

**Ian Sharman**

Switching direction and changing breed has driven down costs and is paying dividends on this family run unit. A reduction in output is proving to be more profitable.



Number of cows:	300, rising to 400
Quantity of land:	210 hectares
Breed:	Montbeliarde
Targeted feed rate:	0.25 kg/litre

A change of direction – and breed – means that less is definitely more

The full Monty

A complete system overhaul on one Nottinghamshire-based unit has bucked the trend towards increasing output. After a total appraisal of their system and a switch to Montbeliardes the Sharman family's herd is on track to realise a 5ppl increase in profit. And added benefits are reduced labour and feed costs – and less stress.

text **Phil Eades**

The system at Ian and Steph Sharman's New Holbeck Farm, near Southwell, used to focus on achieving high outputs from a 300-head herd of pedigree Holsteins.

The cows were housed all year round and fed a ration based on maize and grass silages and fodder beet. More than 80 hectares of maize was grown on rented land and the farmed area totalled 324 hectares.

Knife edge

"It was high input, high output and high stress," says Ian. "We were getting more than 10,000 litres per cow, but at a price. Feed rate was 0.4kg/litre and cows were on a knife edge as they were pushed so hard, leading to high vet bills. We were

dealing with high levels of most of the common problems. We pushed and pushed but the profits didn't follow. "And overhead costs were astronomical. We had one man effectively employed all year feeding cows and spreading slurry and the telehandler was clocking up more than 3,000 hours per year. Contract bills were high as all forage was conserved.

"So we decided to change to ensure a better work:life balance and also make sure we were making money."

Ian had been considering the reintroduction of grazing and reduced dependence on bought-in feed – either concentrates or forage. Two events coincided to

accelerate the decision. "My son Tom was due to come back to the farm and we wanted a system that he would be happy to come back to."

The other factor was the opportunity to change milk buyer to Stilton cheese maker Long Clawson Dairies. If he was to change buyer it would be essential to exploit the contract, specifically with regard to all-year-round production and



Sea change: four trips across the Channel have been made to buy Montbeliardes

high milk protein. "High yielding Holsteins were not, in my view, the breed to make the most of the new contract so it was time to look at making some big changes."

Montbeliarde move

As Ian used Promar Farm Business Accounts, he and his consultant David Burns had comprehensive data upon which to base planning decisions and so a thorough review of the system was carried out.

The first decision was which breed should be milked. Cross-breeding was one option but it would devalue the long-established pedigree herd. The options for switching breed were eventually honed down to Friesians or Montbeliardes.

After several herd visits they chose Montbeliardes. "The breed ticked all the boxes. They are excellent converters of forage into milk with a high protein percent. And they have excellent longevity and are generally easy to manage. Bull calf and cull cow prices are also very good. We estimate calf values alone are worth an extra 1ppl on gross margin."

To begin with, 12 heifers were imported from Ireland and averaged 8,000 litres at 4.2% fat and 3.5% protein. So the family decided to move the whole herd to Montbeliarde.

"And the best option was to change as quickly as possible," explains David Burns. "The milk price benefits could be realised quicker as would the cost

savings. I think Ian was rather surprised when I asked him if he knew where he could find 400 cows and heifers."

The answer lay in France where Ian has been working with Guilhem Brouzes of Coopex Montbeliardes to source stock. Four trips to France have been made, buying animals by the lorry load, with the selection criteria being overall merit and milk protein. There are now 300 Montbeliardes in the herd and this will rise to 400 by the end of this year, with Holsteins being sold as they calve down. The opportunity has also been taken to simplify the entire farming system. "We wanted to reduce stress across the whole system, make the most of the new contract and farm in a sustainable way so this meant a return to grazing and a programme of major cost reduction," explains David.

So this spring grazing has begun again with a vengeance. Around 80 late lactation cows were turned out in early March onto a paddock grazing system, with the whole herd out in early April, and averaged 17 litres from grazing. They are still averaging 16 litres from grass with an overall feed rate of 0.13kg/litre despite the current shortage of grazing.

"In the winter we will feed a TMR based on grass silage and fodder beet with a little maize. We will take all the expensive ingredients out of the diet and currently target an annual feed rate of 0.25kg/litre. We have a lot of heifers and I expect feed rate to come back further as the percentage of cows increases."

The maize area has been slashed to just 12 hectares and grass silaging costs will be reduced as fewer cuts will be taken to supply the 3,000 tonnes required. Around 1,200 tonnes of fodder beet is being grown on contract.

Variable costs have also reduced with lower feed and vet bills. Cell counts are running at 100,000 cells/ml fewer than 2010 year. Replacement rate is predicted to fall from 22% to around 15%, meaning fewer heifers are required and releasing more grass for the cows.

More profit

Ian is delighted with the results so far. "These were enormous changes, reversing a treadmill we had been on for several years, but with David challenging us every step of the way and with decisions based on accurate information we are on target to increase milk price by 2.5ppl and cut costs by a similar amount.

"The whole system is also more relaxed with less pressure on people and animals alike. We are also less dependent on skilled labour, which leaves us less exposed to the labour market.

"We will be producing one million fewer litres but will be more profitable. The farmed area will be closer to 210 hectares and we are less exposed to the impact of feed price increases.

"Had we not changed systems I suspect we would have sold up. But in our case it is certainly true that less is actually more and I think we're now well placed to stay in dairying for the long term." |



Move over: Holsteins are being sold as they calve down