

Award-winning producer puts the profit back into family business

Fate and fortune

Switching to Jerseys and a change of focus have turned the fortunes of one Cheshire-based unit around – and seen its 22-year-old manager crowned the winner of a national dairy award. All this in just two short years and with no prior aspiration to run his family's dairy herd. Read on to be inspired.

text **Rachael Porter**

If you'd asked William Patten two years ago where he'd be today, the last place he'd have said was back managing his family's dairy unit. As for winning an award for his dairying expertise – that would have been further from his mind. Yet he was one of two dairy producers to be crowned Young Producer of the Year, at this year's Farm Business Cream Awards. William is the herd manager on his family's Nantwich-based unit, which is home to a 190-cow pedigree Jersey herd, and his hard work and dedication during the past two years stunned the competition judges. They were staggered by the phenomenal amount of responsibility shouldered by 22-year-old William, when he returned to the family farm after graduating from university, and how he's turned the fortunes of



Breed switch: William says the Jerseys have better fertility, hoof health and milk quality



The Patten family

William (centre) has made considerable and outstanding changes to the management of his family's unit. His efforts have earned him a national dairy award.



Age:	22 years
Number of cows:	190
Average yield:	6,000 litres
Milk constituents:	5.6% fat 3.9% protein



Tomorrow's milkers: breeding goals are set to maximise the genetic merit of the herd

the business around with a change of management system.

It was in June 2011 that William began not only working with Jersey cattle, but also changing his career path completely. He'd just finished an English literature and creative writing degree at Aberystwyth University, when his father Brian became too ill to run the family farm. So despite taking little real interest in the farm before, beyond helping on the odd weekend, William agreed to take on managing the herd and the direction of the business.

Better suited

But some dramatic changes were needed in order for the farm to remain viable. "We needed to up date some equipment and introduce new nutrition and health regimes in order to improve the health and welfare of the herd. These changes were needed to increase milk yields and improve profits," he says.

He also had the unenviable task of convincing his father to gradually replace the black-and-white flying herd with Jerseys. "I felt the breed was more suited to the farm and its facilities. It also offers better fertility, hoof health and milk quality," says William.

He already had two Jersey heifers: "And the more I costed out a Jersey system and learnt about the breed, the more certain I was that they were the cows for me and this unit.

"But then came the tricky part, convincing a man who had kept black and whites for 30 years to milk Jerseys – not an easy task I can promise you."

But when Brian saw with his own eyes

what William saw – cows that were aggressive feeders with sound feet and that fitted into the unit's facilities much better than the larger black and whites – he was sold on the idea.

"We did go through a transitional period, so I could prove to Dad that it would work.

"I didn't want to push him out – I wanted to take him with me. He'd been doing things his way for 30 years and then I come in and want to make significant changes – that must have been hard for him."

He had to get his mother Gillian on side too. She and Matt Dykes, who works full time with the family, are in charge of calf rearing and Gillian also does all the relief milking in the winter.

"Mum is impressed with the vitality of the Jersey calves and they're also extremely pretty. What's not to like?"

Individual attention

Today William is using American and Canadian genetics to help boost the type, strength and productivity of the herd, with the aim to produce cows that are able to milk for many lactations and still produce good yields with high solids.

"Cows need to be healthy, fertile, productive and efficient. But they also need to be valuable, so I'm looking to maximise the genetic merit of the herd," he says.

The top 50% of the herd is bred to the best Jersey bulls that the business can afford and the bottom 50% are inseminated with Belgian Blue semen.

Switching breeds and management changes mean that he's on top of lameness

and cell counts are down from an average cell count of 500,000 cells/ml to 63,000 cells/ml, with all fresh calved cows calving in with low cell counts. But, most importantly, conception rate to first service has risen from 25% to 65%.

"Our focus is no longer on simply pushing the cows for more and more milk. We focus on each cow as an individual. It's all about balance between milk yields and milk quality now – the Jerseys' high butterfat and protein production also helped to sway my father."

The herd average yield is now around 6,000 litres, rather than 8,000 litres, but milk constituents are considerably higher – at around 5.6% butterfat and 3.9% protein – ideal since the milk is sold to Fayrefield Foods and goes for cheese production.

"We're looking to gradually expand the milking herd to between 200 and 250 head. There's no rush. Our focus is on quality, so we want to do this using our own replacements."

On-farm processing

Williams says that he'd also like to move into on-farm processing in the future too. "I want to do something that no one else is doing and make a completely different product. That shouldn't be too difficult because Jersey milk is so versatile."

And what about the writing? "Yes, I'd love to get back into that. But the Jerseys are my first love right now. I'm really enjoying it and the highlight for me so far was quite recently when the first calf that I'd bred was born. It was amazing to watch all the potential hit the sawdust and now I can watch it grow." |