



George and Andrew Leggott

Installing five robots has taken some of the stress out of managing a large herd and is allowing further expansion at White House Farm.



Number of cows:	250, expanding to 300
Average yield:	10,300 litres
Robots:	five second-hand Lelys
Investment:	£240,000

Five robots are making light work of a heavy milk load at White House Farm

Robotic route suits larger herd

Automatic milking systems are not just for relatively smaller herds. We profile a large herd, based near Northallerton, which is expanding to 300 cows and has five second-hand robots in place to milk the high yielding herd.

text Rachael Porter

A tired herringbone parlour and concerns about sourcing sufficient reliable labour were just two of the catalysts that saw Andrew Leggott and his father George install their first three second-hand milking robots at White House Farm, near Great Smeaton, back in 2007.

The Lely A2s were joined by a fourth robot in 2008 and a fifth was recently added to increase capacity. Again, both are second-hand. "If I'd been looking at new ones then it would have been 'forget it'," says Andrew. "But buying second-hand meant that automatic robotic milking was within our reach."

The first three cost around £50,000 each – a total price of £150,000 that also included the computer system required to run and manage them. "Two were two years old and the third just six months old and they were all in good condition. Tim Gibson, from Lely, found them for

An automatic slurry scraper



us and oversaw installation, including looking at the cows shed and cow flow, to make sure they would run smoothly and with as few hiccups as possible," says Andrew.

Tim also sourced the fourth robot, which was 18 months old and cost a little more at £60,000. "But that was just after the milk-price mini boom, so it was worth it," explains Andrew. The fifth robot is the oldest of the lot, at nine years old, and costs just £30,000. But Andrew swears that it seems to run better than the rest. "Don't ask me why, it just seems to have fewer problems and to locate teats more easily. I think it's the way it's calibrated. I'm certainly very happy with it – just as I am with all the robots."

Milking capacity

The robots are housed in a newly built cow shed, designed with a 300-cow milking herd in mind. On paper, each

Three of the robots are housed in the newly built cow shed



robot is capable of milking 60 cows, but Andrew feels that the number is slightly less than that – closer to an average of 55, in his view.

"So our plan is to have a group of low yielders and a group of heifers – between 120 and 130 head in total – each housed in the older buildings and milked by one robot. And a second group of high yielders, housed in the new 130-cow capacity shed, milked by three robots. That's about 40 cows per robot and I think that because they will be higher yielders the robots will be better able to cope with that number."

Milking cow numbers for the Cocklewood pedigree herd stand at 250 head, averaging around 10,600 litres with 3.6% butterfat and 3.15% protein. "We've a lot of heifers to calve in, starting now through til late spring. We should be milking 300 by mid 2011."

And the beauty of this set up is that he

and father George, who is semi-retired, shouldn't feel the strain of managing a larger herd – just plenty of gains. "That's why I decided to go down the robotic route. More cows usually means much more work – and not just in the milking parlour. I figured that if I could take back some of that time that would otherwise be spent in the parlour, I could manage a larger herd more easily and without compromising on management or efficiency."

Crunch time came when the old herringbone parlour was identified as a limiting factor to herd expansion. "It was time to think about a new parlour. And with that thought process comes

labour considerations. There are plenty of good lads about who will milk for us, but they're not always keen to get up at 4.00am – and who can blame them. It's much easier to be motivated if they're your cows, but quite a different matter when belong to someone else."

That said, even Andrew was becoming tired of working long days, particularly dark, cold and wet winter ones.

"And more cows, with a conventional parlour, would probably lengthen those days even further. I'm happy to get up at 4.00am and get a head start with the feeding up and all the other daily tasks. But with the robots I can be finished by 4.00pm and sat by the fire with a cuppa

by 4.30pm. I've got some of my life back." For Andrew, the robots have put some of the pleasure back into running a dairy herd, replacing the daily grind with a shorter working day and time for a social life – his wife Helen is certainly pleased. And visitors to the unit – there were many who dropped by after visiting the 2009 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup winner Geoff Spence's herd that's just up the road – are also impressed. "Some do go away saying they'd like to give it a go. But I don't think it's not feasible unless you can get hold of second-hand robots."

Ideal option

"Buying five new ones would be extremely expensive and I don't think it would be possible to just do that from scratch. A large rotary or swing-over would be a more viable option for many large herds, particularly those setting up on a green-field site."

But if you have got a set up that lends itself to automatic milking, and the time that would allow you to add additional units as you sourced them, such a system may be just the thing.

"I'd never have seen my cows being milked this way 10 years ago, but just look at them now. I'd never go back to milking conventionally now." |



Five second-hand robots milk the Leggott's 250-cow herd and offer capacity to milk 300

Team work is key to robotic success

Ensuring that the nutritionist, vet and robot technician work as a team is vital when using milking robots, according to Andrew Leggott.

"The diet has to be right to tempt the cows into the robot stall," he says, adding that BOCM Pauls nutritionist Keith Colley worked hard to devise a palatable and tempting ration that would do just that. Vet Mark Glover also sat down with Keith, Tim Gibson

and Andrew to ensure that udder health wouldn't be compromised by a change in milking system and that the 'tempting ration' was also open and fibrous to avoid any problems with clinical or sub-clinical acidosis.

"Yes, automatic milking has been a real boon to our business. But the real success of the system is down to the people who work here and their ability to work together as a team."