

Adopting the latest technology helps to build a unit fit for future generations

Reliable analysis offers precision

Adopting new ideas and innovations has helped one family-run herd to build a system that meets the needs of both the cows and the next generation involved in managing the unit.

text **Emily Ball**

Technology is helping to improve efficiency and future-proof the Faulks family's Nottinghamshire-based dairy herd. Robotics and the latest forage analysis technology are just two of the innovations playing a key role in maximising performance.

It was on a trip to the Netherlands in 2014 that Jill first began to think seriously about moving to robotic milking. "And we installed Lely robots at the end of January 2016," says Jill Faulks, who farms in partnership with her brother Michael, at Colston Bassett in Nottinghamshire, milking 120 Holstein Friesian cows. "Our existing parlour needed replacing and I knew any major investment would have to meet the needs of both myself and my brother, as well as his son Sam, who is set to take on the business in the future."

Installing robots

"Michael and Sam run a contracting business and none of us really wanted to be tied to milking cows. It is almost impossible to recruit good milking staff in the area, so installing robots was a logical step," Jill explains.

"With the robots, our day does start a little later, but goes on just as long. The main difference is that we can spend the time on the cows and getting other jobs done, such as fine tuning the ration, rather than being held up in the milking parlour."

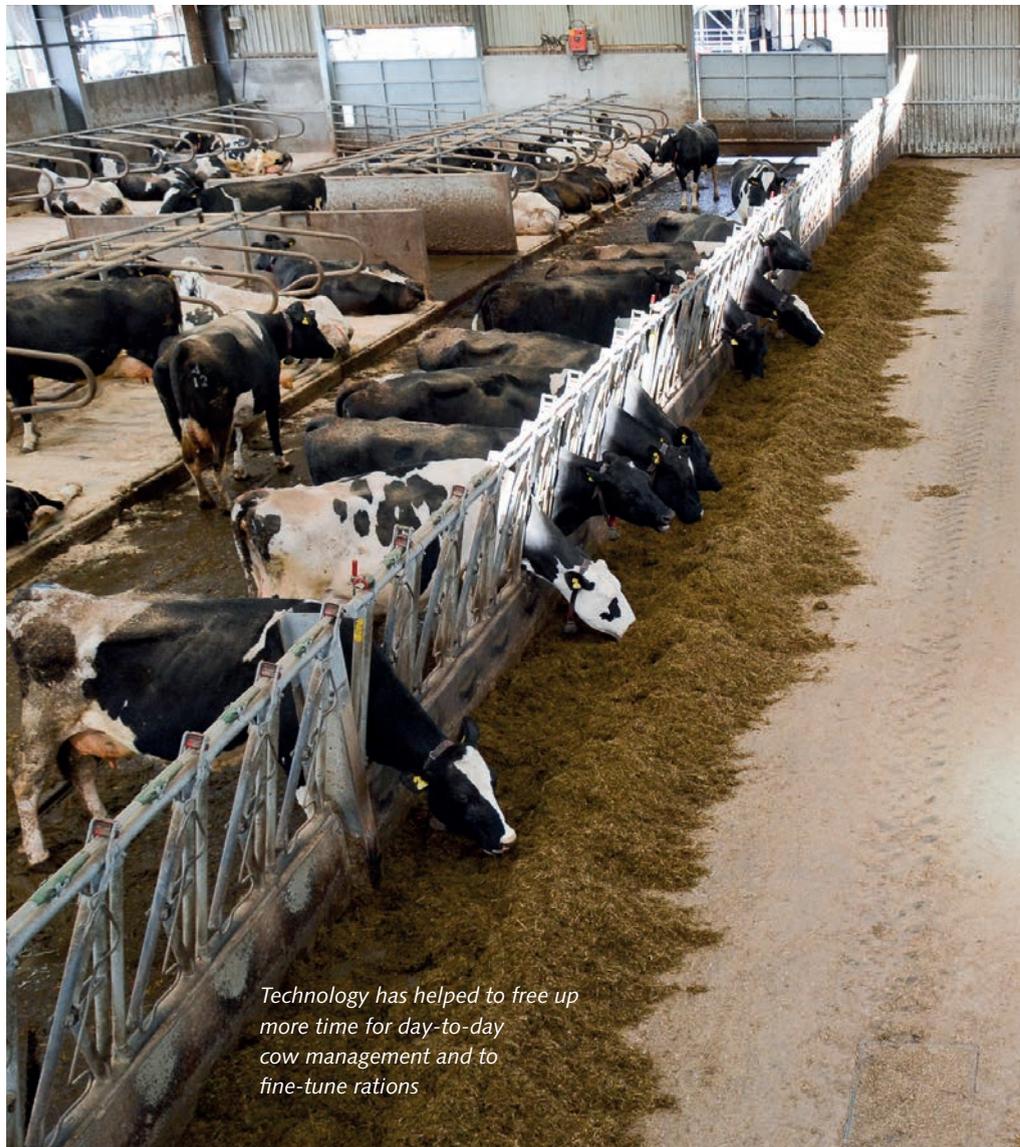
Cows now visit the robot an average of 3.2 times a day and yields have increased by four litres a day per cow. Jill also uses a Juno automatic feed pusher to ensure the ration is always in front of the cows.

"We feed out at about 8.30 am and all the cows come to the feed barrier. We then yoke the cows at this point for any insemination or vet work that needs

doing. The Juno starts up at about noon and runs down the feed barrier every two hours after that."

Adopting technology

The same attitude to new ideas and technology can be seen with Jill's adoption of SilageManager+, a new forage analysis service from ForFarmers. This is part of their new Feed2Milk initiative, piloted in autumn 2016 with Jill, and is based on the use of the latest dry Near Infrared Spectroscopy (NIRS) technology, to analyse forages. This information is then used to balance the correct feeds with the available forages. "By drying and grinding samples before analysis, results are far more reliable compared to traditional wet sampling," explains Jill. "We then work with ForFarmers' Andrew Torrens to develop a diet that's right for both milk production and cow health and fertility. "Inconsistencies in forage analysis are a common source of frustration for dairy producers," explains Andrew. "But



Technology has helped to free up more time for day-to-day cow management and to fine-tune rations



Robotic revolution: each cow visits the automatic milking system an average of 3.2 times each day



From left to right: Michael, Jill and Sam Faulks with ForFarmers' Andrew Torrens

accurate forage analysis is essential to ensure that cows are fed a balanced diet that complements the available forage.” Drawing on experience and technology used in The Netherlands, ForFarmers has developed its forage analysis techniques to provide consistent, accurate results, and new sets of measures to give

producers a better insight into their forages’ potential. “As well as the standard parameters, the analysis service also provides data on milk yield potential, digestible protein and rumen health risk; all of which provide information which can be used to improve the accuracy of ration

composition. By changing the levels of key feed nutrients, producers can hope to achieve more milk from the same level of feeding, without compromising on cow health or performance,” he explains.

Andrew sampled the Faulks’ silage in October 2016 and used the information from SilageManager+ to develop a diet that delivered milk ‘drivers’ as well as maintaining rumen health.

Rumen friendly

After talking to Jill and discussing the new information on values such as MELK (more energy for the lactating dairy cow) and RI (rumination index), they developed a diet that truly fits the Faulks’ silage.

“We feed down the barrier, as well as in the parlour, and it’s taken time to balance how much to feed and where. The cows get 2.5kg per head of the blend outside in the partial mixed ration, as well as grass silage, wholecrop, Selcoplus, lucerne and minerals.

“On the new diet we’ve seen a reduction in cell counts, which I put down to improved rumen health. Cows seem happier and more settled on the diet, and milk production and constituents have either been maintained or increased.”

Jill sees adopting new technologies as a great way to ensure the sustainability of the dairy business at Hills Farm: “We’re just one of the four milk suppliers to the Stilton makers at Colston Bassett, which is just over a mile away,” she says. “It’s this excellent link to the market that has helped us have the confidence to grow and invest in our business during the past few years. We’re building a system that works for the farm now and one that will also perform well in the future.” |

