

**Michael Houlden**

This new entrant has a firm dairying foothold after three years in the business. He shares his immediate dairying plans, as well as those for the future.



Herd size:	52
Followers:	30
Average milk yield:	4,500 litres (5.67% fat & 4.12% protein)
Unit size:	52 hectares

Building a sheep enterprise and buying pockets of land opened dairying door

Determination realises dairy dream

A decade of hard work has paid off for one Carmarthenshire-based producer. A new entrant to dairying, he's spent the past three years building a pedigree Jersey herd and is part way into organic conversion. We caught up with him to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

Starting any business is hard work. And it's particularly tough when the price paid for your product plummets and the pressure is on to squeeze

every penny you can out of the limited working capital available. But 32-year-old Michael Houlden has managed to keep his business going.

He's from a non-farming family – his father is an academic. But Michael's mother is a dairy producer's daughter. So, he says, farming is in his genes. "I've



always been interested in farming – from a very young age. I think some of it comes from my childhood and growing up close to the Blackdown Hills in Devon.”

Michael went to Bridgewater College (formerly known as Cannington College) and studied agriculture before gaining skills on his uncle’s dairy unit, close to Wells in Somerset.

His first independent foray into farming was as a sheep producer. During a 10-year period he bought and rented a total of 37 hectares of land and built up a 320-ewe breeding flock. “Capital was the limiting factor – I knew I couldn’t raise what I needed to get into dairying overnight. So sheep provided a way in and a means of gradually building up some assets.”

Big break

His big break came when a neighbouring county council holding came up for sale giving him the opportunity to acquire some land. “The council holding was broken up into several lots and I was able to acquire 15 hectares. But then I



Reseeding policy: investing in grass/clover leys has been a top priority

was in a position where my owned and rented land was spread all over the place.”

So Michael sold the land and the buildings he’d invested in on his grandparent’s unit. This gave him the opportunity to take the next step on the dairying ladder.” He set up a farming partnership with his parents, James and Lorraine.

Michael kept 320-head of his Poll Dorsets, which lamb in February. And in October 2012, with the capital he’d released, as well as a loan from Lloyds Bank and financial help from his parents, he bought 52 hectares of land close to St Clears in Carmarthenshire. This is predominantly grassland – around 43 hectares. The rest is woodland and rougher land.

He bought his first cows – eight fresh-calved Jerseys – in May 2014. “I felt this breed was best suited to the farm – with its undulating topography – and the type of dairy system that I wanted to operate,” says Michael. “They’re good grazers and offer good feet, legs and fertility. The only downside is that their bull calves are not particularly valuable.” He then got in 2016 the opportunity to take on a neighbouring 22-hectare block of land on a Farm Business Tenancy. “This was the opportunity I’d be waiting for – it gave me the security I needed to allow me to commit to organic conversion,” he explains.

Organic conversion at Plas-y-Cerdin Farm began on October 1, 2016 and is on

track to be completed on October 1, 2018. “I’ve always wanted to run an organic, extensively managed herd that maximises milk from forage. For me, milk production is about quality – not quantity. And the Jerseys also suit this type of system too, with their high butterfat and protein yield.”

Organic conversion

Today Michael runs a 52-cow herd, plus 30 followers. Calving is all year round to produce a level supply of milk for buyer Glanbia Cheese. Once conversion is complete, he’ll switch to supplying Rachel’s Dairies with organic milk. And he’s expecting to see at least a 20% increase in milk price.

The Plascerdin pedigree herd has been built up through buying in cows and in-calf heifers from several local Jersey herds. “I prefer the traditional Channel Island breeding and am using predominantly British Jersey sires, as well as some Danish and Kiwi genetics. From now on I will be using home-bred heifers as replacements. I’m aiming to get to 70 head in the next year or two and I think I’m on track to achieve that. “It has taken longer to get to this point than I expected – that’s why I’ve kept the sheep enterprise. It’s been a welcome buffer – particularly during the milk price slump, when we saw it dip by 18 ppl. That was tough. Having a few lamb cheques coming in has really helped me to stay afloat and continue to develop the business.”

Expanding herd: Michael is on track to be milking 70 cows, using an organic system, by the end of 2018





Next generation: some of Michael's home-bred heifer calves



Ideal breed: Jerseys suit the unit's undulating grassland

The past three years have been all about improving grassland at the unit and generating enough cashflow to invest in stock – as well as the 14-hour days to keep on top of both enterprises.

But Michael is happy and he says he has moments where he can hardly believe that he's almost at 70 cows and dairying in his own right. "We have had a few setbacks – the milk price slump was particularly worrying because it came when we were just starting up. And we've also had a disproportionate number of bull calves. But we faced those challenges and still managed to move forward so I'm really optimistic about the future."

He stresses that the unwavering support of his partner Jodie McGregor has also been invaluable. "I've been working extremely long days for several years to get this up and running. It's been relentless. And she's always there to help when needed."

16-hour interval

Michael's just started NMR milk recording the herd, which is currently averaging around 4,500 litres, at 5.76% butterfat and 4.12% protein, with a somatic cell count of 185,000 cells/ml. Cows are milked, every 16 hours – through an 8:8 herringbone parlour. "It works out that we milk three times every two days," says Michael.

He took the decision to switch to this

routine in October 2015, when the milk price dropped. "I needed to reduce our costs – both time and inputs. I didn't want to switch to once-a-day milking. I felt a 16-hour interval was a good compromise. It extends the conventional 12-hour period by just four hours."

Steady yields

And milk yield didn't drop significantly. "We may lose a little milk from the fresh cows, but milk yields have remained steady so we've maintained milking every 16 hours, even though milk price has risen. This routine works for me and the herd."

Michael says that the only downside is the occasional extra-long working day. Milking at 6am means that the following milking is due at 10pm. But he does employ a relief milker, so that helps. And this routine also frees up time for managing the sheep enterprise, field work and all the other important day-to-day tasks.

The unit is sown with grass/clover leys – key to the success of organic conversion, according to Michael. Reseeding has been at the top of his list of investment priorities. "Whipping the grassland into a good productive state has been very important, not least because we only feed chopped big-bale silage in the winter – topped up with concentrates fed to yield through the parlour. So

we've carried out a lot of reseeding in a bid to help maximise milk from forage." Cows are turned out to graze, during the day, from March. They're out day and night come April. And Michael extends the grazing season as late as possible, with cows still out during the day in October. "They're in day and night come November though, because conditions are too wet by then."

Looking longer term is difficult: "I don't know how I'll feel or what challenges or opportunities I'll be facing when I get to 70 cows and the organic conversion is complete. I think my focus will be on consolidation. Making a decent living from dairying will be a good start and trying to build some cash reserves, and making sure the business is running as smoothly and efficiently as possible."

Michael admits that he's 'ambitious', but that's no surprise considering his determination to set up his dairy business. "I know that once I achieve my goal I'll be looking to see what's next. But I'll also be assessing any risks and reviewing where I am. The future very much depends on what opportunities there are out there and that's changing all the time.

"I need to focus on what I'm doing now. It's been hard work, but I also know that it's been worth it. And, tough as it's been, it's really satisfying to be so close to realising my dairying dream." |