

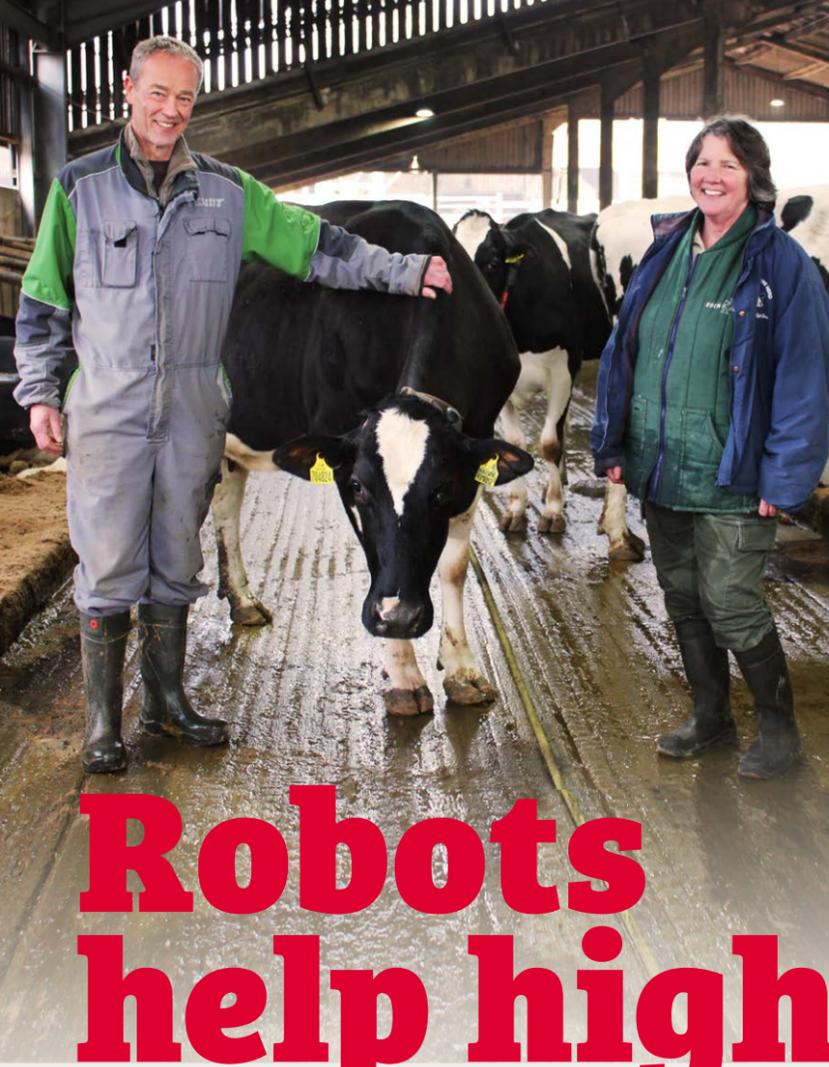
Hitting the high notes

Gold Cup finalist benefits from robots



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Robots help high yielders hit new highs

A move to robots from three times a day milking means the herd run by RABDF Gold Cup finalist, Joe Ives, is on track to realise a 4.6 litre a cow a day increase, coupled with improved udder health and lower antibiotic use.

Such improvements have been achieved, despite the herd already hitting some pretty impressive performance targets on a conventional milking system. In fact, in 2019 the herd was awarded the Chris May Memorial Cup for the UK herd with the highest average lifetime daily yield of 19.6kg. Joe puts the further uplift in yields down to improvements in building design and cow comfort, in

combination with greater milking frequency; cows are now averaging 3.3 robot visits a day. Cow numbers have also been reduced to lower stocking densities. It means cows are producing a milk yield average of over 40 litres per cow per day. Milk solids have also increased to 3.25kg per cow per day, thanks in part to ration changes which have been made to help meet the requirements of the farm's new milk contract with Arla. This has included boosting dietary protein quality by feeding more rape seed meal and feeding fat. "The robots have helped the cows meet their genetic potential," Joe says. "If we'd just tweaked the ration or the buildings, I'm sure they wouldn't have produced 40 litres a cow a day or those solids per day."

Upgrade

The old set-up was in need of investment and very labour intensive, hence the decision to update the buildings and move to robotic milking. Having made the "simple decision" to go with Lely Center Yeovil due to "reliability and service back-up," Joe and the team started working with Project Coordinator Alistair Cumings to discuss how the existing buildings could be adapted and improved (see back page). Joe also took the opportunity to reduce cow numbers from 300 to 240 as part of the overall drive to create a stress free cow environment. In December 2019, cows started milking through the four Lely A5 Astronauts. Cows are run in small groups of about 55 per robot to minimise stress and maximise lying and eating time.

Joe believes more time to rest and eat, combined with the luxury of deciding when they want to be milked, has led to a more 'relaxed' herd. It's also proved less labour intensive. The team is now three people less and everyone has much more manageable working hours of around 40-50 hours a week, compared to 60-70 hours previously. Joe says this should help attract more, highly skilled staff. "It's a lot more attractive to the older, more experienced person who doesn't want to be standing in a pit putting on cups 10 hours a day," he says. Herd Manager, Sally Bowden says the set-up allows the team to spend more time around the cows. "There is as much work, but it's different and I feel I'm achieving more with the work, rather than standing in the parlour," she says.

Health improvements

Sally and Herdsman Ric Mariano, have been blown away by the data available through the robots, which has enabled them to make more informed decisions on an individual cow basis. Sally explains: "My first port of call in the morning is The Health List. That brings up any milk conductivity issues or rumination issues."

Sally tracks rumination rates to get an idea of whether a cow is recovering well post-calving. A drop in rumination and activity suggests a cow is sick and flags her up for closer assessment. Milk conductivity has proved helpful in picking up the early signs of mastitis. A cow with an increase in conductivity will be assessed and stripped. If necessary, the team will give her non steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) and udder mint. Nine times out of ten this will stop the problem from escalating and avoid the use of antibiotics. Addressing issues early - coupled with improvements in the cow's environment - has helped reduce clinical mastitis rates. Antibiotic use across the farm has also dropped from 12.05mg/psu before the robots were installed to 7.62mg/psu in 2020.

Joe says all of the improvements have helped take overall herd performance to the next level. "Because of what we've done to the buildings and set-up with the robots, that's given us the confidence to go for The Gold Cup. The cows' performance was very good, but now their performance is excellent. We know we can get better and the robots will help with that," he says.

Performance improvements

	April 2018-April 2019 (start of building work)	January 2020 - January 2021	Improvement
Average milk yield per cow per day (litres)	38.1 litres	40.8 litres	+2.7 litres (Cows produced 42.6 litres a head in January which Joe views as "the new normal.")
Average milk yield per cow per year (litres)	12,320 litres	13,271 litres	+951 litres
Average milk solids per cow per day (kilos)	2.8kg (April 2019)	3.25kg (for the month of January 2021)	+0.45kg
Average milk solids per cow per year	869kg	1,000kg+ (expected in 2021)	+130kg
Mastitis cases per 100 cows	> 30 cases/100 cows	19 cases/100 cows (for the month of January 2021)	- 11 cases/100 cows (minimum)
Average bulk somatic cell count (cells/ml)	166,000 cells/ml	138,000 cells/ml	-28,000 cells/ml

FARM FACTS

- Herriard, Basingstoke, Hampshire - Tenant of the Herriard Estate
- 242ha total; 180ha for dairy, rest for arable
- 240 pedigree Holstein cows
- 13,300 litres sold per cow per year at 3.80% fat and 3.18% protein (last 12 months)
- January's costings: 42.6 litres/day sold at 4.17% fat, 3.24% protein, giving 3.25kg solids/cow/day
- 4,580 litres milk from forage
- Cows rationed for Mn +30 litres and fed up to 10kg a head of an 18% nut through the robot
- Diet consists of maize and grass silage plus a home-mixed blend. No soya used
- Highly Commended in both the High Performance Dairy and High Feed Efficiency categories at The 2021 Cream Awards.



Teamwork makes the dream work



The farm team.

*l-r: Lilian Love,
Ric Mariano, Joe Ives,
Sally Bowden,
Liam Pusey
and Phil Pusey.*

From the start, the Lely Center Yeovil team has worked closely with the farm's staff, nutritionist and consultant to help deliver the best possible results.

Project Coordinator, Alistair Cumings initially put forward various options to help Joe decide whether to go with a greenfield site or work with the existing set-up. In the end, adapting the buildings was the best solution on the tenanted farm.

Alistair worked with the farm's consultant Tim Mckendrick of The Dairy Group to improve and adapt the sheds for the robots. This included

re-levelling the floors, putting in new central feed passages, widening passageways and upgrading some of the cubicles to ensure they were all deep-bed sand.

Joe says: "Alistair is brilliant, really good. He listens to what you say and he's been doing it for so long, he's seen so many systems."

Lely Center Yeovil's Farm Management Support, Jon Eldridge also supports nutritionist, Mike Bray of Kite Consulting who has been doing the farm's nutrition for 20 years. Mike handles the core diet, whilst Jon monitors the Lely robot's dashboard and feeds back information to Mike and the farm team.

"Jon has been really helpful and worked very well with Mike," says Joe. "It's having the cooperation and Lely being open to cooperating with people we're already working with which I think is a real bonus."

Jon comments: "The teams there is fantastic. I talk to Joe and the team about the settings on the robot, how much access they have and I do the feed tables with Mike, although Mike takes the lead on the ration. We're always optimising and reviewing."

The specialist team at Lely Center Yeovil will guide you every step of the way when it comes to designing your new robotic set-up; from initial concept, to project coordination and ongoing support.

Project Coordinator, Alistair Cumings and General Manager, Ian Tossell will come out, discuss your goals and design a system that works for you, your cows and your labour. Farm Management Support, Jon Eldridge will also support you through the set-up process and work with you to achieve your targets. We also have 11 professionally certified technicians located throughout our area to ensure local support and backup, 24/7.

Lely Center Yeovil

📍 Deer Park Farm,
Babcary, Somerton,
Somerset, TA11 7DS
☎ 01935 577024

✉ info@fds.lelycenter.com
🌐 lely.com/gb/centers/yeovil
📱 [@lelyGB](https://www.facebook.com/lelyGB)

