



Miles Saunders

This founder member of OMSCo's herd was one of the first to convert to organic in the UK and today his business is doing well, despite the current milk-price storm



Number of cows:	400
Average yield:	6,214kg 4.24% f. 3.40% p.
Calving interval:	380
Annual production:	2.4 million litres

Award-winning producer shares conversion and cross-breeding catalysts

Reaping rewards of organic 'risk'

One of the UK's first producers to take the organic route celebrated 25 years of conversion with a well-deserved award. And he says that this is just the icing on the cake as he continues to run a profitable business in such a volatile economic climate.

text **Rachael Porter**

It takes guts to take a different direction in dairying – particularly when you're one of the first to take that route. But Miles Saunders says that his decision to convert his Oxfordshire-based 540-hectare unit to organic production was a gradual and considered process. He began his organic journey with just four

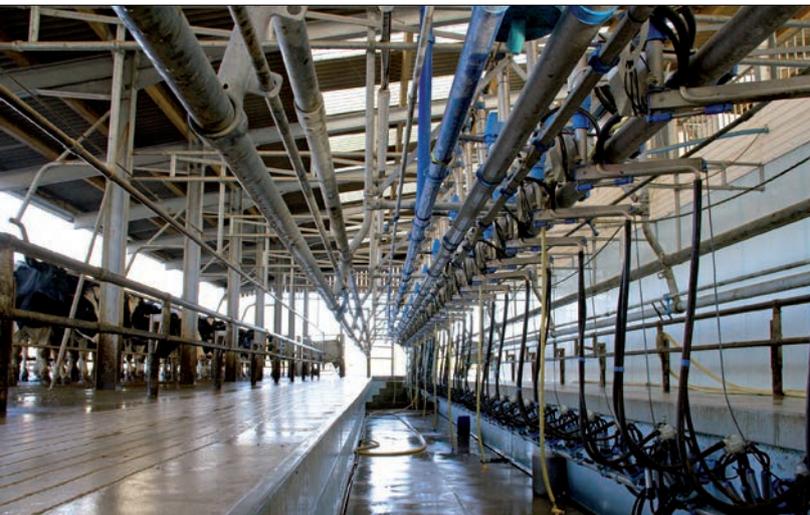
hectares of the arable enterprise in 1982 and gradually increased this area. The grassland and dairy herd were the final piece of the puzzle.

"The catalyst for converting the herd to organic was the feed controversy back in 1988, when lead sulphide was found in some cattle feed in the southwest of

England. It was a very worrying time and it made us think long and hard about what we were feeding to our cows," explains Miles. "We decided we wanted to have more control over our inputs and that to be profitable we needed to maximise milk production but also keep bought-in inputs to a minimum."



Future milkers: cross breeding results in cattle that suit the organic system



Swing-over parlour: the 30:60 set up makes short work of milking



Home-grown feed: cross-bred cows enjoying their organic ration

He says it was tough at first, not least because so many people would question what they were doing. “And sometimes we’d question our decisions too, because we were breaking new ground. It was a little scary at times, but we had the support and expertise of grassland specialists and our vets and more recently, the Farm Consultancy Group’s William Waterfield. And we soon worked out that the secret to a successful dairy unit was clover. It’s absolutely vital to have grass/clover leys, with clover’s nitrogen fixing ability and high protein. It’s very difficult to get any grazing yield – or milk from grass – without clover on an organic unit, so we greatly increased the clover percentage in the leys through the 1980s as the whole farm became organic.”

Home-grown feed

Organic milk production began in 1989, from the then 180-cow herd. Numbers have expanded and today Miles runs a 400-cow herd, and the arable unit, in partnership with his wife Annabel and herdsman Richard Adams. With 900 head of young stock also based at Step Farm, near Faringdon, it’s no surprise that he also employs four full-time staff and one part time employee.

“We grow a lot of our own feed for the herd – between 500 and 600 tonnes of a mix of barley and peas, which we either harvest as wholecrop or take a little later in the season and crimp.”

Calving runs from autumn and through to the spring and milk is sold to Organic Milk Suppliers Cooperative (OMSCo). Miles is a founder member of the co-operative, which today is supplied by organic herds from Cornwall to Scotland. At its peak in March, his herd produces around 250,000 litres of milk and this dips to around 119,000 litres in September. “We’re producing 2.4 million

litres a year,” says Miles. “But it’s not all about yield.”

He’s driven by profitability – not productivity. The herd’s average yield is 6,214kg at 4.24% butterfat and 3.40% protein. Calving interval is very important to Miles – more so than yield – and it is currently averaging 380 days. “I’m not interested in pushing the cows – and feed costs – too hard. My aim is to run an efficient and profitable business. Just focussing on producing more milk is not necessarily a ticket to financial success.”

Cross breeding

A change in management system at the unit also required a different type of cow – one that was better able to graze and produce milk efficiently on a more extensive system and be hardier.

“We dabbled in cross breeding to begin with. The catalyst for that was in 2007 when we were hit by a significant number of positive TB tests. We lost 107 cattle. Not a single lesion was found when the reactors were slaughtered, but it really frightened us,” says Miles. “We needed to make sure that we had enough heifers coming up through the system to ensure that we could maintain the milking herd if it were to happen again.”

He sold the herd’s beef bulls and replaced them with a MRI sweeper: “So that every female calf born on the unit was a dairy type.”

Other sweeper bulls have included a British Friesian and a Brown Swiss. “And the results we have had with cross breeding have led us down the cross-breeding route with the sires we use for AI now. We just couldn’t ignore how well the cross-bred heifers and cows were performing on our system.”

Today first-lactation cross-bred heifers are averaged a calving interval of 364 days for the three months ending December 2014,

whereas the black-and-white cows and heifers in the herd are closer to 390 days.

“The cross-bred cattle – using Brown Swiss and Norwegian Red – look great and I’m really pleased with them. We graze from mid March through to late October and they’re definitely more suited to grazing.”

Miles says that yields are good too and comparable with the ‘pure bred’ cattle. “We’ve crossed everything and yields are up at around 25 litres a day for second-lactation crosses. Cows are also completing more lactations.

“Our system requires cows with good feet. Ours have black hooves, which are much harder, and they milk well. I’m selecting on type and yield. I want tidy udders, good feet and legs, not too much stature, but plenty of capacity. And I’m happy to spend a bit extra to breed the right kind of cow for our system. It’s a sound investment if it produces ‘trouble free’ cows that produce milk efficiently and for several lactations.”

Organic demand

Miles would recommend cross breeding to anyone looking to take a more extensive ‘grazing’ route. And, although it’s a particularly volatile time at the moment, he’d also recommend looking into organic conversion. His milk price has remained relatively stable compared to conventional herds.

“The UK’s supply of organic milk is relatively low and demand is strong. We’re exporting to the EU and even across the pond. We’re in a good position at the moment and there’s scope to take more organic milk.

“Although the conversion process can take up to two years, it could be a sound long-term proposition for some UK dairy producers. I’d recommend speaking to OMSCo to find out more.” |