




John Swiers
Free-range egg production sits well along side his farm's main enterprise – a 200-cow dairy herd – and provides a welcome additional source of income.



Herd size:	200 cows:
Flock size	8,000 hens
Farm size:	400 hectares
Time to recoup new investment:	2.5 years

Free-range flock provides extra income but cows still rule the roost

'Eggs' in more than one basket

Milk and eggs – a recipe for success? Yes, according to one producer who set up a free-range egg laying flock in 2009. Here he tells us why the birds are the ideal 'insurance policy' for his farm business' financial security

text **Rachael Porter**

They're a little smaller than the ladies he's used to managing, but John Swiers is thoroughly enjoying running his flock of free-range egg laying hens. The 200-cow herd still rules the roost, so to speak, at his 400-hectare farm, based at Langdale near Scarborough, but the birds are a welcome and financially rewarding addition to the business. Uncertainly about the future and quite literally not wanting to 'put all his eggs in one basket' were the drivers behind his decision to add the enterprise back in 2008. "I did consider going into free-range egg production prior to that and researched the idea with another farming friend," explains John. "He took the plunge and I held back, but

whenever I spoke to him he was always really pleased with his decision and said things were going well. So I didn't lose interest – it was always at the back of my mind. I was just waiting for the right time." For John that came 18 months ago. "I just got up one morning and decided to do it."

Back-up plan

And he hasn't looked back since. His first flock is just coming to the end of its productive life – the system runs on a 13-month cycle – and building work to expand the existing shed has just finished. He's doubling bird numbers to 16,000 when the next flock arrives in June.

Bickley Rigg Farm is 'stuck out on a limb', according to John. It's seven miles from the nearest farm and 50 miles from the nearest creamery, Chestnut Dairies, which is where his milk goes. Geographical issues of another kind – NVZs – are another possible threat to the dairy business. John's waiting to hear if his unit will fall within one or not – he's already appealed against a decision once. If it is, then major investment in slurry handling and storage facilities could be on the cards for the dairy and that may not stack up due to diminishing returns. "I love the cows – I've milked them all my life and the herd forms the heart of this business. But everyone needs a back-



Tomorrow's milkers: John breeds and rears his own dairy replacements



Feathery future: the hens offer some financial security



Stacking up: John's 'happy eggs' command a price premium

up plan or some form of insurance. And that's what the hens are for our business. They're a vital stream of income." He averages 93p per dozen eggs – price varies according to the grade of eggs produced. And he's pleased with this flock's yield – around 300 eggs per bird. "To put that into a dairy perspective, in the poultry world that's equivalent to 10,000 litres per cow." Unlike a dairy herd though, flock performance will diminish with each flock as disease levels inevitably begin to rise on the unit. "That's the norm and it's to be expected with poultry, compared with a dairy herd where yields should go up each year as genetics improve and management is fine tuned." The birds sit well within the farm's system – the permanent pasture range that surrounds their shed is also grazed by the farm's sheep and beef cattle. "So we make good use of the 10-hectare range. The grass doesn't go to waste." Finding staff to help has been easy. "Collecting eggs, for example, is something that most people could do and it's 'clean' work too." And the return on investment's not bad

either. John converted an existing shed, which used to house young stock, for the hens so it cost him just £14 per bird to set up, compared to the more typical £25 to £30 per bird for a purpose-built house. So he's looking a recouping his costs in just 2.5 years, as opposed to seven. **Buyer support** "But there's one thing I don't like and that's the fact that once the flock goes in it has no re-sale value. I can always sell dairy cows and heifers – they have a value. But those hens, if anything goes wrong, are worth nothing." Sounds scary, but John says that Noble Foods, his egg buyer, has been extremely supportive. "All the help and advice you could need is on tap and the company invests in its suppliers too." John's is contracted to supply eggs for the company's Happy Egg brand. "This is Noble's own egg brand, which commands a premium in the shops, and we receive a premium of 2p per dozen," he explains. "To 'qualify' to supply eggs for the Happy Egg brand we have to have wooden arches to provide the hens with

shelter on the range, as well as trees, perches and swings. Noble supplies and pays for it all." New legislation also means that, as of December 2010, all eggs have to be date stamped before they leave the farm. The equipment to do this costs around £3,000 and again it will be supplied and paid for by Noble. This willingness to work with its producers is extremely refreshing for John and he says that it's something that dairies should learn from. "There'd be a lot more producers milking today if they had more help from milk buyers when it came to complying with rules and regulations." But since that's not likely in the foreseeable future, John remains focused on ensuring that his dairy herd is run as efficiently and profitably as possible, with help from his full-time herdsman. It is, after all, still the business' main enterprise. It demands more than 50% of his time and he enjoys dairying. "While we're still making a profit, that's the way it will stay. It's just good to know that we've other profitable options whatever the future brings." |

Girls on top: the dairy herd is the farm's main enterprise and, while it's still making a profit, that's the way things will stay

