



### Robin Clements

A move away from beef and into dairying was a decision taken to help his unit support a growing family business. And further expansion is planned.



Herd size:	<b>160</b>
Unit size:	<b>50 hectares</b>
Average yield:	<b>7,300 litres</b>
Calving interval:	<b>372 days</b>

Dairy business set up to support a growing family

# Taking the dairy plunge

In just four short years, Northern Ireland-based producer Robin Clements – a relative new comer to dairying – has almost trebled the size of his herd. We spoke to him to find out what his current, and future, plans are for his family-run unit.

text **Rachael Porter**

**W**ith two grown-up sons wanting to join the family business, Robin Clements' suckler beef enterprise just wasn't going to generate enough income to support them all, so he decided to switch to dairying

"And having a regular cash flow, from a monthly milk cheque, was another attraction – it's something that can't be underestimated, even if the cheque's not as big as we'd like," he says, explaining the rationale behind his family's decision to set up a dairy herd.

He introduced cows to the farm in 2011 and began milking in September that year at his Trillick-based unit, close to

Omagh in County Tyrone, with just 60 cows – a figure that now stands at 160 head. It is, indeed, very much a family-run business with his wife, Heather, and two sons, Stephen and Matthew, all involved in managing the 50-hectare unit. And already there are plans to expand further. They have purchased another 60-hectare farm, about a mile from their unit.

"The plan is to eventually run two herds – one here and one there – a few years down the line. But we've got to learn to walk first. So, at the moment, the second farm is where we house dry cows and young stock and we're also zero-grazing

some of the grass from that unit too," explains Robin.

The first 60 cows were bought from herds based in the south of Ireland. "We bought some maiden heifers too, which we've since calved and we're also milking some home-bred heifers. The plan is to push cow numbers up to 200 with our own replacements. But we need to take it steady and build slowly. Milk price is such that we can't afford to rush, but once that improves we'll invest more in herd expansion."

The herd is a mixture of Holstein Friesian crosses, as well as a few Friesian Jersey crosses. "We're looking for good milk

*All change: a dairy herd now fills the shed, complete with cubicles beds, at the Clements' Trillick-based unit*





*Future milkers: there are plans to expand the herd further, using home-bred replacements*

solids and fertility. So far that mixture of genetics is working for us and we'll continue down the cross-breeding path for the foreseeable future."

### **New challenge**

Robin worked as a relief milker when he was younger and says it fired his interest in dairying. "I've always wanted to start a dairy herd and thought it would be much more interesting – and lucrative – than running a suckler beef herd or a sheep enterprise. Now I've taken the plunge, I wish I'd done it sooner. Both Heather and I are relishing the challenge of managing a new and different enterprise and we've no regrets about our decision."

Robin takes charge of milking and feeding, predominantly. Heather takes charge of the paperwork and book keeping and sons Matthew and Stephen also milk, but Stephen is also particularly keen on the breeding side. "In fact we all find that interesting and like to get involved in sire selection and matching bulls to cows and heifers," says Robin, adding that they all need to play a role in managing herd fertility and AI because

the herd is block calved in the autumn. "Stephen AIs for two months and then we use a sweeper bull. We calve 90% of the herd between September and December, with just a few 'stragglers'. This ensures that we make the most of our buyer's – Lakeland Dairies – seasonal bonus."

In January, Robin saw 19.6ppl for his milk: "The base price for the dairy is a little lower than that, so it could be worse."

### **Zero-grazing flexibility**

He says that their land is too heavy for a spring-calving pattern: "It's not easy to get the cows out in early spring, when the weather can be changeable. Our land is better suited to grazing later in the season."

"We turn the cows out when weather and ground conditions permit, which can be any time from February onwards. If weather conditions turn bad we rehouse cows for short periods, as required."

Zero grazing is used as a management tool throughout the season and paddocks that are too heavy for grazing are either

zero grazed or cut for round bales. He did some zero grazing the first year of dairying because the weather was so wet and it wasn't possible to graze the cows. "I don't like to do it all the time, because it is more labour intensive, but it's good to have the option and, if it's just too wet in the spring, we can still utilise the grass. It gives us some flexibility."

When the cows do go out, they're paddock grazed with electric fencing. "Again, we like the flexibility of this system – the fences never seem to go in the same place, but that's fine. They go where they need to go and where the cows need to go," he says, adding that they measure grass on weekly basis throughout the season: "So we can graze and cut grass at the optimal time."

"We do see a boost in milk yields at turnout – and the milkers perform well on the grass until we start drying them off in late July."

Cows then stay out at grass until October: "But again, this very much depends on the weather – ground conditions rule on this unit."

### **NMR records**

The NMR-recorded herd averages 7,300 litres with good solids – 4.07% butterfat and 3.32% protein. "And we're expecting these to rise with breeding – particularly the milk solids. We're not paid for higher constituents at the moment, but I suspect there will be more emphasis on quality in the future. So we'll be ready for that."

Robin places a lot of emphasis on milk from forage and has invested heavily in reseeding swards during the past five years, with around 85% of the grassland now replaced with long-term leys. "The old leys were tired, particularly after grazing suckler beef. In fact much of the land needed ploughing, because compaction was a problem."

Robin uses his NMR data to monitor and measure herd performance and fine-tune management – vital when milk price is averaging just 18ppl. He says somatic cell count data is essential to help stay on top of good udder health and milk quality. And he also uses Silent Herdsman and this has reduced his CI to 372 days. "That figure has to be tight if we're block calving – there's very little room for manoeuvre here. I can't afford to let that slip."

"And, because we're a relatively new herd, there are no excuses for an excessively long calving interval. We started as we mean to go on and we have to consolidate what we have and continue to strive to get even better." |

*New parlour: a 16:16 herringbone design    Bulk tank: part of the new dairy set up*

