

Gillian and Ian Dixon outside their purpose-built training centre. They now run smallholding courses for beginners



# RARE opportunity

We visit a rare breeds farm in the South West which is now offering training courses for smallholders

**T**en years ago Ian and Gillian Dixon took on the management of their 93-acre farm in Devon with the aim of rearing rare breeds and farming in tune with nature. Since then, they have built up a stunning collection of rare breeds, developed a thriving business specialising in supplying poultry, sheep and pigs and are now offering training to people starting out in smallholding.

South Yeo Farm East, near Hatherleigh in West Devon, has been in Ian's family for more than 60 years. He grew up on the farm and has a liking for restoring old tractors, particularly David Browns. When they met, Gillian was working as an advisor for the Westcountry Rivers Trust, an environmental charity providing advice to farmers and landowners on how to manage their land with minimal impact on their watercourses. As time passed, and livestock numbers grew, it became obvious where their true passion lay, and Gillian gave up full time employment to concentrate on running the farm.



Gillian Dixon outside feeds some Vorwerks. She and Ian have 30 breeds of traditional and rare poultry

The traditional Devon holding has small, irregularly-shaped fields that are not suitable for modern large-scale farming. There are about 10 acres of native mixed woodland and a mile of the River Lew which flows into the Torridge at Hatherleigh, and the rest is mostly old grass pasture. The river is fenced to protect it from livestock impacts and the protected buffer strip provides a fantastic habitat and refuge for a variety of wildlife - dipper, kingfisher and heron are regular visitors and signs of passing otters are often found too.

When Ian's father retired in the mid 1990s, the grass was let out to a neighbouring farmer but, as their own stock numbers grow, fields are now taken back in-hand. The aim is to gradually build up, and take on, management of the whole farm, to run 100 ewes, 25 suckler cows, a breeding group of Large Black pigs, 30 breeds of rare and traditional poultry, and to provide help for others to get started on their smallholding dreams too.

### A growing reputation

Ian and Gillian already have a collection of 30 breeds of rare and traditional poultry and specialise in selling hatching eggs and young birds with an emphasis on help and aftercare. Customers have come from as far away as Scotland to collect their birds as their reputation for quality stock has grown. Each sizeable breed pen has 1-2 cockerels and 5-6 unrelated hens that run at grass year-round. Every year, the best of the hatches are kept to improve the parent stock, and new bloodlines are occasionally brought in to reinvigorate lines. The couple are very strict on bio-security, preferring to buy in new stock from hatching eggs wherever possible to reduce the risk of bringing in disease.

Both are involved with the Devon Association of Smallholders (DASH) and, in 2006, were asked to run 'Introduction to Keeping Poultry' courses, which were a great success. Since then, a variety of smallholder-related training courses have been developed and run each year, from keeping sheep, pigs and



Balwen sheep from Wales. They were chosen because they were striking and different

lambling to building otter holts and maintaining tractors. To accommodate the training, a traditional cob barn has been sensitively converted in the farmyard in order to offer a dedicated training space - the oak beams in the roof structure

were even cut from trees on the farm and hand carved by Gillian's father, a timber framer who now lives in Canada but came back for a few weeks to help. Courses are run both privately and also for other training organisations, most being day courses run at weekends; this year, some new mid-week evening poultry keeping courses have been added to the list. The couple say their modestly priced courses are fun and relaxed with a mixture of classroom and hands-on experience allowing participants to ask as many questions as they like. The 2010 course schedule is summarised in the table on the next page, or see their website at: [www.southyeofarm.co.uk/smallholder\\_training](http://www.southyeofarm.co.uk/smallholder_training)

In addition to poultry, there are 50 pedigree Balwen Welsh Mountain sheep and a smaller growing flock of Shropshires at the farm. The Balwen are a native breed from Wales and were chosen as they are different - strikingly marked black sheep with a white blaze, white socks and tail tip. Gillian wanted to process their wool to take to craft sales and the like, but has since found she has little time for that now there are so many →



Large Black pigs at South Yeo Farm. The breed was on the 'critical' list in the 1970s, but numbers are now on the increase.

## REAL LIVES

animals to look after.

"They are a small breed which has perhaps kept them on the rare breeds watchlist, but their meat is exceptional, all the better for being kept on an extra year and sent off as hogget," said Gillian. "Ewe lambs are generally sold for breeding while some wethers go on to new homes as eco-grass munching lawnmowers as they are so pleasing to the eye.

"The Shropshires are a friendly breed that are occasionally run through our small Christmas tree plantations to keep the weeds down. The breed is a perfect choice as they don't seem to eat the trees, and this is more environmentally friendly than using sprays for weed control during establishment of the young trees. All Shropshire ewe lambs are currently being retained to increase the flock numbers. In addition to selling sheep for breeding, we also sell meat boxes fresh back from the butcher, lovely soft lamb skin rugs, wool for spinning, and some naturally coloured balls and cones of wool processed by the Natural Fibre Company in Cornwall."

### Choosing a pig breed

Ian and Gillian experimented with rearing a variety of traditional pig breeds before settling on keeping pedigree Large Blacks; they found them to be docile, easy to manage and great for both pork and bacon.

"A normal year sees a litter of piglets every two months, with some being kept for rearing on for our own consumption or meat sales and the remainder either sold as breeding stock or for others to fatten," she said.

"The pigs are kept outside on grass in arks in large electric fenced runs, only being brought in for the wettest few months in the winter or for a week or so around farrowing



time. Each year the pigs are moved on to a new patch of ground and the previous year's area is planted to barley or corn to help take up excess nutrients and copper that would be fatal to sheep if it were simply re-seeded straight away to grass.

"I joke that it was an excuse for Ian to buy yet another piece of old farm machinery (a 1960s New Holland combine) to play with, but it has helped the farm return to being a traditional mixed holding, providing both straw for bedding and feed of known provenance to feed back to the pigs and other stock."

Gillian and Ian have just taken delivery of their first five Shorthorn cattle, and plans for the year include taking down old dilapidated cow kennels that Ian's father built in 1966, and replacing them with a purpose-built stock shed, rendering another cob barn to protect it from the weather and continuing to provide a link for local customers to see how their food is raised and where it comes from; all that in-between lambing, chicks hatching, farrowing and running training courses.

Although not open to the public on a daily basis, customers are welcome by appointment and can be shown around.

### Blue Andalusians, an attractive light breed that lays a large pure white egg



## CONTACTS AND COURSES

To find out more about South Yeo Farm East, visit [www.southyeofarm.co.uk](http://www.southyeofarm.co.uk) or sign up for their free quarterly email newsletter by emailing [southyeofarm@btinternet.com](mailto:southyeofarm@btinternet.com)

This is the training course schedule at South Yeo Farm East for the rest of this year. Courses run from 10am - 4:30pm unless stated otherwise:

Saturday, May 8.....	Poultry Keeping
Wednesday, May, 12.....	Poultry Keeping (7pm-9pm)
Sunday, June 6.....	Tractor & machinery maintenance
Sunday, June 13.....	Poultry Keeping
Wednesday, June 16.....	Poultry Keeping (7pm-9pm)
Wednesday, July 14.....	Poultry Keeping (7pm-9pm)
Saturday, July 17.....	River habitat management for otters & other wildlife
Saturday, August 28.....	An introduction to sheep keeping
Saturday, Sept 11.....	Poultry Keeping
Saturday, Oct 9.....	Wildlife pond creation & management
Saturday, Nov 27.....	Poultry dispatch & dressing

**TO BOOK:** Visit the training page on the website: [www.southyeofarm.co.uk/smallholder\\_training](http://www.southyeofarm.co.uk/smallholder_training)