

FARM CONSTRUCTION: DO NOT BITE OFF MORE THAN YOU CAN CHEW

- **Images supplied**

Farmers are a resourceful breed, accustomed to having to turn their hands to a variety of tasks. This is as true now as it ever was - today's farmer is likely to be a business administrator, ecologist, mechanic, vet and plant scientist all rolled into one. He is also likely to spend some of his time as a builder, repairing, maintaining – even constructing – the various structures essential for his business.

With all of these diverse activities, there comes a point where the farmer has to acknowledge his limitations and call in the specialists. No modern dairy farmer, for example, would expect to build his own state-of-the-art milking unit. But on the other hand he might happily venture onto the roof of one of his sheds to fix a new rooflight.

This, says Antony Lowther, managing director of agricultural building contractor AJ Lowther of Ross on Wye, a member of the Rural and Industrial Design and Building Association (RIDBA) which ensures its members sign up to a health and safety Code of Practice, is where many farmers come un-stuck.

“Replacing rooflights is the most dangerous job we do. It's very common for farmers to attempt this themselves because it seems like such a simple job. Personally, I think it's absolute madness for an untrained, unskilled person to go up on a fragile roof with no protective equipment,” he said.

Additionally, many old roofs in need of repair or replacement are made of asbestos-cement. Not only are they fragile but also, without the contractor's specialist knowledge and protective equipment, the dust generated while working on them is a serious health hazard for the DIYer.

As well as inhaling asbestos fibres and falling through fragile roofs, other serious risks include falling off the edges of roofs and balance being compromised while carrying large or heavy rooflights – only experts know the tried and tested ways of reducing these risks to acceptable levels.

Falls from height are the biggest cause of death and serious injury in the workplace, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and while Mr Lowther would agree with that he says the HSE's own accident figures do not give a true indication of the risks involved.

According to the HSE, in the period 2005-2007 there was one fatality and one serious injury in the farming industry due to falls from a height of more than two metres.

"I don't believe it's correct. They must have been searching the wrong database," he said.

In fact, the figures reflect only those accidents which were reported to the HSE or local authority. And, says Mr Lowther, there is massive under-reporting in the farming industry:

"What farmer, having fallen through a fragile roof, is going to report his accident to the HSE afterwards?" he asked.

Herefordshire farmer Lance Harbord, a customer of AJ Lowther's, added: "Farmers turn their hands to virtually everything – and not always to the full satisfaction of the health and safety people."

Farming a mixture of arable, poultry and beef over 330 acres, Mr Harbord runs the farm with his son Ed and two full-time employees who between them carry out a wide range of tasks on the farm.

"We have carried out roof repairs ourselves over the years. If it's fairly low down and there's nothing in the way, you can sometimes reach the roof safely from inside by stacking hay bales up underneath," he said.

But when, earlier this year, Mr Harbord damaged the roof of his grain store with the forks of his telehandler, a DIY repair was out of the question.

The damage took out a rooflight and part of a fibre-cement roof panel directly above one of Mr Harbord's grain bins. With the harvest in full swing, Mr Harbord could not afford to drop what he was doing in order to fix the roof. Nor could he leave a gaping hole in the roof through which the next shower would drench his stored wheat.

"Also, it was about six or seven metres up and I wasn't keen to tackle it because of the height. This was a no-brainer; I called Lowthers and they were up in less than an hour and a half."

Under Construction Design and Management (CDM) regulations, farmers have a responsibility to use a contractor competent in health and safety and one way of ensuring this is to check they are a member of a trade association such as RIDBA.

Another RIDBA member, Adam Minshall, partner with Minshall Construction of Market Drayton, says current health and safety legislation is increasing the incentive for farmers not to take the DIY approach.

"If a farmer expects an employee to carry out work at height, he owes a duty of care to that person, which means providing the necessary training, carrying out a proper risk assessment, preparing a proper method statement and so on. That's a lot for a farmer to take on board," said Mr Minshall.

Mr Lowther agrees: "Can you imagine someone in the commercial sector, like Tesco for example, sending one of their employees up a ladder to clear a gutter or mend a roof? If that person fell and was injured, there'd be hell to pay."

Farms are different, he admits. Often family-run, with few employees and by definition situated in rural locations away from the public gaze, farms do not attract the health and safety scrutiny of most construction sites. And of course there is the fact that building work has always been a part of running a farm.

This is partly due to the nature of the industry. Farmers all experience periods of intense activity – such as late summer when they might be silaging late into the night – but there are also periods of relative quiet when the farmer can use slack time to carry out maintenance work.

“Farmers sometimes have time on their hands and naturally they’d rather use this time productively than sit in the office twiddling their thumbs while a contractor comes in and does the work,” said Tony Lowther.

“We have to be realistic. It’s no good telling a farmer not to go up on a roof...and there is no way we can pretend getting a contractor in is going to be cheap,” he added.

However, with a bit of planning, the farmer can get a lot of work done for minimal outlay.

“For example, replacing one rooflight might cost £600 for an hour’s work. But the second one will only cost £20. That’s because of the capital set-up costs; once you’ve got your guys and all their equipment on site, they can do a lot of work quickly, safely and cost-effectively,” he added.

Adam Minshall agrees: “Profit margins are small. The high initial price is our costs – it doesn’t go into our back pocket.”

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