

'Tough' cows are needed to thrive in Shetland's 'tough' environmental and economic climate. We visited one of six remaining milk producers on the island to find out how they manage to run a profitable business in difficult conditions.

Running a dairy herd in the most northerly – and some would say most beautiful – part of the UK sounds idyllic. But all is not as it first seems. High input costs and wet weather are just two of the daily obstacles faced by the Irvine family, based at Setter Farm in Tingwall, near Scalloway, in the Shetland Isles.

Milk producers in Shetland pay an extra £50 per tonne for feed and fertiliser costs for shipping alone. And on top of that they're seeing the same price hikes as producers on the mainland for key inputs.

"We do see a better price for our milk



Vivien, John and Linda Irvine

and the resulting heifers and cows would just stand around in the gateways – they really didn't like the rain," explains John. During the past two years Friesian sire Mr Frosty has been used pretty much across the entire herd.

Climate change

John is used to the climate at Setter Farm – his family has been farming here since the 1720s, starting with a series of crofts that have grown and evolved into one large farm. Today the Irvines own 105 hectares and rent a further 290 hectares, which provide grazing, home grown

you get with low-maintenance, hardy and trouble-free cows," says John.

And that's what he's expecting from Mr Frosty daughters. "I have some heifers that are not far off calving and they're looking promising – I can't wait to see what they can do."

Breeding is geared towards longevity and for John that means breeding out any final traces of Holstein genetics – the legacy of dabbling with the breed 15 years ago. "We're moving back to pure Friesian as the choice of Friesian bulls has greatly increased during the past six years or so and we don't breed from the 'Holstein' cows. We put them to an Aberdeen Angus bull that we share with a neighbour," explains John.

"I'm looking for good feet and legs and tidy udders with teats in the right place. And cows of moderate size – no giants."

He says that temperament is important too. "I want trouble-free cows that will last in the herd. Holsteins walk a tight

rope on our system. But Friesians do well.

"They calve easily too – it's been many, many years since we've had to get the vet out to assist with a calving."

John's grandfather milked 12 Shorthorn Ayrshire crosses at the farm in the 1940s. And the milk went straight to the nearby Scalloway market: "If it was cold then no one wanted it. That's very different to today's market demands," says John.

Milk imports

At the moment, 15% of the island's liquid milk is imported from mainland Scotland by one of Shetland's supermarkets, which is based in Lerwick. Tesco has just bought the supermarket from Somerfield and the store is being refurbished and it about to open. John and the other co-operative members hope to persuade Tesco to buy their milk, rather than importing it.

"We can produce a maximum of 7,500 litres per day at the moment. If, when the

superstore opens, it sells imported milk then that will have to drop back to around 6,300 litres," he adds.

Most of the co-operative's annual production of 2.75 million litres are sold as liquid milk, but the dairy also makes butter, yoghurts and buttermilk. No cheese is made on the island.

Butter and yoghurt are exported to Orkney: "And the dairy in Orkney produces cheese and exports that to Shetland – it doesn't make butter or yoghurt, so it's a good exchange."

As for the future, John and his family plan to continue milking cows, despite the squeeze on margins due to rising input costs. "For us it's a family tradition, but there could come a point where we may be forced to quit. My biggest concern is if we had to upgrade to a parlour – we simply couldn't find, or be able to justify, the finance to do that."

If that happened, the farm's sheep and livery enterprises and the contractor business, run by John's sons Terry and Gary, would take centre stage. But for now John and the family are very much focused on dairying.

"We enjoy running the herd – it's what we've always done. And we do it well. So that's what we'll continue to do for as long as we possible can."

Rachael Porter

When the going gets tough...

Friesians are key to successful dairying in the far north

than our mainland counterparts – about 37ppl," says John, quickly adding that it's still not enough as their milk production is pegged back to 15% below quota because one of the island's major supermarkets imports milk.

With help from wife Vivien, daughter Linda and sons Gary and Terry, John is one of six producers within a 25-mile radius that supplies the island's only dairy – Shetland Farm Dairies – which produces liquid milk for 'domestic' consumption. All the liquid milk bought and consumed on the island comes from these six herds. With 44 milkers, John's is one of the smallest herds but it's perfectly formed mainly from pure Friesian bloodlines – a breed that's ideally suited to the island's sometimes harsh environment.

"We get a lot of rain here, upwards of 1,500mm a year, and the Holstein crosses that we've had here in the past just couldn't cope. We used some Holstein semen about 10 years ago because Friesian semen was getting very difficult to obtain

forage and some cereals for the unit's 90 head of dairy stock, as well as 250 ewes.

The herd is turned out in late May and re-housed for the winter again in mid-September. "We're certainly feeling the effect of climate change – the cows used to be outside for six months of each year, but now that's closer to four. It's much wetter here than it was a decade ago," explains John.

Winter rations comprise grass silage mixed with distillers' wheat, barley grains and beet pulp. Concentrates are also fed to yield.

The herd is milked twice a day through a 23-point pipeline, with six units, in the byre. The herd's annual average milk yield is 6,500 litres. "I'm not pushing for yield. I'm looking for longevity and, therefore, milk production over a longer lifetime. Twelve years is a typical age for cows to reach in our herd and that's what

Pure Friesians are trouble-free milk producers

