

# Ground force

SUE CADE talks all things smallholding with Emma Hillier, secretary and events manager at DASH

If you keep chickens, goats or even alpacas you may well have heard of DASH – the Devon Association of Smallholders.

DASH is the largest smallholding association in the country - since 1986 it has been providing support to smallholders across the county. Some members are hobbyists, whilst others run their activity as a business.

“The definition of a smallholding could be something as small as a back garden where chickens are kept, or an allotment for growing vegetables.” explains secretary and events manager Emma Hillier. “But then a number of our members have ten acres with a wide variety of animals.”

*‘We need to get back to the mentality where everyone has a pig in the back garden’*

Emma is certain that some are people who watched too much *River Cottage* and got carried away with the concept – just like she did. “I had the opportunity to buy some land, in theory to keep my horse on. But quite suddenly there were sheep, chickens – etc!”

I ask what it is exactly that DASH offers to members. “Lots and lots of support. Courses are a big thing, not just for experienced members but for anyone interested in becoming a smallholder. We offer smallholder taster courses, an introduction to keeping sheep and even one on cheesemaking.”

Member events include farm walks where you sometimes get to meet rare breeds like the Torddu Welsh Mountain Badger Face sheep at South Yeo Farm West. Emma suggests there’s a role for DASH as custodians of these breeds which are in danger of disappearing. “Keeping rare breeds like Old English goats, woolly pigs, Oxford Sandy and Blacks, Devon Red Ruby and Dexter cattle doesn’t make sense to a commercial farmer.” The farm visits are a great opportunity to see what others are doing – and they’re social, too. “Everyone



A walk on the farm

PHOTOS: Rosie Parsons



## SELLING YOUR SMALLHOLDING PRODUCE - DASH MEMBERS SELL THROUGH:

private sales

veg boxes

village websites

Facebook

farm gate sales

local farm shops

farmer's markets

agricultural shows

brings a plate of food, takes a look around the farm and then eats together.”

For smallholders love to celebrate and share their successes. At one AGM, private chef Tim Maddams came to cook a meal based on whatever produce was brought along. “It was like *Ready Steady Cook*” laughs Emma. “The mutton wontons were delicious.”

There are plenty more opportunities to get together; for example, at ‘chat’ evenings at venues such as Coldharbour Farm in East Devon and Holsworthy Farm in West Devon or agricultural events including Honiton Show or in the autumn, South Molton Apple Fair.

One memorable DASH event, Emma says, was clicker training for chickens. “It was very quirky! Maisie Wake who ran it was incredibly compassionate and

thoughtful – it really changed our perspective, especially those of us who thought that chickens couldn’t be trained.”

On another occasion, Catherine Warren gave a talk based around zoo pharmacognosy – I have to ask for help spelling this. “Catherine spoke about the way animals will self-select herbs and other plants found growing in the hedgerow as a way of self-medicating.”

As well as learning from the experts, DASH also has input into research projects. “One PhD student wanted to meet our smallholders to find out how we use antibiotics in comparison to large scale farmers.”

In general DASH promotes good welfare principles and many members are in the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. “This covers things like cutting hedges every other year and not spraying

**ABOVE:**  
DASH members bring their own produce for lunch

nitrogen on the land.”

DASH is very much a community organisation with members sharing ideas, advice and experiences to support each other. “As an example, these days fleece isn’t worth much, so we got all our fleece-producers together and approached the Natural Fibre Company in Launceston. Now we have our own DASH wool and rovings to sell on our stand at shows. It’s a pure Devon wool.”

The tide, it seems, is turning and interest in smaller farms and self-sufficiency is increasing. “Many people have the misconception that smallholders are generally older folk. But younger people are becoming interested in becoming self-sufficient. We’re beginning to realise that we need to produce food on a small scale, we need to get back to the mentality where everyone has a pig in the back garden.”

There are about 770 members in DASH, but there’s room for plenty more, says Emma. “You don’t even have to have a smallholding to join and it only costs £20 a year.”

With more and more of us growing our own veg and keeping small numbers of livestock on a patch of land, it’s important to know where to go for advice. Whether you’re beekeeping, making sausages, apple pressing or needing to learn about using a chainsaw or bookkeeping, DASH could be the ideal resource for you. ♦

[devonsmallholders.co.uk](http://devonsmallholders.co.uk)

## VITAL STATISTICS

DASH members farm  
7,700 acres

1,129 of these are farmed  
organically (15%)

35 members are under 18

There are 207 members with less  
than five hectares of land

164 members have five  
or more hectares of land



**BELOW:**  
A Berkshire pig