

Forage wagon purchase brings many farm benefits

A switch to silaging with a forage wagon, instead of a forager and trailers, has been a cost-effective option on a Derbyshire dairy farm with savings on fuel costs, labour and time.

Silaging has always been a family affair for Neville and Valerie Palfreyman and son Paul. But last year, to reduce the labour input, the Derbyshire farming family switched from using a forager and trailers to picking up and carting grass with a Strautmann forage wagon. As well as reducing the labour required, fuel consumption fell and the overall operation was quicker.

At Hubber Dale Farm near Buxton, the Palfreyman family milks 100 Holstein cows, averaging yields of 9,500 per cow/year. Cows calve all year round and are grazed outside 'as long as possible', usually from early May until November. During that time they



The new forage wagon was used for the first time last year.

will also have free access to a total mixed ration (TMR).

Two cuts of silage are taken each year—the first in early June from around 100 acres and the second off around 60 acres.

The silaging team

The Palfreymans have never employed a silaging contractor. Neville Palfreyman explains: "I'll get the grass mown and rowed up in one go. Then we've always carted the silage between the three of us, with a trailed forager and two trailers.

"My son-in-law Rob comes in to cover for us on the buckrake during the afternoon milkings.



The Palfreyman family—Paul, Neville and Valerie.

Doing it all ourselves does take longer than using a contractor, and is a bit more hassle. But by being our own bosses, we can start when we want and fit the silaging in around other jobs we're doing."

Less labour required

But after the silaging season of 2018, Neville decided it was time for a change. "Valerie has had a bad knee, and getting up and down off the tractor all the time just wasn't good for her. So I told myself—and her—that was the last year she'd be carting grass."

Neville and Paul looked at alternative options but still wanting to keep it a family affair. They decided a change of machinery was needed to reduce the labour required. They looked into using a forage wagon, and spoke to their local Darley Dale machinery dealer Platts Harris, and also Opico's Nick Rider.

"We did some homework—and it looked as if there would be fuel savings as well as less labour required," Neville explains. "So we decided to go for it. We specified a forage wagon with a steering axle as we have a lot of small fields and want to be able to turn sharply without scrubbing the ground."

The Palfreymans traded in their forager and two trailers for a Strautmann Zelon CFS 2901, which was suitable for the horsepower of their New Holland T6 155 tractor. Its bank of 32 double-sided knives would give a chop length of 44mm—a longer chop than the trailed forager.

The 2019 silage season

The silaging season in 2019 did not, however, start off to plan. "We had an early spring here, so we turned the cattle out earlier," explains Neville. "Then, in preparation for the forage wagon—as it would be longer than a trailer—we set about widening the gateways of the fields which are on narrow roads, to help improve

"It normally takes us five days from mowing to sheeting up to take 100 acres of 1st cut," explains Neville. "However, using the forage wagon, instead of the forager and trailers, we were able to shave a whole day off that time. Plus, we had one less person involved. And it was a little less stressful—we didn't feel we were rushing."

access. This has since also proven beneficial for the slurry tankers.

"The day we had planned to start mowing the first cut, it started raining. And it did not stop for a month! So it was July when we were able to cut it—the grass was too long really but it was still green."

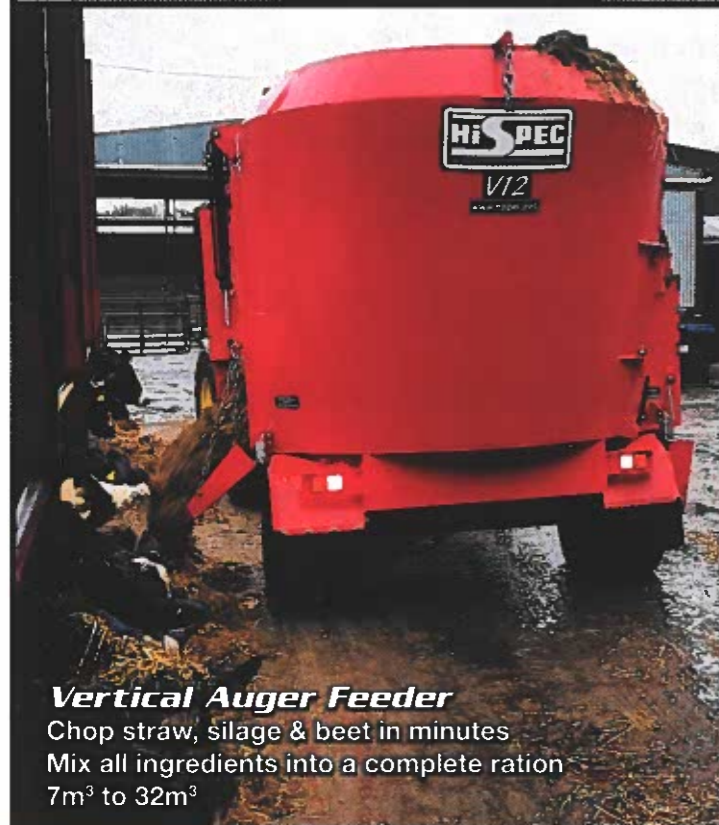
Around 100 acres of grass was mown. The guide gates had been removed from the mower/conditioner, and the grass was broadcast across the ground for faster drying. It was left for 24 hours, and then rowed up with a new machine that Neville had bought specifically for the new system.

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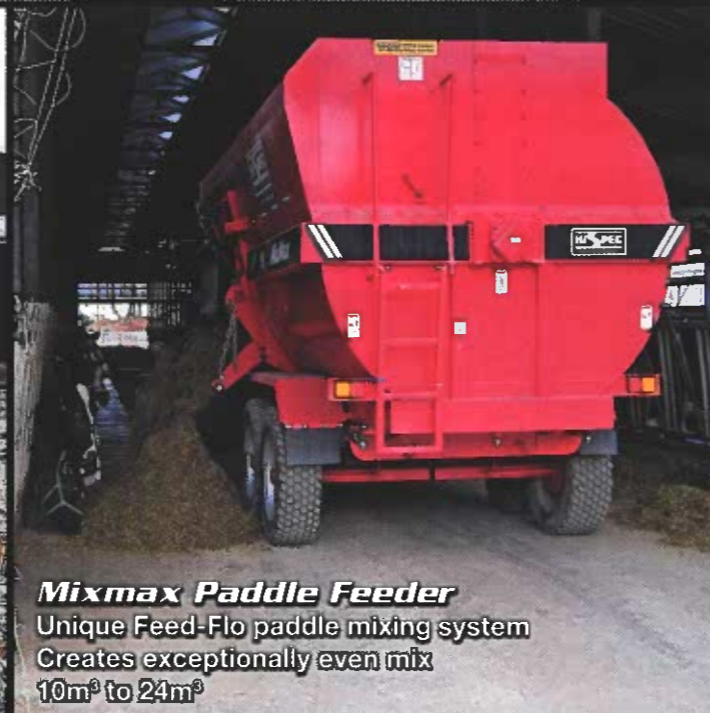
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The forage wagon gives a more consistent and longer chop than the silage forager system it has replaced.



The longer chop-length grass takes more effort to compact. However, there is more time between loads to do this with the new system.

"And it was a little less stressful—we didn't feel we were rushing. We thought having the steering axle was well worth it—you couldn't see where you'd turned, and we could have got away with not widening the gateways."

Neville manned the buckrake on the clamp while Paul picked up with the Zelon. Paul adds: "There's a buzzer in the cab which tells you when the wagon's full. To start with, I kept getting off the tractor thinking it wasn't working, and that it must surely be full. However, it wasn't—the pick-up system spreads the grass out across the whole width and really packs it in."

"Once I was on the road, the tractor engine was certainly telling me I'd got a full load! There were fewer journeys back and forth between field and clamp, and this made a big difference to fuel consumption."

Neville continues: "We were

saving around 30% on diesel costs for the wagon's tractor. And the only other tractor work was rowing up—which doesn't require a lot of power."

Valerie, who was no longer needed on a tractor, was able to support Neville and Paul by taking over various other necessary jobs—such as checking on pregnant cows, bringing the herd in for milking and cleaning the parlour—allowing them to focus more of their time on the silaging operation.

Longer chop length

Neville says: "Our nutritionist had told us that the longer forage chop length would slow rumen passage and improve silage digestibility."

"Once we opened the silage pit last autumn, and started feeding it, the long fibre made our butterfats rocket up to 4.25%. We get paid for quality—so we were delighted."

"The chop length has been noticeably more consistent. But the slight downside with longer chopped grass is that more time needs to be spent rolling for consolidation. However, we've only one forage wagon bringing the grass, so there's more time between each load, compared with when we had two trailers."

This year, the Palfreymans

are hoping to take two silage cuts of more equal quality—perhaps an earlier first cut at the end of May. But, as ever, it will depend on the weather. "We need a good weather window—a minimum of four days really," explains Neville. "But as we do it all ourselves, we don't have the pressure of being in a queue or missing our slot. So we can pick our time."



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