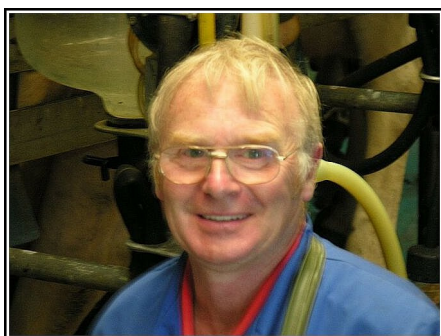


THE JOURNAL INTERVIEW

DOWN ON THE FARM –

JOHN HILL, STOCKMAN



It was not one of the best days to visit New Farm for the Journal interview with John Hill, stockman for the Russon herd of pedigree dairy cattle. News of the Foot and Mouth outbreak in Surrey had just hit the headlines and there was great anxiety on the farm, already hit by the problems of coping with one of the wettest summers on record. John had risen at 4.30am as he has done for the past 40 years in the dairy industry. After a cup of tea and a light breakfast, he was in the crew yard at 5.15 to prepare for milking. He visited the paddock to check if any of the 6 cows in the maternity ward had calved during the night. By 6am, when most of the country is still asleep, the first 10 of the 74 cows ambled into the milking parlour. Breakfast in the form of pelleted feed is dispensed automatically to each milking position, and the vacuum pump connected to the udders. The yield of each cow (10-25 litres of milk) is recorded and today a sample is taken which will be sent for analysis to determine butterfat content with a cell count that indicates the purity of the milk.

By 8am the last of the cows have been milked and the herd is let out to pasture in the fields adjoining the crewyard. Fields are grazed in rotation and sometimes the cows are driven along Fen Lane much to the annoyance of some commuting motorists who can be abusive. “If you’re late, don’t use Fen lane” is his response, no doubt thinking less kind thoughts of someone who had only got out of bed 30 minutes before. It is then back to the dairy, wash down the parlour, clean the equipment and if he is lucky it is back to his bungalow for breakfast with wife Gwen.

I arrived on the farm at 10.30; John was back in the dairy updating the herd statistics and records on his laptop. The Dairy Crest bulk milk tanker had arrived to collect the product of the previous afternoon and this morning’s milking. 2100 litres of milk (467 gallons) was transferred giving an average of just over 28 ltrs or 50pints per cow over the past 24 hours. John was a little disappointed. A change in the feed over the weekend had affected the yield which normally averages 31 ltrs giving an upload of 2300lts to the tanker. Over a week this could represent a loss of £250 on the milk cheque.

We moved into the office, a functional room containing the dairy records and smelling sweetly of a combination of hay, silage and cows – the walls displaying John’s certificates from the Lincolnshire Agricultural Society - A first for herd management and Lincolnshire’s Stockman of the Year.

His apprehension about the consequences of Foot and Mouth filled him with dread. He spoke emotively about the herd; he loved his cows and he would be devastated if the disease was not contained and spread into Lincolnshire.

Aged 60 and married to his wife Gwen for 40 years, John has spent almost the whole of his working life in farming. Trained as an engineering apprentice in Gainsborough, he hated the idea of working in a factory and as soon as he had finished his apprenticeship, he applied for the job as assistant stockman on a large farm at Stow Park. With the dairy industry contracting, he moved to Leverton farms in 1995 but when Fred Myers decided to sell the dairy herd at Stow, he became stockman to Peter and Tim Russon at New Farm in 2002.

Although sentimental about his cows, he has brought a lifetime’s practical experience with him and his knowledge of breeding, feeding programmes and herd management has ensured that the Russon herd of pedigree Holsteins is one of the few remaining dairy herds in the area. John explained that the herd contains 118 animals of which 74 were currently in milk with a further 44 dry cows and heffers in the final stages of calving. The replacement of cows in the milking herd is a continuous process and these would gradually replace the animals in the milking herd. After calving, a cow would spend 43 weeks in the herd during which time she would be artificially inseminated. The bull is carefully selected by John to produce the characteristics he wants in the herd. Udder size, milk yield, looks, temperament and toughness are all genetic factors he considers. At the end of 43 weeks, the cow is “dried off” and moved out to pasture. After calving around the 52nd week, the process begins again. The matron of the herd is Eclipse aged 12, who has produced 10 calves and can still produce 45 ltrs of milk a day.



All cows have individual names and personalities but John’s favourite is Jenny, who is always last to leave the yard and will not move unless she gets a tickle behind the ears.

Careful breeding selection and feeding has increased the yield of the herd to a massive 845,000 ltrs of milk a year with each cow producing 8,500 ltrs or enough to fill 15000 pint bottles. This output, 1700 ltrs above the national average for dairy cows, is proof of his success. However, in an industry where the cost of milk triples between the producer and the supermarket, there is a constant squeeze on margins and “profit” to renew and reinvest in equipment is unheard of. On average the farmer receives 18p per litre for his milk and the industry calculates it needs a return of 21p to make a profit. The supermarkets charge around 55p a litre so someone is making a comfortable profit without the inconvenience of rising at 4.30am in all weathers for 365 days a year.

John is enthusiastic about his product “If the public realised whole milk is 96% fat free they’d buy it by the gallon. Compare the value of a pint of milk to low fat yogurt claiming to be 96% fat free and full of additives” he said.

The economics of running a dairy herd are daunting and it is small wonder that over the past 5 years 6000 dairy farmers in England and Wales have sold up their herds to diversify into other farming enterprises. Only the most efficient can now survive in a market dominated by the supermarkets. John explained that although most of the fodder for the herd is produced on the farm, the arable and dairy sections are costed separately as an internal market. Fodder, which includes silage, hay, maize and grain cost on average £2.84 per animal per day, wages, vet bills and other costs, will bring the total cost close to £5. The margins are so tight that a spell of bad weather, an accident or the foot and mouth crisis can quickly create a loss.

There is some light at the end of the tunnel and there is pressure to increase margins for farmers as demand increases, but few in the industry will be holding their breath. While milk prices may rise, the cost of feed has more than doubled with the price of feed wheat rising from £65 a ton to £150. John remains upbeat – his management programme for the herd is geared to increase production to an average of 9000 ltrs a year for each cow and to increase the annual yield for the herd to 875,000 ltrs which will keep the herd in profit.

John outlined the remainder of his working day – after lunch he would look at the dry cows grazing on the ridge and then at 3.30 he would herd the cows from the church field pasture back for the afternoon milking session. Having checked and fed the dozen or so new calves in the nursery he would be back in the house at 6.30pm. At 10pm he would check the cows in the paddock before retiring. It is the time when the cows go into labour and often he assists with a difficult delivery and he is not in bed until after midnight.

A rough check of the hours revealed an 11 hour working day, often longer, for 6 days a week. “Do you ever wish you had a nice comfortable office job?” I asked. John looked incredulous at even the suggestion. “This is not a job, it’s a vocation, it is my life and I love it” he said without a moments thought.



Leaving the farm I drove home and stopped to watch the herd grazing contentedly in the avenue at the foot of the village. Once there were a dozen small farms in the parish, all with a few milking cows supplying the local community. The richness of the countryside and the wildlife is now dependant upon the existence of this single herd. Let us hope that with the expertise of John Hill and the continuing support of the Russon family, the herd will continue to thrive – without it the parish will be a much poorer place.

GH

