

**Rhys Williams**

A scholarship and a switch to once-a-day milking has helped to fine tune one large extensively managed herd in North Wales



Herd size:	1,000
Average yield:	3,200 litres
Unit size:	320ha
Milk from forage:	97% of total yield

Low cost just got even lower for the herd based at Cefn Amwlch, Tudweiliog in North Wales. CowManagement first visited the large dairy unit, which is run using New Zealand-style management, back in 2005, just six months after David Wynne Finch and Rhys Williams began milking what was then an 830-cow Jersey herd. Today's herd is not only bigger – numbering 1,000 head – but it's also black-and-white and there's been a switch to once-a-day milking.

Cross breeding

A move to milking New Zealand Friesian Jersey crosses was made to develop a more efficient cow to produce milk from grass, explains business partner and herd manager Rhys. "We decided to introduce some New Zealand Friesian bloodlines as the breed that's been bred to suit our system and management style perfectly." He adds that yields are slightly higher from the crosses – around 4,000 litres on twice-a-day milking – and feet, legs, fertility and other 'longevity' traits are also improved. "The first cross was New Zealand Friesian semen on our Danish Jerseys and now we use Kiwi cross sires on the herd."

The herd is still block calved in February and everything is dried off by December and over wintered on kale and silage," explains Rhys, who recently returned from a 12-week study tour, that took him to New Zealand. Rhys won a Trehane Award – one of the Nuffield Farming scholarships – and was sponsored by the

Further streamlining reduces costs without compromising long-term yields

Once is enough

We visit a large low-input-low-output herd, seven years after it began milking, to check on expansion and management progress and to find out why it's being milked just once a day.

text **Rachael Porter**

Trehane Trust to find out more about 'wealth creation in equity dairy farm partnerships'. This is something close to his heart, since he now has a 50% stake in the dairy business, built up from a 7% stake in 2005. "I'm passionate about dairying and I'm proof that, with enthusiasm, commitment and drive, you can start with nothing and end up as a partner in large dairy business." Building a sustainable business is something else that Rhys believes in emphatically and that's why once-a-day milking caught his eye. "It's something I've been looking into for the past three years. There are a handful of UK producers who have made the switch. They all run low-input-low-output New Zealand-style systems and the majority

are doing it for lifestyle reasons. But that's not my driver."

While travelling he saw several herds that had dropped a milking: "And it was working well for them. I had some time while I was travelling to think about it and how it might work on our unit."

He took the plunge on his return and, as the herd calved down in February and March, one of the milkings was dropped. As a result, the lifestyle of the unit's three regular milkers has changed. But for Rhys it's about driving more cost out of the business and running it as efficiently and sustainably as possible. "And because we're already a low-yielding herd compared to more conventional UK units, it doesn't mean less milk. Yields will 'develop' on once-a-

day milking and get back to where they were in just three years. That's the 'adjustment' time scale and we're well on track to achieve that already.

Reduced costs

Yields have dropped for the short-term, to 3,200 litres with 5.9% butterfat and 4.1% protein, but Rhys says that the herd is well placed to take that hit at the moment. And there are reduced costs and other benefits to help counter it. Next year the herd should see yields increase by between 10 and 12% and by year three it should be back to between 90 and 95% of what it produced on twice-a-day milking.

Besides the obvious pluses of reduced labour costs – and electricity, water and dairy chemical usage – another benefit is the increase in milk solids. This is good news for Rhys' herd because he's not on a 'white water' contract. His milk is processed into cheese. "But once-a-day milking is not for higher yielding herds or those that are paid for milk yield alone and not solids," says Rhys. "And higher yielding herds don't see the same level of 'adjustment' – yield would just be lost and not regained."

Other benefits that have emerged from once-a-day milking include improved udder and teat condition, better fertility and reduced lameness. "We're not seeing much in the way of body condition score change and that's helping fertility. Already we've seen an improvement in

conception to first service rates. They were at around 60% and now they're closer to 70%," explains Rhys.

"Signs of heat are stronger because we're not 'pushing' the cows too hard. Cows only walk to the parlour once a day, so hoof condition is better too. We've a lower culling rate and, the cherry on the top, is possibly more young stock to sell as we don't need so many replacements." Udder health and milk hygiene have remained the same, with the herd's average somatic cell count standing at 150,000 cells/ml – earning them a 0.5ppl bonus – and a Bactoscan of between 25 and 45.

70-bale outdoor rotary

The herd is milked every morning through a Waikato 70-bale outdoor rotary. Milking starts at 5.45am and it takes three hours for three men to milk and just 30 minutes to wash down.

"There's no hard and fast rule about what time of day you should milk, but most of the units I've seen do it in the morning. It suits me because the rest of the day is then free to tackle other tasks."

The herd is still run in two groups of 500 cows because 1,000 cows is 'too big a mob', according to Rhys. The unit spans 300ha of a mixture of sand and loamy clay land. There are 78 paddocks with an average size of 4.2ha.

Study awards

The Trehane Trust offers awards each year, through participation in the Nuffield Farming Scholarship programme, to individuals who want to study and research a particular aspect of the dairy industry.

The remit is broad. Applicants are invited to study areas from milk production to processing and product development. It covers all related areas.

Available to those aged 22 to 45, application forms can be downloaded from the Nuffield website www.nuffieldscholar.org. Closing date this year is November 15, 2011.

Just 150kgDM per head of extra feed is now fed in a 10-month milking period – back in 2010 this was closer to 1,000kg.

Fine tuning like this, and management and breed changes, are all continuing to take cost out of the system, without impacting on long-term production, and ensuring that business continues to make a profit both now and in the future.

"That's exactly what David and I set the unit up to do and that's what it's doing and will continue to do." |

Once-a-day: morning milking at Tudweiliog

