

# Blands' long-term dairying plan pays off

By Jennifer McKenzie

**A 20-year plan to establish a sustainable family-run dairy farm on tenanted acreage in Cumbria's Eden Valley, is coming to fruition for Steven and Claire Bland.**

After losing their black-and-white herd to foot-and-mouth in 2001, the Blands decided to make radical changes at their 230-acre Abbott Lodge, Clifton, near Penrith.

Pedigree Jerseys were the Blands' replacement choice to add value to the business through direct sales of homemade ice cream, by achieving a premium for high quality milk sales and by breeding pedigree dairy stock to sell.

As part of the succession plan, they were joined in the business five years ago by son, Robert and daughter, Elizabeth Herbert, who works as a sales and breeding adviser for CRV Avoncroft.

After significant

investment in the Clifton Jersey herd, plus buildings and equipment, the Blands are now happy with the structure of the business and its potential, and they feel their plan is working.

They took on the tenancy of the Lowther Estate farm in February 2000, attracted by the farm's excellent grass growing ability. They invested in a new milking parlour and bulk tank – the cubicle shed was perfectly sound, but the cubicles were suitable for smaller cows than today's modern larger breeds.

With the switch to Jerseys, the Blands converted former calf pens in an old gin case (a circular former horse engine house) on the farm with spectacular views towards the Pennines for the ice cream making area and tea room with the help of a Defra grant.

Further investments have been made in cattle buildings

at Abbott Lodge. Cubicle housing was extended and with the focus on young stock and rearing calves to enable calving at two years of age, a new calf shed and heifer building were added.

Further young stock housing has been built with help from the landlord, enabling all the cattle to be housed at Abbott Lodge and saving significant travelling time and costs.

The most recent investment which has made a big success and worked perfectly for us as a family farm," said Steven. "The herd was running at 250 cows and now we have reduced numbers to 210-220 cows, with 175-185 going through the three robots.

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THE BLAND family Elizabeth, Steven, Claire and Robert

"Our milk yield in 2014 was averaging 6000 litres and now milking through the robots it has increased to 7400 litres, while maintaining constituent values of 5.6% BF and 3.9% P.

"It's allowing the cows to express their genetic potential, with some going through the robot four times a day and at an average of 2.7 milkings a day per cow. High yielders are giving 45 to 52 litres a day and we're regularly getting lactations

over 12,000 litres in 305 days," he added.

"The cows get used to the robots quicker than humans.

They soon learned the system. They are creatures of habit and visit the robot at around the same times during the day."

The three Fullwood Merlin2 robots have been housed in an extension of the cubicle shed and a re-organisation of the buildings for fewer cows in milk. The automated milking has cut down staff time, allowing staff numbers to be cut by two people. Now the Blands only need to employ the occasional part-time help on the farm and they have become more self sufficient.

Robert looks after the robots and the easing of the workload has allowed Steven to fulfil his ambition of spending more time with pursuits off the farm, including shooting and scuba diving. Robert also has enough spare time and he is captain of the local Edenhall Cricket Club.

Under the new system Steven described the herd as 'the ultimate free-range cows'. In summer, the lower yielders have access to grazing from 4.30am to 5.30pm in nearby paddocks, or they are free to stay inside the housing with the higher yielders where feed is available.

The cows are fed through a tub mixer a ration based on 21% protein consisting of grass silage, whole crop, sugar beet pulp, wheat and barley, rapeseed, Megalac, dark distillers grains supplied by Roadhead Farm Feeds. They are fed an 18% protein cake through the robots



NOW LOCALLY famous the Blands' Abbott Lodge ice-cream comes in a wide variety of flavours

and have further access to concentrates through out of parlour feeders.

The herd is all year round calving to fulfil its milk contract with Graham's The Family Dairy, Bridge of Allan, as well as making the best use of the facilities on the farm.

Robert said the cows are naturally more healthy on the robotic system, particularly when they don't have to stand for several hours a day in the collecting yard to be milked. Fertility has also improved and the Blands say it is easier to see individual cow behaviour when walking through the cubicle housing than collected in a group.

All cows and heifers are served up to two times with sexed semen – good cows are given a third chance.

As a past chairman of the Jersey Cattle Society and now its financial director, Steven keeps a close eye on the integrity of Jersey cattle breeding and genetics not only for his own herd but also for the breed in the UK.

Bulls being used on the Clifton herd are split 70% American sires and 30% Danish, using 100% sexed semen. Steven added: "In the UK, we have the most diverse genetics in the world and the original Jersey traits of health, fertility and longevity should

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**THE JERSEY** herd tuck into their winter rations and since moving on to robot milking have significantly upped production and reduced vet's bills

be protected. I believe we should be testing more UK bulls. The ultimate aim is for a herd average of five lactations, 7500litres with 6%BF and 4%P.

"At Abbott Lodge, we want to breed good cows that we can show when we are able to again, but we have got to produce the goods that our milk buyer wants in terms of milk quality from robust, long-lasting cows," he added. "I'm convinced cow families are the bedrock of breeding good dairy cattle and we seem to have drifted away from that. I'm a bit sceptical about genomics, but I still like to use proven bulls."

Robert does most of the sire selection, with some input from a Worldwide Sires mating programme. Recent US bulls used have been Lemonhead and Chrome, with Jersey Island sire, Ansom Animate P and the Danish bull, VJ Gurtz, also featuring in the breeding programme.

The aim is to breed a good functional cow of medium size with a bit of chest width, a well attached udder and good teat placement to produce cows which last four and five lactations

In the last 12 months, all Jersey cross Angus calves have been retained for rearing on a grass-based

system until 20 months old to sell at auction. A more recent development has been sweeping up with Wagyu semen through Genus, from Warrendale Wagyu, to produce calves with a value and it pays a guaranteed price to dairy farmers, rearers and finishers.

"Every dairy-bred calf should have a viable life. The Jersey cross produces very good beef," said Steven. The first Wagyu cross Jersey calves are due at Abbott Lodge early this summer and they will be finished on farm to an agreed weight.

The focus is very much on rearing calves and youngstock to enable calving at two years old in a purpose built calf shed and heifer building. Newborn calves stay on their dams for 24 hours. They are never fed pooled colostrum or waste milk to reduce exposure to pathogens and resistance to antibiotics.

Calves are then housed until they are two weeks old in a traditional building in individual pens which are steam cleaned and limed after each occupant.

The first two weeks are critical for the Jersey calf and they wear jackets. They are then moved to the new calf building for 50 head which Steven designed after studying other calf housing.

The calves are fed on two Volac Urban automatic calf feeders with milk powder fed at 145g/litre from starting at four litres a day and increasing to six up until seven weeks of age and weaning. Calves record up to 1kg a day of liveweight gain.

Each pen is cleared of bedding and steam cleaned once each batch of calves leaves the building at weaning. The building is well ventilated but insulated and draft proofed.

"The bedding stays dry and there is no smell of calves in the building. The design has reduced cases of pneumonia and so reduced vaccination. By being a true closed herd we are trying to breed cattle with their own natural immunity," said Steven.

The building is designed for the welfare of the calf with good ventilation and it enables the building to be cleaned out by a JCB Loadall.

"We have got to pay this attention to detail if we want the heifers to grow and be able to calve at two years old which they need to be profitable," added Steven.

Two to three cuts of silage are taken each year using shared machinery in conjunction with Claire's cousin, John Holliday, at Clifton Hall Farm, where Elizabeth's husband, Ashley, is tractor man.



**HEALTHY YOUNG** stock is the building block for the Jersey herd

### Diversifying into selling direct to the public

UNTIL the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, last March, the ice-cream business had exceeded the Blands' original expectations.

"It has definitely been worthwhile as it produced a full time wage for me and it helps if there is any milk price fluctuation," said Claire, who added that the development of the business has been market-led.

Since it opened to the public in 2002, the ice cream parlour has been open year round with Claire helped by a team of part-time staff making 40 different flavours of ice cream on a regular basis for the Napoli pans.

The parlour serves tea and fresh ground coffee, as well as locally-made tray bakes, but Claire has concentrated on the core business of making ice-cream and resisted making things too complicated.

She specialised in seasonal flavours for

Christmas and for the last two seasons has been working with the famous Grasmere Gingerbread making ice cream using the gingerbread which is also sold in the shop in Grasmere. Ice cream is now sold in individual 125ml pots compostable pots with compostable spoon, as well as new one litre pots.

Abbott Lodge Jersey Ice Cream is also sold in local pubs and small independent shops/cafes. More recently, Claire had been working with Steve Douglas, who bought a van in 2017 when a local ice cream business retired.

As well as the tea room, there is a meeting room and outdoor play area. Visitors can see cattle grazing the fields in summer and the Jersey calves in a viewing pen, and can watch the cows being milked by the robots via a camera with live screening in the tea room.

The business gives Steven and Claire the opportunity to explain all about farming to school groups and the general public and they give slide shows of what happens on the farm.



**VISITORS TO** the on-farm cafe shop can also see the cow's milking themselves in the Merlin2 robots

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