

More and more farmers are investing in bed & breakfast pig enterprises. **SAM WALTON** found out how one business has benefited in Essex

I have often been asked what I consider to be the biggest difference in the pig industry now compared with when *Pig World* was first published in 1987. I would have to say that, other than the tremendous development of genetics, it has to be bed & breakfast pigs.

I suppose when it first started, there were many arable farms that had never had livestock. There would also be some who had exited livestock for whatever reason, and they would have suitable buildings for pigs on straw.

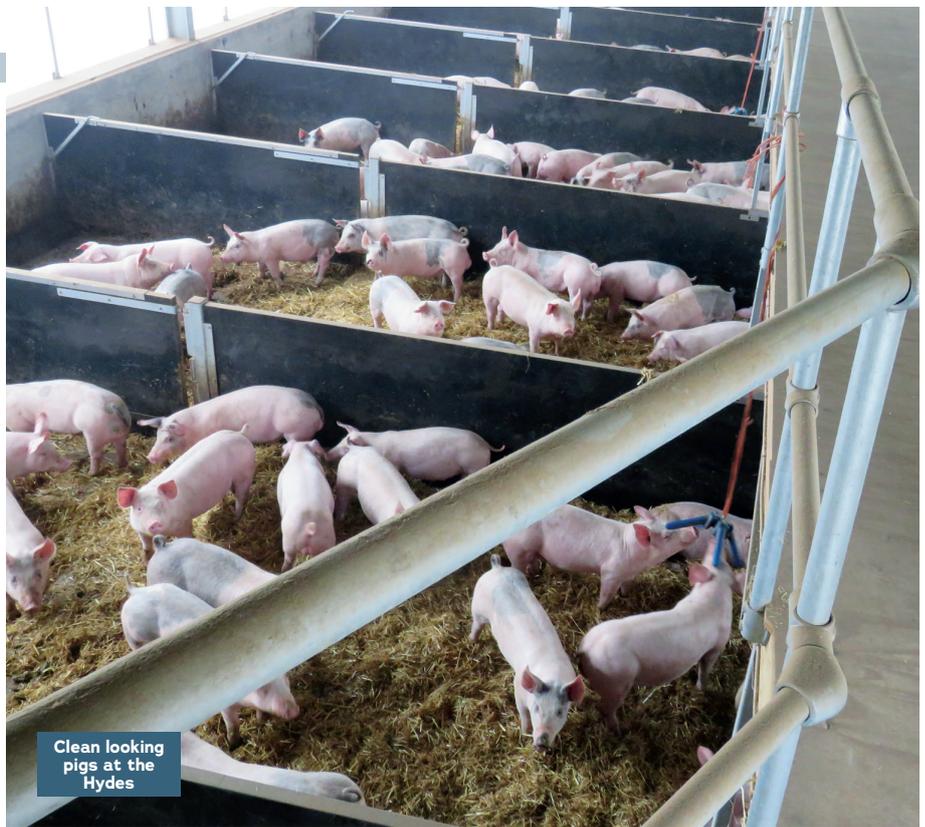
That would give them extra cashflow and they would have the added benefit of manure. Some would be able to take 300 or so, while others could take a thousand or more, as batch farrowing grew and producers had more weaners to offer every two or three weeks.

So that meant bigger, specialist buildings becoming necessary and viable and, fortunately, the industry is blessed with a number of firms who specialise in those pig buildings, which enable the pigs to grow faster and keep healthy.

I paid a rewarding visit to a farm to have gone down this route very recently, EW Davies Farms, at the Hydes, at Thaxted, in Essex. It is a large arable operation stretching to several thousand acres, which used to have dairy cattle, although the only livestock they have had for the last six years is a herd of 400 Dorset Poll sheep.

The sheep – belonging to farm manager Jeremy Durrant – were introduced to enable grassland to be brought into the rotation.

Eighteen months ago, Josh Bennett, at 23



Clean looking pigs at the Hydes

Adding pigs to the mix

years of age and a former student at the Royal Agricultural University Cirencester, joined to help on the arable side and take responsibility for the sheep, which, incidentally, are the only breed to lamb in November and so catch the spring market.

The seemingly only difficult thing about these sheep is that they are difficult to clip as they have wool on their foreheads and down their legs! The good thing about them is that they produce a lot of lambs, many triplets with very few singles and, in turn, very tasty meat.

Josh has a particular interest in livestock and his enthusiasm had been noted by Jeremy. A decision had been ongoing as to whether they should contemplate a bed and

breakfast enterprise on the farm.

It would mean extra cash flow and more manure, while the cleaning out would give the men on the farm something useful to do in the 'off' periods of arable farming. But I have a feeling that a big part of the decision to go ahead and invest in this spanking new set-up was down to the interest and enthusiasm of Josh, who is a born stockman.

“Josh had never had contact with pigs, but he was very keen to learn and be responsible for the set-up”

After all, Jeremy more than has his hands full with the rest of the business. So once the bullet was bitten, and the decision was made to invest in the new enterprise, they contacted BQP, who have been extremely helpful.

They advised on the type of building, and a new 1,050-place Quality Equipment specialist straw and scrape-through building was erected and completed in nine weeks. They also recommended the Jag drinkers, designed by Mark Jagger, which seem to be working well wherever they are installed and save a lot of water.

The first batch came in March and did extremely well, which you would expect from a new building. The second batch was well on its way at the beginning of



Dorset Poll sheep



Josh Bennett outside the new shed

up as the pigs grow. He scrapes the edge of each pen every morning to make sure it stays clean, while the main passage is also scraped out every day.

The farm, itself, is very interesting. It is actually a LEAF farm and is well set up for public engagement, opening its doors as an Open Farm Sunday demo farm in 2017. On the arable side, they do a lot of environmental education with school children and often have 950 visitors on any one open day.

They have actually designed the pig unit to allow visitors and the children to look around. The business takes the area around the farm buildings very seriously and has a number of schemes going that will provide lots of environmental areas, one of which is a newly planted orchard alongside the new building.

They already have several environmental areas, which encourage birds, particularly goldfinch. Since the birds and the bees have been working together, the fly population has dwindled, Jeremy told me.

And they already have an adjacent site earmarked for pig building number two! **PIW**



Josh, left, with Jeremy Durrant

on the job, taking the weaners through to finisher weights with enthusiasm.

He had carefully considered how much of the pen the pigs should have on entry to encourage them to use the dunging passage. So to start with, he lets them have about a quarter of it and gradually opens



The new 1,050-place Quality Equipment shed

November when I visited.

Josh had never had contact with pigs before, but he was very keen to learn and be responsible for the set-up – he has taken to the management of the new enterprise like a duck takes to water.

He has been well advised by BQP staff and listened to everything they have told him and what he needs to look out for. He is as keen as mustard and deals with all contact with BQP, the vets and RSPCA Freedom Food and is certainly learning

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