



The
GEORGE
Farm Vets

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The Grand Tour



A few weeks ago, I was lucky enough to visit the U.S.A as part of an Advanced Dairy Vet Group, kindly facilitated by Elanco.



We were based in Indianapolis, the capital of Indiana and home of the Indianapolis Colts (NFL) and Indiana Pacers (NBA). Our journey also took us briefly into Ohio, Kentucky and Illinois.

The aim of the trip was to visit and spend some time with a variety of American dairy producers and their vets to contrast, compare and knowledge share regarding daily running and the bigger management picture of these, often large scale, enterprises.



There are currently approximately 1.9 million milking cows in the UK. Over in the States this number rises to 9.4 million. There are oversupply issues at the moment, with many producers implementing caps, quotas and penalties to try and manage the growth and future of the industry. Almost 20% of these cows reside in California, Texas, Wisconsin and New York State. However, over recent years there has been a shift in geography, with a significant move to set up dairies in the central belts of the U.S. such as Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado. An infamous industry strapline being – “No Caps, no Quota, move your cows to South Dakota.”

In 1993 15% of U.S. milk was produced on farms milking over 1000 cows. In 2017 this number had risen to 40% and by 2025 it is estimated that 70% of milk produced in the U.S. will have come from farms milking over 1000 cows. The number of dairies has rapidly dropped from 65,000 in 2005, to 40,000 in 2017 and a predicted 33,000 by 2025. These figures consolidating the fact that although cow numbers may be stable or moderately increasing, the number of individual producers is on the decline. The mindset is definitely one of growth, increased size and production on a massive scale. It is generally thought that the main driver for the U.S. dairy industry is the manufacture of processed cheese, of which the biggest single user is McDonalds!



We saw a variety of farms. The smallest being the family run Flatrock Dairy, a 250-cow herd being run by two sisters. From a farming background they decided to set up their own unit and have been going for a few years now. The most striking feature talking to the owners was their complete drive to improve, re-invest and grow. There was no complacency, only a single-minded drive to be in the top 25% of producers – love it or hate it, benchmarking is becoming ever more frequently used as a tool for the assessment of production and efficiency in the farming industry.

Scaling up was the 1400 cow herd at Green Top Farms. Incredibly here the new born calves are transported away at 3 days old to a specialist heifer rearing unit in Texas – nearly 1400 miles away – a journey of over 20 hours. They return as springing heifers, ready to be calved down on farm. This idea of contract rearing, though not always so extreme, certainly was commonplace and allowed the skill and facilities at the dairy to be streamlined and concentrated on the husbandry of the milkers.

The most impressive visit was the day we went to Homestead Dairy. A robot milking farm like no other.



It comprised of 36 Lely Astronauts, each milking 60-70 cows, all under one roof. The herd was split into 12 sections, 3 robots in each serving 180-190 cows, with 2 sections (6 robots) for heifers. Central areas were used as extra handling facilities and dry cow and transition pens were also in the same facility. The whole building was mechanically ventilated, and cleanliness and hygiene were of the highest priority.



On our final day we visited Fair Oaks. This is farming on a vast scale. 15,000 milking cows. Split over 5 sites, each with its own 75-point rotary parlour, 3000 cows were milked 3 times a day. As you can imagine, on this scale, an important part of the business is farm tourism. The carefully and impressively constructed education centre and farm shop attracts many thousands of visitors and with 25 calvings a day to choose from there was always an expectant cow about to give birth in the 'birthing theatre' for all but the squeamish to watch.



The overwhelming impression that I got from this visit was one of the importance of understanding the cows' needs and requirements. Yes, they are expected

to perform. Calf growth rates were hitting 120kg by 60 days of age, average milk yields are 40 litres plus and they only get 3 chances to get back in calf, but that said cow (and calf) comfort was top of the priority list for all these producers. Sand beds, mechanical fans, water sprinkler systems, adequate feed space and access to **clean** water. Feed was presented and pushed up/refreshed continually. Young stock were clean and well looked after. Only a comfortable, contented cow will be able to reach her maximum potential and thus maximum profitability.

**Best wishes, have a nice day!
Ian.**



TB Biosecurity

Any farms involved in the forthcoming government backed badger cull project are reminded that, during the months of March and April, Natural England will be conducting on farm biosecurity visits. Around 10% of participants will be assessed and the visits will be announced to ensure that all correct preparations and requirements can be put into place. A Biosecurity checklist needs to be completed and kept on-farm.

For anyone not involved, it is still a good idea to discuss a TB biosecurity and control program with your vet as part of your Herd Health Plan, in order to reduce the risks of TB entering your herd.

Herd Health Plans

Don't forget to check when your Annual Herd Health Plan is up for review. Let us know in advance so we can prepare and have all the details and information required at hand. There have been some new additions to the Red Tractor Health Plan. Templates for the plan can be obtained from the farm office to be part completed in advance of your annual health review with your vet.

