



Photography: BBC, Getty

FARMING MATTERS Jonathan Gill, formerly of JLS, has swapped the mic for wellies and is vocal about countryside issues

Pop star pipes up to champion farming

Young people need to know where their food comes from, says ex singer Jonathan Gill

Clad in wellies and surrounded by Tamworth pigs and free range turkeys, Jonathan Gill looks every bit your typical farmer. Indeed, his smallholding in North Kent could well be one of the most idyllic in Britain.

But this is where the clichés end, because at 31, Gill is around half the age of the average UK farmer. Moreover, he is perhaps, the only one in the country who can claim he was once in a chart-topping R&B band. Better known by his fans as JB Gill, the Croydon native rose to fame in 2008 as part of the boy band JLS, who sold more than 10 million records worldwide.

However, since the band split in 2013, Gill has ploughed his own furrow, eschewing a career in music for a life in farming. More recently, he has become a champion of countryside issues. 'It sort of happened by accident,' admits Gill. 'When I was in JLS, my wife Chloe and I bought a house with 12 acres of land and we wanted to make the best use of it we could.'

'Our collective experience of farming at that point was zero, so we did some research and decided to start rearing turkeys, which have the benefit of only being in demand over Christmas, which is definitely a good thing for novice farmers.'

Five years later and the couple's savvy move has paid off. Their flock of award-winning Kelly Bronze turkeys are in high

demand, not only from locals who buy the birds direct from the farm gate, but from a number of celebrities, including members of One Direction and Little Mix.

Meanwhile, Gill's newfound kudos as a farmer has seen him carve a niche career as a presenter specialising in rural matters, leading to roles hosting everything from Countryfile to the Bafta-nominated children's show *Down On The Farm*.

He has also become an ambassador of the Prince's Countryside Fund (PCF), which

'As a society we've become very removed from where our food comes from'

supports people working in agriculture. As part of this role, Gill uses his public profile to raise awareness of the disconnect between the general public and farming.

'As a society we've become very removed from where our food comes from,' he says. 'Yes, we have access to more ingredients but few of us know where or how these foods are produced. It's particularly bad for young people growing up in inner-city neighbourhoods because they have no direct connection with the countryside.'

His concerns are echoed in a poll by the PCF, which found that one in eight young people had never seen a cow in real life, while a fifth have never left the city they live in. The same survey revealed that more than half did not know strawberries are in season in summer and 42% consider their knowledge of the countryside 'poor' or 'extremely poor'.

'I'm passionate about equipping young people with the knowledge they need to make informed choices about food,' says Gill. 'This is the only way we're going to improve the diets and health of future generations. Although I don't have the biggest farm and I'm certainly no expert, I do have a voice and I'm determined to educate people about these issues wherever I am.'

Gill's own interest in food and farming spawned on the Caribbean island of Antigua, where he spent the early years of his childhood picking fruit and tending to his father's horses. Aware of the impact this experience had on him, he now has long-term aspirations to open up his farm to young people from urban areas.

'Even as a child I had an appreciation of the countryside,' he says. 'And this is one of the reasons I'm so passionate about farming now. I want to give young people the same opportunity I had to see where their food comes from. Who knows, some of these kids might one day consider becoming a farmer. If I did it, then so can they.'

Hope for future of red squirrels

A rise in the number of pine martens could be the key to saving red squirrels, research has confirmed.

Scientists in Scotland found that where there are pine martens, red squirrels are thriving, but the grey varieties are not. And they believe the spread of pine martens, thought to be hunting the greys from their current strongholds in Scotland into England, could be a long-term solution to the decline of reds.

The report, called *The Enemy Of My Enemy Is My Friend*, was written by experts from Scotland, America and Ireland. 'Our study has confirmed that exposure to pine martens has a strong negative effect on grey squirrel populations, whereas the opposite

effect was observed in red squirrel populations, who benefitted from exposure to martens,' Emma Sheehy of University of Aberdeen writes in the report.

The research team placed more than 200 feeders in woods containing hazelnuts – a squirrel favourite – and peanuts, which pine martens enjoy.

A sticky patch on the trap collected hairs and the DNA was analysed to identify individuals. There were once 3.5 million red squirrels in the UK, but the introduction of grey squirrels from the US in the 1870s has left between 120,000 and 160,000 reds, mostly in Scotland.

The larger greys carry a pox, which is deadly to reds and they also compete with their cousins for food.



HERO Pine martens could help save red squirrels

A Rose by any other name...

Visit a Royal Horticultural Society garden this summer and there's a high chance you'll come across a Rose, a Heather or a Berry. That's because they are just some of the plant-related names of staff at the organisation. The nature-linked names were discovered during research carried out to highlight National Gardening Week next month.

It revealed that out of 900 staff, more than 100 have names that can be linked to nature, the outdoors or horticulture. The figures support the theory of 'nominative determinism', the idea that people are drawn to careers that fit their names,

said the organisation.

Other names on the list include Fuchsia, Gardiner, Marsh, Shears, Bird, Fountaine, Goodacre, Garland, Garlick, Orchard, Jasmine, Greenfield, Cutmore, Sage and Moss.

Chief horticulturist Guy Barter says: 'It's a fascinating phenomenon and we would be interested to see whether the theory applies for people working in other sectors of the horticultural industry across the UK such as garden centres, growers, community gardening groups or other gardening organisations – especially if there's a long history of gardening in the family!'