

Success built on youth and dairy experience

A young herd – managed by an equally youthful team – is thriving on a spring-block calving system. And, after recently expanding, it’s now focused on a period of consolidation.

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Setting goals, hard work and a few good expansion opportunities have seen a Leicestershire-based dairy business double in size and operation since 2018. Now with a herd of young cows managed by a dairy team headed by Ifan Roberts, the focus is on rearing youngstock for multiple units alongside managing the ‘home’ herd.

Houghton Lodge comprises 526 hectares and 1,000 head of Holstein Friesians, with a grazing platform of 400 hectares for the spring-calving herd sited around the dairy unit. The remaining 100 hectares are cut for silage and hay to support late-lactation and dry

cows during a relatively short housing period, from approximately December to March.

This is a far cry from the 550 cows and 270-hectare block that Ifan Roberts started with when he arrived at the unit six years ago, in 2018, as herd manager for Evolution Farming.

Early ambition

Ifan grew up on a dairy farm in North Wales with an ambition, at only 15 years old, to milk 1,000 cows and, at some point, run his own business. “Taking on the family farm wasn’t an option,” he says, “But after an interview with Tom Rawson at Evolution Farming, I got the chance to take a step in this direction, and gain invaluable dairy management experience and have some ownership through investing in my own capital – in this case cows,” he adds.

In 2017, the company brought a dairy unit, which had been redundant for 15 years, back to life. Existing facilities provided a good foundation, with further investment in reseeded cow tracks, buildings, and a new parlour. Alongside managing the herd’s expansion and

Ifan Roberts:
“There are career opportunities for those who enjoy farming”





Herd owners: **Evolution Farming**
Herd size: **1,000 cows**
Team size: **10 employees**
Average yield: **5,500 litres, at 4.47% butterfat and 3.7% protein**
Milk sales: **4.7 million litres**



restructuring, Ifan was able to embark on a service agreement with Evolution Farming that involved leasing some of his own cows to the Houghton herd.

“As neighbouring land at Houghton became available, the herd was able to expand, and Tom allowed me to bring in some heifer replacements I’d reared back in Wales and lease them to the company,” says Ifan.

Just one legacy of the old buildings comes with mixed blessings. “That’s the loose housing,” says Ifan.

“Somatic cell counts are a challenge and we set our target at 150,000 cells/ml, but it’s hard work,” he adds, acknowledging that swapping farmyard manure for straw in this arable region works well.

Young herd

With cows leased from Ifan, herd size was increased using sexed semen on all eligible cows and heifers. “We bred and reared around 300 heifers each year. So we’ve a young herd now.”

The same can be said for the people managing it. Herd expansion meant doubling staff numbers and a team of 10, with Ifan at 28 years old being the oldest now runs the herd and youngstock unit.

New recruits, many from non-farming backgrounds, have been attracted to joining the business, helped by the offer of accommodation and an ‘11-days on, three-days off’ rota.

“We try to develop a good environment with everyone involved,” says Ifan “We carry out appraisals twice a year, and run training in herd management skills, such as foot trimming. And time out is important – we have a five-a-side-football team that plays in a local league and take part in quizzes and darts evenings at the local pubs.”

Attracting staff didn’t present too much of a problem for Ifan, who uses tools like Facebook to attract applicants.

“Maybe farming is becoming more attractive too,” he adds. “It’s outdoors, varied and there are career opportunities for those who enjoy it.”

This is an area of particular interest for Ifan, and he’s recently been awarded a Trehane Trust-sponsored Nuffield Farming scholarship to investigate how to inspire the next generation of dairy entrepreneurs.

Travel plans

This year he plans to travel to New Zealand, China, Chile and the US. All, to varying degrees, are forward-thinking with schemes to attract younger people into the industry and encourage them to take responsibility. “It’s sometimes a stumbling block in the UK and I’d be keen to know how dairy industries in other countries tackle this,” he says.

The rapid expansion programme at Houghton required a restructure of the system and the two calving blocks were merged into one 12-week spring-calving block. Calving begins in February, and they start breeding cows on May 5.

Sexed semen is still used on all eligible cows and heifers as the unit provides a source of replacements across multiple herds in the Evolution Farming group. The priority is to breed high-fertility, easy-care cows and the current six-week-in-calf rate is 74%, with 9% recorded empty in 2023 breeding season. “We’re really pleased with this level of fertility for a herd this size,” says Ifan. Other cows are bred using Hereford beef semen and easy-calving sires are selected. Beef-cross calves are sold through local markets. ▶



Home herd: there are 1,000 Holstein Friesians at Houghton Lodge



Next generation: young staff are charged with securing dairy business' future

◀ “We simplified the system,” explains Ifan. “I prefer to concentrate on one thing at a time, and review each part separately, such as calving, breeding and youngstock rearing. We compare performance with KPIs so we can continue to improve.”

The herd is averaging 5,500kg of milk, at 4.47% butterfat and 3.7% protein, with a combined fat and protein of 500kg. Annual milk sales to Arla are currently 4.7 million litres.

Achieving good fertility rates also comes from careful transition-cow management and nutrition. “We aim to keep condition on cows in early lactation and look for a score of 2.5 at breeding. Any cows needing to put on extra condition are reduced to once-a-day milking.

Dairy ration

The herd's ration comprises grazed grass or silage, concentrate fed at a flat rate through the parlour, and bought-in maize. The three dietary ingredients each contribute a third of total dry matter. Average annual concentrate use is around one tonne per cow.

“Good grass quality and yields are important,” adds Ifan. “We graze each paddock for 12 hours and measure grass yields weekly, moving to twice a week in the peak growing season. Slurry and locally sourced digestate are applied post grazing to boost growth.” Paddocks are reseeded regularly on a rotation, and they are looking at introducing herbal leys.

During the past 12 months Houghton Lodge has expanded and invested in youngstock facilities to house around 700 calves.

This cost £67 per calf space, including labour, but improvements in handling facilities and pens, a pump trailer for feeding milk replacer, and automatic water feeders have all helped to reduce labour requirements. “It's allowed us to adopt a better system with more time spent on calf care and less on carrying buckets of milk and water,” says Ifan.

“And it's been a good move – we've seen a drop in

scours and any problems. Calves are thriving despite it being a wet and damp season.”

As well as improved facilities, the youngstock team also undertook a three-day training programme in January with Foss Vets to define protocols and look at improving routines. “It's so important that these calves get off to the best start. We're committed to ensuring each calf is fed high-quality colostrum for three days, and making sure all supplies have a minimum Brix score of 22. Any milk from Johne's-infected cows is discarded.”

The herd's vet has been carrying out tests this year to check immunoglobulin transfer from the dam to calf. “This ensures we're getting the sufficient colostrum into the calf,” says Ifan.

“We also offer starter feed from day one to encourage rumen development, and ensure fresh water is always available. We look for consistent growth rates and a smooth transition at weaning.”

Target weaning weight is more than 90kg and the aim is then to grow them on to be as uniform as possible, ready for breeding at 15 months old. To help achieve this, at around a month post weaning, calves are grouped according to body condition and competitiveness and the ‘off target’ group are fed additional concentrates, at a rate of up to 2kg a day, to help them make up ground.

Between 200 to 250 heifers are kept as replacements for the ‘home’ herd, and the rest sold to other herds in the Evolution Farming group.

The target age at first calving, which is achieved at Houghton, is two years old.

After rapid expansion and the development of the youngstock unit, the herd has entered a period of consolidation. Ifan will pass on the reins to a new manager, Henry Spelman, this year, while he hopes to find his own opportunity in dairy farming through a joint venture or tenancy agreement. “And my experience so far, and knowledge from my Nuffield trip and study, should put me in good stead.” |