

Deer Farming - A Background



The information on these pages is meant to give the reader an overview of rearing deer on a farm or in a park. More detailed information is available from the British Deer Farmers Association, who can offer assistance in getting started, including estimates of the cost of setting up, where to source stock and available markets.

Deer Farming and Deer Parks - A Background

The farming of deer is still a relatively new enterprise, although husbandry skills have existed for many centuries in the parks of Britain and other parts of Europe. Originally created as hunting preserves, today in the UK, deer parks are often created as an attractive amenity, as well as a source of venison. Careful breeding over many years has developed animals of increased size and exceptional antler development, that are renowned worldwide. With the advent of deer farming, many park-bred animals have been transferred to farms in order to enhance stock that was often bred from wild-caught deer.

It was nearly 40 years ago that the first commercial farms were established in the UK and New Zealand and more recently in other parts of the world. In the UK there are now approximately 35,000 farmed deer, while in New Zealand this figure is closer to 1.5 million.

The growth and success of the industry in the UK has occurred despite the lack of support for deer farming in an otherwise support-dependent livestock sector of agriculture. Increased awareness by a more health-conscious public of "alternative" foods has led to significant markets for farmed venison being developed. With its low fat and high iron content (compared with traditional meats), venison is now available everywhere from farm shops to major supermarket chains,

As markets have developed, so have the skills necessary to farm deer, assisted by the work on a number of government funded research farms in England and Scotland. Originating as they do from deer parks and the wild, the deer themselves have proved they can adapt well to the different types of management practised today. Farmed deer have rapidly developed confidence in the farm environment and those responsible for their care have developed husbandry techniques which meet the deer's social needs and unique behaviour.

Deer, which have grown up to expect winter housing, regular handling and rotational grazing, behave no differently to cattle and sheep, sometimes better, and as a result, with appropriate care and facilities, can be transported and even slaughtered with minimal stress. The low labour regime for deer farming means that it can easily compliment other livestock and arable enterprises. Dairy farms, with existing buildings, are ideally suited for conversion to deer.