

MUCK, BRASS AND RED TAPE: DOWN ON THE FARM

JAYNE BEAMOND, INTERVIEWED BY TONY GRAHAM



In partnership with her brother, Jayne Beamond runs a mixed dairy and arable farm in South Shropshire.

IT'S 3.30AM. MY WORKING DAY IS JUST BEGINNING. THERE'S NO ONE TO TALK TO AT THIS TIME IN THE MORNING. EVEN THE DOG ISN'T EXCITED TO SEE ME.

Usually, he leaps out of his bed, tail wagging, but it's cold and wet outside: this morning he wisely stays put, preferring the warmth of his bed to getting his paws wet. So it's on with the overalls and wellies, and off to the parlour to milk the cows. If things go well, I should be able to have some breakfast at about 9.30am. I might get a couple of hours sleep before lunch, but only if I ignore all the paperwork in the office and the other jobs that need doing around the place. I'll have to be milking again at 2pm if I am to finish in time for the bulk milk tanker collection at 7pm.

I run a small mixed dairy and arable farm with my brother. The farm has been in the family for three generations and I'm very aware of the blood, sweat and tears that have gone into making the farm what it is today. My grandfather bought the farm in 1926, just before the Great Crash of 1929. Life was hard and he struggled to make ends meet from his 17 cows, 700 chickens and a few ducks. Gradually the farm grew and when my father took over the business in 1966 there was a dairy herd of 40 cows. Today, we milk 150 Friesians, which produce about one million litres of milk per annum. We try to grow as much of the animal feed – grass, wheat, barley, beans – as we can from over 600 acres of land.

July through to January is the busiest time of the year. The grain harvest starts in mid-July. Once the harvest has finished we have to move all the straw bales and then start to plough the land back up and drill the crops for the next year. We also have to check the calving cows and feed the calves. During the Autumn we can be feeding up to 90 calves on the bucket. This year we are still rearing Friesian bull calves, although it is debatable whether it is economically viable due to the changes in the 30-month beef sector. Many surrounding farmers now shoot bull calves at birth. This is understandable given the economic realities, but is it right? I don't think so, life is precious, but it is something we have to seriously consider for the future. But it's a terrible dilemma. One of the great joys is seeing a newborn calf take its first breath. It will be soul destroying to shoot the newborn calf because it is the wrong sex and no one wants to buy it.

For me, farming is more than a business, it's a way of life, but it's a lifestyle that's under serious threat. Thirty years ago the local vet had 40 dairy farms registered with his practice. Today there are just fourteen,

although the size of the dairy herd in the area has remained roughly the same. Nationally, the predictions for the future make grim reading. It is suggested that due to commercial pressures the number of dairy farms will fall by about 3–5 per cent each year. In 2002/03 there were 24,500 dairy farms. By 2014/15 the figure is expected to be around 14,500.

Farming is one of the few industries where you buy at retail price and sell at wholesale price. At the moment, on average, we receive 18p per litre of milk, which is roughly the same price we received six years ago, even though the average retail price of a litre of milk has gone up by 10p. Our production costs – labour (i.e. the two people we employ), diesel, electricity, feed, fertiliser, environmental care, animal welfare, etc. – have now increased to the point where we just about break-even. With the continued upward pressure on fuel prices and little prospect of an increase in the price we receive for the milk, we might not cover our production costs. In fact, the milk price is expected to fall further over coming months.¹

I say 'might not' because there are other factors that can make a substantial difference to the balance sheet. For example, if May is dry and we can make silage during the two-week window when the grass is at its most nutritious, this will save us about £10,000 as we won't have to buy in mineral supplements. They say the difference between a good and bad farmer is a fortnight.

Events in other countries also have an impact. For example, the harsh weather in parts of Russia and the Ukraine is likely to drive up EU wheat prices as there is likely to be a higher crop failure rate in the Black Sea region.² Any of the wheat we grow that isn't used for animal feed we sell, so we could benefit. Or take the example of the dispute over the prophet Mohammed cartoons that were published in Denmark. Oddly enough, even a dispute like this can, potentially, impact a small rural farm. The Arla Food Group, a co-operative owned by approx. 11,600 milk producers in Denmark and Sweden, has recently cut its milk price by 0.9p because their products have been boycotted by Muslims in the Middle East to the point where sales have fallen to almost zero.³ Fortunately, the producer we supply is holding the current price, but it does highlight how unpredictable the market can be.

It is certainly fair to say that the farming industry in this country is in crisis: we are feeling the squeeze here in Shropshire. At a national level we have to decide about the future of land use and food production in this

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country. Do we want a sustainable farming industry or are we, as a nation, prepared to import the majority of our foodstuffs – milk from Eastern Europe, beef from Argentina (where, incidentally, foot and mouth is rife), etc.? Or is the countryside to become a playground with farmers becoming land-managers who run off-road tracks for 4x4's; paintball fields, maize mazes, golf courses, and the like?

At a local level, we are doing what we can to survive the crisis and maintain a viable business, but it's hard to plan for the future when it's a struggle to survive in the present. We're planning for three years time. The heifers born at the end of 2005 will start producing milk in 2008. Hopefully we'll be able to expand the herd size. That's the key for survival, I'm told, along with efficiency.⁴ But for our small, family run farm, expansion will have to be gradual. We don't have sufficient resources in time or money to do it any other way. We could economise by cutting the workforce, but we do not want to make redundant someone who has worked loyally for the family for over fifty years. That would not be right. Anyway, everyone is already working all the hours God sends (or the EU permits), and we could really do with more help around the place. However, even if we could afford to pay another salary, it's very difficult to find labour these days. Very few people in this country want to work in farming and we are now seeing more and more immigrants, particularly from Eastern Europe, being employed in the industry.

As for efficiency, I'm sure there are things we can do to become more efficient, but it's difficult to find the time to implement the necessary changes when an increasing amount of my time is spent in the office filling in government forms and dealing with red tape. In recent years, following the introduction of milk quotas and other European Union measures, the amount of paperwork that we have to complete to stay within the law has increased dramatically. At the end of 2004, The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) published its five year plan. One of the stated aims is to cut bureaucracy. Hopefully, this will be the case. But, as yet, there is no sign of an improvement.

So why do I farm? Wouldn't it be easier to find a 9–5 office-based job, with a salary? Yes, in some ways it would, but I wouldn't be happy. Although it's tough going a lot of the time, especially in the winter, it remains a way of life that I want to protect and pass on to future generations. In my mind, the farm is a living

entity that needs nurturing. You see the work of your hands. There's something special about being a steward of God's creation in this way, managing the land, rearing livestock from birth, planting trees and hedgerows for this and future generations to enjoy. It all goes into making the countryside into something we can all appreciate and enjoy.

It's 11pm. I've just got in after helping deliver a calf. The cow and calf are fine, thankfully. Me? Ask me in the morning, when I get up at 3.30am. Now, I just want to get some sleep. ■

NOTES

1. Every penny reduction in the milk price we receive reduces our income by about £10,000. Following reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy, the milk Development Council predicts that “the average producer milk price might settle at around 15 pence per litre from 2007 onwards”. David Colman and David Harvey, “The Future of UK Dairy Farming”, p. 2, at www.defra.gov.uk/foodrin/milk/pdf/colman-harveyreport.pdf.
2. Cf. “Black Sea weather impact on wheat price potential wider”, *Farm Brief* 21.6 (February 2006), p. 1.
3. “Arla cuts milk prices by 0.9p, Wiseman holds”, *Farm Brief* 21.5 (February 2006), p. 7.
4. Cf. The National Farmers Union report, “A Vision for the Dairy Industry” at www.nfonline.com/x834.xml accessed 22 February 2006.

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