

Adopting technology and improving efficiency drive award-winning business

Take-home messages

A trip to the Netherlands has seen one award-winning producer inspired to make yet more changes at his West-Sussex-based unit. We spoke to him to find out more.

text **Lauren Goringe**

Embracing change has enabled ForFarmers' 2016 Dairy Feed Efficiency Award winner, Charlie Hughes, to develop a diverse and successful business. After visiting the Netherlands in September 2017 – a trip that was part of his prize, he's returned with yet more new ideas to implement on his unit.

Charlie and his West Sussex-based herd won the ForFarmers' award primarily due to the huge improvement seen in forage quality during the past few years and increased efficiencies that he's achieved.

In partnership with his wife Sarah and mother Julie, Charlie manages a diverse

business. The family run a 120-cow herd on 61 hectares, as well as a milk processing business. Since 2014 they have also run a farm shop. Historically, the family had sold raw milk, but 15 years ago they invested in pasteurisation facilities so that they could process and bottle milk on site. Now, they supply more than 100 local customers, including nursing homes, schools and shops. Surplus milk is sold to Arla.

Public perception

With such a diverse business to run, improving efficiency is crucial to the farm's success and this was a key factor in Charlie's decision, five years ago, to



Charlie Hughes

replace the unit's herringbone parlour with a robotic milking system.

"Allowing our cows to graze is important not only in terms of public perception, but also for me as a producer," says Charlie. "To this end, despite using robots, cows still graze in summer, through the use of a Lely Grazeway gate. This routes low yielders out to grass twice a day, and high yielders just once." Similar automated technology is in use across the unit, with automatic scrapers

Summer stroll: cows still have access to grazing, through the Lely Grazeway gate





Colostrum feeding: strict calf-rearing protocols are followed



Milk machine: calves visiting an automatic feeder

employed in buildings, and automatic machines used to feed calves. “Innovations, such as the scrapers, save us time and the calf-feeding machines have increased growth rates and improved the quality of our heifers,” explains Charlie.

Forage quality

ForFarmers’ account manager Peter Cade has worked with Charlie for more than a decade and has seen average yields increase from 6,500 litres to more than 11,000 litres.

“Charlie is not afraid of change and this has allowed him to progress quickly. Another key area that we have worked on together is improving forage quality. By selecting the most suitable additives, making changes to clamp management, and growing better-quality maize, he’s got the results he needs in terms of producing starch and dry matter.

“Keeping it simple is important. Everything that Charlie and I discuss at our monthly meetings is focussed on creating simple feeding and grazing systems that maximise milk yields without creating unnecessary work.”

“The ForFarmers’ award trip to the Netherlands was fantastic and we packed a lot in,” says Charlie. The trip included

visits to ForFarmers’ HQ, Denkvit, forage field trials at Wageningen University, and four dairy farms.

“One thing that struck me was the sheer number of dairy units and their uniformity. They all follow a similar management model, predominantly high yielding and housed systems, with just 1.5 people managing around 100 cows with very little stress. I’m still trying to work that one out.

“In terms of ideas to try back at on my own unit, I think the Dutch multi-cut silage approach works well. They have the right soil and climate to do this. Grass silage was usually cut, tedded and raked by the producer and the self-propelled forager or silage wagon was charged on an hourly basis.

Reducing waste

“Most farms were onto their fifth or sixth cut, some with their seventh to come.

“I think we will struggle to achieve a similar approach here until we address contractors’ pricing structures, but it’s certainly something I am going to consider,” says Charlie.

“Some Dutch producers layered sandy soil on top of their clamps and the added weight resulted in almost no wastage.

It’s something I’ll be looking at.” Charlie was also interested in colostrum management. “The herds we visited were feeding colostrum for longer and isolating calves early to help prevent disease. This was an approach I had already tentatively started to use back home, to ensure calves receive good levels of antibodies before they meet difficult challenges. But it was reassuring to see others doing this – and to see the results.”

Good ventilation

“Recent livestock unit restrictions and phosphate regulations were in place and producers were managing them by increasing cow and forage efficiencies, and contracting out heifer rearing,” says Charlie.

“The cow houses also had good ventilation and feed presentation was consistently excellent on a ‘painted dinner plate’ surface. Many farms also had attractive cobblestone yards that don’t get destroyed by HGVs.

“These points are things that I will look to replicate. These ways of working have obviously been handed down from one forward-thinking generation to the next. I think that there is a lot that UK producers can learn from the Dutch.” |

Multi-cut system: Charlie was impressed with Dutch silage making



Automatic milking: yields have increased since robots were installed

