

Animal Health and Welfare farm case study - beef

Investment means improved efficiency and a safer working environment on one Cheshire farm...



Outdated cattle handling facilities were adding extra time and risk to the daily routine of Andy Gibbon, a beef and sheep farmer from Northwich, Cheshire.

Andy works predominantly alone at the family's Marston Hall Farm and was having to rely on the availability of other family members, or contract labour, every time cattle needed to be put through the crush.

"Our old equipment was very outdated and not suitable for the larger finishing cattle," explained Andy. "Weighing and inspection were very difficult and almost impossible to do alone, so we weren't able to handle the cattle as often as we'd like."

As well as the outdated handling equipment, Andy also suspected there were some underlying health issues amongst the herd. Andy supplements his suckler herd with some 250 finishing stock bought in from selected livestock markets, he was aware biosecurity was always going to be an issue, however he felt there was more he could be doing.

He explained, "With the number of cattle coming onto farm we knew there could be problems. The handling

system we had made it impossible to check and vaccinate incoming animals as soon as they arrived, which left us exposed to disease risk."

Andy was aware of the RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme through his membership of the Cheshire beef and sheep monitor farm steering group. After talking to his vet he decided to apply to have an Animal Health and Welfare Plan carried out on the farm.

Matt Bagley of Reaseheath College, a technical advisor working on behalf of SAC, first visited Marston Hall Farm in May 2010 to conduct the health planning assessment. During this visit Matt, Andy and his vet, Darrell Irwin, identified four key priorities: minimising the risk to operators and cattle whilst handling; more regular monitoring and recording of animal performance; improved quarantine procedures when bringing in new animals and finally to improve biosecurity practices.

"The findings from the health visit were what we expected", said Andy. "We knew the handling system was a priority, and I felt that once we had equipment that was fit for purpose it would make the other issues easier to tackle."

Through the RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme scheme, Andy was able to secure 40 per cent grant funding towards the cost of a new cattle handling system. "The grant money enabled us to upgrade to better specification equipment", explained Andy. "We chose equipment that



will last us longer and will cope with any future expansion to our herd."

Andy spent time researching the different options available and chose Rancher equipment consisting of handling pens, a race and crush. The system was designed to be operated by one man, making it ideal for Marston Hall Farm.

The new facilities were installed in March 2011 and Andy is pleased with

the results. "It's ideal for what we need. The fact that I use it alone saves time and money, it's safer to operate and better for the cattle who are a lot calmer inside the crush. Most importantly it means I can handle the animals more routinely and keep on top of weighing and worming."

As part of the health plan Andy also had a series of blood samples done on his herd which showed evidence of BVD, Lepto and IBR in the breeding herd. John's was also identified as a risk.

"The blood testing confirmed our suspicions", commented Andy. "But getting confirmation of the exact issues meant we have been able to put a vaccination programme in place and tackle the problems identified by the lab tests. This has spurred us on to make blood testing routine and we've just tested our flock of sheep and are waiting for the results."

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Andy now weighs and worms all new stores as soon as they arrive on farm. Previously this would have been delayed until extra labour was available. He is hoping to see the full benefits of the vaccination programme next spring, but he thinks the herd is already healthier, and testimony to this is that there have been no abortion cases this

spring, compared with several over the previous few years.

'The new handling system means we're weighing animals more regularly and paying closer attention to

growth rates. I'm looking forward to seeing the results from this year's calves, and once they are weaned we'll weigh them and compare them to last year's calves."

Andy believes the changes made as a result of the health and welfare plan are having a positive effect on his bottom line too. "We have much better control now. We can quickly and easily weigh cattle before they go to market or the abattoir and keep them back if required, or regulate their weight if they are too heavy."

Accurate weighing also enables more exact dosing of wormer and fluke treatments, which saves money and increases efficiency.

"Overall we're pleased with the new equipment and the changes we've made to our routine," explained Andy. "It meets our requirements and although we'll have a better idea of how well the vaccination programme has worked next year, so far the herd seems to be responding well."

Marston Hall Farm

- Diverse unit consisting of 186 acres of owned land, 210 acres of rented land in sole occupancy and 310 acres of autumn/winter grazing.
- Good arable land producing forage maize, barley, fodder beet and grass, which are all retained for use on the farm.
- Beef enterprise has a spring calving herd comprising of 39 ¾ to pure Limousin cows and two bulls, one pure bred British Blue and the other British Blue x Limousin.
- Cattle are finished on a diet consisting of maize silage and barley with a protein pellet and minerals added to make a complete ration.
- 250 head of finishing cattle are purchased from a select group of producers.
- Cattle are sold through Woodheads and Dunbia abattoirs on a deadweight basis and through Chelford livestock auction.
- Sheep enterprise of 700 breeding ewes.

The RDPE Northwest Livestock Programme is a four-year business support package that aims to improve farm competitiveness, animal health and welfare and the efficient use of main farm resources.

There are six key areas to the programme:

1. Animal Health and Welfare Planning

To apply contact: SAC Consulting on 08456 040 535

2. Nutrient / Manure Management Planning

To apply contact: Promar International on 01270 616 800

3. Resource Efficiency Auditing

To apply contact: Promar International on 01270 616 800

4. Farming and Forestry Improvement Scheme Grant

(contact the Defra RDPE Delivery team for the North West on 01228 640 311)

5. Farmer Groups, Demonstration Events and Monitor Farms

Contact: Myerscough College, CFN or Reaseheath College

6. ICT Network (Livestock NW website)

For more information visit the support and grants pages at: www.livestocknw.co.uk