

# Change is the only constant

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to create a range of issues for many producers, we spoke to Myerscough College about the impact that the virus has had on its herd.

TEXT JAMIE PERRY

**R**eassessing staffing level and putting additional biosecurity in place are just some of the measures being taken by the team managing the dairy herd at one of the UK's largest land-based colleges.

Ruari Martin oversees the enterprises at Myerscough College & University Centre, based near Preston in Lancashire, and he says that, like most dairy units across the country, its herd is fairly resilient and used to frequent change – whether it be due to drought, floods, market fluctuations or this recent coronavirus outbreak. “We can usually find some way to be flexible and cope but, that said, the COVID-19 crisis has been quite unique. It’s presenting a wide range of situations and problems across different units, which have many influencing factors,” he says.

*Next generation: keeping heifers on target, to calve at 24 months old, is key to maintaining herd and business efficiency*

“We were in the middle of lambing the college’s sheep flock when the main restrictions impacted. This immediately caused a casual-staffing pressure, as people were pulled from our dairy operation to cope with this demand. All students were sent home immediately when the lockdown was put in place and no casual staff were allowed onsite during lambing, as they had, potentially, been exposed to people with COVID-19 symptoms.

“The units dairy management team, comprising three core staff, has been amazing, putting in the hours, with no days off, in the early stages. This is not ideal, but we managed to pull in some teaching staff as relief workers and have now settled into a more realistic work pattern,” adds Ruari.

## Biosecurity measures

Adding strict bio-security measures – such as restricting farm access to our key farm team, frequent handwashing, creating work patterns more in isolation and two metre distancing where possible – were key to ensuring staff could work safely on the unit. “We also brought more of our team onsite, by offering on-farm accommodation to those who didn’t have it. This allowed us to treat everyone as ‘one household’. We even managed to repurpose food supplies from the college to reduce supermarket trips.”





## COMPANY PROFILE

Company name : **Lodge Farm, Myerscough College and University**  
 Manager : **Ruari Martin**  
 Farm size : **323 hectares**  
 Herd size : **200 cows, plus 100 followers**  
 Average yield : **10,000 litres, at 4.2% butterfat and 3.5 protein**



Lodge Farm is home to the college's 200-cow all-year-round calving herd, plus 100 followers.

The herd is fed a PMR, utilising home-grown forage and grain, with individual cows then topped up to yield through out-of-parlour feeders. The helps produce an average yield of 10,000 litres, at 4.20% butterfat and 3.50% protein, with around 2,000 litres produced from forage, grown on some of the farm's 323 hectares. This land also supports sheep, beef and arable enterprises. Milk is sold to Muller and Co-op and, like many herds, the college has been asked to reduce output by 3%. "The challenge has been to reduce feed costs to balance expenditure," says Ruari.

"Our grazing platform was in need of some TLC, so turning cows out to reduce costs has not been an option as yet. We've attempted to correct this by relieving the compaction in our grazing leys and carrying out a programme of extensive reseeding. But with little or no rainfall so far this year, the growth rates and ley renovation progress has been slow," he adds.

### Culling decisions

So, short term, this has meant an increase in bought-in feed costs for the herd. "But we are also fortunate that some of the cereals in the herd's PMR are home grown – an advantage of being a dairy that's part of a mixed farm."

Some late-lactation cows have been dried off early to reduce milk output. Culling decisions have also been brought forward and these cows are currently housed in beef accommodation and will be sold when prices improve. Fresh cows have been given priority.

"We're only looking for a short-term reduction in volume and income because we need to safeguard the future milking potential of the herd," stresses Ruari. Heifer rearing is also a priority and there's been no compromise here. "We refuse to feed waste milk to calves because we want to maintain growth rates for calving replacements at 24 months old and finishing beef at between at 15 and 18 months.

"That said, it is something that we may be forced to consider if the milk price reduction became more severe, and or went on for a longer period.

"We also decided, in February, to forward-buy our feed on a fixed contract for the summer period, when COVID-19 first looked as it would become a serious issue. This has really highlighted the importance of forward planning and 'stress testing' our business," he adds.

Ruari and the team have also looked at the more extreme measures that they could implement if the pressure on the business increases, which include turning out low yielders to grass and milking once a day, to reduce the pressure on staff if there were further labour shortages



due to COVID-19 and/or vastly reduced demand for milk. "We would always plan to prioritise high yielders and open cows. They would remain inside on a PMR and OOPFs, to maintain production and fertility in the longer term."

Ruari is open about the impact and cost of COVID-19 for their operation. He estimates that a combination of increased use of contract labour and bought-in feed, combined with the reduction in output, has cost between £15,000 and £16,000 during a three-month period. "Whatever your situation is, it's important to look at your options for cutting costs.

"For us this was attempting to look at more long-term grass utilisation by renovating our leys, fixing our feed costs to ensure that they do not spiral out of control, and using our feeding system to more closely regulate the amounts of feed provided.

"We're keeping up to date with the support on offer and the information coming from our processor, and we're ensuring that our cash flow is realistically forecast.

"We haven't had the chance to properly digest everything yet, but there is plenty of help and guidance out there – whatever your situation. So, we're tapping into some of that now." |

▲ *Long hours: core staff worked extra shifts to cover a short-term labour shortage*

## COVID-19: support for producers

Many producers are facing farmgate price cuts, changes to payment terms, requests to reduce milk production or, worst of all, having to pour milk away. AHDB Dairy has provided a central point for information that will help producers face and overcome these challenges. The response from

processors will affect every dairy business in different ways and may mean that some producers need to take immediate action to change business operations.

For the latest guidance and updates visit: [www.ahdb.org.uk/coronavirusdairy](http://www.ahdb.org.uk/coronavirusdairy)