

BEEF

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Left to right: Mark, John and Matt Crapper.



A change in feeding regime has enabled one family business to make better use of co-products and improve margins on its beef finishing unit. **Angela Calvert** reports.

Switch to TMR brings multiple benefits

The Crapper family of John, his wife, Sue, and sons, Mark and Matt, finish about 1,650 cattle a year at Billingley, Barnsley, buying-in stores, finishing and then selling them through livestock markets and deadweight. All cattle are sourced from markets, mainly Selby, Penrith, Skipton and Otley, with Mark and John attending sales every week. About 75 per cent are continentals with the remainder Aberdeen-Angus and Herefords. They also

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MARK CRAPPER

buy cows to feed, and finish about 900 store lambs a year. Historically, the cattle were fed rolled barley and silage from ring feeders. But, when Mark returned from Harper Adams and a spell working on a large finishing unit as part of his work placement, impressed by what he had seen he instigated the switch to feeding a total mixed ration (TMR). He felt a tub feeder would provide a more consistent ration than a paddle feeder, so they took a Strautmann Vertimix with a 12cu.metre

mixing capacity on trial and later went on to buy it. In 2016, this was replaced with a Verti-Mix 1651, which has a larger 16cu.m mixing capacity, but still a single auger as the design and layout of some of the buildings puts a limit on the size of a trailed feeder. They also specified it had to have two discharge doors. The back one is used to empty feed which needs chopping, while the other door opens onto the belt for feeding into the troughs/passageways. The new system enabled them to take advantage of co-products available locally to incorporate into the diet. **Minerals** The finishing ration consists of home-grown grass and maize silage, potato and vegetable waste, stock feed potatoes and a mixture of home-grown wheat, barley and minerals, which are milled on-farm by a third party. Mark says: “We can now make use of a lot more products in the diet. The potato waste is good feed, but it has got more expensive through demand for digesters, although it is a better quality product



The Strautmann diet feeder provides a consistent ration.

PICTURES: MARCELLO GARRAGNOLI

now and a regular supply justifies the extra cost at this current time. “We chop the stock feed potatoes in the diet feeder, which only takes five minutes. They are then emptied out and we bucket them back in to add to the TMR.” Cattle are fed ad-lib and they mix two TMRs a day with feeding and bedding up, using a bale spreader completed in less than an hour-and-a-half, which is a big saving on time from the previous system.

The diet feeder does a good job of producing a consistent ration, says Mark. The wetness of the potatoes helps bind all the ingredients and also prevents sorting so animals consume a consistent ration. John says: “Although grass silage is the basis of the ration, maize has become increasingly important and I think it really makes a big difference to daily weight gain. We first grew it 30 years ago with mixed success, but newer varieties,

Farm facts

- New Grange Farm, Billingley, Barnsley
- Tenanted farm on the Fitzwilliam Wentworth Estate
- 345 hectares (850 acres) - 30ha (75 acres) maize, 202ha (500 acres) wheat and barley
- The remainder a mix of permanent grass, silage grass, turnips and spring barley
- 1,650 cattle finished a year, all bought-in as stores from livestock markets
- 900 store lambs finished a year

along with improved pesticides, mean it is a completely different crop now and we are increasing the acreage we grow. Last year we harvested it on September 3, due to the drought conditions, and achieved 18 tonnes/acre.” Cattle are fed for a target of 90 days and growth weights are aver-

aging about 1.5kg/day across cows, heifers and bullocks. Mark says: “Because of the range and type of cattle we have, it does vary - some will do more and some will do less.” Mark is responsible for the costings and the livestock rations, with some input from a nutritionist,

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The family have 400-500 cattle on-farm at any time.



while Sue does the rest of the paperwork, as well as working full-time for Selby auction market. Matt carries out all the arable work, as well as helping with the livestock.

Mark says: "Margins are tight and we have to keep a really close eye on costs. All the home-grown produce is put in at market value and I use a computer programme to keep track of everything."

"Feed costs are going up constantly. We are the middle men and really need to be paying less for cattle to ensure there is a margin, but this then has a knock-on effect back down the supply chain."

There are 400-500 cattle on-farm at any one time and numbers are expanding with the construction of a new livestock building currently underway.

John says: "We are buying cattle every week and we sell 32 a week on average. One of the biggest handicaps to our business is the six-day rule, which I think is now completely unnecessary. It doesn't seem to be a priority for authorities to change at

the moment, but removing it would make a big difference to how we could run our business."

"We generally buy older cattle, aged 18 months plus, at about 500kg, so we do not have to keep them too long. This reduces the pneumonia risk you get with buying younger cattle, which also tend to be more expensive, but we may have to start looking at buying them a bit younger now some abattoirs are bringing the weights down."

Premium

"Independent butchers buying at markets also pay a premium for smaller carcasses."

"We will buy bullocks, heifers and bulls, whatever we think there is profit in, although bullocks will get more weight and heifers are more saleable."

Cattle are weighed on arrival, isolated and allowed to rest for two or three days before being fluked, wormed and vaccinated against pneumonia.

John says: "We like to get them



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filled up with silage as soon as possible and then onto the ration over the first week.

"We prefer to sell through the live market at Selby whenever possible, especially the better cattle, those which will achieve U and E grades. Younger cows also sell better liveweight. But we also

sell deadweight to Dunbia, Kepak and Dovecote Park."

In spite of the challenges facing the industry and the political uncertainty with Brexit looming, the family remains optimistic for the future, although perhaps not as much as they once were.

Support

Mark says: "I think farmers have become an easy target for the likes of animal rights protestors and vegans and we need to stand up for ourselves, but a lot more support and promotion of the great British food we produce is needed from Government bodies, which we pay levies to, as well as from livestock associations and the NFU."

"There is nothing we can do about Brexit and no doubt we are in for some challenging times. I think all farmers can do is focus on the things they can control in their own business, looking at where efficiencies and improvements can be put in place to make it sustainable in the long-term."