for a start as both Onion and Garlic gave birth to triplets: two girls and four boys. The

births were unassisted and both mums are proving very adept at feeding all three kids in equal measures! We feel very lucky.

So, the Boer side of it is potentially on its way and we are hoping to source an Anglo Nubian nanny sometime in the coming year, otherwise we are going to miss our Chèvre cheese way too much, not to mention those Anglo Nubian ears!

We have spent the last few weeks talking to several Boer goat owners and finding out why they keep Boers, how they run their herds and how they sell their meat, and the information we have gleaned will be the basis of the next article. There is a lot to say....

■ **Read Jack's daily blog at www.relaxedathome.org.uk where you can also find livestock for sale and details of their 'Relaxed' smallholding courses.**



Newborn Boer kid, one of triplets to Garlic



Goat kids are very mischevious

