

Grass-based system brings Drumatee success in national herd competition

With just eight years of Hereford experience under his belt, John Conlon, Co Armagh, took the 2018 UK reserve national herd of the year competition title.

Richard Halleron visits his farm to learn more.

Co Armagh pedigree Hereford breeder John Conlon is a firm believer in the old adage: 'why keep a dog and bark yourself?'

"I got into Hereford breeding because of the cattle's ability to thrive at grass," he says.

"This is the cheapest way to produce beef. As a consequence, I have developed the herd in a way that lets the cattle express this ability in the most effective way possible. It's up to the cows and their calves to do all the hard work, not me.

"Those animals that can thrive under these conditions stay, and those that can't do not feature in my breeding plans."

John's strategy is clearly one that works as 2018 saw him win both the Northern Ireland Hereford herds competition and, thereafter, the reserve national Hereford herd of the year accolade. For the record, it has taken him a mere eight years to reach this pinnacle of success.

John established his Drumatee herd in 2010. Prior to that he had run the farm as a commercial dry stock operation, bringing store cattle through to finishing weights.

Foundation females were sourced from the Allowdale herd of Liam Phipott in Co Cork, and Herefordshire's Westwood herd of Clive Davies, Trumpet and the Freetown herd of Richard and Tony Bradstock, Tarrington.

The Drumatee herd now comprises 40 breeding females plus their calves, split equally into spring and autumn groups. February and March are the spring calving months with August and September set aside for the autumn calving season.

"Taking this approach eases the workload, both on me and the stock bull," John explains.

The Conlon farm at Markethill extends to 34 hectares (85 acres), all of which is in grass. The focus of the operation is the main grazing block. This has been divided up into paddocks akin to what would be found on any modern dairy farm committed to producing as much milk from grass as possible.

John continues: "The farm has been developed in order to provide the cows and calves with all the nutrition they



L-R: Frankie, Joe, John, Joe, Cara, Claire and Oona Conlon

Farm facts

- ◆ Drumatee herd was established in 2010
- ◆ The farm is 34 hectares (85 acres), all of which is in grass
- ◆ Three cuts of grass taken each year for ensiling
- ◆ Rotation grazing system in place

need from fresh grass throughout the grazing season.

“At the height of the growing season, this means operating a 21-day rotation with paddocks surplus to requirements taken out for silage.

“I am also committed to regular soil testing, an ongoing grass re-seeding programme and ground improvement works, which will improve grass dry matter output.

“I regularly attend dairy farm walks, in order to pick up the latest tips on grazing management. In fact, these events tend to be more informative than a beef farm walk. Everything on this farm revolves around grassland management.

“I will try to get stock out into the paddocks during February. We were very fortunate in 2018 with the favourable conditions through the entire back-end. A number of the autumn calvers were kept out well into November.”

Three cuts of high-quality silage are also made by John annually. Again, it's a question of the stock making best use of forage throughout the winter months.

“Feeding concentrates to the cows and the young stock goes against every principle around which the herd was established,” he stresses.

“Given the grass availability on the farm, I am able to have my spring



A 21-day rotation is operated at the height of the grass growing season

calvers well fleshed by the time they are housed in the autumn. I don't mind them losing up to 150kg of weight over the winter months. The aim is to have them at the correct body condition score for calving in February.

“I got into Hereford breeding because of the cattle's ability to thrive at grass.”

“Hereford cattle were developed as a breed which could put on flesh easily when offered forage-based diets. They are also well-shaped and can be finished at a much younger age than other breeds.

“My sole aim as a pedigree herd owner is to produce breeding stock that can do this job extremely well.”

When it comes to animal selection, John puts a fair degree of reliance on performance figures. And in this context EBVs are important.

“But you can't overlook an animal's pedigree and how pleasing he or she is to the eye. It's a question of balance at the end of the day.”

Good fertility is another core herd selection requirement for John.

“The cows in the spring and autumn

groups are managed separately,” he says.

“I won't let animals from one group slip into the other, simply because they couldn't be put back in-calf at the appropriate time. Getting as close to a 365-day calving interval is, therefore, crucial.

“In addition, all replacement heifers calve down at 24 months. Over 90 per cent of the herd is now home-bred.”

Improving conformation is the top herd breeding priority for John at the present time.

“My present stock bull is Cill Cormaic Nevada, bred by David Larkin, from Birr in Co Offaly,” he says.

“The animal was purchased last May and his first calves are now on the ground. I am very pleased with their shape and ability to grow. I have also used some AI on the herd and have imported a number of embryos from Canada.

Selling young bulls is the lifeblood of John's business. Dungannon sales are his main market outlet. He is no stranger to success in the sale ring with prices of up to £3,000 a regular



occurrence. John hopes to have animals entered for sales the other side of the Irish Sea in the foreseeable future .

“I normally have 20 young bulls for sale annually, ranging in age from 16 to 24 months,” he confirms.

“I will sell one or two animals privately from home. There remains a strong demand for Hereford bulls from both dairy and suckler farmers. They want an animal whose progeny will be easily calved and that grow on to produce top quality beef.

“It’s up to pedigree Hereford breeders like me to meet this demand.”

John is happy to sit on the fence, where the poll versus horned debate is concerned.

“All the cattle in the Drumatee herd are horned,” he says.

“I happen to think they are that bit easier fleshed. But that is just my opinion. I also know many farmers would prefer not to de-horn calves. At the end of the day, it comes down to a matter of personal preference.”

But a principle John does hold dear to is the need to continually invest in the infrastructure of his farm.

“I am currently building new calving



Cows calve in both spring and autumn

and bull pens. It’s all about providing the animals with as much comfort as possible,” he comments.

“But improving the grassland performance from the farm is just as important as that of investing in new sheds.”

John concludes: “My cattle must prove they can perform at grass. This is the acid test. Drumatee is a fully performance recorded herd.

“The Hereford breed is well placed to meet the growing demand for grass-

fed beef. It’s not good enough to say we have the cattle to perform on forage diets; breeders need the figures to back these claims up in full.

“I am truly delighted with the successes achieved in 2018. My father Sean and I attended the Society’s annual awards dinner and we were extremely happy to be standing alongside the most long established and legendary herds in the Hereford breed. Hopefully, we can build on all of this for the future.”



Stock bull Cill Cormaic Nevada