

HILL VIEW DUCKS



All the ducks have access to paddling pools for a good splash

Helen Babbs meets the smallholding family who've turned a few surplus ducklings into a thriving poultry business.

In the quiet village of Cropthorne in Worcestershire, there's an ordinary brick farm house with an ordinary 'Eggs for sale' sign outside the gate. But the duck eggs for sale in the box, and the row of wooden ducks along the ridge of the roof, show that this isn't just an ordinary farm. This is Hillview Ducks, a small family-run farm that's developed into a diverse poultry rearing business.

A few spare ducklings

Hillview Ducks began a decade ago, when Mand Bowen hatched a few extra ducklings on their small acreage farm. As husband Mike had recently been hinting that the ponies' feed bill was getting rather large, she decided to advertise the ducklings for sale. An advert in the local paper caused the phone to "ring off the hook," and the business was launched!

"It just started as a hobby," says Annabel, Mand's married daughter who now also works on the farm. "We never expected it to grow as it has, but ducks



Cherry Valley duckling

proved popular. Hillview Ducks has steadily grown from a family hobby to our main business."

Hillview Ducks now specialises in raising and supplying Khaki Campbell and Cherry Valley ducks, at all ages from day-old to point-of-lay. "They are two of the best commercial egg laying breeds,

laying approximately an egg a day each," Annabel explains. "The Cherry Valley is a good dual purpose bird and so could be raised for meat as well as egg laying. The majority of ducks that we sell are for pets, but we supply farms for commercial egg laying as well."

"We also have a long-established relationship with the children's activity and petting farm, Longdown Activity Farm, in Southampton," Annabel adds. "We supply them with ducklings throughout the summer and spring months." More recently, they have added hens for sale too, with Rhode Rocks, Sussex Ranger, Speckled and Commercial Browns. Like the ducks, these are all good laying breeds which are weather hardy and well suited to free-ranging. This means they can be kept happily with the ducks.

On the farm

As the main business, the ducks at Hillview obviously take up a lot of space. "The majority of our farm land is set up for rearing and keeping ducks," Annabel



Ducks out on pasture



Fresh duck eggs collected each morning



Hillview Ducks: an ordinary farmhouse with an unusual poultry business



Holiday boarding accommodation for rabbits and guinea pigs



Part of the Hillview Ducks team: Tom, Annabel and Jeff, with Troy the dog



◀ Khaki Campbell duckling

▶ The boxer dog "Troy" helps deter predators



describes, "but we have some free land for our family ponies, donkey, sheep and geese." The geese also have a specific role in the business by helping to guard the poultry yards overnight to ensure they're free from predators and unwanted visitors.

The ducklings start out in a heated rearing shed, and then move on to free-range. "As soon as the ducks are old enough, from six or seven weeks old, they are outside to roam in large paddocks with paddling pools. We are firm believers in rearing our ducks outside, where they can enjoy the sun on their backs," says Annabel. "They have plenty of space to waddle about and have a splash and a paddle as nature intends."

Holiday boarding

The Bowen family don't only sell ducks, but will also take them back for a holiday. "We started to offer holiday boarding a couple of years ago," Annabel explains. "Many of our customers were contacting us to ask if we could look after their ducks whilst they were away, and because it seemed popular we decided to launch our holiday boarding service."

"Most of our boarders are small groups of ducks and chickens which we have sold to people," says Annabel. "However, we are starting to get much more popular with rabbits and guinea pigs. We have even had a ferret to stay! We have also had house rabbits and hamsters that have stayed with us in the farm house."

The rabbits and guinea pigs have purpose built hutches and runs, similar to those of a cattery, while the poultry boarders stay as "family groups" in spare sections of the rearing barn, with the pens fitted out with paddling pools for ducks as needed. "It makes good use of spare run and barn space, especially at quieter times when we're not rearing so many ducks," Annabel says. "It's a good boost to the farm income at these quiet times too."

A family business

To keep up with all this activity, Hillview Ducks now involves the entire family: not only Mand and Mike, but also grown up son Tom and daughter and son-in-law Annabel and Jeff. "Mand is at the helm, ➔



The Cherry Valley ducks enjoying the sun

organising everything, ensuring the farm runs smoothly, and managing the business,” says Annabel. “We also sell duck-related gift ware, which is mostly hand-made or hand finished by Mand. Our wooden ducks are proving very popular. So, you will often find her busy sewing or painting during the day.”

“Mike is in charge of the farm husbandry, making sure that the ducks are all clean, fed and watered. When he is not selling ducks on the farm, he’s often out delivering ducks to various customers around the country accompanied by Mand and their dog Troy.” Annabel herself manages the Hillview Ducks social media and website, and takes the lead on holiday boarding, while Tom and Jeff both work full time but come in as the handymen for any fix-it jobs around the farm.

A day with the ducks

With so much poultry to look after, a day at Hillview Ducks starts “bright and early.” “We start with feeding, watering and tending the ducks,” says Annabel, “then letting them out into the paddocks. For all the livestock, each pen, house or shed is cleaned. The duck eggs that



The ducklings start life in a heated rearing shed

have been laid over night are collected, washed and boxed. The majority of these we sell on our door-step but we do also supply a couple of local farm shops.”

Over in the boarding sheds, all the boarders are let out, fed and watered and checked over to see that they all seem well. “Each run is cleaned out daily, and given fresh straw. Some pets have their own routines that owners ask

us to keep up. For example, some longer haired rabbits need to be brushed.”

During the day, customers and holiday boarders come and go, and the livestock and poultry get regularly checked up on, with food and paddling pools topped up as required. “All the boarders have lots of time spent with them,” Annabel explains. “As dusk approaches, the boarders are shut in and we start to put away the ducks, so that they are in their houses safe from predators at night.”

Happy ducks

Spending your days keeping ducks might seem an unusual way to farm or small-hold, but it’s one that seems to make both the Bowen family and their livestock very happy – and it’s created a thriving business. “Ensuring our ducks and other livestock are well cared for and live in nice conditions is hugely important to us,” says Annabel. “In the words of the poultry pun, we are quackers!” 🐔

For more information, see the Hillview Ducks website: www.hillviewducks.co.uk



The ducks spend their days in large, free-range paddocks



The outdoor poultry boarding runs