



Barclay and Jack Taylor

With a view to reducing their workload, Jack and Barclay Taylor decided to start rearing and selling youngstock and sold their dairy herd.



Youngstock:	400-head
Hectares of land:	122
Stock sold per year:	200 to 240-head
Motto: 'Sell a heifer, keep a costumer'	

New enterprise frees up more time and requires less labour

Moving from 'milk' to 'maidens'

A desire to continue farming as they neared retirement age prompted two Shropshire-based producers to set up a business rearing heifers. But how do you switch from milking cows to breeding replacements for other herds?

text **Rachael Porter**

"We just wanted to slow down a bit and lighten our labour requirement. Managing a dairy herd on a day-to-day basis is extremely demanding – both physically and mentally," says Shropshire-based heifer rearer Jack Taylor, explaining why he and his brother Barclay have switched from milking a 200-cow herd to rearing and selling heifers.

And the pair may have shifted to a lower gear as far as the workload is concerned, but not in terms of profitability. There's still enough income to sustain two families and plenty of free time to enjoy it to boot.

The pair developed their heifer rearing business – which comprises 400-head of youngstock based at Webscott Farm near Myddle – so that they could move out of dairying, but continue to farm without the day-to-day demands of managing a dairy herd. "We had to devise an exit plan, since our children were not interested in running the herd. And we wanted to be 'proactive' and sell the milking herd when we were ready – not be forced into it," says Barclay.

"When we hatched our three-year plan when we were both in our late 50s. We both wanted to carry on farming, but also to pursue other interests off farm," explains Jack, who likes to go horse racing whenever he can. Barclay likes to spend his free time salmon fishing.

Back in 2006, the 150-head of youngstock from the herd was contract reared six miles away and the rearer said he had capacity to take and rear more for us –

another 150. "And that's where we started," says Barclay. "We went out and bought more young heifers from dispersal sales to bolster numbers. We hit on the idea of rearing heifers, getting them in calf and selling them as freshly calved heifers."

Sexed semen

Jack and Barclay also switched to using sexed semen on their herd, which increased the number of heifer calves. And now at least 80% of all calves born at the unit are heifers.

"We spent the next two years building up the business – running it along side the dairy herd and wondering when would be the best time to sell the latter. But in the end it was an easy decision and we took it a little sooner than expected," says Jack.

In August 2008 their herdsman left. "So rather than try to replace him – no easy task as he was extremely good – we decided to bring our plans forwards a year and began to sell the herd."

Cows were sold as they calved and the brothers retained all the heifers. Many were sold through Beeston Cattle Market – the best market in the UK by far, according to Jack.

Today the Taylors sell between 200 and 240 head of freshly calved heifers each year – about 20 each month – through Beeston, as well as Shrewsbury and Welshpool. And private customers account for around 20% of sales at the moment.

"We've six repeat customers who all buy

from us on a regular basis. They come and select the ones they want to buy. Everyone has a different eye," he adds.

'Staying power'

That said, he and Barclay are working hard to breed strong heifers with plenty of milk, as well as plenty of 'staying



Dairy potential: the brothers aim to breed heifers that milk well and also have 'staying power'



Fresh milk: calves are reared on whole milk taken from freshly calved heifers

power'. "That's what the market wants. The majority of producers are still looking for lots of milk – they've got their buyer's contracts to meet. But they also want good type and trouble-free cows that can thrive on today's larger, more automated and 'time poor' dairy units."

A good reputation is just as important as the heifers themselves and the brothers always put customers first. Jack's motto is: Sell a heifer, keep a customer. He prides himself on always being open, honest and fair. "And so far all our customers have come back and they've made recommendations to their neighbours."

Heifers due to calve this winter include

daughters by Shottle, Drake, Talent, Garrison and Bolton. Around 90% of the semen used is sexed. At the moment Drake and Talent reside in the AI flask, along with red-and-white Dutch sire Classic.

"We've used his sire – Stadel – in the past. He was a great bull and a smart red-and-white heifer always commands a good price in the sale ring," says Barclay.

Expansion plans

Around 10% of all bulls now used are red and white and this is increasing to meet the demand for red-and-white heifers.

The brothers are looking to increase the number of heifers they sell each year, although land and NVZs are a limiting factor. "We left our contract rearer on good terms and there's a possibility that we may get him to rear some heifers in the future.

"It all depends on how quickly we can increase the number of youngstock we have here. Using sexed semen is a step in the right direction and we also buy in heifers, mainly from dispersal sales," says Jack.

"But we'll expand carefully. We don't want to build a business that's so big that we're back to working just as hard as we were before!"

Heifer rearing at WebScott Farm

Heifers calve at between 27 and 30 months of age. Replacements for the dairy herd were calved at 24 months, but Jack says that calving them later for selling means that they're more robust and more easily able to cope with the stress of joining a new herd. Bull calves are reared for 10 weeks then sold to a local finisher.

Between eight and 10 heifers are in milk at any one time, so fresh colostrum for new-born calves is never in short supply. And all calves are reared on fresh whole milk from these heifers.

A strict programme of vaccination and worming ensures that all stock is in the best of health and good condition. Vital for efficiency but also essential when customers view the heifers. All stock is vaccinated against bluetongue, leptospirosis and BVD.

