



BIRD BROS

FREE RANGE FUTURE PROOFING

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As a true producer packer – Bird Bros are always considering their next step to secure the business for generations to come. The Ranger spoke to Matthew and Stuart Bird, both directors of the company, about recent investments and plans for the future.



Matt and Stuart Bird believe it's important to keep a foot in egg production and to that end have built a state of the art free range site. As well as understanding the issue producers face day to day – having their own farms allows them to adapt and move with market conditions.

Continued investment

Bird Bros pack around four million eggs a week and employ 70 people – mainly from the local community. They own and manage a farm housing just under half a million Bovans brown hens in an enriched colony system. Upgrading the sheds was



completed in 2011 after investing over £5 million pounds. They rear all their own pullets for this system - working with Joice and Hill, who supply the day old chicks.

As the business grew, increasing egg packing capacity became a priority. In 2014 they invested £5 million pounds in a new packing centre, head office and renewable energy systems. Matthew Bird explained that as soon as this project was completed they started thinking about what was next. "The free range egg market was growing and we were actively recruiting new producers. But we felt that we should also be involved at a grass roots level." So, in 2015 they started looking at a piece of land near Cambridge. "It has been a three year project, resulting in the completion of a free range site with three laying houses and a rearing unit supplying the pullets. It complements the contract producers we already work with, to supply the increasing demand for free range eggs."

History

C and P Bird brothers started life when, in 1969, twin brothers Carl and Peter brought a small farmhouse and piece of land to start producing eggs. The first shed was a wooden POW Nissen hut that housed 4,000 hens. During the 80's they expanded to meet the consumer demand for more and cheaper food. The business stayed afloat during difficult times, following the Salmonella crisis, and went onto be one of the founder members of the British Egg Industry Council.

Still owned by Carl and Peter, their two sons Matthew and Stuart are directors of the company now called Bird Bros.

The business is based in Bedfordshire and has always been family run. Matthew is in charge of the business operations, whilst Stuart is involved in all technical aspects of the business, including the free range egg supply.

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Fairview Farm

Completed this year, the new free range site is part of Bird Bros plan to safe guard their future in free range. Stuart Bird described the 132-acre multi-age site, which was finished this summer. "There are three 32K units, each of which has an egg room in the middle and a flock of 16K each side. We chose to put up Harlow wooden sheds so they blended into the surrounding countryside." It was choices like this, along with positioning the houses with the gable ends towards the road and tree planting, which were essential to a smooth planning process - coordinated by Ian Pick. "The range is predominately pasture with existing trees and established hedgerows. In November we will start planting a large number of indigenous trees to further enhance the landscape." Bird Bros want to create an environment that encourages the hens to roam whilst maintaining the range.

After seeing a house with a veranda at a farm open day they decided they wanted something similar for their own units. "There is a wooden veranda down the length of each side of the laying houses, offering the birds both shelter and shade. Underneath there is a three metre wide strip of concrete, then six metres of stones, before the birds are on the range itself. This helps prevent puddles forming in this 'high-traffic' area and means that the birds come in with clean feet." This has the knock-on effect of improving litter quality and reducing infection pressure.

"We decided to install the verandas before the AI outbreaks during the winter of 16/17. But with AI becoming a more regular threat, they could potentially be used to allow the birds out, in the case of a housing order." By using screens, the birds could be held in this area. "Our decision to build them was also to encourage good ranging behaviour, which is important to us. From this area where they

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feel protected, they can then move out to and between trees, hedges and shelters on the range.”

Multi-tier at all stages

Having worked with Newquip on previous projects, the company installed a Big Dutchman 284 multi-tier system in the three new units. “It was our farming director, Robin Hele, who over saw the project and made sure that we achieved the quality we were looking for.” They used a local builder they’ve worked with before, for the ground works and PS Higgins Electrical to carry out the electrics. “The installation included a balanced pressure ventilation system to further improve litter quality and the ‘big farm network’ computer system to monitor and control key parameters.” There is a MOBA farm packer in each unit, again a company Bird Bros worked closely with when fitting out their packing centre. Nuovo supply the printing equipment for stamping the eggs.

“We think it’s worth buying good quality equipment; then if you look after it - it will look after you.”

Bird Bros have always reared their own pullets, taking advantage of the flexibility and quality control this offers them. “We wanted the free-range side of the business to be no exception. So, we built a 32K rearing unit on the same site, with the capacity to supply the three laying houses.” Bird Bros have installed a Big Dutchman Natura multi-tier rearing system. “We believe that birds who will lay in a multi-tier system should be reared in a similar facility.” They have been granted derogation from RSPCA assured scheme for this system. Hoping that they will soon accept the production and welfare benefits of a consistent housing type from rearing to laying.

“We are learning each time we start a new flock but we are extremely pleased with the



The installation included a balanced pressure ventilation system to further improve litter quality

results so far. The birds understand the system when they move to the laying house, transitioning seamlessly." This is in stark contrast to experience they've had of pullets reared in a jump-up system. "It took a lot of time and manpower each evening for several weeks, to ensure the birds were up on the system. The behavioural aspect of the birds, has greatly improved and we aren't seeing dips in weight, from birds staying on the floor - not finding the food and water."

Bird Bros are currently rearing the third flock in the system and are seeing better-framed birds and with better weights. "They are already adapted to system, with no training required. I think it makes a difference that they learn to move around the system when they are small and agile. The consequences of a mistake at the pullet stage are less and it means they are competent 'multi-tierers' by the time they move to the laying house. I would be interested to see if this means that

there is less keel bone damage."

Challenges and opportunities

The laying houses were housed with 5 months (20 weeks) between each, with flocks placed in Autumn 17, Spring and Summer 18. "Although it is a multi-age site, it's isolation and self-sufficiency reduces disease risk. We have day old chicks arriving and end-of-lay hens leaving – there are no bird movements in between." There are six members of staff working on the site, who are not in contact with any other part of the operation. "Crowshall Veterinary Services, provide support but we haven't had any significant challenges."

Stuart believes as the birds spend their whole lives on one site, it means that they get used the 'pathogen microclimate'. "We have strict biosecurity measures in place and the set-up is fairly unique as a multi-age site, we are not bringing birds from the four corners of



the UK, each with their own variation on common diseases." There are minimal movements, eggs on plastic trays are collected daily and transported to the packing centre. "We use feed compounders with mills local to us. Both rearing and laying rations are specific to Bird Bros - we use an independent nutritionist to formulate diets to suit our needs." Bird Bros have three laying rations at their disposal but are finding

that they only need to use two. "The persistency of hens is increasing so that there is no need to step down energy so far, as hen genetics advances. We plan to keep birds to 76 weeks to start with - our oldest flock is currently 65 weeks." For turnaround Bird Bros will use their own staff with the help and equipment of a local contractor.

The agricultural land where the farm was built

Bird Bros have long kept Bovans Brown hens to produce their enriched colony eggs so made the decision to continue their relationship with Hendrix genetics



was home to a man who was blind. "On his death the land was held in trust and the proceeds of the sale went to a charity for the Blind. It's great to know that Fairview farm continues to preserve this agricultural land and offer employment in the local area." The site isn't near any villages, which helped with being granted planning permission. "We did a lot to minimise the visual impact of the farm and once the trees have grown it will blend in

nicely to the local landscape."

The hens

Bird Bros have long kept Bovans Brown hens to produce their enriched colony eggs so made the decision to continue their relationship with Hendrix genetics. "Penny Humphrey has been there every step of the way with this project; offering advice and support on setting up the system. Bird Bros



Bird Bros have seen their market for free-range eggs grow massively over the last few years. Although the company supplied free range for many years it first launched its branded free-range eggs in 2013.

have a very long history with the company and we are very happy with the quality of the day old chicks they supply." Joice and Hill's hatchery is only 30 miles from the free range site, so short travelling times was also of benefit to early performance.

"The Bovans work well for us maximising supply of large eggs, which the market demands. Unfortunately, at the moment medium eggs are a virtual a by-product. It's a crazy situation and one which retailer marketing has in part created."


Market forces

Bird Bros have seen their market for free-range eggs grow massively over the last few years. Although the company supplied free range for many years it first launched its branded free-range eggs in 2013. It also supplies retailers with own brand free-range eggs. "We have five contract free range producers, all of whom are based in East Anglia. For that reason we have decided to

create our latest initiative, a new premium egg brand – 'Eggs of East Anglia'. These will soon be sold in local retailers and farm shops. I think that a regional brand could have a wider appeal – just as for Cumberland sausages etc. – so we are looking at a national launch."

In terms of the free range market, Matthew has seen it grow with their food service customers, who along with large supermarkets make up a large proportion of their business. "Our original free-range brand is 'Roamin' free', which is sold in mixed, large and BIG size packs of six; or family packs of 12 large eggs. We wanted to express the fact that hens with a superior quality of life produce our eggs."

Matthew hasn't as yet seen any significant decline in sales of colony eggs to their customers, which are mostly sold under the Bird Bros brand. "Currently one third of the eggs we sell are free range but our aim is to



“Currently one third of the eggs we sell are free range but our aim is to increase that to 50%” said Matthew

increase that to 50%. But that will likely be due to overall growth rather than substitution.” In the short term these extra free range eggs will come from new contract producers. “We are interested in speaking to potential likeminded and local free range producers for a long term relationship. We are also investigating the possibility of selling organic eggs from experienced producers. However, in the longer term, if the market is right we will also consider expanding our own free range egg production and even keeping organic birds ourselves.”

Deal or no deal

For Stuart and Matthew, the two big considerations for the future are; the supermarkets ‘cage free’ pledge and of course Brexit. “Following announcements from the retailers many people have invested in new units and the capacity to fulfil their promise is there. However, demand is not keeping up at the moment, which has an obvious negative

impact on prices.” Their own expansion, although affected by reduced egg prices and increased feed costs, they believe will pay off in the long term. “It’s a buyer’s market at the moment – there is too much egg. And the issue of imbalance in size demands has created a ridiculous situation, for which a solution needs to be found.” Bird Bros also think that the supermarkets should clarify exactly what they are looking for in terms of ‘cage free’; for example how big a role barn production will play and what kind of housing systems they want to see. “It’s a massive investment for producers to make on a ‘what-if’ basis of whether there might be a future for this production type.”

“The implications of a Brexit makes future planning very difficult, particularly with the prospect of no trade deal. For us, finding and keeping good people could be a challenge – we’ve already seen an impact in the labour market.” They suggested that increased



**Bowden
& Knights**

Unit 6, Dolphin Business Park,
Shadwell, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2RY
Tel: 01953 681 830

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automation is one option. Supplies are also a concern, as they buy equipment and packaging from Europe. "The UK is around 85% self-sufficient in eggs, so with the continued increase in home production, I don't see an issue with shortages. In fact with the Lion Code ensuring gold plated standards - I don't see why we shouldn't look into potential export possibilities."

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Currently however, market challenges are coming from closer to home. "In recent years the industry has been very reactionary. Eggs prices go up, producers put up more sheds and then there is too much egg on the market." Bird Bros stressed that, the fact that poultry has so far been an unsupported market, is both negative and positive. There is great growth potential but they would like to see more continuity; rather than seesawing

between expansion and contraction, shortage and surplus. "Ours was a three-year project to steadily increase production, so we want to see only small moves in the market."