

Thomas Steele

A family-run unit that's invested in the latest management technology to help with the day-to-day running of the recently expanded herd.



Number of cows:	375
Average yield	9,000kg 4.01% f 3.36% p
Additional tools:	InterHerd and RMS
Parlour:	60-point rotary



Family farm: Thomas, William and Samuel Steele Well-designed buildings ensure good cow flow



Milking time: it now takes just 1.5 hours to milk the 375-cow herd



There's now enough space for 400 cows

Thomas Steele: "There are good tools that can help you to be a better stockman"

It's all about the cows

Herd expansion at one Northern Ireland-based dairy unit required new buildings and adopting the very latest computer technology to make sure that it's still 'all about the cows' and good stockmanship, even when time is tight.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's been a busy time – and a steep learning curve – for Northern Ireland-based producer Thomas Steele. He farms in partnership with his parents William and Rosemary, and brother Samuel, on the Ards Peninsula – one of the most intensive dairy areas in the UK.

Expansion has seen cow numbers at Rowreagh Farm, near Kircubbin, increase from 120 to 375 during the past three years and this growth demanded additional cow housing and a new parlour. The former took the form of two new houses with cubicles for 400 cows and the latter is a 60-point rotary.

"We did a lot of homework before we chose the parlour," says Thomas. "We looked at systems in the UK, Eire, South Africa and Germany before deciding to install a rotary.

Time pressure

"It was a substantial investment and a big commitment to the business and it's bigger than we need but it gives us the option to expand further if we wish."

Prior to installing the new system, milking was through a 24:24 herringbone parlour.

That was more than adequate back in 2006, but increasing cow numbers pushed

the time spent in the parlour up to 4.5 hours per milking – around nine hours each day.

"It wasn't good for the milkers or the cows. Time spent stood in the collecting yard is time that could be spent eating, drinking and resting."

Milking time for the herd, which is currently averaging around 9,000 litres of milk at 4.01% butterfat and 3.36% protein with a SCC of 220,000 cells/ml, is now down to an acceptable two hours. The Fullwood rotary with an Afimilk system, which is similar to one that Thomas saw on a unit in South Africa, can handle 330 cows in 1.5 hours. And it's been going so well since the parlour was up and running in January – the cows were quick to adapt and so were the milkers – that Thomas is now considering milking the herd three times a day. "Possibly around September time when we start calving."

Management tool

The parlour is more than just a means of milking. It's also a management tool.

"It weighs the cows as they come off the rotary platform and a computer program alerts us to any excessive weight loss, as well as measuring milk conductivity and milking speed.

"The cows talk to us through the parlour – it's a communication tool."

Part of the 'communication package' is NMR's InterHerd. "We can log on and see how things are going and so can our nutritionist, who's based in England, and so can our vet. He finds the fertility monitor particularly useful," says Thomas.

In a bid to keep herd fertility on track, Thomas is also using Genus RMS. The technician works closely with Thomas, his nutritionist and his vet. "We work as a team and having InterHerd reports that flag up potential problems in real time means that we can be proactive. We're dealing with what's happening now – not with historical data.

Early adopter

"And I find that RMS and InterHerd complement each other perfectly. I get the most out of both services.

"Because it's all computerised I can go to my PC and, with just one click on an icon, I can see all the important herd events that have happened that day."

Thomas was one of the first producers in Northern Ireland to use InterHerd and he says he doesn't know how he managed without it now. "It would certainly be difficult, particularly with a herd this size. With so many cows I could easily spend all day in the office drowning in paperwork and this is a lifebelt!

"With time so tight, it really does help to keep a close eye on so many aspects of herd management and it can flag up possible problems before they really start. "It's not a substitute for good stockmanship, but it's a tool that can help you to be a better stockman," he adds.

Thomas and his family pride themselves on their stock and grassland management skills. The herd is grazed during the summer, although the 125-cow high yielding group is housed for most of the year. Turnout is typically in mid March – the unit is in a relatively dry area – and the cows come back inside in mid October. "I do try to produce as much milk as we can from grazed grass," says Thomas, who's won several awards for his grassland management. His unit is also one of Northern Ireland's focus farms, where

groups of producers visit to learn about good herd management.

"I'm still learning too, I'm learning every day and that's why we're going to consolidate and build on what we have now before we decide to expand herd size further," he says.

Pushing up to 500 cows could be on the cards in say another three years, but the Steeles would like to do that using their own replacements.

"No one sells their best cows and heifers do they? So there's always the risk of

buying in some trouble, like high SCCs. "General herd health did suffer for a couple of years when we expanded using bought-in stock, so we really would like to avoid that this time and use our own stock," says Thomas.

And he's looking forward to focusing on the cows for a few years, rather than building work. "I enjoyed the challenge of expanding the herd, but now I'm eager to see what we can get out of the cows now we can devote all our time to them once again." |

Big plans: the 60-point rotary means that the Steeles can expand cow numbers again at some point in the future

