

Jon and Emma Hillier at  
Farrantshayes, their farm in  
East Devon



# Fast learners!

Emma and Jon Hillier have relished the challenge of their first smallholding

**N**ew smallholders Emma and Jon Hillier have jumped in at the deep end with livestock. After little more than a year they have Badger Face Welsh Mountain sheep, Red Ruby cattle from Devon and Mangalitzta pigs...originally from Hungary!

Emma, a secondary school teacher, and Jon, a property developer took on Farrantshayes Farm in East Devon in August 2016. It was a run down former commercial farm, which had originally gone on the market with 178 acres.

"We had dismissed it totally – too much land and way too expensive," says Emma. "But when it came back on the market

with 24 acres (the rest of the land has been sold off) it suddenly became possible. We had initially been looking for a house with just a few acres for me to keep my elderly horse at home and maybe dabble in keeping livestock for the first time. Even 24 acres was more than we had ever thought about – and the farm came with many outbuildings to service the original, much larger business. At the viewing I just held my head in my hands and said to Jon 'It's amazing – but what on earth are we going to do with all these outbuildings?'

The answer didn't take long to present itself. The couple were approached by a pair of local sheep farmers with a flock of pedigree Lleyens and Kerry Hills who

were happy to use some grazing land and spare shed to lamb in. A knowledgeable local dairy farmer moved his heifers into some of the bigger sheds for the winter. "Regularly having people on site who have been working with livestock all their lives is so reassuring," says Jon. "We have learnt so much from sharing the farm with more experienced people; as newcomers to keeping animals it's a great way of learning."

"Before moving in, went on an Introduction to Sheep course at Kate Humble's rural husbandry school in Monmouthshire. "We liked her Welsh Badger Face flock," said Emma. "They were small enough to turn over easily, their

distinctive markings gave them character and we were told the meat was amazing.”

Fortunately they found a breeder near to them – CS writer Debbie Kingsley up on Dartmoor – and picked up their first six ewes and two wethers in in October 2016. “We felt a bit overwhelmed – the thought that we were suddenly responsible for all these lives,” says Emma. It was a feeling that was to be oft repeated in the following months as more stock arrived.

### Native breeds

“We had, early on, determined the criteria for selecting breeds – that they should be native to the UK, of good temperament and producing great meat,” said Jon.

With that in mind, they chose the Devon Ruby as their cattle from the Whitefield Herd in Somerset the following month. Jon was their biggest fan. “I find it humbling that such a large creature can be so



*There comes a time when you have to take the plunge – or you never will*

manageable and affectionate. They are huge and you need to have a lot of respect for them, but they’re so characterful and fascinating to watch. There’s nothing more satisfying than watching your herd on new pasture, giving you their lovely, low moo.”

A few chickens were also acquired from from an organic farm for a couple of pounds each and they’ve been valiant little egg producers.



Emma keeps just a few chickens



Emma with the Mangalitzas

The biggest surprise has been pigs. “Em kept going on about pigs and producing our own pork,” says Jon. “Eventually I relented and we went on an another course – this time with Ian and Maggie Todd at nearby Smallicombe Farm.”

Emma says: ‘I think that as a teacher I really appreciate having the chance to listen and learn rather than being the one delivering the information. It’s great to build your confidence, but there comes a time when you have to take the plunge – or you never will.’

### First pigs

“Chris and Carl, two (supposedly) Oxford Sandy and Blacks arrived a week later and were to prove a great hit. “Pigs are just great fun. They love to play with a football and were fascinated by the horse treat ball that I bought them,” said Emma. “When the time came for them to make their final journey, five months later, it was a difficult day. They went into the trailer so willingly. You feel like the worst person in the world. It’s only a short journey to our local, family-run abattoir and they were so relaxed they were asleep when we had to unload them at the other end.”

All went smoothly and the result was a freezer full of pork. Next came Oxford Sandy & Blacks. This time friends and family were offered the opportunity to buy half a pig and visit their animal throughout the rearing process. “Our local newspaper ran a story about it,” said Emma. “I walked into a garage to pay for fuel and there were our piglets on the front page!”

The scheme has proved very successful and Jon and Emma have recently ventured into keeping Mangalitzas, buying a breeding pair and two weaners from a smallholder who was giving up. The intend

to try their hands at the increasingly popular art of charcuterie; the ‘wooly pigs’ are ideally suited to having their meat dried as a lot of fat runs through it, allowing the joint to hang for many months without drying out.

### What next?

With a wide range of animals now on the farm, what does the future hold? Emma and Jon still have their day jobs, but hope to convert some of the buildings into holiday lets and specialise in breaks for people who have a dream of running a smallholding.

“I love social media,” says Emma, who tweets about her adventures at @farrantshayes and blogs on [www.farrantshayes.co.uk](http://www.farrantshayes.co.uk). “It’s put us in touch with so many interesting people who are enthusiastic about small scale farming, countryside education and ethically produced meat. Though we haven’t really got a business yet, it’s something we would love to do in the future as we become more knowledgeable. There are plenty of buildings on site that would be suitable for conversion into a small farm shop, so who knows what the future holds?”



The Red Ruby cattle. Also see cover picture