



Heart of England Farms Ltd

Breeders of Quality Game Stock

Established 1983

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Dears Sirs/Ladies

Over the years I have had to work through many challenges as every business goes through cycles, some good and some not so good. During the difficult years one appreciates how much easier it is to manage a business during the average and better years. The test of any business and its management is just how quickly it can overcome the challenges of a difficult time, preserving all its customers as they are their most important asset, and moving on to better times which are always just around the corner.

I cannot commiserate enough with those of you who last year speculated on the potential, who took the risk and went ahead with your shooting programs. To now have had your shooting dates limited to such a degree that a proportion of your anticipated financial reward has been taken away from you. We too found ourselves in a similar dark place last spring when overnight all our previous years' work with our breeding stock looked to have been wasted. Suddenly and unexpectedly the progeny of these hens, both eggs and chicks, had a very limited market. During April 2020 when things were at their very worst we were forced to furlough many staff, our new hatchery extension did not get opened and tens of thousands of hatching eggs were collected and consigned to skips as a result of cancelled chick and poult orders. Dark days indeed!

During the ensuing lockdown we were all advised by well-meaning experts to adopt a community spirit and look out for our neighbourhood, to stay in our homes, not to travel, and to only go out for exercise, to work or for essential shopping. All very sensible and laudable, only whilst we all complied with Government advice, Sainsburys filled their supermarket shelves with tonnes of Polish minced beef and your breakfast eggs which they sourced from the very countries with the highest incidents of Covid 19, Spain and Italy. Great British dairy farmers poured their unwanted milk into slurry lagoons and Great British game farmers did similar with their hatching eggs. This was hard enough for me but what made it nearly unbearable was learning that lorries of French game producers continued to thunder through customs, delivering French hatched chicks across the UK. What I failed to understand then and still struggle with now was how, during such desperate times with restrictions on all unnecessary travel, and the UK having finally decided to leave the European market; why they even had any customers to deliver to in this country anyway?

The future looked very bleak for us at that time but perhaps we should not look backwards to that period as the situation improved greatly thereafter. Following the initial knee-jerk reaction of cancellations many customers later returned with their orders and we went on to see a strong demand for mid and late season chicks and poults. Our furloughed staff returned to their jobs and other staff were recruited who are still here today. Any spare time we had was put to completing our large hatchery extension and the reduced demand for early season poults allowed us to boost breeding stock numbers by keeping and over-wintering an additional 7000 early hatched pheasant hens.

More recently our seasonal turkey business enjoyed a successful year albeit by the skin of our teeth, as the same restrictions on social gatherings which so constrained and then stopped game shooting also threatened to dampen peoples Christmas festivities.

Everyone has their own opinion on how long it will take for the country to get a grip on this virus and therefore how long before confidence returns to the markets, but most relevant to us the shooting and game markets. My view is that when shooting returns to normal conditions it will herald the start of a phenomenal season with much pent-up demand and anticipation from gun teams eager to 'get back on the peg'. They may even choose to spend this years' unused shooting budgets on extra days! Every shoot manager will wish to capitalise on this and when the time comes will need plenty of birds on the ground with which to do so. Unfortunately, I cannot advise you on this and you would take little notice of my prejudiced view anyway!

No one knows for sure just how strong the demand for game birds is likely to be this season but as a business we do know that we need to sell early chicks and poults that were lost from sales during last year's lockdown. Early chicks and June poults are discounted on our price list being not so popular with keepers who claim they need more feeding and

management. I am not convinced that they actually do if they are shot early on in the season. But what is not in question is how they allow so much more flexibility with shoot dates, being mature and ready from the start, allowing you to extend the season with early days. A very apt and relevant consideration based on last season! If you think you can use some please let me know, we may even do a deal!

We continue to over-winter all our pure-bred breeding stock of pheasants and partridges. This always proves a challenge keeping such large flocks in good condition in open topped pens especially when the autumn weather turns wintery. The partridges were penned early last autumn as they do not thrive when the ground is wet. This left the pheasants playing in puddles until November when Avian flu returned to the UK. Sporadic outbreaks were reported throughout the country in both wild and domestic bird populations. The Ministry vets reacted quickly and decisively in controlling the threat and brought in a housing order covering all domestic poultry with effect from mid-December. As our Christmas turkey sheds emptied, they were quickly filled with pheasants and our bird catching teams consequently become very efficient and well-practised at their job! Though the number of new bird flu outbreaks have since slowed, the threat is ever present and likely to show again as the spring migration of wild birds resumes. I doubt the Ministry will be wanting us to let our birds out again! France is presently battling with a serious outbreak on the Spanish border with many regions in the Landres area locked down to bird movements as heavy culling of domestic ducks takes place.

Despite the challenges and threats our breeding flocks look well, bird health is good and all our birds continue to test clear on routine blood testing for Mycoplasma. As we finish moving the pheasants to their laying pens we will complete the rigorous vaccination program we have adopted for Newcastle Disease, TRT, IB, EDS and Mycoplasma. The protection of our breeding stock involves nearly as many injections as the NHS vaccine rollout program. Let us hope they both remain equally effective!

Another consequence of the recent lockdown developments is the unusual and unprecedented problem of numerous birds left on shoots. I have already been approached by many people who having 'caught some up' were hoping to sell them on as potential breeders. I cannot see hen pheasants having any sale value this year as there is only ever few people to purchase caught up birds. More and more frequently we are complimented on the flying ability of our birds and how superior they are to strains supplied by others. Do our pheasants really perform so much better or are the complimentary people just being kind to me or looking for a discount for next year? The fact that several customers called last autumn all commenting positively on how well the birds flew on their early days suggests to me that our policy of over-wintering all our stock which are of known genetic merit, suited to their purpose and on a full and comprehensive programme of vaccinations is now being recognised for the improvements it has made. We would therefore not wish to go back to caught up hens as this could only be a backwards step. However, I am sure many hens will be caught and kept for eggs as a way of clearing them from the shoot. If you are considering this I suggest you do your calculations first. The cost of feeding penned hens from now until June dictates that a significant number of eggs must be laid, collected, washed and sold before the enterprise starts to break even. Trust me, I know!

Finally, in this most difficult of years I would have liked to be able to notify you that we could hold our game prices. Unfortunately, the weekly rising price of wheat has prevented even this benefit. With wheat presently £60 per tonne more than this time last year my calculations show an increased production cost of 2-4% which equates to 3p per chick and 10p per poul on feed alone which I regret to inform must be added to last years' prices. The new season price list is enclosed and shows only this increase from last season's prices. I thank you for your understanding.

Before ordering please make note of the following. 2021 is a year when the calendar moves significantly, meaning week numbers fall on different week commencing dates. During discussions any reference by us to 'same week as last year' will mean same date not week number. We are also moving away from the postal confirmation/ordering system. All confirmation letters will be being emailed with the facility for the signatory to sign online. It is important therefore that when placing the order we have the email address of the person responsible for paying and therefore is the signatory. A copy of the letter can be sent by email to additional recipients keeping both the office and the gamekeeper up to date with delivery and order information.

We are confident that we are in a strong position to fulfil your orders and wish you well in the making of this seasons' difficult decisions.

Yours sincerely



Ole and Judy Gronning