



## Stamp out lameness case study

VACCINATION STOPS LAMENESS IN ITS TRACKS



*Steve Richards from Bevistan Dairy with one of his sound-footed milking ewes.*

Despite appreciating the extra muscle provided by Bedford Blues professional rugby player Huw Worthington, who helps out on his farm once a week, specialist niche dairy producer Steve Richards has reduced the unwanted time and effort that comes with man-handling livestock.

“It’s back-breaking work trying to sort out any lameness issues and so much better to focus on disease prevention and keeping feet sound,” he says.

And Mr Richards, who runs Bevistan Dairy – a dairy cow and sheep milking unit at Valley View Farm at Carlton in Bedfordshire – gets to see a lot of feet walking through his milking parlour daily.

“I’m probably one of the only dairy farmers in the country that milks four times a day using a traditional set up. Both our Holstein Friesian herd and flock of Friesland and Lacaune dairy sheep are both milked twice a day. Good hygiene is central to everything we do on the farm and we’ve adapted our small herringbone parlour to accommodate and milk both cattle and sheep. It works well, although it’s pretty busy from dawn until dusk,” he says.

Steve and his partner Bev farm 200 acres overlooking the river Great Ouse, milking 100 dairy cows and 100 dairy sheep, with plans to keep the same number of cattle but grow the milking ewe flock to 140 next year.

The move into milking sheep alongside the dairy cattle enterprise started about five years ago and they haven’t looked back. “I didn’t think increasing dairy cow numbers would work here and wanted to develop an enterprise Bev could be involved in too – and one where we had more control over the marketing of our end product,” says Steve.

Bev now oversees the sheep milk processing at Valley View Farm, turning it into Bevistan-branded milk, cheese, yoghurt and ice cream products sold directly to the consumer from their own roadside retail outlet housed in a converted horse box, as well as from stands at local food fairs and summer shows. They are also building an enthusiastic clientele amongst owners and managers of local restaurants, pubs and shops.





Sheep milk is prized for its health benefits. "It is naturally low in lactose, easily digested and is the ideal alternative for people who are intolerant to cow and goats' milk," explains Bev.

### Lambing

The flock starts lambing in March and the ewes are then milked for up to eight months. Each ewe is capable of yielding about 200 litres over this period. The lactating sheep are fed just like a small dairy cow, receiving a high energy and protein mix of grass/maize silage, rape, soya and some cereal. Between October and February, the dry ewes over-winter outside when weather and ground conditions are favourable.

"The system works well, but initially we did struggle with a lot of lameness in the ewes post lambing, particularly footrot. At its worst I'd say at least 10% of the sheep were lame and I got tired of seeing them hobbling in the parlour and always having to turn plenty over to assess the problem and treat many of those affected with antibiotics," says Steve.

"Initially, I thought the high lameness incidence was down to feeding a high protein diet, but now I know the infection pressure from the *Dichelobacter nodosus* bacteria that causes footrot obviously just built up in the shed.

"Consequently, we were advised by our vet three years ago to vaccinate the flock against footrot and to administer the vaccine prior to the peak disease risk period, which was when the pregnant ewes started being housed for lambing. We now use a combi-clamp to restrain the sheep and vaccinate them correctly under the skin in the neck using a Sterimatic gun.

"This has worked really well and completely transformed the situation. We now hardly ever see a lame ewe in the parlour. We do have to treat the odd one, but vaccination has certainly broken what was becoming a vicious circle of treatment and re-treatment. I'd say lameness incidence is now down to less than 2% annually in the ewe flock." Now, if a ewe is chronically lame, it is culled. Bevistan Dairy benefits from rearing all its own flock replacements and only buys in rams.

"Our risk of buying in health issues is relatively low. We've got four rams now and recently bought a couple of pure-bred Friesland rams from Simon Stott in Preston, but these were quarantined for four weeks."

The milking sheep originate from Holland and France and are relatively prolific with each ewe producing a twin on average – although one bore quintuplets last year!

"All the lambs are taken off the ewe at 2-3 days of age once they have had a good intake of colostrum. We hand-rear them; feeding them warm cow's milk by bottle initially for up to two weeks and then via a bespoke teated-feeder I developed and built myself, which will feed groups of 20 at a time. Once weaned, we finish the male lambs off grass and sell to a local butcher or Farm Fresh. We keep all the ewe lambs primarily for breeding," Steve says.

Milking sheep alongside his dairy cows has been a real eye-opener for Steve. "Whilst it's been a steep learning curve and quite a challenge at times over the last five years, when you get such positive feedback from the consumer about the products we have been able to develop and retail ourselves, it makes all the hard work well worthwhile," he says.

