

Switch to dairy was driven by bid to stave off market volatility

Back to the future

Moving back into dairying is a long-term strategy to build a business that's better able to cope with market volatility, according to one County Antrim-based producer. We spoke to him and his son to find out more about their plans.

text **Rachael Porter**

"Yes – that's me. And no, I'm not insane," is the humorous reply from Northern Ireland-based producer Robert Duncan, when asked if he's recently set up a dairy business.

He has indeed moved back into dairying, after selling his previous dairy herd in 2006 and moving into suckler beef production for eight years. A decade ago he ran a 120-cow Holstein Friesian herd, in partnership with his father Fred, but decided to switch to beef production. "We had a mix of pedigree and commercial beef Shorthorns and we reared and finished the latter for a specialist scheme," he says.

So, why the switch back to dairy again? "It's really to build a sustainable business for our youngest son – he wanted to come home and farm and beef market stability is constantly declining. I couldn't see it getting any better, particularly because the UK imports quite a lot of beef.

"Dairying, despite the current downturn,

does offer a little more stability. And we still had most of the infrastructure here needed to manage a dairy enterprise – the slurry handling facilities and cow housing with cubicles. And a regular cash flow – the monthly milk cheque – is another bonus, of course."

New parlour

All the family members were positive about his decision, predominantly because the unit is ideally suited to dairying. "It's a decent size, so we can run a larger than average herd. And the farm is located in the centre of the 114-hectare unit, which means that all the grazing land is easily accessible," he adds.

So, in 2014, the family took the decision to move back into milk and started the ball rolling. Apart from selling the beef herd and buying in dairy stock, the family also needed to invest in a new milking parlour at their Crumlin-based



Good decision: Robert and Chris Duncan are optimistic about the future

unit. They opted for a Dairymaster 20:40 swing-over herringbone.

"Back in 2006, we sold our dairy herd to a producer in Scotland and in November 2014 we bought a batch of maiden heifers from the same producer, which were descended from our original stock, plus some others that were Fleckvieh crosses. And we also bought some heifers from a herd, here in County Antrim, which had previously used a number of bulls from our pedigree herd."

Starting up again was a chance to do things differently and try something new, so after a period of integration and vaccination – to reduce stress and prevent disease – the heifers were mostly served using Fleckvieh sires.

"We wanted to manage and milk cows that are better suited to our climate

All change: a dairy enterprise has replaced the unit's suckler beef herd





New parlour: this was the only major infrastructure investment required to set up the dairy herd at the Duncan's unit

and system,” explains Robert. “My father and I have each been to Europe – Austria, Germany and The Netherlands – and seen Fleckviehs and Fleckvieh crosses and we were impressed.

“Fertility is particularly good – vital when we’re running a block-calving system. And milk quality is also impressive, with high fat and protein. The breed also has a quiet temperament, which makes handling them a little easier, and cross-bred bull calves also sell well at market too.”

Early days

Robert stresses that, as far as the Fleckvieh is concerned, it’s very much early days. “I don’t want people to think that I’m advocating using the breed – we’ve got a few years to go to see how it works out for us. But on paper the breed has everything we’re looking for and I’m confident that we won’t be disappointed. I’m no Fleckvieh expert, but I’m giving them a go.”

The heifers calved and were milked for the first time in October 2015. And today he’s milking a total of 110 head and is aiming to push numbers up to between

150 and 160 during the next couple of years, using home-bred replacements. “We want to remain a closed herd and grow ‘naturally’ – to help keep disease out and to make sure we’ve got our management system running smoothly before we expand.”

All three generations – Fred, Robert and Chris – are pleased with how things are going. “We’re particularly pleased with the parlour. We did consider a robotic system, but we felt that it wasn’t ideal when we plan to graze the herd for at least six months of the year.”

The herd is calved in two blocks – autumn and spring – and milk is sold to LacPatrick, which was formed in July 2015 as a result of the merger of Ballyrashane and Town of Monaghan Co-ops. The company owns three processing plants that produce liquid milk, cheese and butter. “And our milk price isn’t too bad compared to some. We’re seeing 19.8ppl at the moment – that’s 1.8ppl above the base price of 18ppl. But I have to admit that back in 2014 I based our business plan on between 23ppl and 24ppl. I didn’t think it would drop as low as it has.”

That said, Robert is still pleased that he took the decision to go back into dairying. “Chris is thriving on it. Our eldest son Michael also helps out with morning milkings and my wife Janet takes care of all the paperwork. It’s very much about the longer term and building a sustainable business that can support us all in the future.”

Dairy passion

Chris agrees and says that he really is enjoying running the herd. “Dairying is what I’ve always been interested in,” says the 17 year old, who relishes the chance to get involved in sire selection and AI, as well as the day-to-day tasks of milking and feeding the herd. And he’s also applied to study for an HND in agriculture at a local college. “So I can study and come home and help manage the herd,” he says.

Father and son have a positive outlook for the future. “What’s going to happen with milk price and UK dairying it the million dollar question,” says Robert. “It’s a huge unknown, but I do have a feeling that things will improve and, hopefully, sooner rather than later.” |