

Rubber matting offers 'red-carpet' treatment – and a regular pedicure

# Put a spring in their step

Cushioned and comfortable, yet hard wearing. That could be the 'flooring' solution for tackling lameness, and other problems like poor heat detection, in cubicle housing.

We visited a Cambridge-based dairy unit's cow house, with rubber matting through out, to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's the equivalent of wall-to-wall Axminster, with a pedicure thrown in for good measure. Rubber matting in cow housing is, as far as the cow is concerned, a luxury.

But for producers wanting to improve cow comfort and welfare, particularly in systems where cows are housed all year round, it's becoming something of a necessity – even if it's only laid on areas where cows are standing for a long time or turning 90° or more.

Good quality rubber matting – which won't stretch or lift – comes at a price. But it's a price worth paying, according to the herd manager at Cambridge University's Park Farm unit.

This is a relatively new set up, with a cow house comprising 200 cubicles and four milking robots. The herd is housed 365 days a year and Gavin Hughes says that the rubber matting is like bringing the pasture indoors.

"The cows love it – it's the next best thing to being out at grass. It gives them a sure footing and they move about freely and naturally – without fear of slipping or falling. Cows literally skipping and jumping down the passageways are a common sight. It's like turn out in spring – everyday."

He's not exaggerating. After just a few minutes in the house it's easy to see the effect that the flooring has on the cows' confidence when they're walking – or running – about. The grip is good for staff going about their daily business too, particularly on the shoulders joining passageways and the areas around drinking troughs.

These are covered with slightly different matting – Kraiburg's Pedikura. This is soft and slip proof, but also provides gentle and constant abrasion to cow hooves – a little like a nail file.

"A little wear on the hooves is vital, to mimic natural conditions outside and prevent hooves from becoming overgrown," explains Gavin.

## Interlocking design

This matting contains corundum (aluminum oxide) – the second hardest mineral after diamond. It does not react with acids and bases, making it suitable for use in slurry environments, and it's ideal for creating hard-wearing and nonslip surfaces.

The remainder of the passageways are covered with Kraiburg rubber mats. These are 1.25 metres square, 24mm thick and feature 5mm nubs on the underside to provide softness underfoot. They interlock and are laid out and fitted like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

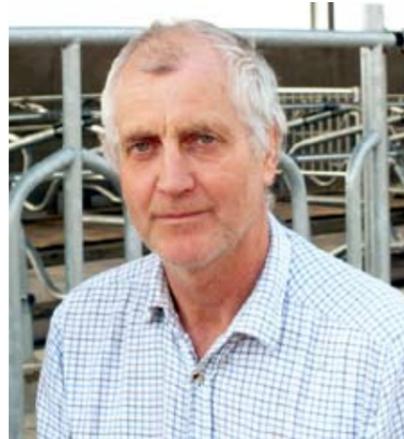
And they can be fitted to both solid and slatted floors. In fact there are some fitted to the slats in the unit's cow house.

"I first saw them on a dairy unit six years ago and I was convinced they were the way to go.

"I'm extremely pleased with it now we have it – it's done everything I hoped it would do and more in terms reducing lameness, preventing cows from slipping and falling, increasing heat detection rates and basically allowing cows to display their natural behaviour."

The herd has seen a reduction in lameness caused by solar ulcers and white-line disease.

But Gavin says that the most notable



Gavin Hughes: "It's like bringing pasture indoors – the cows love it"

saving is losses due to cows slipping. "We were losing about seven lactations a year. The cubicles were particularly slippery in the summer, when conditions were drier and the scraper didn't clean the concrete passageways so well. And putting grooves in the concrete didn't work. But we've not lost a single cow or lactation due to slipping or falling since the matting went in."

He's so impressed that the heifer housing, with training cubicles, is

*Pedikura matting is abrasive – like a nail file*



*Rubber matting offers cushioning and grip, with an added pedicure*

currently being fitted with rubber matting and calving pens also have rubber matting: "It's easy to keep clean – it can be power washed and disinfected after each cow – and it's comfortable. Cows are able to get up more easily after calving too – they're not wobbling about on straw and concrete."

Heifers joining the milking herd appear more confident: "Being sure footed lessens the impact of bullying – they're able to get away from dominant cows more easily."

Gavin has plenty of producers visiting the unit to see how well the rubber matting is performing and typical concerns are about cows lying on the matted floor in the passageways, rather than the cubicles. This obviously has implications for udder health.

## Cubicle comfort

"But that's more of a reflection of cubicle comfort. If cows prefer to lie in the passageways, then cubicle design needs attention. We've made sure that our cubicles are much more comfortable and inviting than the rubber floor," he says.

Other questions are about wear and tear. Continuous rolls of rubber matting in some cow houses have proved problematic due to stretching. "But the interlocking 'tile' design of this matting means that's not an issue.

"The individual mats will expand and contract due to changes in temperature, but they still remain locked together and in place.

"And there's no problem with automatic scrapers, because the floor is evenly and securely laid and the rivets are strong. We switched to nylon blades on our scrapers because you get a better and cleaner result than metal on rubber."

The unit is run commercially, with an emphasis on health and welfare standards.

It's connected to the University's vet school and students spend time with the herd to gain dairy experience. "We have to lead by example and set a benchmark for these young vets.

"When they leave here, they won't see many units with matting like ours. The cost is prohibitive for many units."

The matting retails for around £37.50 per square metre and it's an additional £5 per metre for professional fitting.

"For a unit with lameness and slipping issues, I think the figures could easily stack up," adds Gavin. "I know they do for us." |