



Jersey herd pays its way

Alongside the farm's main Holstein herd, the 2019 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup winning Sloan family manage Jerseys. Robert Sloan explains the reasons for establishing this second herd.

Our Holstein herd in the robotic system is the bread-and-butter on our farm. The Jersey herd is our form of diversification. Having different branches to our business with varying sources of income is something we are continually looking for in order to smooth out price fluctuations.

Our robotic journey began in 2011. We were the second farm to start up with a brand new service centre in an area with very few robots. We built our shed with a 'just in case' area where a parlour could be built. The shed was built big enough for three robots but we started with two—keeping the parlour going in our existing system with late lactation cows and as a back-up in case the robots let us down.

The first four months were extremely tough. We were one of the very first to install the Lely A4 robots which brought its fair share of teething troubles. However, we never had to milk the cows in the parlour and animal welfare was never challenged. Human welfare was stretched pretty close to the wire though. A software update changed things overnight.

Updates and upgrades continually over the years alongside high quality servicing means that today our robots are as reliable as they have ever been. Reliability to anyone starting robots today certainly isn't as big an issue as it was 20, 10 or even five years ago. This allows you to concentrate your time on changing the way you manage cows to make the most of this type of system.

The third robot was installed two years after the initial two. The robot shed ran really well at this time. Freshly calved heifers, problem cows and late lactation cows were kept in the parlour.

The year 2015 brought with it an A/B split in our milk contract based on historical production. It was a challenging time which really made us step back and look at the structure of our business. All the parlour litres were B litres so we decided to reduce the size of the herd and shut the parlour down at this time.

Comparing one with the other I prefer running the robotic system without the parlour. Heifers are easier to train when freshly calved. Settings, liners and milking times have been altered over time to deal with any cows that the robot struggles with.

But by far the biggest advantage is keeping the cows on robots for the entire lactation. They always really

disliked the change of system—it's not dissimilar to taking a calf away from a suckler cow. This in itself was a big part in our decision to stop the parlour.

Listening to and working with our milk buyer Graham's through 2015 brought us the opportunity of the Jersey milk contract in 2016. We were given the opportunity to replace the B litres we lost with Jersey litres on a separate milk contract. The existing shed, parlour and bulk tank were all lying idle and ready to go—all we had to do was source the cows.

Comparing UK & Danish Jerseys

Our main concern was bringing in animals that could risk the health status of our Holstein herd. There were very few herds outwith TB areas within the UK with cattle to sell at this time. Half our herd was sourced from UK genetics from the Ansom, Bluegrass, Fourcrosses and Logan herds. The other half I went over and picked from herds in Denmark.

We don't see a huge difference in milk quality between the two groups, I suspect the well marketed difference in components between Danish and UK Jerseys exist due to the broadly different management styles of the two

countries. Many Danish herds are housed and fed to protect components while many UK herds are grazed, which makes maintaining high components a bit more challenging. Over time the UK Jerseys carry the longevity we continually strive to find when breeding cows. These are the cows we focus our replacement policy on.

Our original herd of 60 now stands at 75. We sell batches of young cows or in-calf heifers annually to keep our milk volumes relatively static. There are 13 producers with a Graham's Jersey milk contract with a daily fixed allocation. If we produce any more than that we get paid the conventional price.

It seems a very responsible way to deal with supply and demand as it curtails any producer from putting on another 100 cows and crashing the milk price. The result of this had been—Covid-19 aside—a stable milk price since the Jerseys came. Price stability for any business is critically reassuring.

We calve the Jerseys all year round but predominately in late summer and the autumn, which allows us to feed them well in the winter to protect components and get them back in calve. We then utilise cheap protein in spring grass when they are in late lactation, which boosts milk yield to produce a relatively flat lactation curve over the year.

The Jerseys have taught us a lot of lessons. Any flaws in any part of our management were quickly highlighted by the Jerseys. As were any gates which were not fastened correctly. The slightly smaller cubicles in our old system suit them better than the Holsteins. Their lighter feet also suit our heavy land better while grazing.

Like everyone else who grazes cows, we post lovely videos for social media of them running out of the shed into beautiful green grass and spring sunshine. It's the best job of the year.

In the West of Scotland when cold rain is falling horizontally in July the Jerseys run back in the house just as quickly—for warmth and shelter. In situations like these, the welfare of cows and a bit of commonsense should always prevail over unrealistic public perception.

Taking visits on farm and explaining why we do what we do is vitally important to allow people to understand the way we manage our cows. Having the two different herds which are managed very differently always makes an interesting comparison.



Darnlaw Jerseys enjoying the green grass and Scottish sun.