

Recharge your batteries – and your business acumen – with a farm walk

Take a 'power' walk

The humble farm walk has come along way during the past 20 years. It's still a social event but it seems that many more producers are also getting down to a spot of business. We spoke to some farm walk organisers and visitors to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**



Robert and Linda Tarver: farm walk 'groupies'

Do you make time for the occasional 'power' walk? Or is it hard to justify time spent away from your herd? If it's the latter then your business really could benefit if you make time.

"Apart from anything else, when you get back to your herd you'll be looking at it with fresh eyes," says regular farm walk attendee and Gloucestershire-based producer Liz Best. She's also been on the other side of the fence. Her herd, based

at Poole House Farm near Tetbury, has been the focus of farm walks in the past. "And that was beneficial too. It made us look closely at how visitors might perceive our unit and we certainly had a bit of a tidy up before the big day." Above all, she says what draws her and her family to visit other producers' farms is wanting to 'know how other people do it – what works on their unit and why'.

"And we always learn something, without fail. You come away with ideas of how you could improve and techniques you could apply to your own business. Sometimes you get home and think 'well, my set up's not so bad after all'. It's all relative, but how can you know when you've nothing to compare it with. Visiting other farms is a real eye opener and I think it's something that all

Time to think: farm walks provide a well-earned break from the daily routine, as well as some space to reassess your business



Social gathering: catching up with friends – and making new ones – is important

producers should do – even if it's only once a year."

To get as much as possible from a farm walk, it's best to go along with an open mind, according to Promar International's managing director Andrew Thompson. "And if you pick up something new that you could apply to your business then that's a bonus," he says, stressing that producers shouldn't lose sight of the importance of spending some time socialising too.

"People do get bogged down with being on their farm day in and day out, but it doesn't have to be all work, work, work."

Give away secrets

He's seeing people travel further to farm walks, particularly if they have a special interest in breeding or a new piece of technology, for example. "They may go along to see how investing in a borehole is saving on water costs, or how a new cubicle design looks and works in the cow house.

"Whatever it is, they want to see it in action and hear, from the producer who has already invested and working with it, how it's going for them before possibly taking the plunge themselves," he says. "Investing in expansion or new technology is expensive – we're talking tens if not hundreds of thousands of pounds. So it's not surprising that they want to do plenty of research and see something working on farm with their own eyes."

And the beauty of the dairy industry is that producers will share and tell you how things are going. "They're open and frank because even if they're talking to a neighbour, he's not a business rival. They're not in competition with each other – they're competing on a UK level

with producers from abroad – so they're prepared to give away some secrets to help other UK milk producers," says Andrew.

The farm walk is also an ideal and powerful platform to raise the profile of innovative products and useful tools. "There's no better recommendation better than that from a fellow producer who's prepared to tell it how it is."

Business-like approach

NMR's Sheryl Veldboer has been organising farm walks for the past 10 years and says that she thinks that they've certainly become more popular as a means of socialising since the demise of local agricultural shows.

She's seeing around 150 people on each of the six walks she helps to arrange each year – that's up from around 50 back in 2000.

"I'm also seeing a more business-like approach from many visitors. They ask a lot more questions and seem keen to get as much out of their day as possible. It's about so much more than a chance to catch up with friends and a spot of lunch."

Both are important, as dairying can be an isolated career, but most visitors are getting a lot more than that. "Many go along as a way of researching possible investment back home", she says.

"They may want to have a good look around a new parlour and ask the host some searching questions. Or they may be thinking about expanding cow numbers and want to get a feel for managing a larger herd."

Whatever the herd size and set up, Sheryl says that all units have something different to offer visitors. "It's rare to come away from a farm having learnt nothing. By their very nature, every unit

is unique. And size is not relevant. A 300-cow producer can learn something from visiting a 60-cow unit. Scale isn't everything.

"Sometimes it's attention to detail that matters and they may pick up some tips on reducing SCCs.

"What makes farm visits so interesting is that you just don't know what you're going to find when you get there", Sheryl says.

Linda Tarver and her husband Robert certainly find them interesting. They're what you could call farm walk 'groupies', having regularly attended those organised in their area by NMR for the past 20 years.

"It's very much a social thing for us. It's what we like to go out and do together," says Linda, who runs the 90-cow pedigree Bishampton herd at Hayes Farm near Worcester.

"But it's also business and a great way to pick up new things that we may be able to adapt back on our own unit. I always learn something new – even if it's only something as small as the way a gate is hinged."

Fresh eyes

"I also like to look at progeny when we're out on farm. When you go to a show or look in a sire catalogue, you're seeing the very best daughters.

"I like to see the average ones working on commercial units. That's a much better indicator of how a bull is going to perform," Linda says.

She adds that when they return home they see their own herd and unit in a whole different – and usually positive – light. "For us, it's the break and the 'fresh eyes' that a farm walk gives us that really recharge our batteries and help to make us better dairy producers." |