

Quality time on Ballamodha Moar Farm

By ffinlo Costain

Over the last generation dairy herds across Britain have been getting larger as milk production has intensified. As a result many people have become ever more concerned about the health and welfare of the cows that produce our daily milk.

The Isle of Man Creamery is a cooperative dairy on the Isle of Man serving just 51 busy farmers, each of which, in UK terms, has a small to medium size herd. Welfare is an important feature of all farming on the Isle of Man, but dairy producers in particular are proud of the way they treat their animals. The Creamery's Managing Director, Findlay Macleod, believes the standard of welfare, mixed with the lush island grass eaten by the Manx dairy herd, has contributed directly to the quality of the Creamery's products. 'As the main supplier of milk on the island's we have to make sure our produce is excellent quality, and my own belief is that our mature cheddar cheese range is one of the creamiest and highest quality cheddar ranges on the market in Britain today. We frequently win awards for our cheeses - and I'm sure welfare is a major factor in ensuring a top quality product.'

Belinda Coole (*picture available*) farms at Ballamodha Moar in the south of the Isle of Man under the shadow of South Barule, a beautiful mountain capped with an Iron Age fort and covered in magnificent purple heather every June. Ballamodha Moar is a family farm, which she runs with her husband Dougie, and their two teenage daughters, Kayleigh and Sarah.

The welfare of Belinda's cattle is particularly important, which is one of the reasons she was recently proud to show visitors from Compassion In World Farming around the farm. 'They certainly seemed pleased with what they saw,' says Belinda, 'and so they should have been! We take great care of every cow in our herd - they're part of the family too aren't they?'

I decided to visit Ballamodha Moar to find out exactly what goes on in the life of one of their dairy cows.

I arrive on the farm on a crisp morning just before seven o'clock. The yellow sun is climbing, and the sky is crisscrossed by diagonal streaks of high cloud. It's clearly going to be a lovely day, but right now it's still chilly and my breath turns to mist. I walk out to the fields with Belinda.

The calves are up early and ready for feeding. As we enter the field they crowd round a large barrel with rubber teets that Belinda's brought in on a trailer on the back of her quad-bike. The barrel's filled with milk and every calf knows it! They're young and skittish, but friendly and eager for a good meal.

That done it's time to milk the Coole's eighty Holstein-Friesians. Their udders are full, and they're waiting patiently at the field gate, surrounded by the steam from eighty pairs of bovine nostrils.

Belinda greets them and opens the gate and immediately they start to file quietly past, taking quick nose peeks at me - the stranger in their midst.

They're enormous creatures, with backs up to my shoulders - if they wanted to they could do some serious damage, but they're content and well looked after, so instead they make their way along the track through the farmyard and up to the back of the milking parlour.

So far as a black and white dairy cow is concerned milking is a necessity. Without regular milking at the right times their udders just keep on producing and become painful. It's essential that Belinda's family milk the cows regularly to ensure they live free from pain.

Times have changed since the days when cows were milked by hand into a wooden pail. Nowadays it only takes a couple of hours for Belinda to milk her herd - and each cow must wait her turn. The cattle move into the parlour sixteen at a time and file into two rows of eight on either side of a concrete well.

Each cow has a number, which is entered into a computer that locates her correct diet. Food then shoots down automatically into individual feeding troughs. This supplementary food is in addition to the lush grass they eat all day every day, and ranges from Manx grown peas and beans, to rolled barley and soya.

Having started the feeding Belinda walks up and down the well cleaning each cow's udders and checking for infections. Vacuum suction clusters are then attached to the udders, which immediately start to draw out the milk. The milking is clearly a pain free process as the cows are much more interested in feeding than they are in Belinda working around their back ends. When each cow has finished, the suction pump automatically falls off and Belinda cleans the udders again.

Then when each row of eight cows has finished milking they're released back outside to find their own way back to the fields - to a patch of new grass where they can rest and feed to their hearts' content. Isle of Man Creamery will collect their milk later in the day.

Each cow seems perfectly content to be living in such a green place, with fresh grass available on demand. They stand or lie and chew the cud, and later on this afternoon they'll be waiting by the gate again, ready for Belinda to take them for another turn through the parlour.

While intensive farming might be an issue elsewhere in Britain - it's still a pretty good life for a dairy cow here on the Isle of Man.