

President's Medal Award 2022

Alison Lawrie



“You are at a recruitment fair. Convince the young people attending that entering the UK dairy industry would be a good career choice”

According to Dairy UK the UK Dairy Industry employees 74,000 people. In the House of Commons library, the UK Dairy industry statistics report published September 2021 states Dairy accounted for 16.4% of the total agriculture output in the UK in 2020. In a study conducted by AHDB in May 2021 98% of UK households buy liquid milk. The UK has always been at the forefront of animal welfare legislation and offers some of the best farm animal welfare standards in the world supported by the Farm Animal Welfare Summary Report conducted by NFU in 2018. As such, the UK dairy industry is a key section of our society and one we should all be proud to be a part of.

In light of recent world events with the war in Ukraine – food security has become the forefront of news headlines as has food sustainability. Likewise on the back of covid – UK Dairy industry workers were regarded as key workers as essential to the countries survival. Therefore, there has never been a better time to get involved in the UK dairy industry.

Changing Times

The total number of dairy cows in the UK has fallen from 2.6 million in 1996 to 1.9 million in 2020 – a 28% reduction, a similar trend but more extreme the number of dairy producers in the UK has fallen from 35,700 to 11,900 in 2020, a 67% reduction! There has been a rapid advance in genetics due to the rise in the use of Dairy sexed semen – AHDB reported in 2012 12.5% of the semen sold in the UK was sexed and in 2020 51.3% of semen sold was sexed. Higher reliability of information available for these sexed sires allows for more accurate selective breeding. As a result the average Dairy cow in the UK Produces 8,200 litres of milk per lactation , that is a 100% increase from the average Dairy cow in 1975 from a DEFRA report.

Cows are working harder so UK dairy farmers and their farming systems have had to essentially move forward or get left behind. The average sized UK Dairy herd has increased 97% since 1996, the very small family run farms have had to leave the industry as it has not been justifiable to upgrade and invest in their systems thus these larger modern automated dairy systems are producing more litres and as a result have exciting openings for young forward thinking people. In a survey conducted by RABDF, encouragingly, half of the labour employed on the surveyed dairy farms (54%) were aged between 16-34, with 75% of employees aged under 49 – well below the national average age in agriculture of 65.

Something for everyone

The Scottish Association of Young Farmers promote the slogan ‘Not just for those who wear wellies’ , and this applies to the UK Dairy industry as well. As mentioned cows are working harder than ever before; it takes a team of people, excluding – but not degrading the hard work from the on farm team, before a heifer reaches the age of first calving to even produce a litre of milk. Likewise, it involves a youngstock specialist for advising correct feed and milk/milk replacement; genetic consultant to recommend the correct sire for her mating; AI Technician to serve her; a vet to confirm her pregnancy and calving aftercare. Similarly, after the point of calving, a dairy cow nutritionist, Dairy engineers for milking equipment and feed technology maintenance and not forgetting people keeping an eye on the bottom line - your agricultural lawyers and accountants as well as all office staff at agriculture organisations. Therefore, there are a huge number of personnel who contribute to the productive cycle of a cow's life and compliment our modern dairy industry – providing exciting opportunities for many.

Some of these careers involve having specialist degrees but most careers in the UK Dairy industry and some of the countries best consultants have worked their way up regardless of their formal education. The late Sue Cope was a pivotal example of this, although being brought up on a farm it was her dedication to the industry for over 20 years along with her gained knowledge that led her to be appointed CEO of Holstein UK Group of companies in 2018. All that is required is a will to learn and the sky is the limit in terms of career possibilities.

Think outside the bottle

Talking about mental health is something that has rightly become a standard within our industry. @therapyforfarmers on Instagram ran by Naomi Wright of Berryholme Holsteins recently posted about the need to normalise self-care for farmers. This is a message that is getting across – more farmers are taking scheduled time off therefore this opens up part-time and flexible self-employed working for relief milking and general farm work that requires little to no experience and training can be provided quickly that was not necessarily available in the near past.

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I live on a dairy that milks 300 cows through a GEA 30:30 Rapid Exit parlour 3 times per day. The milking times are 3am, 11am and 7pm. With the exception of 1 full time employee all our milking staff have full time jobs away from the farm as the unusual hours of relief milking supports the ability to have this extra income source for these individuals - all from non-dairy farming backgrounds and a mixture of male and females. These sort of shifts for young people are often well paid compared to the equivalent working hours in other industries such as retail and the hospitality industry. According to Statsa.com the average hourly wage for a 18-21 year old in the UK in 2021 was £9.48. Relief Milking alone can earn an individual of the same age more than double this in some cases.

Equal Opportunities

Working in the UK dairy industry is not just restricted to males. According to NFU women make up 55% of the farming workforce in England and Wales if you include unpaid and family labour. Sadly only 16% of 'farm holders' are female. Countries in the UK are tackling this challenge. The Scottish government is currently offering grants to females in the industry 'The Women in Agriculture Practical Training Fund has been established by Scottish Government to support the personal development of women, providing them with additional skills to progress their careers and employment opportunities in Scottish agriculture beyond their current role.' I was fortunate enough to take advantage of this grant for a DIY AI Course ran by Semex UK that I would not necessarily have completed if it was not for this encouragement towards females in agriculture. This future vision has £300,000 of funding every year until 2024/25.

There are noticeably more vacancies available within the UK Dairy Industry now than ever before, due to Brexit and Covid making it increasingly difficult for European immigrant's to enter the UK for work. Dairy Farmers recognised change was needed in order to attract young people in the UK to work on farm. RADBF recently conducted a review and found 77% of Dairy Farm employers said they have made changes on farm to make employment opportunities more desirable. These changes include creating dedicated staff facilities, offering more time off, accommodation and pension packages.

Working towards being green

England have recently passed their new Agriculture bill and Scotland are consulting on their new Agriculture bill. The environment and climate are big priorities in these. The Scottish Government propose to commit to transform how we farm and become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture. To meet its target on the Climate change plan, Scottish agriculture has to reduce its emissions by 31% from 2019 levels by 2032, to help achieve this they are proposing the new Agriculture bill should include powers and other mechanisms to allow future payments to farmers to support the delivery of national climate change. At home, as a Nestle Producer we have committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030, this year we tested every acre of ground to see how much carbon our grassland was sequestering. Once the results come back along with our carbon footprint it will be interesting to see how close to carbon neutral our own farm is and if we are needing to implement any changes to our farming procedures to become carbon neutral. It is a great time to join the fight against climate change and be part of the solution and not contributing to the problem.

Conclusion

Producing milk was one of the pivotal roles in a worldwide pandemic, being able to be part of such an important area of society is an honour. In conclusion there is something for everyone be it from an office desk or manual labourer on farm; it is an inclusive industry for all. Our industry is modernising at such a quick pace compared to other parts of UK farming. Therefore, it's a great time to jump on the fast moving train that is the UK Dairy Industry to work towards the greater good together. As the well-known expression goes "Find something you love to do and you will never have to work a day in your life".