



A very special breed

Traditional breeds and some hardy incomers makes Ballingham Hall Farm a unique spot for fine food production, says Richard McComb

George Watkins inspects the herd of Hereford cattle at Ballingham Hall Farm, Hereford



The fluffy four-legged creatures in front of us, endlessly nibbling grass or scratching their backs against the hedgerows, might be more at home on windswept Lakeland fells.

But it is hard to imagine a happier flock of Herdwick sheep than those mingling in this sheltered upper field at Ballingham Hall Farm, near Hereford. Herdwicks have never had it so good.

Farmer David Watkins speaks of the breed's hardy nature and enduring temperament. "They're used to rough weather in Cumbria," says David, whose family have lived here for more than 120 years. "It must be paradise for them here."

David and son George bought the sheep a year ago because they wanted to experiment with a different breed, one not native to Herefordshire but nonetheless steeped in tradition. "We got them as pets really," says David.

Don't be deceived by the disarming manner. As becomes apparent, this is a very shrewd farmer and if the market for Herdwick lamb takes off in Herefordshire there will be no one more satisfied than 48-year-old David.

George, 22, who accompanies us on a tour of the 1,000-acre farm, says: "We thought Herdwicks would be an interesting thing to try. They will probably be classed as hoggets (older lambs) because of their age."

David adds: "The meat is slow growing and will give a more flavoursome meat. We can't wait to see how it turns out."

The animals will be slaughtered at about a year-old, meaning the first tranche of Ballingham Herdwick will be ready for spring roasting next Easter. There are 30 ewes and their lambs. David says the ewes have produced "one-and-a-half lambs" each as opposed to the single off-spring of upland Cumbrian Herdwicks. "So they must like something about the place," he adds.

As is traditional, the lambs tails have not been docked and the Watkins like the fact the animals are low maintenance. Lakeland sheep are said to be loyal to their patch, being "heafed" to the fell, meaning they can be left alone without straying; but the Herefordshire incomers are inquisitive and a few explorers need to be rounded up swiftly after sneaking out through an open gate.

The Watkins' holding extends to three farms, including Brook Farm at Little Marcle, a 15-minutes' drive away. It is here that they are experimenting with an even more unusual breed – badger faced lamb. The striking black and white Welsh mountain animals graze under old cider apple trees and have been here for several years.

George says: "The meat is fantastic, a little like Herdwick, very flavoursome." The meat, lean and tender, is known for its succulence and the Watkins' flock feeds entirely on grass, as do all their animals, making the meat an entirely natural product.

George is working on launching a new internet-based shopping service for Ballingham Hall Farm,



The Watkins are experimenting with an unusual breed of sheep – badger faced lamb.

working closely with website designer James Ford – who happens to rent the orchard and field where the badger face sheep live.

There is, though, another significant type of Ballingham livestock that we haven't touched on. The Watkins' business is based on a Herefordshire mixed farming model, with cereals and grasses and potatoes. And that means there has got to be Hereford cattle. If you think the sheep live in idyllic conditions, just wait until you see where the cattle live.

With David at the wheel of his 4x4 jeep and George's trusted wire-haired Jack Russell, Bernard, at my feet, we head off to the lower fields at Ballingham, where the River Wye meanders past. It's a beautiful spot, wooded on the far side of the river with lush pasture where we are now standing,

Although the river is several feet below the bank, David assures me that it doesn't take much for the level to rise and flood the field. It explains why the grass is so thick and vibrant in colour; and it also explains why the cattle love feeding here.

There are nearly 40 beasts in this field, about two years old, being fattened up on the sweetest grass for their last few weeks. They are destined for the Watkins' other sideline – Hereford's plush hotel, the Castle House Hotel. There are plans for the hotel to become self-sufficient in beef from Ballingham by next year.

When David bought the hotel five years ago, it was, he says "because it needed buying." "I never intended buying a hotel. Who wants to buy a hotel? It was never on my shopping list," he says.

But the farmer has always had a keen interest in

property and thought Castle House's then asking price of £1.5 million represented good business.

David reasoned that by having the hotel he would have a ready market for Ballingham beef and would benefit financially by keeping the profits in-house. The cattle's breeding pattern has been staggered so there is calving now in both the spring and autumn – and therefore beef throughout the year.

In total, there about 200 cattle, which are overseen by George. His sister, Rebecca, works at the hotel and George pops over for bartending and waiter duties.

The Herefords are tailor-made for the surroundings, as George explains: "They get fat off eating next to nothing. If you had a modern continental breed on this grass they would be skin and bone. But that's all the Herefords need. We don't give them anything except grass."

"They produce a good marbling of fat through the beef. They were originally bred for ease of maintenance and they are nice to work with. They don't gallivant around the place."

We are back on tour and soon spot 18 mums-to-be are gathered in a higher field about half a mile away. "They're due anytime now," says David, a buzzard flying over our heads.

Like the lamb, the beef (what's left from supplying the hotel) will soon be available on the new Ballingham website, which is due to be launched in time for the Christmas trade. And there will soon be another addition to the expanding quality meats empire. George purchased an incubator for 12,000 pheasant eggs last year with the intention of supplying local shoots. The birds will come back to the farm after being despatched and will be sold online, turning up on diners' plates in the autumn.

"The next thing is to get some pigs," says George. "We want to get Middle Whites or Berkshires, a rare breed. And I've already been looking into chickens. The French do lovely yellow corn-fed chickens. I am researching the breeds at the moment."

It might be idyllic, but nothing stands still at Ballingham.