

produces 3,600ha of wheat, barley, canola and lupins, most of which is home milled to feed his 5,000 beef cattle. Paul, who believes in using the latest technology and keeping things simple, recently leased another 10,000ha of arable land.

On day four we headed to Craig Moyston Farms, a 2,700-sow outdoor pig unit, to meet Manager Steven Harris, who once worked on a pig unit owned by a Fram Farmers Member. Known to most of the group, Steven gave us an insight into the outdoor pig industry and showed us around the unit. Clearly demand for free range pork is on the increase in Australia. Day five was spent with local pig farmers who produce for Milne Agrigroup and we visited pig units that had recently signed contracts to supply the company with free range pork. Mark Gauld, our host, took us to a 750-sow unit which was established in 2015 by Jeremy and Josie Keam, and now produces 300 piglets a week. Jeremy, a fence erector by trade, designed and manufactured the arcs to suit his needs and has a particularly efficient unit which keeps labour costs low.

David Plant of Milne Agrigroup joined us for visits to two more pig units, together with two poultry facilities which produce for both the standard and free range markets. The company's free range brand, Mount Barker Poultry, is doing exceptionally well at the moment and it is where the Milne group is making some considerable investment.

From there we drove along the coast to Bunbury, where we spent the last three days of our tour. On day nine we visited a 900-head dairy enterprise owned by Victor Rodwell, Chairman of Western Dairies, who has clear expansion plans and will eventually have two 600-plus cow herds on different sites.

En route to our final farm in the west of the wheat belt just north of Narrogin, we took a detour through the enormous open cast coalmines of Western Australia, which was very interesting. Hillcroft Farms is owned by Dawson and Greta Bradford who farm 5,060ha, which includes 1,100ha of grain, 300ha canola, 120ha clover seed and 1,800ha Oaten Hay for export. They also have a 1,300 sow indoor herd producing 32,000 bacon pigs each year, together with a sheep enterprise with 3,000 Ultrawhite ewes averaging 135% lambing, a stud of 1,000 Ultrawhite ewes which sells around 200 rams per year and a 200 Ultrawhite nucleus development stock which has a target of 170-180% lambing. The couple's son, Dawson Jnr, who now runs all but the sheep enterprise, has used their proximity to southern Asia to reduce costs substantially. Over the last couple of years he has purchased a feed mill from China and all his new pig buildings come flat packed from Vietnam.

FREE RANGE EGGS OFFER A PROFITABLE OPPORTUNITY

Ever thought about free range egg production? You should, says Norfolk-based Anglia Free Range Eggs (AFRE).

Free range egg production provides a reliable income and an opportunity for the next generation to remain on the family farm, according to Harry Irwin and Peter Davidson, Operational Directors and major shareholders in AFRE.

Founded in 2010, it combines a wealth of experience and shared commitment, driving innovation and excellence into the production of local free range eggs. The company is committed to helping the farming community by developing healthy, sustainable businesses. All farms within the group are purpose-built units designed to the highest welfare and hygiene standards. They are audited and approved by the Lion Code, Freedom Foods and DEFRA.

AFRE producers receive a comprehensive educational programme addressing all areas of production, and a consultant who offers practical advice. Requiring 20 acres and a £500,000-£600,000 investment per 16,000-hen unit, the AFRE plan allows for buildings to be paid off in five to seven years and an annual labour charge of £28,000.

25-year-old Shona Steel from Cambridgeshire grew up on a 1,200 acre arable enterprise at Hamerton. She loved having chickens around the farmyard and worked in various animal-related roles, including a free range unit.

"In 2012 I was looking to come back and father suggested free range egg production; it offers good cashflow and it's not weather dependent. We researched the market thoroughly and chose AFRE as it was relatively small and their producers are a close-knit community.

I run the 16,000-bird unit six days a week from 7am to 1pm, with part-time help on three mornings. Birds arrive at 16 weeks and stay to 72 weeks, each producing around 320 eggs. The flock produces 15,500 eggs a day which I collect, my mother helps to pack and are collected three times a week. The business has worked out much better than I expected, but we did everything possible to avoid mistakes."



Shona Steel

Chris Ford has 48,000 free range hens on 60 acres of his family's Red House Farm in Suffolk. Leaving school at 16 he worked on the pig breeding enterprise, then in 2004 read about free range eggs. After nine months of research he put up his first shed for 16,000 hens. Two years later, with the business doing well, he invested in another unit, then a third, for AFRE in 2011.

"The free range sector is doing well; it's a brilliant way for young people to remain on the family farm or come back," explains 38-year-old Chris, who farms with his brothers Stephen, 43, and Trevor, 45, running 1,000 acres of arable land and a 450 sow breeding herd.

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Chris Ford, Red House Farm

