

**John Mawle**

A move to New Zealand has allowed growth – and prospects – beyond anything the family business could have hoped for in the UK.



Herd size:	2,000 cows
Unit size:	405ha plus 285ha rented
Annual milk sales:	937,000kg of milk solids
Milk price:	£1.89/kg of milk solids

Bold move and expansion is paying dividends for family-run business

Living the 'Kiwi' dairy dream

The grass is certainly greener in New Zealand, according to one British producer who sold up and emigrated 10 years ago and, with help from his family, is now milking 2,000 cows. And there are still plenty of opportunities to further grow the business.

text **Ben Pike**

The Mawle family is a long way from home, 12,000 miles in fact, if they still think of England as home that is. Because for the past decade John Mawle, his wife Jean, their daughter Ellie and twin sons Rob and Tom have been building a new life in New Zealand's Canterbury Plains. Initially they didn't plan to fly to the other side of the world to milk cows, but now they find themselves running a 2,000-strong herd of 'Kiwi-cross' Jersey-Friesian crosses.

"Financially it was one of the best decisions we have ever made but, emotionally, leaving behind a lifetime of friends and family in the UK has been the hardest thing we have ever done," says John.

It was not a decision taken lightly; the family weighed up the pros and cons of selling their 122-hectare set up, which

incorporated 5,200 square metres of industrial units in Ampthill, Bedfordshire. "It was about succession really," he explains. "Two of our three children were about to graduate from Harper Adams University and our share cropping business and the units were not enough to support everyone. So we had a family meeting and we all voted on moving to New Zealand."

Swift progress

It took two years and 45 farm viewings before the Mawles shook hands on a deal to buy their new home – a 405-hectare former deer unit, plus a further 285 hectares of leased land – in 2008. They started with beef and sheep before buying a milking herd to supply dairy processing giant Fonterra. Since then progress has been relatively swift and the herd is about

seven times larger than the country's average. Cows are grazed all year round across five-hectare paddocks in the shadow of Mount Hutt.

And it truly is a family affair. The Blackford Farming operation effectively splits the unit in two, with Rob and Tom taking responsibility for 1,000 cows each, while Ellie manages the farm office and a 102-hectare seed potato business. The brothers each have three herdsmen, a calf rearer and a 60-bale Waikato rotary milking platform for twice-a-day milking at 4 a.m. and 2 p.m.

The New Zealand system pays per kilogramme of milk solids (kg/ms) produced. In 2015 the herd produced 937,000kg/ms. "We'd like to get that up to one million by the end of 2017," John says.

To achieve this, the family is focusing on





Dairy unit: home to 2,000 cows and young stock



Young stock: at peak times, as many as 120 calves can be born each day

productivity and efficiency using the natural environment, good stockmanship and technology to maintain herd health.

Annual rainfall

The rich, Canterbury grass paddocks are 460m above sea level with an average rainfall of 1,250mm in a season. Peak growth sees the land produce as much as 150kg DM/ha/day of high sugar grass and clover varieties. The milking herd is overwintered away from the unit, on 200 hectares of neighbouring land.

The cows are grazed on fodder beet, kale and oats and a further 1,000t of silage is purchased to feed in during periods of drought and slow pasture growth.

About 700 heifer calves are reared, partly on contract, each year, leaving the home unit at 100kg LW and returning to calve at two years of age. And the Mawles keep 35 home-bred bull calves, which are kept for two years to use on the dairy herd. "Calves from these matings are not retained – we only use AI-bred replacement heifers," says John. The unit's grazing platform needs to grow at about 65kg DM/ha/day to fully feed the cows, and during the early season they are given 0.35kg of grain and 0.5kg of molasses for magnesium. Grain

intake increases to 3kg/cow/day of grain later in the year and the cattle are also supplemented with minerals and selenium.

A strict breeding policy, which centres on a block-calving system and uses genetics from New Zealand's Livestock Improvement Centre, sees the cows synchronised to produce milk from July until May when the cows are dried off. The result is an average herd performance of 466kg/ms/cow, putting the herd in the top 5% of New Zealand herds, according to John.

Significant investment

"We employ a newly-qualified vet from England during calving and AI and we have had great results because both can be very stressful times. We can have as many as 120 calves born a day."

Welfare issues are kept to a minimum – all the unit's staff are trained in foot trimming and use a SmartD-tect system, which measures each quarter of the cow's udder to flag up the early onset of mastitis.

Since moving to the unit, the family has invested in installing two milking sheds, increasing herd size and building 10 houses for staff and family. But, like most

of Fonterra's 13,000 suppliers, herd production and future investment will be driven by the farm-gate price. The \$ 8.45 NZD (£ 3.80) payout for each kg/ms in February 2014 is now down to just \$ 4.70 NZD (£ 1.89), but is expected to strengthen this season.

"We used to employ four men per 1,000-cow shed, but with the low payout that's been cut to just three and all family members agreed to take a 20% pay cut. We also increased home-grown feed production to reduce our costs."

Looking to the future, John says that he would like to buy another 100-hectare unit to strengthen the succession plan. "Our aim is for all three children to each have a third of the business."

He adds that the main thing that he's enjoyed about making the move to New Zealand is that he has been able to grow the business from 'zero' to 'very big' relatively easily, which isn't simple to do in the UK.

"We have been welcomed into New Zealand with open arms. And, in terms of lifestyle, it's fantastic – the rugby is quite good and the beer's not bad. You could say that we're 'living the dream' by being able to come here and earn a living from dairying in such a beautiful country." |

