



Vineyard tours will be offered at Durslade Farm as part of Open Farm Sunday. Photo: Durslade Farm

# Meet the FARMER

From tractor rides and farmyard animals to vineyard tours, bird of prey displays and soil pits, this year's Open Farm Sunday has much to offer.

CATHERINE WELTON speaks to some of the farmers throwing open their gates to find out why they take part – and how you can too

**T**hink of Somerset's rich and varied landscapes, and you think of rolling hills, dramatic coastlines, ancient woodland, low-lying wetlands – and fertile farmland. Farmland covers around two thirds of the county and supports thousands of food producers, including some of Britain's favourite brands.

Of course, there's no denying that times are tough for farmers. The support of the Great British Public has never been more important to them, which is the inspiration behind Open Farm Sunday, a nationwide initiative that aims to connect food producers with

consumers. This year's takes place on June 7 and marks the scheme's 20th anniversary. To date, over 2,000 farmers have invited over three million members of the public to see firsthand what it takes to produce our food and drink.

One of those farmers is Oliver Dowding of Dowding's Apple Juice & Cider, in Shepton Montague. He's been taking part in Open Farm Sunday since 2022 and is a passionate advocate for the scheme. 'I'm a farmer and I have been my whole life,' he says. 'Within three or four miles of here, there are around 12,000 people and anything we can do to

increase their understanding of where their food comes from, and their connection with the farms right around them, is a good thing.'

## BACK TO NATURE

Oliver has farmed organically for 35 years and is particularly keen for visitors to learn about how farming and nature can co-exist. 'We have displays from Pitcombe Rock Falconry, which is a great way to explain how the natural world works. One of our biggest pest problems is voles – a pair of voles at the start of the year can have several hundred babies by the end. But a barn owl can >



All sorts of farming activities are demonstrated on Open Farm Sunday. Photo: Durslade Farm

eat as many as 17 a day when rearing young. It's about explaining these connections to people: why we need bees and wasps in the orchard, why we don't spray, the things that make it tick. Being able to explain that helps cement the connection between the public and where their food comes from.'

Camilla White, of the Slow Farming Company in Castle Cary agrees. They've been taking part in Open Farm Sunday since 2023 and see the day as an opportunity to educate the public about regenerative agriculture. They were early adopters of the practice, which for them includes rotating their cattle to avoid over-grazing, planting deep-rooted plants and increasing biodiversity, all of which visitors to the farm can see for themselves. 'As time has gone on, we've

added more elements to make the day as engaging as possible. For example, last year we dug a soil pit, so visitors could really see how our mob grazing improves soil health,' she explains. 'We're always thinking about how to make the day more interactive – and how to help people feel more connected to the farm, long after they've left. The first time, it massively exceeded our expectations, we had over 300 visitors and everyone was so enthusiastic, even if we were still mowing the parking field as the cars started coming in!'

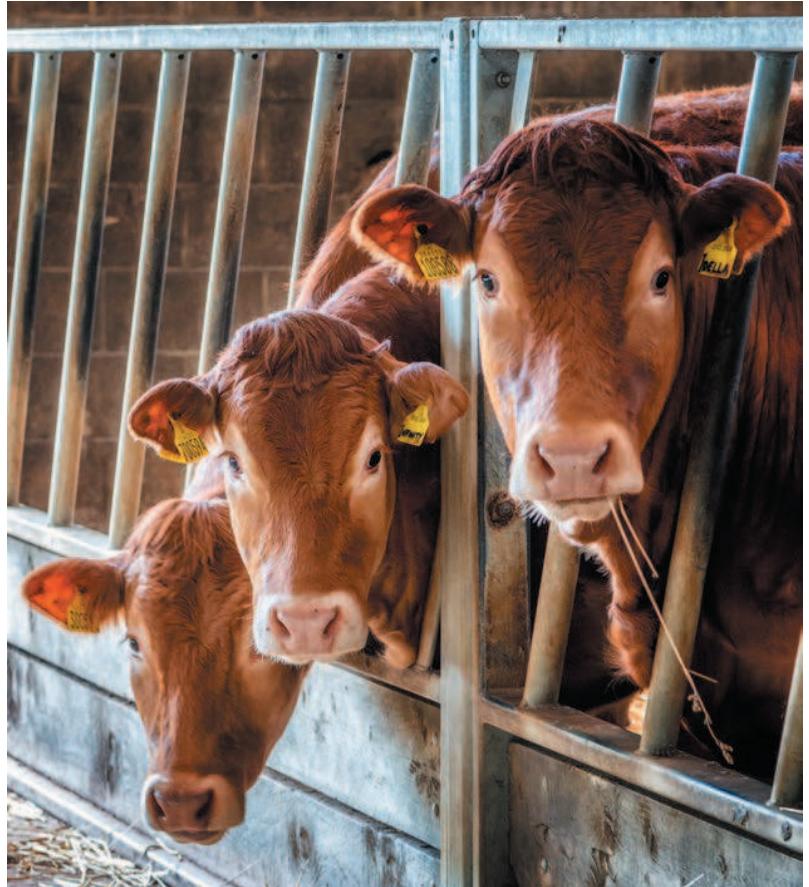
### INSPIRING CONVERSATIONS

This unique opportunity to talk directly to the public is what motivates the farms to take part. Ben Carter is estates manager at Durslade Farm, a 1,000-acre farm on

the outskirts of Bruton, with an orchard, vineyard, and livestock including Wagyu cattle. He explains why Open Farm Sunday has been a fixture in their calendar every year since 2017: 'The team love engaging with visitors and explaining what we do and why we do it. It's important for us to share the pride we take in our work.'

'We know that people are genuinely curious about farming and where their food comes from, and the day creates a relaxed space for conversation, learning and connection. It's incredibly rewarding to see visitors engage with the farm, ask questions and leave with a better understanding of the work that goes into producing food and caring for the land.'

Farrier and farmer Dom Northmore opened up his Lane End Farm near Axbridge



Across the country farms open their gates to the public on June 7. Photo: GettyImages



It's a day out for the whole family. Photo: Slow Food Company

for the first time last year. 'Farmers are often pushed for time, but when you do get hold of one, I guarantee they won't stop talking about farming!' he laughs. 'Education is so important, and if you only manage to talk to 10 per cent of the visitors, and they only take away one piece of information, you've still made an impression.'

'We had about 350 people, many more than we were expecting. From children to people in their 80s, including people from the centre of Cardiff who'd never been on a farm before. We had a really positive response, and a couple of people said they didn't realise how hard farmers have to work.' Keen to build on last year's success, this year Dom has plans to include a farrier's competition and hedge laying.



## OUTDOOR LIFE

### PLENTY TO SEE AND DO

Most of the farmers try to do something different each year, so repeat visitors always have something new to experience. Durslade Farm has been taking part for nearly 10 years, and their open day has expanded to reflect the changes on the farm in that time. 'As our enterprises have grown, we showcase a different one each year, so no two events are the same. We've featured lambing, cattle and now with our vineyard expansion we offer tours there as well,' says Ben. 'This year, visitors can enjoy tractor and trailer rides, and we'll also be hosting foraging tours and "woodland wellness" walks. There will also be plenty for younger visitors, with children's workshops, a scavenger hunt and live music throughout the day.'

It's the same story at Dowding's. 'We will have more exhibits, so visitors can understand things like the grafting of trees for example, which I've started doing over the last two or three years and has been really successful,' explains Oliver. As well as the educational aspect, he also wants visitors to enjoy having access to such a beautiful space. 'They can walk around 15 acres of orchard, with a stream running through it, we don't charge for entry as we don't want to put barriers in the way to see the place we think of as special.'

Talking to the farmers who take part, it's impossible not to be swept away by their passion for farming, and for communicating that to the public.

'If you've never visited a working farm before, Open Farm Sunday is the perfect chance to do so,' says Ben. Camilla agrees: 'In this day and age, when many people feel disconnected from the origin of their food, Open Farm Sunday is an invaluable opportunity to bridge that gap.' ●



From vineyard tours to tractor rides there's something for the whole family. Photo: Durslade Farm

## HOW TO TAKE PART IN OPEN FARM SUNDAY

### Dowding's Apple Juice and Cider

**WHERE:** Apple HQ, Shepton Montague, Wincanton, BA9 8JW

**WHEN:** 10am-8pm

**FOOD & DRINK:** Available from 11.30am-6pm. Picnics welcome

**CHARGES:** Free entry, minimum £1 donation to the Pitcombe Rock Falconry

**DOGS:** Welcome on leads

### The Slow Farming Company

**WHERE:** Clanville Manor Farm, Clanville, Castle Cary BA7 7PJ

**WHEN:** 11am-3pm

**FOOD & DRINK:** Barbecue, cake, ice creams and a cider bar. Picnics welcome

**CHARGES:** Free entry and parking, contributions to the Air Ambulance for the tractor tour

### Durslade Farm

**WHERE:** Durslade Farm, Dropping Lane, Bruton, BA10 0NL

**WHEN:** 11am-4pm

**FOOD & DRINK:** Durslade Farm beef lasagne, falafel and hotdogs

**CHARGES:** Free entry & parking. Booking recommended for tours and workshops

**DOGS:** Welcome on leads, but not on farm tours, foraging walks or in the galleries

### Lane End Farm

**WHERE:** Lower Weare, Axbridge, BS26 2LH

**WHEN:** 12-4pm

**FOOD & DRINK:** Teas, coffees and cakes. Picnics welcome

**CHARGES:** Free entry, charges apply for some activities

**DOGS:** Regrettably, no dogs

For more farms in Somerset taking part in Open Farm Sunday visit: [farmsunday.org](http://farmsunday.org)