

Our oyster farm's a real labour of love

YOU might find this surprising but oysters have been farmed in the North East for hundreds of years. And now husband and wife team Christopher and Helen Sutherland are carrying on the tradition.

The couple, who have two children, have been farming oysters on the Northumberland coast for the past three years after buying the business from Christopher's dad.

Now known as the Lindisfarne Oyster Farm, it lies on the site of the oyster beds established by the monks of Lindisfarne Priory.

But if you think it's a glamorous job, think again. Standing waist-high in ice

Sales of oysters are expected to triple as we get in the mood for love on Valentine's Day. **MITYA UNDERWOOD** dons her wellies and pays a visit to the only North East oyster farm

cold water for hours on end isn't a job for everyone. Christopher has to brave some of the coldest and most miserable conditions in the country, and all for his oysters.

"It's hard work but so is all farming and the end result is worth it," he says. "It's not a massive business for us, we probably sell about 1,500 every week but that doubles around Valentine's Day.

"It's a hard job all year round but definitely worth it."

It's believed the Lindisfarne oyster beds were originally founded in 1381, when the monks bought an oyster-filled boat from a Scotsman for 100 shillings.

What happened between then and the 19th Century is unclear, but oyster farming in the area gets a mention again in 1881 when landowner Lord Tankerville employed a man called Thomas Bowey to manage the rediscovered oyster beds.

However, financial problems were on the horizon and the Tankerville family fell from grace. Once again the oysters faded away.

Then in 1953, John Sutherland, Christopher's dad, started farming at Ross, between Bamburgh and Holy Island.

He began farming oysters in 1989, when on low tide he noticed oyster shells in the sand.

Thanks to John, oysters were back in the North East and back on the menu.



And if it's got anything to do with Christopher and Helen, they'll continue to be farmed in the region for many a year yet.

They are now so successful their oysters sell all around the country, including to Rules - London's oldest restaurant and one of its finest. But most of the sales - Christopher estimates about 80% - go to wholesalers, fishmongers and restaurants across the North East.

Customers that take his oysters include the Gusto Group which runs Secco and Paradiso in Newcastle city centre and the Malmaison hotel on the Quayside.

And one of the best-known advocates of good quality local food in the North East, Michelin star chef Terry Laybourne, was so impressed with their produce he devoted a whole chapter to the North East oysters produced by the couple in his book, *The Quest for Taste*.

"Oysters are very specialist food and not everyone likes them," Christopher says. "When you're selling them to restaurants some of them really know how to get on with them but others don't do such a good job.

"If you have an oyster that's fresh and properly prepared it's lovely.

"That's the thing about our oysters,

they are pristine. When you open them up they look natural and untouched, that's the way it should be."

As well as being very high in protein and low in carbohydrates, oysters have a more well-known attraction. Literally.

Since Roman times they have been used by lusty couples as an aphrodisiac.

And each year as Valentine's Day approaches restaurants stock up with thousands of oysters which will be requested as part of the wooing process.

The Sutherland's business, Lindisfarne Oysters, have one of the busiest times of year around Valentine's Day as their orders more than double.

When the oysters arrive at the farm they are the size of a thumbnail and it takes another two-and-a-half to four years before they are fully grown and ready to eat.

When Christopher, 42, and Helen, 39, first took over the farm they were undecided as to whether they should keep the oyster side of things going.

"We weren't sure about whether we wanted to do it or not," says Christopher. "But in the end we decided we didn't want the oysters to disappear from the North East. It's a marvel that they're able to grow up in this part of the world. The conditions are very harsh but it works if you do it properly."

The UK's consumption of shellfish is relatively low, especially compared to other European countries like France and Sweden.

Christopher added: "People all over Europe eat shellfish all the time but it's just not part of our diets anymore which I think is a real shame. A lot of the problem is worries over safety, but there are such strict regulations there really is no problem."

The process of harvesting the oysters takes a lot of hard work and energy, especially when almost everything relies on nature. Christopher and Helen, who are parents to Harry, five, and Arthur, two, have to check the low tide timings every week so they know when they can get access to their



SPECIALISTS: Chris Sutherland inspects his Lindisfarne Oysters near Belford, Northumberland

PICTURES: TONY HALL

400 trestles which each hold four bags of oysters.

The oysters are bought in from Guernsey as the sea off the North East coast is too cold for them to breed. They can grow to the size of a palm of a hand.

The bags tied to the trestles need to be rotated depending on their age and Christopher needs to check they are secure and surviving in the harsh conditions.

This is particularly difficult because

Christopher has to rely on the tides. Which means he's only able to check on his oysters about seven days in every month, and then for just two or three hours.

As he says he's not in it for the money. "Oysters are definitely something you can sell.

"I don't have any problem selling them, but getting enough money for them is a different matter. You can work your socks off but you might not end up with a lot."

Pearl of a starter

THERE is no way of telling the sex of an oyster by just looking at the shells. While oysters have separate sexes, they may change sex one or more times during their lifespan.

The largest pearl ever found in an oyster was 620 carats.

In the Caribbean some oysters can climb up trees. Baby oysters are called spats.

There are between 50-100 species of oyster, but only 10-20 are fished or farmed. It is thought that Casanova would feast on 50 oysters a day for breakfast.

The formation of a natural pearl begins when a foreign substance slips into the oyster.

It then covers the irritant with layers of the same substance that is used to create the shell. This eventually forms a pearl.

The classic way of serving oysters is opened, raw on a bed of cracked ice, decorated with seaweed if you can obtain it, lemon juice and tabasco sauce too. Champagne is the obvious accompaniment, but any dry white wine is good, as is Guinness.



SEE that picture in the top right of this column. See that twinkle in those wide-eyes. That fresh-face. That earnest expression. A head full of hopes and ideas. That was taken in December 2002. My first week at the Chronicle. Happy days.

Now look at the picture at the bottom. That picture was taken this morning.

My final week at the Chronicle. February 2007. Four years and two months later.

The twinkle has been all but extinguished, those eyes narrowed as they evolved to adjust to the lack of natural light in a windowless office. The earnest expression has been replaced by one of a hounddog and the head full of ideas is now full of aches and pains.

Life has been tough at Stalag Chronicle. But now it's over. The tunnel is finished and I can see the light. The stench of freedom is in my nostrils, and I am to make good my escape.

According to the lines scratched on the wall, I've been here for.... well a while anyways. I lost count after 1,500. That's a lot of lines. My point is, I'm off. I'm upping sticks and heading into the Tyneside sunset. Off into the distance. Well South Shields.

I'm well practised at leaving. I've left more jobs than Kevin Keegan, but it still doesn't get any easier. The saying goodbyes to the good friends you've made over the years. The bank of happy memories you store up. Good job it's the Chronicle I'm waving farewell to.

It was a blustery December weekend which saw me leave Lancashire up the M6 and across the A69 to my new home in Tyneside four years and two months ago. The land was new and foreign. I'd heard of Newcastle, even seen it on TV in programmes like *Our Friends in the North* and *Badger*. And I'd made the odd visit here to see a pal who had made the trip from Rochdale long before me - like a pioneer (the Rochdale Pioneers were the forefathers of the modern Co-Op), but it's not until you get here and live among the locals that you begin to get an understanding of the place.

Of the proud heritage, the proud people and that insular mentality. Miles away from anywhere looking after their own. Their marras. Working at the Chronicle has been insular. I hope my new place has got windows.

And if there are, they will still look out on the North East. It maybe across the river, but it's not a million miles away and this time I don't have to move. Of the four other newspapers I've left (three were in the same group before you accuse me of being a butterfly, floating from job to job) I've also left the area.

Rochdale when I went to work in Blackburn (I lived in Lancaster mind, much nicer) and when I left Blackburn I left Lancashire altogether for the North East. The Long Suffering Marjorie wasn't too pleased. She was

tempting at a school in Morecambe - same one Eric Morecambe went to. He'd left by then - and didn't really want to go. Four years and two months on and she's a well-thought of teacher at Newbiggin-by-the-Sea.

This time we don't have to move. Don't have to leave our Tyneside flat in Whitley Bay. I'm of that age that when I move jobs I have to do it in the same region. The great thing about journalism is the fact you can pretty much live anywhere. Every city has at least one newspaper and if the right job comes up, you can live where you want. I always saw myself walking to work in Devon. Stopping for a scone with clotted cream, before getting into the office and writing about tin mines, or whatever it is they have down there. But you get old, get responsibilities and get trapped. Luckily Tyneside is not a bad place to be trapped. It's no Rochdale but it'll do.



Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome

Regular exposure to hand-arm vibration can cause a range of conditions known as Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome (HAVS) which includes vibration white finger and carpal tunnel syndrome.

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