

Pearl of a crop is looking likely for Lindisfarne oyster grower

By IAN SMITH

A BUMPER crop of fresh, locally grown oysters will soon be available again in fish shops and restaurants.

After months of shortages, the first samples of a new stock of oysters now being gathered look and taste good. Within a few months, Lindisfarne Oysters — the only oyster farm in the north east — expects not only to be supplying its existing outlets in the north east but to be selling oysters in the UK's biggest cities. "It looks as though we're going to have a bumper crop of really top quality oysters, for which there is always a strong demand," said Christopher Sutherland, who took over the business from his father, John, just over two years ago.

He restocked the farm in May 2003 with Pacific rock oysters known as gigas. They were first introduced to the UK in the 1960's. Gigas grow twice as quickly as the native variety but because they cannot breed so far north, Christopher buys seed oysters, about the size of a thumbnail, from a breeder in Guernsey.

The seed weighs about a gramme and a mature oyster reaches 80, 90 or 100g and can process up to four gallons of water in an hour.

The Lindisfarne oyster beds are exposed only at low tide and it is a slow, bumpy ride by tractor and Land Rover over the dunes of Ross Sands to reach them.

"We really don't get enough suitable tides to make it easy to handle the oysters and even at low tide we are often working nearly waist high in water," said

Christopher.

"We put the seed into mesh bags which are then placed on a trestle table on the beds, and as they grow the bag is opened and split and the young oysters are given more room to grow."

Grading the oysters according to size and rebagging them in wider mesh bags is done manually and is time consuming.

Christopher is helped in his task by a small team of workers from Ross Farm, the mixed arable and cattle farm which the Sutherland family has farmed since 1936. Regular helpers include David Renton from Ross, Keith Watson of Belford and Willie Milburn who makes a 70-mile round trip from his home near Netherwitton.

The latest crop of gigas is growing very well and some have already been sold to local restaurants and hotels.

The oysters are often requested for wedding receptions. It may be because oysters contain a balanced content of rare vitamins and minerals and are naturally high in zinc — which is essential for sexual maturity, an active brain and healthy skin.

However, before Lindisfarne Oysters ever reach the dinner plate they are purified in a tank back at Ross Farm for 42 hours where they are thoroughly washed through in water which is bathed in ultra-violet light.

Local records show there is a long history of oyster beds being worked in the shallows between Ross Sands and Holy Island and that the monks of Lindisfarne had acquired some oysters as far back as 1381.



☐ GATHERING TIME. Christopher Sutherland of Lindisfarne Oysters harvests the first of his latest crop.



NINETEEN ramblers rambled on Sunday. We set out under lumpy skies that threatened rain but failed to deliver and we thankfully avoided a soaking.

From South Middleton car park we headed south with Dod hill, a sugar loaf-shaped mound on our right. The country was mostly bracken, grown tall enough to tower over some of our members, but was passable even without machetes!

After 3kms of gentle climb we came to a normally boggy area with a small burn in a hollow among the rocks and trees. This was time for a coffee stop, sitting on fallen trunks or rocks. Now we made our way through a few hundred metres of abundant varieties of meadow grasses before joining the dirt road at the Dodd Farm and on towards the plantation at Threestoneburn Wood. We didn't venture in but with Steel Crag on the skyline, made a beeline for it. It was to be the site for our lunch sitting with the rocks as our backrest. A popular spot as it happened, as we encountered the only other sign of walkers, already tucking into their bait boxes.

Onward and upwards, through the heather covered peat. Here the clouds were starting to lift, even clearing off Cheviot so we took advantage of some of the best views of the National Park. We skirted Langlee Crag, now the path became ever steeper, but we were going the easy way, down hill. The valley opened up and Harthope Burn came into view. The steepest climb of the day was still to be tackled to take us out of the valley.

A tea stop at the top allowed some debate as to whether the large white ship we could see close to the horizon was in fact a tall ship making its way to the quayside at Newcastle and Gateshead, but even with the aid of bins and telescopic lenses, it was impossible to tell. Patches of blue sky greeted us as we headed back to the car park by Middleton Old Town, a grandiose name for two ruined cottages.

Next week's walk, July 31, will be Halterburn and Schill leaving Wallace Green Car Park at 9.30am. TOM BREWIS.

And now for something completely different...



By THOMAS BALDWIN

THE head teacher of Holy Trinity First School, David Wilson, hung up his chalk last week after 17 years at the school.

Mr Wilson, from Wooler, who is leaving to take up a new post with Northumberland County Council, was given gardening vouchers in a presentation from pupils and staff on his last day.

He said: "It was very sad. It's a very strong local community and, although I live out at

Wooler, through the children I've got to know everyone very closely. That will be a big miss."

However Mr Wilson, who has overseen the transformation of the school buildings and the development of the nursery at Holy Trinity, said it was the right time to move on: "I thought it was time to consider doing something completely different and also give a chance for somebody else with new ideas to come in."

His job at the County Council will involve working as an advisor to 17 schools throughout the county, helping to raise standards and implement new initiatives.

☐ David Wilson, head teacher at Holy Trinity First School: Feels now is the right time to move on and give a chance to somebody else with new ideas. Picture by Joe Payne.

Let's hear it for the man from DEFRA

HURRAH for the Defra men! Not only is this an eye-catching and to many, an unbelievable introduction, stunningly it is also true. However, like most statements of unlikely credibility, there is a qualification.

The DEFRA men in question are those from the National Bee Unit. Talk to almost anyone involved in agriculture or agronomy and they will have tales to tell of red tape, farcical instructions and a frightening lack of competence - but not local beekeepers.

Unfortunately DEFRA has heard how respected, knowledgeable, and well-respected their bee inspectors are and, apparently deciding that this does not fit the Ministry ethos, has been slowly starving it of funds. The Bee Unit has had no budget increase for eight years (which has almost halved the value of its

£1.25 million allocation) and, during the next three years, will suffer a further reduction of 20 per cent. Half of all the inspectors and two of our regional inspectors will leave and will not be replaced.

Every person who grows crops whether they be oil seed rape or apples or peas, knows of the increase in yield attributable to pollination from bees. There is scientific evidence of yield increases of 25 per cent and more, depending on the crop and the size of the bee colonies involved. Local bee associations like the Alnwick & District Beekeepers Association play a big part in encouraging the growth of the craft (an almost four-fold rise in the last three years), and in demonstrating best practice. This is one of the reasons that Northumbria is relatively free of most of the diseases which affect bees.

However, it takes nothing away from local beekeepers to recognise the very valuable part played by the National Bee Unit in ensuring this welcome state. The unit collects and collates news, information and good ideas from across the UK and the world. When the Bee Inspectors, who add to their competence and personal credibility by being beekeepers themselves, go out on visits they pass on this wealth of information. The manner and style they adopt is that of a friend who is an expert and who will check out your apiary and the way you manage it. They will pass on good relevant practices and take away any local tips and hints which would be welcome elsewhere.

There is no down side to the National Bee Unit — no wonder that DEFRA wants effectively to cull it.

Move up the bus — tables on top

A NEW cafe housed inside a 1960's vintage bus has thrown open its doors to the public at the Chain Bridge Honey Farm.

The Bristol bus was driven up to the Horncliffe tourist attraction from Yeovil in Somerset where it has also been used for hospitality purposes. Prior to that it was owned by P&O.

The interior of the bus has now been restored to a high standard and its outside will be painted over the winter.

Managed by Livvy Cawthorn, the cafe will be a welcome addition to the honey farm visitor centre, now in its tenth year.

A range of light refreshments will be served onboard and the facility is also available for evening group bookings.

The Chain Bridge Honey Farm is open to the public seven days a week, from 10am to 5pm. Entrance is free.

☐ Livvy Cawthorn, Angus Mason, Sian Watson and Frances Robson with the Honey Bus Cafe.



Successful open day for Coastwatch

BERWICK Coastwatch had its busiest weekend yet last week, coinciding with an open day at the Magdalene Fields lookout tower on Sunday.

The Coastwatch team was involved in a

search for a briefly missing child, who was found within 20 minutes and two incidents of people being swept out to sea on inflatables. In one case, watchkeepers used a megaphone to alert a man who was

asleep on a dinghy; in another, a rope was thrown to two teenagers.

Over 150 visited the tower on Sunday and more than 40 climbed the ladder to the upstairs viewing area. One new watchkeeper and four observers were signed up. Later a shield was presented to Beverly Thompson of Bourne Leisure in recognition of the help given to Coastwatch by Berwick Holiday Centre, the first shield awarded by Coastwatch.

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