



The Davis family

Pride in all aspects of their dairy business has led this Devon-based family to sharpen their calf and heifer rearing skills and improve performance



Herd size:	270 cows
Average yield:	6,800 litres
Calf mortality:	Less than 1%
Age at first calving:	24 months

Setting targets – and paying close attention to detail – steer heifer rearing back on track

Only the very best will do

No expensive equipment or regimes but just making the time to pay attention to detail has seen the calf rearing programme, and overall herd performance, on one Devon-based unit go from strength to strength.

text **Rachael Porter**

Like all other aspects of their dairy business, Gordon and Hazel Davis believe that if something is worth doing, it's worth doing well. That's why the couple work hard to produce top quality Jersey milk, to supply a dairy business that's dedicated to manufacturing premium-end puddings and desserts, is their main priority. But doing that means that all aspects of herd and business management have to be tip top, starting with calf and heifer rearing. Gordon and Hazel, who run their unit with help from sons Kevin and Mark, take a lot of pride in the replacements they rear for their 220-cow pedigree

Jersey herd, which is currently averaging 6,800 litres at 5.8% butterfat and 4.0% protein, plus 130 head of young stock. They also run a 50-cow herd of Holstein Friesians at Westcott Farm, predominantly to produce bulls and heifers to sell as an additional enterprise, which also benefits from having an effective calf rearing system in place.

Calf mortality

But it's not always been this way. Back in 2014, the couple felt that calf mortality rates were too high at between 7% and 8% and, although the age at first calving was close to 24 months in

the heifers, there simply weren't enough heifers coming through to allow them to gradually expand the NMR-recorded herd.

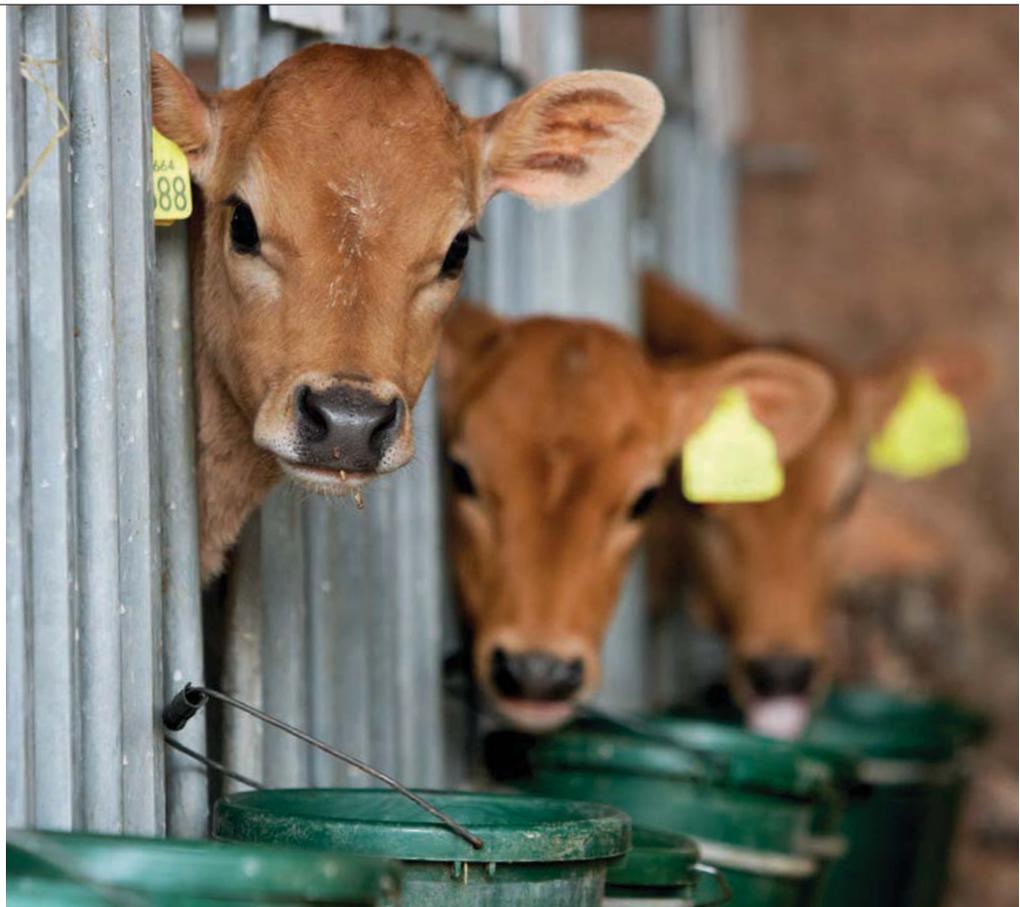
"Jersey calves are, in my opinion, harder to rear than other breeds," says Gordon. "I think they're frailer when they're born in comparison to say a Holstein Friesian. They have very low body reserves and don't seem very strong. So we knew that if we wanted to reduce our calf mortality that we'd have to really focus on it and make quite a few changes," he adds, stressing that their calf rearing wasn't bad, per se, but it just needed to be better if the Jersey calves

Golden girls: top-quality milk from the Jersey herd is sold for manufacturing luxury desserts





Weighing calves: monitoring growth rates



Flying start: Jersey calves are reared following strict protocols

were to survive and thrive. “You could say that if you want rear Jersey calves well, then you’ve got to have an exceptional calf rearing system. So that’s what we set out to achieve.”

Today, the Davis’ heifer rearing is supported by more facts – rather than gut feeling – thanks to ‘Nurture with Provimi’, which is Cargill’s young stock rearing programme. It identifies seven key phases from birth through to calving at 24 months and uses ‘real time’ farm information in a model to help determine the most efficient path to successful heifer rearing.

Focussing, to start with, on the first three phases of calf rearing – colostrum, pre-weaning and post-weaning – the Nurture with Provimi model, developed through Cargill Animal Nutrition, has shown that the Davis family could reduce calf milk replacer costs by £19.74 per calf by reducing weaning age by two weeks. That’s a saving of £3,000 a year for the business – and the potential for improved performance.

“I’m pleased that we’re using the programme, not least because it helps us to identify key areas to improve and we now have clear targets for each rearing phase.”

Monitoring progress is key and it’s what really allows the Davis family to dig

down into the detail and make small changes that yield big improvements. Calves are now weighed at birth and at weaning using a scale. They are fed ProviMilk Professional milk replacer twice a day with concentrations built up from 15% to 17.5 % and Three Counties Feed calf starter from five days old. Dry feed intakes are monitored to get an indication of rumen development.

Target growth rate in the pre and post weaning phases at Westcott is 500g to 600g a day and growth rates continue to be monitored in the post-weaning phase, when the young Jersey heifers move to a site that’s situated two miles away.

Colostrum feeding

Changes could be seen after just four months and the results are continuing to improve. “We’re now monitoring colostrum with a colostrometer and supplementing where necessary. The main change so far has been a reduction in our weaning age from 12 to 10 weeks, which represents a significant cost saving,” says Gordon.

“We’ve been weaning at 12 weeks old for a long time, believing that this was the optimum age for Jerseys. But I felt sure we could reduce it and cut our milk replacer cost,” adds Hazel.

The cost benefits demonstrated through

the model were enough to convince the Davis family that weaning age needed to be reduced and they are moving to 10 weeks with a target to cut this further to eight weeks. “We need to keep looking at the data to make sure it’s working,” adds Hazel.

Although in its early stages – they’ve been following this heifer rearing regime for less than a year – they have already seen improvements in early growth rates and are heading towards their average target of 0.75g/day with the first few calves weaned at 10 weeks old.

“And we’ve achieved this without spending a lot of money. In fact we’ve saved money. We’ve not put up new accommodation or installed automatic feeders. It’s still very much a basic system and it’s working,” says Gordon.

He adds that it really is down to the little things, such as making sure calves have fresh water every day and paying close attention to the calf environment and hygiene. “It’s just been a case of everyone putting in a bit more time really. And, as a result, calf mortality is now less than 1%.

“And, all figures aside, it must be working, not least because we’re well on the way to having surplus Jersey stock – and we’re gradually managing to expand the herd,” he adds. |