

A parlour for today – with an eye on possible future expansion

# Revision planning

Meticulous planning paid off for one producer partnership. Chris and David Dibble's unit now has a milking parlour that many herdsmen dream of working in. We spoke to the Somerset-based brothers to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's all in the planning when installing a new parlour. Just ask Chris and David Dibble. When they decided to upgrade the milking facilities at their Somerset-based unit, they made sure they researched every aspect of the new setup's

design before the diggers moved in to start the new build.

"We knew the project was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to upgrade, so wanted to get it right first time," says Chris, who farms in partnership with his brother David and father, Richard.

Together they manage Lottisham Farms, which comprises 404 hectares and is spread across two neighbouring farms near Glastonbury. Both units have their own dairy herd, with 160 cows at Lottisham Farm and 220 cows at Lottisham House.

It was back in 2010 when the brothers began thinking about their future in dairy production, and what to do about the aging milking facilities at Lottisham House.

"We were milking 180 cows through an old 16:16 parlour that originally started out as a 10:10 herringbone. We could have carried on with it for a few more years, but it was rapidly becoming too small for the size of our cows and was an





Chris Dibble with relief milker Kevin White and herdsman Paul Murray

increasingly unpleasant environment to work in,” explains Chris.

“We’d already decided to remain in milk production for the long-term, so took the plunge to update the parlour and invest in new facilities.”

The pair wanted to design a setup that would allow the 220 cows to be milked and looked after by one person, with the unit’s second worker free to concentrate on feeding and straw bedding. So plans were drawn up for a unit that sits



*Flushed with success: an automated system to clean clusters after each cow is milked has reduced the spread of contagious mastitis*

adjacent to the farm’s existing housing facilities.

“In the current climate 220 cows is enough to make Lottisham House a viable venture, but you never know what new challenges are around the corner so it made sense for us to future-proof the business by building facilities that could easily be extended to cope with up to 350 cows,” adds Chris.

### Team effort

The Dibbles spent the next 12 months researching and looking for kit and a setup that would best suit their requirements. And they made sure they involved their herdsman, Paul Murray, and their relief milker, Kevin White, as well as their vet, Mike Kerby, in the relevant discussions.

“It was very much a team effort,” says David. “We wanted to get everything exactly right before any work started. So we drew on the expertise of our own staff and the experience of a group of contractors and suppliers who knew what would work and what wouldn’t.”

In the end the Dibbles plumped for a Fullwood 24:24 low-line parlour, which sits within a purpose-built shed, complete with cow handling races, a hospital area and office accommodation. “We made the parlour’s walls long enough so that an extra four milking points can be installed on either side of the pit at a later date, and pre-installed hopper chutes where the additional in-parlour feeders would sit,” explains Chris. “We also extended the parlour’s vacuum pipe so that cows in the hospital yard can be milked without having to go through the parlour.”

### Parlour potential

All associated pipework and pumps have also been installed to suit the parlour’s potential larger 32:32 layout. And the new build has also been future-proofed in a number of other ways.

“We built an extra large milk storage room so that an additional tank can be installed, if cow numbers do increase, and we fitted high and wide doors so that new equipment can be installed without having to dismantle any brick or block-work. It’s all about making any future expansion as simple and hassle-free as possible.”

A total of 23 revisions were made to blueprints for the cow handling facilities before the plans were approved and signed off. “We even pegged out the layout of the new building and parlour

with wooden stakes and baler twine to get a better feel of how things would fit together,” says Chris.

“It seemed a bit excessive at the time, but was a worthwhile exercise as it made us realise that the building needed to be one bay longer than we originally thought in order to give the cows enough space to exit the parlour comfortably.”

The facilities also feature a plant room that houses the parlour’s pumps and refrigeration units, as well as the parlour’s receiver vessels that have been moved out of the milking pit for hygiene purposes.

“We are conscious that we are producing a foodstuff and that we have a responsibility to maintain a hygienic environment,” Chris adds. “It also makes the parlour quieter and less cramped.”

### Backflush system

The brothers also installed Fullwood’s backflush system, to clean the clusters after each cow has been milked, and have introduced pedometers for cow auto-identification, heat detection and to monitor cow activity and inactivity.

“The pedometers allow us to track each cow’s performance much more closely than previously, while the backflush system has helped us to maintain a cell count as low as 100,000 cells/ml and a Bactoscan of around 10,” says Chris. “It also reduces the risk of any unseen or sub-clinical cases of mastitis being spread from cow to cow.”

The parlour stalls and pit floor have been fitted with rubber matting for improved cow and worker comfort, while the in-parlour feeders have been mounted externally for ease of servicing and to prevent damage. Staff footbaths have also been installed at the parlour’s entrance as a disease barrier – and to keep the dairy and office areas clean – while a high level exhaust has been fitted to divert noise from the parlour’s compressor away from the farm office.

“It’s the little things that have made the biggest differences,” continues Chris. “We visited a lot of other installations to learn from others and to bring the best design elements together on our farm. “With hindsight I think we got most things right as there isn’t much that we’d change. We’ve succeeded in providing Paul and Kevin with the technology and infrastructure to enable them to maintain the same meticulous standards that they’ve always prided themselves on, albeit in a more efficient and enjoyable environment.” |