

**Rob Green**

It's been a busy few years with plenty of changes on this family unit. And the herd and business are now set for a more productive and efficient future.



Herd size:	250 cows plus followers
Average yield:	10,000kg
Robotic milkers:	Four units
Average heifer yield:	32 litres per day



Robots reduce reliance on labour and free up time to spend on dairy husbandry

System sharpens management focus

Moving away from cheese production and setting up a larger herd, rather than running two smaller units, are just a couple of the major changes recently undertaken by a Somerset-based family in a bid to build a business for the future.

text **Rachael Porter**

There have been many changes at the Green family's Somerset-based Court Barn Farm – not least a recent switch to robotic milking the 250-cow herd, in September 2015. The catalyst was increased demand for more sociable working hours and a growing realisation that more time was needed to spend on managing – rather than milking – the cows if herd health, fertility and productivity were to improve.

“My father spent six weeks in hospital in 2013 and that really brought home just how little we valued our own labour and how much we would potentially

spend on buying in labour should either one of us be unable to work,” explains Rob Green, adding that his father is, thankfully, now fully recovered and plays a key role in feeding the cattle on the Glastonbury-based unit.

Better way

Back in 2013, he and his father managed two dairy units, five miles apart, comprising a total of 280 cows. “We ran one – where we run our herd today – and we also had a herdsman running the other. But I did all the feeding, with a mixer wagon, on both units.

“I'd clock up 15 miles in the tractor every day before breakfast. And when dad was out of action for several weeks it made us realise that there had to be a better way to run the business – and a way that offered greater flexibility and less reliance on labour.”

The logistics involved in silage making and slurry handling were also proving increasingly tricky. “And we needed to expand what he had, so a more viable and sustainable option was to lease the second unit to tenants and increase cow numbers here at Court Barn.”

That option also meant building new facilities, on a greenfield site, to house and milk more cows. “We rented out the other farm, which we own, and sold the cows that were there to the tenant. That released some capital,” explains Rob.

This process began more than two years ago – renting and selling the herd at the other unit took 12 months of planning and heifers from that herd and the herd at the home unit were reared and retained to push up cow numbers on the newly-built unit.

Four Lely robots have replaced the 16:16 herringbone parlour, which wasn't in bad shape apart from the ageing stall work. “We needed to be less reliant on labour and ‘future proof’ our business. And the robots allow us to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. Our routine doesn't now revolve around milking, which is just one aspect of dairying.

“There's still a lot to do – the robots need cleaning every day, as do the cubicles beds. And there's feeding, calving,



New shed: built on a greenfield site, cow housing also accommodates four milking robots and two robotic passage scrapers

fertility and health to keep an eye on. But that's the point – we have more time to spend on actually managing the cows and, as a result, we're improving in all those areas."

Management skills

In fact, Rob says that the robotic system has actually served to 'sharpen up' their management skills: "Because there's twice as much data on the herd available now compared to previously, thanks to the fully computerised milking and constant monitoring. Management is now more 'involved' and there's certainly no time to rest on our laurels – if anything we've gone up a gear. Some producers who've installed robots have said that you need to tear up the rule book on everything you know about cows and start again. And I'd be inclined to agree. "Cows and heifers have to go into the milking herd in good shape and able to

milk and get back into calf as quickly as possible. Full udders, in early- and mid-lactation, mean that they visit the robot more frequently, they milk well in the system and it also ensures that they get enough feed. Minimising the number of 'average' lactation days, by maintaining a tight calving interval, definitely reduces problems."

Rob is certainly pleased with the 'early warning' he gets from the robotic system's individual quarter conductivity monitors. "Not only do these pick up any mastitis quickly, but they also flag up issues such as decreased milk yield. It allows us to respond rapidly and halt a drop in milk before it becomes an issue. And mastitis cases are also easier to treat, because we're able to tackle them quickly. I hope we'll get to a point when we rarely see a case of mastitis," says Rob, adding that the herd's somatic cell count is currently less than 100,000 cells/ml and

milk is sold to local buyer and cheese producer Barbers.

The NMR-recorded herd is averaging around 10,000kg – impressive for a herd that comprises 50% heifers. "Yields increased when we started milking through the robots – by between 5% and 10% – which is the result of the early lactation cows and heifers visiting the milking units between four and five times a day. A large proportion of the herd are heifers, so we're excited about the yields we could be seeing this time next year. We've yet to see the true potential of the herd."

Efficiency focus

Average yields for the herd, which calves all year round, is 38 litres for cows and 32 litres for heifers. The Greens are happy where they are in terms of milk yield and cow numbers: "The cows aren't under too much pressure – and neither are we. They're milking well and we have time to focus on health and other aspects of husbandry to maximise the productivity and efficiency of the cows that we do have," says Rob.

"Our focus, now the new set up is up and running, is on maximising output and efficiency. And with the pressure of milking twice a day through a conventional parlour now a thing of the past, we have the time to do that. We can really focus on making sure that everything else – health, nutrition and fertility – are spot on.

"And with more heifers yet to calve and join the milking herd, it'll be an exciting time for us for a while to come yet." |



Robotic milking: just one of the four automatic units at Court Barn