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An everyday tale of rural economy folk

Although the modern rural economy comprises many parts, food & farming remains one of the most significant sectors, accounting for around a fifth of rural businesses¹. The sector is characterised by short supply chains, benefitting both food producers and the communities they serve. It is estimated that every £1 spent on locally produced food is worth at least £2 to the local economy².

With around 70% of UK farmland being grassland only suitable for grazing by livestock, local pasture-fed beef and lamb is an essential part of our local food system. Much of the meat sold within local food systems is produced from native breeds of livestock. Over centuries these native breeds have adapted to thrive on the unimproved pasture of their local landscapes, producing a slow-grown meat low on environmental impact, high on eating quality, and better for you than the intensively reared grain-fed alternative³.

The future of our native breeds, and the grassland farms that keep them, is inextricably linked to the future of the UK's network of local abattoirs, a point clearly made by Christopher Price, CEO of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust *"It looks like post Brexit, we will be seeing much more high value, low volume, niche meat production. Our native breeds, many of which will thrive in low input extensive systems have a huge role to play in that. However, one of the biggest threat facing farmers who produce native breed meat in this way, is the crisis now facing what is left of the UK's network of small abattoirs."*

This crisis is not just a concern to those working in the abattoirs and their immediate customers. The consequences are far reaching, as noted by the [Campaign for Local Abattoirs](#) who describe small abattoirs as the "linchpins of our local food systems." In taking evidence from people involved at every stage of the local meat supply chain, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Animal Welfare, appears to agree with this view, recently tweeting *"abattoir provision and links between many different parts of the rural economy are clear. Joined up thinking, collaborative work & a bit of Government support will mean a stronger rural economy, better animal welfare & a healthier [human] population."*

The Brexit referendum signalling our departure from the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), created space for a much needed debate about the purpose and direction of UK food and farming, the terms of which were set by the former Secretary of State for Environmental, Food, and Rural Affairs, Michael Gove's DEFRA Policy Paper ["Health & Harmony: the future for food, farming, and environment in a Green Brexit."](#) We now have new Agriculture and Environment Bills waiting to pass into statute, the promise of a [National Food Strategy](#), and numerous reports to Government on the need to step up its commitment to the rural economy, including the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy's report, [Time for a Strategy for the Rural Economy](#) published in April this year. We can but hope that Prime Minister Johnson and his new-look cabinet will now act on this compelling body of work to convert, without delay, its rhetoric of a countryside buzzing with dynamic rural communities, into reality.

¹ Rural Services Network, It's Time for a Rural Strategy, March 2019: https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/publications/rural-strategy-2019/rsn_rural_strategy_online.pdf

² Plugging the Leaks, Making the Most of every pound that enters your local economy, New Economics Foundation https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/9215d0d00f79789377_cxm6bu0ue.pdf

³ Why Pasture?, The Pasture Fed Livestock Association: <https://www.pastureforlife.org/why-pasture/good-for-your-health/>

What we must not forget amid the reams of policy briefings and papers, is that rural economies are not an abstract concept, but a mosaic of real people, places and passions that drive creativity and entrepreneurship. Here are two such stories of the many remarkable everyday tales of rural economy folk.

West Ilkerton Farm, Exmoor



- **People:** Chris & Victoria and daughter, Sarah
- **Farm:** belonged to Victoria's grandmother, who brought in 1968
240 acres livestock farm, typical of the area
1000ft+ above sea level
- **Livestock:** native breed [Red Ruby Devon](#) cattle and [Exmoor Horn](#) cross-bred sheep bred and reared on farm, with some retained or sold for breeding, some finished for beef and lamb. [Exmoor Ponies](#) bred for conservation grazing, and sold for pedigree breeding
- **Produce:** Red Ruby Devon beef and Exmoor lamb sold direct to the public
- **Processing:** Chris and Victoria transport their livestock to their local abattoir—a journey of 10.5 miles. The abattoir slaughters, and provides an expert butchery and packing service
- **Customers:** Comprising approx. 60 core customers plus new and occasional customers, within 30 miles of the farm, as well as increasing demand for their beef from customers further afield.

Chris: “Since eating and selling our own produce we have learnt a huge amount about our own farm, our focus now being about eating quality, not yield. Everything we do is designed to minimise stress to our land and our livestock, including seeing through our ultimate responsibility to ensure they have a good death as well as a good life.”

Victoria: “The abattoir provides a brilliant service. Without it, we would not be able to sell our meat direct which increases the amount of profit we are able to retain as the producer. The abattoir understands how to handle livestock and treats our animals with total respect.”

What do your customers say? “Our customers chose to buy from us for 3 main reasons; provenance, welfare, and taste. It's really important we get the message across that eating beef and lamb raised on pasture and moorland, with plenty of wildlife corridors mixed in, is the best way to conserve our landscapes, culture, and wildlife, while producing food and providing a countryside that everyone can enjoy. To help build connections and better understanding about food and farming we provide farm tours in a tractor-drawn trailer and are keen to encourage schools and colleges to visit the farm.”

Trevaskis Farm, Hayle, Cornwall

- **People:** Giles Eustice and family
Giles returned to the family farm in 2004.
Established a farm shop and restaurant in order to grow, market and sell their own produce direct to the public
- **Employment:** The farm shop and restaurant employ over 100 local people
- **Farm:** A traditional mixed farm, with diverse cropping, and livestock, farmed for generations by the Eustice family
The farm now operates over ~100 acres
The farm regularly puts its pigs out on ground belonging to neighbouring vegetable farms, in order to clean up the crop aftermath, cultivate the soil, and naturally add organic matter and fertility.
- **Livestock:** The herd of [British Lop pigs](#) was first established at the family farm in the 1800's. The British Lop (originally known as the National Long White Lop Eared pig), is one of our most endangered native pig breeds.
Pigs are bred, reared and taken through to finishing at Trevaskis
A small pedigree herd of [South Devon cattle](#), bred, reared and taken through to finishing on farm.
The farm also grows soft fruit, top fruit and vegetables, for sale through the farm shop
- **Produce:** The farm shop sells a wide array of foods from bread to veg to local beers, much of it grown at Trevaskis. It has its own on farm Butchery, specialising in British Lop pork and local South Devon beef. South Devon cattle are one of the south west's indigenous native breeds. As well as cattle bred and reared from its own herd, Trevaskis buy in South Devons from local farmers to sell through its Butchery.
- **Processing:** Giles uses the services of a small abattoir less than 10 miles from the farm. After slaughtering, the carcasses are transported back to the farm for maturing and butchery.
- **Customers:** The farm shop and restaurant has an annual footfall 400-500,000 visitors, ~80% of which are local customers living within 30 miles of Trevaskis. The business generates ~£5M of sales p.a.



Giles: "for us and our customers, it's all about provenance and eating quality. As soon as we took the decision to only sell our own British Lop pork, we saw an increase in sales that year of almost 50%. The British Lop possesses those essential native breed attributes; a very efficient convertor of feed, producing meat with great intra-muscular fat which gives the meat real flavour and texture you simply don't get with the hybridised, ultra-lean pig bred for the supermarket shelves."

"our business is wholly dependent on the continued existence of our local abattoir. As Chairman of the British Lop Pig Society, I am very aware that access to a local abattoir is not just crucial to our business model, but to the majority of British Lop pig breeders across the UK. For the British Lop, as for many of our native breeds, it is a case of "conservation through consumption." Local abattoirs are vital to maintaining viable populations of many of our wonderful native breeds."

What do your customers say? "our customers are really interested about where their food comes from and how it is produced. At Trevaskis we run a schools visit programme to help engage and inform the next generation. Annually, we welcome around 4000 school children to the farm. Our customers want meat that eats well, that provides a meal that the whole family will enjoy. And it has to be good value. We constantly benchmark our prices against the supermarkets to ensure we offer value for money, PLUS provenance, PLUS taste, PLUS local."