

Longevity, efficiency and an increased volume of milk has been the key plus points following the installation of two Fullwood Merlin robotic milkers at Boylston Farm, based in Cumnock, Ayrshire.

Very much a family affair, it is run by Alastair and Aileen Struthers, along with their son, Andrew, and daughter, Emma. They recently made a big invested in the future of their 110-cow Glenmuir Holstein and Ayrshire herd by transforming their milking system.

They previously ran a six-swing parlour, which was more than 30 years old and took three hours for each milking. It was beyond doubt for the family that it was in need of an upgrade.



WITH EASY access the cows have no trouble using the robots, and come through the foot bath on the way out from the robot Ref:RH041120580

“Robots have advanced in the last five years and are a lot more manageable, flexible and have fewer time constraints.

“If we have been working with sheep or cattle, we no longer need to get back to the parlour and spend hours milking, so it is more effective for our farm.

“Labour has always been a problem for us. To get to full potential with some of our cows we were looking at milking three times a day, however, in our old system we just didn’t have the labour to cover it,” said Andrew.

With the robots taking the strain, the cows now average 3.4 milkings per day to level at 33 litres, hitting a 4.01% BF and 3.3% P.

Pre-robots, the cows were averaging 8000 litres per lactation, but already the cows are hitting 10,700 litres, since the robots were installed two years ago.



Merlin robot controls

“The cows are a lot happier and content as the cows can milk when they want, eat when they want and lie down when they want. However, the biggest thing for us has been the increased volume of milk the cows have produced,” said Andrew, whose milk goes to Yew Tree.

Of course, with robots comes extra costs, like chemicals and electricity, so it is crucial that the family work to make it pay.

“Robots are the way forward for any family farm. I could not imagine milking in a parlour, although it is has been a big step for us it has certainly paid off and suits our system well,” added Andrew.

The servicing side of the robots has been tasked to McCaskies, who have been there for support the whole way since installation.

“The initial start up was a huge change and investment to our farm, but it was also a new environment for the cows, it was such a huge transition that we had to make it work. We were grateful for the support and help that the McCaskies team have given us along the way,” explained Andrew.



ELSPETH GIBSON from Agri-Pharma gives support to the Struthers on AHV products that they use in conjunction with the Merlin robots. Ref:RH041120584

Along with the latest milking system investment, a range of AHV products have also been added to the mix to improve cow management.

These include new boluses which help in lowering cell counts, as well as treating cases of mastitis, along with ASPI to act as an anti-inflammatory, explained Andrew.

“The robots and the AVH products go hand in hand. The biggest advantage, though, is the reduction in antibiotic use as a lot of milk contracts specifically look for fewer antibiotics in a dairy herd to help with efficiency, so it is a great way of doing this,” said Andrew.

He also added that since they aren’t handling the cows at milking as much, it is a lot easier than penning them to treat them every day.

All milking cows are housed all year round on Wilson mattresses in cubicles, with a Pollock rope scraping system in place.



OVERVIEW OF the cubicle shed which houses the dairy cattle and the two Fullwood Merlin milking robots Ref:RH041120569

The shed was designed and adapted by William Yuille, Girvan, just two years ago to accommodate the new robot system, with the aim to be as open as possible, to allow all the cows to see the robots at any point in the shed, to improve the cow flow.

“The area we are in is very wet ground, so putting the cattle out would affect their diet and their routine. We try to keep everything as consistent as possible to maximise cow productivity – cows don’t like too much change.

“That includes the cows being on a TMR silage diet all year round,” said Andrew.

“Not only this, but housing the cows all year round enables us to get more out of the ground. By not using it for grazing, we can make more silage in the summer,” he added.



*THE STRUTHERS work out the feed ration with the help from Carrs nutritionist, Gareth Brolly
Ref:RH041120568*

Dry cows and youngstock are out during the summer, leaving the team to conserve around 350 acres of silage each year.

The herd is in an all year round calving programme, where they aim to calve heifers at a round 2½-year-olds old. All cows will be AI'd to sexed semen or beef.

The majority of the heifer calves will be retained for breeding in the herd, with any surplus sold privately.



LASERS ON the Fullwood Merlin locate the teat Ref:RH041120585

“Meanwhile, the dairy bull calves are taken right through to 30 months and finished through Highland Meats and the beef calves will be sold as stores at two-years-old at Ayr Auction Market.

“We like to balance our avenues out and have an income from other parts of the farm as opposed to relying solely on the milk,” he said.

“If the milk price is down, we have to hope the dairy beef, or sheep trade is doing well. We have the land and scope to do this, so it is important that we maximise our farm income,” added Andrew.



NICE AND relaxed in the cubicle shed at Boylston Ref:RH041120577

Showing from the herd comes as no surprise – the family exhibit not only at local shows but national ones too, including AgriScot, the All Britain Calf Show and the Royal Highland Show.

“Shows are a great way to get our name out there, and is crucial for showcasing your animals and marketing your herd.

“We aim to breed a cow that can milk and function well. If she looks the part it is a bonus, but we do need to concentrate on the butter fat and protein percentages as it is our livelihood,” said Andrew.

The herd recently took the reserve red and white calf at the All Britain Calf Show and did well with a milking Ayrshire in 2017.

This year has been an exception. With no shows to go to, Andrew was still keen to get their name out there so entered the Holstein West of Scotland herd competition for the first time.

It was a good decision for the Glenmuir herd as it picked up both the best individual cow and individual heifer prizes in the contest. The family had also won the Ayr Ayrshire Cattle Club herd competition for the last two years.



LASERS ON the Fullwood Merlin locate the teat Ref:RH041120585

As another income stream, the family run 40 pedigree Texels, which the tup lambs will be used as lambs on all their cross ewes, before being sold as shearlings at Ayr Auction Market.

The fat lambs are sold through Lanark Auction Market and the aim is to average around 42-44kg liveweight.

“We find the carcass of the cross ewe and the quality of lamb we get sells well through Lanark. The Texels are a great breed that works well in our system,” added Andrew.

The family have also recently ventured into Blue Texels, starting a flock of 12 ewes. The Blue Texels arrived on farm three years ago as a venture into a new breed.

“They are the up and coming breed yet still give us the strong commercial value that we are looking for. We also use them as lambs on our hoggs for that easier lambing they give us a lot fewer problems,” said Andrew.

So what’s next: “We are currently at maximum capacity, even though we have a small dairy herd, running the beef and sheep keeps us all busy and ensures that all our eggs are not in one basket. We don’t want to expand so much that we need to start bringing in employees, we want to keep it a family-run business for as long as we can.

“We may need to expand at some point to keep our margins right and we would look at putting an additional robot in if the time was right. However, to do that we would need to expand the cubicles as well, so it is not a straightforward solution for us.

“Margins are always getting tighter, especially in the dairy industry, so we are always looking at becoming more efficient and producing the best that we can,” concluded Andrew.



BOYLSTON FARM home to the Struthers and the Glenmuir dairy herd Ref:RH041120011

On The Spot:

Best investment: The robots that we recently installed

Best advice received: Never give up on your dreams and goals

Hobbies outwith farming: Andrew enjoys playing junior football for Kello Rovers as well as being a keen member of his local YFC, New Cummnock.

Best achievement: Winning a class at AgriScot. Andrew is also a keen stock judge, and has lifted the Glasgow Herald trophy for the dairy pairs at the Royal Highland Show.



*SOME THE the Glenmiur herd tucking into the good quality home grown silage
Ref:RH041120578*

Farm facts:

Livestock numbers: Milking 110 Holstein and Ayrshires. As well as running 650 breeding ewes and 40 pedigree Texels.

Acres: 230 acres, plus 200 rented.

Who is involved: It's very much family affair, made up of Andrew's mother and father, Alastair and Aileen, also working away and sister, Emma also helps out when she can, though she's

currently studying Geography at Glasgow University. Plus, there's help from one part time worker.