



## Blackbird Farming

(the trading name of G H Dean and Co Ltd)



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Blackbird Farming (the trading name of G H Dean and Co Ltd) is an arable, sheep and fruit business sitting just outside Sittingbourne in Kent. We are a private family farming business that was first established in 1922. Today the company farms 1780 hectares including arable, grassland for sheep, apples, pears and cherries. The farmland lies within two Joint Character Areas which describe this part of Kent; the North Kent Plain and the North Downs. Much of the grassland is unimproved grassland lying within the Medway Estuary and Marshes SSSI, SPA and RAMSAR site. The area has considerable breeding and wintering bird interest and is a target area for HLS being in the Greater Thames Marshes Nature Improvement Plan.



### The Farm

We are very much science-based in our approach to adopting innovation and new technology. We manage our farm through the Integrated Farm Management (IFM) approach and work to improve our soil biology, create sustainable rotations and improve biodiversity. We are adopters of Strip Tillage Seeding and Controlled Traffic Farming so reducing our carbon footprint whilst at the same time improving our soils health. We are innovators in fruit growing and as an example, use modified atmosphere packaging to extend the storage life of our cherries.

We grow a wide range of crops including wheat, barley, oilseed rape, peas, beans and soya. Pest populations are carefully measured to see whether treatments are required and they encourage predatory insects that provide natural control. Wildlife corridors are planted in our orchards to help boost populations of beneficial predators such as anthrocorids.

There are 190 hectares of fruit orchards growing apples, pears and cherries.



## Livestock

We run a 1,500 strong sheep flock comprising Romney and Suffolk Mules. The sheep are housed in January, shorn and remain inside until lambing in early March. Ewes with lambs at foot are turned out to graze a mixture of both stewardship grassland land and improved leys which often comprise pure stands of Italian Ryegrass and Westerwolds.

The lambs have individual EID tags to give accurate information on the weight gain arising from the Beltex and Texel sires used. As part of our Integrated Farm Management practice, the replacement ewe lambs will run on arable catch crops of stubble turnips, oats and vetches before the fields are returned to spring sown crops of peas, barley and soya.

## Conservation

The Saxon Shore Way and Swale Heritage Trail pass through the Estate and other farmland features include hedges, ponds, ditches, brickfields and old chalk pits. Woodland is coppiced and gapped up with sweet chestnut and oak and new hedges planted with hawthorn, blackthorn, goat willow, dogwood, ash, sycamore, elder and hazel.

Windbreaks planted for the orchards include species such as pussy willow, which is a great habitat for beneficial insects. We sow wildflower mixes to give supplementary feed for pollinators for the fruit orchards and also get involved with the Kent Wildlife Trust to help protect specific species such as water voles on the marshes.

## Visits

We enjoy sharing what we are doing at Blackbird Farming with other farmers and members of the public. As a current regional Monitor Farm for the AHDB we host seasonal meetings for local farmers discussing current issues relating to agriculture. We have planted an orchard next to the village primary school which we hope to use to encourage the next generation to be more connected with their food. We regularly host visits to overseas visitors and are proud to open our gates for LEAF Open Farm Sunday.



## About LEAF Demonstration Farms

LEAF Demonstration Farms are commercial farms, which show the beneficial practices of Integrated Farm Management (IFM) to a broad range of audiences, through organised visits. They communicate an understanding of IFM in order to encourage uptake by farmers, support from the industry and political awareness of sustainable food and farming. For more information, visit [www.leafuk.org](http://www.leafuk.org)