

# GRAZING WITH ROBOTS



***The Gateway to Grazing Success***  
*Robotic milking & block calving*

*Bright farming is yours by choice.*





***“We’re predicted to grow 15% more grass than our previous system.”***

*Coral Senior, Eastfield Farm, Somerset.*

# The Gateway to Grazing Success

Coral & Matthew Senior run a block calving, robotic milking system where cows access pasture through a Lely Grazeway gate.

**Daily access to individual cow data and more time for grazing management are the main reasons The Seniors know they made the right decision installing robotic milkers on their block calving system.**

Nine months after installing four Lely A5 Astronauts and a Grazeway gate and Matthew and Coral Senior are convinced that the change will help them drive herd efficiencies, whilst saving on labour. “We’ve got milk fat, protein, somatic cell count and milk yield daily, compared to monthly when we were milking through a parlour,” explains Coral. “It’s already highlighted our lower yielding cows. It gives you predicted yield. Our highest yielding cows are predicted to do 8,000 litres per cow per year and our lowest is 3,000 litres. If we get to take out our bottom 10% we’ll soon increase average yields to 5,500 litres.”

***“Our aim is 450kg liveweight and 450kg of milk solids and the robots should help us get to that.”***

The herd at Eastfield Farm, North Perrott, is made up of 340 Jersey cross high EBI

Irish Friesians. Cows currently average 4,700 litres a cow a year with most calving in a nine week, spring block. There’s also a small late summer block to ensure milk is available for the

business’s three vending machines. This also helps robot efficiencies, although not essential.

## System change

The Seniors and share farming partner, Geoff Sayers, realised that the system needed to change when cow numbers hit 400. On an organic system, with a 350 acre grazing platform and 24/48 swingover, the system was struggling to support that number without upgrading the parlour, employing another team member and buying-in forage. Having kept an ‘eagle eye’ on spring block calving, robotic systems in Ireland, the business partners had a lightbulb moment. Matthew recalls: “We realised we could reduce cow numbers to 300-340 cows and push individual cow yields up slightly. We took Geoff to Ireland and we all had a light bulb moment. We didn’t need any more staff.” Shifting to robots also required less capital investment than a rotary with the same level of technology. Taking pressure off the system, and having access to cow performance data,

## FARM FACTS

- Share farming with Geoff Sayers of The Carswell Group.
- 340 Friesian x Jersey cows.
- Most calve in a nine week spring block. Small late Summer block.
- Supplying Arla on organic contract.
- 5% of milk sold through three vending machines under the Holy Cow brand.
- 4,700 litres cow per per year at 5% fat and 3.9% protein.
- 78% of production from forage.
- Three cases of mastitis per 100 cows.
- 154,000 cells/ml average somatic cell counts.

will allow the business to achieve its target of producing the same total volume of milk with around 100 less cows. Matthew adds: “Our average live weight is 435kg/cow and we’re producing around 430kg of milk solids at the moment. Our aim is 450kg live weight and 450kg of milk solids and the robots should help us get to that.” He believes robotic systems have a place on block calving, grass-centric systems, it just requires a new approach. He explains: “The misconception on robots is that you’ve got to be milking three times a day on 10,000 litres. We’re looking at it differently. We don’t need the three robot visits per cow or the 10,000 litres. We just want two milkings per day, but we’re having more cows through each robot. We average 85 cows per robot versus an average of 60.”

## Grazing

Cows are rotationally paddock grazed through a Lely Grazeway gate. The Seniors operate an ABC system with three eight hour grazing blocks. Depending on the time of day, the Grazeway gate will automatically draft cows one of three ways towards pasture. Cows tend to learn when the gate changes to send them to a new block and head back to the gate. If a cow is eligible to be milked, she’ll be drafted into the shed. If she’s eligible for grazing, she’ll be sent to a new block. With cows grazing up to two miles away from the shed, Coral believes grass allocation is key to success. This means allocating slightly less in the 6pm-2am grazing block so cows are encouraged to come back to the robot when they are naturally motivated

to be milked at around 2am. Back fencing has also proved an effective strategy in hitting target residuals of 1,500kgDM/ha. More time to focus on grazing management has also been reflected in better grassland performance. “We’re predicted to grow 15% more grass than our previous system,” adds Coral, who loves the fact cows are also now ‘free range’ and free to do as they wish.

## Fertility

Having activity meters on the cows has also proved beneficial for heat detection, removing the need to tail paint or PD cows, which has reduced vet time. Now, whether a cow is in-calf is based on her activity data. Coral says access to individual cow data has proved a revelation.

“Before, I’d have spent seven hours in the pit.

Now I spend longer analysing the cows and the data. I’m really enjoying that whole change.” she explains.

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All-in-all, the whole system is a lot more labour efficient. “With the system we have now, one person could do 1.5 hours in the morning and 1.5 hours in the afternoon. In Ireland, a lot of people have a second full time job,” Coral explains.



***Cows are grazed on an ABC system with three, eight hour grazing blocks.***

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