



*Forage fans: Phillip's milkers are now producing a higher proportion of milk from grass and silage*

## Welsh dairy unit takes Dutch approach to improve grass silage quality

# Renewed focus on forage

Inconsistencies in grass-silage quality prompted one producer to reassess his approach to grass growth and overall forage management. And it was a trip to the Netherlands that really opened up his eyes to 'home-grown' potential

text **James Marshall**

**F**rustrated with fluctuating forage quality – particularly grass silage – has seen Redwick-based producer Phillip Williams overhaul the production and feeding system at Longlands Farm in South Wales. Phillip runs the 300-cow herd in partnership with his father, Stuart, and

older brother John. The family moved to the 122-hectare unit in 2007 and milk is sold to Tesco.

"We run an intensive system, with cows housed all year round and some low yielders going out to graze," says Phillip. "The farm's infrastructure isn't suited to a grazing-based system and we have

very heavy clay soil, so keeping them indoors makes much more sense."

While the herd's rations consist of many different components, good quality grass silage is the cornerstone of daily feed intake.

The herd is fed a TMR comprising 5.25kg of a blend, 8kg of caustic wheat, 8kg of a combination of brewers' grains and nutritionally improved straw mix (fed at a 5:1 ratio), 14kg of maize silage and 25kg of grass silage. "Grass silage is a vital element of the ration and it is important that we have the best quality, as it has a direct impact on overall ration quality and cow performance," says Phillip.

Back in 2013, Phillip was fed up with the variable quality of grass silage that he



Phillip Williams: "Dutch producers take more numerous and smaller cuts of silage"

was producing year on year. Some years were exceptionally good while others were, to say the least, disappointing.

"I was conscious that with so much going on on the farm, maybe the level of attention and detail that should be going in to grass growth wasn't quite there," Phillip explains.

He consulted with ForFarmers' Richard Gibb and he encouraged and supported Phillip to make more of the grass and silage on his farm.

"I'm particularly passionate about helping producers to grow better quality forage," says Richard. "It is the foundation of most herds' rations and, if done well, can provide excellent energy for cows and really improve milk yields. That said, making improvements isn't easy and it requires a lot of attention to detail, hard work and some financial investment."

### Implementing changes

Having discussed options with Richard, Phillip started reseeding old leys with new, high-performing grass varieties. "One of the ways we refocused our

efforts was to invest in reseeding older leys. After all, if you have made a significant financial investment in a ley, you pay a lot more attention to how well it performs – it has to provide a good return."

Three years ago, Phillip began using TOPGRASS Silogen – a three-year, short-term grass ley seed mix, which he hoped would improve the quality and quantity of the grass we grow. "This coming year will be a little different because we are hoping to grow more maize, but we aim to reseed about 20 hectares of grassland each year."

ForFarmers' forage specialist Lisa Hambly helps Phillip to decide which varieties are best suited to his unit.

So far the results have been good, with increased grass yields and silage values jumping up by more than 1MJ/kg DM during the past couple of years to an average value of 11.8 ME.

"I used to take three cuts off our grass leys, but with the reseeded areas we now take four," Phillip explains. "First cut is exceptionally good, with grass often reaching to waist height, with plenty of leaf and not too much stem. It provides a good starting point from which to produce the best quality silage."

### Dutch example

On the recommendation of Richard Gibb, Phillip went on a ForFarmers trip to The Netherlands in 2016 to gain an insight into how Dutch producers approach forage management.

"The Dutch are renowned for their top-quality forage, so I was keen to see how they did things," says Phillip. "The obvious difference was the way that they took lots of regular, smaller grass cuts to

stimulate grass growth. The amount of attention that went into growing and harvesting grass was inspirational.

"The silage leys on the units that we visited were impressive, with very little stalk, plenty of leaf and high DM levels. This is exactly the kind of grass that I want to be producing and I was motivated to recreate what I'd seen at home."

### Vital role

Alterations to reseeding was only one of the changes that Phillip has made on farm, and a lot of progress has been achieved due to greater attention to detail.

"All the smaller changes soon add up and they help us to achieve the end result we need," says Phillip.

"When we are ensiling, we make sure that we wrap everything as tight as possible to keep air out – sheeting up with a layer of cling film, then black plastic and heavy duty matting, and topped with tyres.

"When the clamp is open, we use a shear grab to make sure that the face is kept tidy and even, to reduce the risk of secondary fermentation."

Phillip is pleased with the improvements that have been made on farm during the past few years, but he is keen to push things on even further.

"We are actually going to grow a bit more maize for the cows this year, as we can grow it well here," he says.

"But grass will always have a vital role on the unit. I am determined to push the quality of our silage and get the ME value above my personal target of 12ME – something that I now think is achievable." |

Tidy clamp: a tight face prevents secondary fermentation



Top quality: first cuts, in particular, are now exceptionally good

