



# Putting calf care top of the agenda

With 280 dairy calves born on their unit each year, meticulous calf care is key to the long-term success of one Cornish dairying family's high-performance herd.

TEXT EMILY BALL

**A**s their dairy enterprise has grown, maintaining high calf rearing standards has been a major focus for the Bradley family. Graham and Kate Bradley run a herd of 1,000 Holstein cows, based at Tregray Villa Farm in Camelford, in partnership with Graham's mother Ann. "When I left school, I was milking around 70 cows

and now we have more than 1,000," says Graham. "But no matter the size of the herd, we know how important young stock rearing is to the success of the business, and it is no coincidence that the core family unit plays a primary role in overseeing calf care."

Graham and Kate's three sons – Sam, Harry and Luke – also work full-time on the unit, as well as five other full-time members of staff and two relief milkers.

## **Colostrum management**

The herd is milked three times a day and produces an annual average yield of 10,800 litres.

"We are meticulous when it comes to hygiene, colostrum management and calf feeding, and have extremely high standards," says Graham. "Everyone on the farm is focused on the calves and, even now, my 75-year-old mother will pop across to the calf

shed regularly and keep an eye on how calves are getting on.”

The milking herd is housed all year round and fed a simple diet, based on grass silage and fodder beet. “We feed fodder beet all year round, to act as our second source of forage alongside the grass silage,” says Graham. “We feed high rates of fodder beet – 12kg in the winter and around 8kg during the summer. The ration, which supplies maintenance plus 28 litres, is then mixed with some straights and a blend, and individual cows are then topped up to yield with an 18% protein concentrate that’s fed through parlour.”

The herd calves all year round and the Bradleys produce 280 dairy calves each year. All animals are served using sexed dairy or beef semen, with a target age at first calving of between 23 and 24 months. “We use sexed dairy semen on all our heifers, and they will be served up to four times before we switch to a beef sire,” says Graham. “And around 95% of the milking herd will be served to British Blue and the remaining 5% will be served using sexed dairy semen, to make up the number of replacement heifers that we need to produce. We produce 700 dairy-cross beef calves a year and they are sold at around 14 weeks old.”

All dairy heifer calves reared by the Bradleys go to a local young stock contract rearer, who is based eight miles away. “By 14 weeks, we know that we have done everything possible to get the calf off to the best start,” explains Graham. “Good colostrum management is vital and we ensure that all new-born calves receive two litres of colostrum within two hours of birth, and then another two litres during the following four hours.”

### Close eye

“All colostrum is pasteurised and calves will stay on 1.5 litres of colostrum, fed twice a day for four days, before they move onto milk replacer.”

Calves are fed ForFarmers’ Omega Gold milk replacer, beginning on 1.5 litres – at 180g of replacer per litre of water – twice a day, before increasing to three litres, twice a day until eight weeks old. The calves are then fed three litres once a day until 10 weeks old. “All calves are bottle fed, so we can keep a close eye on feed intakes and quickly spot any calves that aren’t feeding as well as they should.”

All calves are weaned at 10 weeks of age and are fed ForFarmers’ VITASTART concentrate ad-lib, from birth. Intakes are around 2kg per day at weaning. “The calves will stay on ad-lib concentrate until they are 14 weeks old and they then go to the contract rearer,” explains ForFarmers’ Matthew Jenkin. “The rearer is then responsible for providing the forage and care for the animals, but the Bradleys provide a 21% protein VITA Heifer concentrate, which is fed with straw to young stock until they are 12 months old. They’re then fed an 18% protein concentrate, as well as grass silage, to take them up to when they return to the home unit to calve.”

The whole dairy team pays a huge amount of detail to calf care, with set management procedures and protocols in place to ensure optimum calf



performance. “Calves are housed in individual pens until eight weeks old, so that we can accurately assess how each animal is performing,” says Graham. “We have a diary in the calf housing where any member of staff can note concerns about a calf – enabling us to spot potential problems as early as possible and take appropriate action.”

“All calf pens have a coloured band attached to them and this signals how much a calf should be fed: yellow bands for calves on colostrum; blue for those on 1.5 litres of milk, two times a day; and green bands for those on three litres, twice a day.”

“There are also two boards in the calf housing that detail how many calves are in each category, so that whoever is working can easily see which animal needs to be fed what.”

### Cleaning protocols

All feeding protocols are clearly displayed in the feed preparation area and every member is trained in preparing calf feed. “Hygiene is the other key concern when it comes to rearing calves. We want to avoid diseases that have the potential to damage calf health and performance,” concludes Graham. “As such, we have strict cleaning protocols in place and these include washing calf feeding bottles and disinfecting teats after every feed.”

“When a calf is moved out of its pen, everyone knows that the pen must be disassembled, mucked out, steam cleaned and disinfected, before another calf can go into that pen.”

“The young stock are the future herd and providing them with the best possible start in life is crucial to our business. During the past 18 months we have worked hard to reduce age at first calving. Average age at first calving is now 24 months and we have set a new target of 23 months old,” concludes Graham. |

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*Graham and Kate Bradley:  
“We take pride in our calf  
rearing system and give  
the calves the attention to  
detail that they deserve”*