Farmers Guardian
WWW.FGINSIGHT.COM
FRIDAY AUGUST 28 2015 £2.95
AGRICULTURE'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

LIVESTOCK

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Rearing calves has given Ben Moody the opportunity to start his own business and build his own home. **Jane Brown** finds out more.

Rearing calves gives chance to grow business

Not many people would relish the prospect of living in a mobile home, 313 metres (1,027ft) above sea level, while building a farmstead and rearing calves. But for Ben Moody this determined entry into farming has finally paid off, with an efficient calf rearing system and an energy-saving home to be proud of.

Having reared calves from a young age with his father, Mr Moody decided to develop his own business in 2004, obtaining planning permission to build three calf-rearing sheds on a greenfield site at Northcoombe Farm, Chipstable, Somerset. He started out bucket feeding his own calves to finish as barley bulls, but soon opted for milking machines, and joined the Mole Livestock Initiative which was taken over by Blade in 2005.

He says: "I had to live in a mobile home for three years before trying for permission to build a house, but did not have the money at the time so ended up in it for six years. It was just very cold."

However, his new timber-frame Scandia Hus is extremely energy efficient, and with a 3.9kW solar PV array on one barn netting above the solid sides which we can remove on warm days."

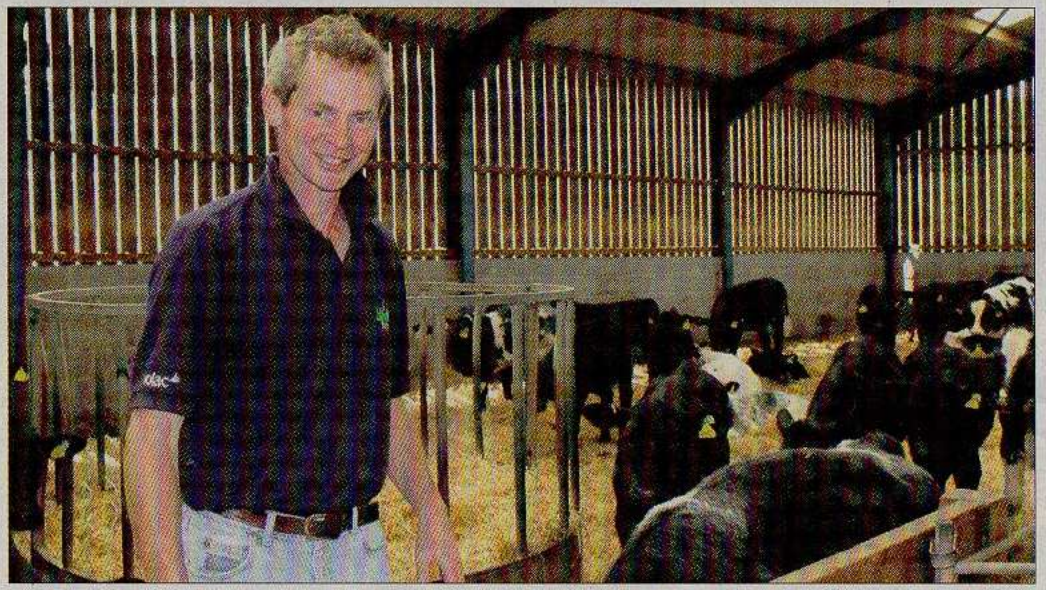
After overcoming those few issues, the system now operates extremely smoothly, with batches of 120 calves arriving over a 10-day period and kept in pens of 60. Mr Moody primes the milk machines to teach the calves how to suck, and they consume 19kg of powder on average over the milking period.

Weaning

Weaning is done gradually, and completed by day 43 on the farm, after which the calves are moved from the milk shed to the weaned shed and fed ad-lib nuts and barley straw. "They each eat about 220kg of nuts in total, and average a daily liveweight gain of 0.9kg, although some can do 1kg," says Mr Moody.

Aberdeen-Angus cross calves must be at least 45kg on arrival at the unit, with all other breeds 50kg plus. By departure they should be at least 110kg, and Mr Moody says they average 124kg. He provides housing, labour and straw, with Blade supplying the calves, feed, vet and medicines.

Mr Moody runs the system himself, drafting in part-time help when needed. "I have got just over 80 hectares and grow barley for straw as well as producing hay which I sell. I also buy back about 20 heifers a year from Blade, which I finish myself or sell as stores."



Ben Moody decided to develop his own calf rearing business on a greenfield site in Somerset in 2004.

Having an automated system makes it efficient from a labour perspective, but Mr Moody makes sure he checks calves at the same time twice-a-day. "The milk machine tells you if a calf is drinking slowly, not drinking enough, or is breaking off, but I am also looking out for droopy ears, dull eyes, puffing – any sign they are off-colour," he says.

Health challenges

The biggest health challenges are coccidiosis and mycoplasma. "We are seeing more and more mycoplasma coming in from the dairy herd, and it is difficult to treat successfully," says Mr Moody. "The calves look like they have had a stroke. Coccidiosis is also a challenge as it can live in the smallest amount of dung, so a really thorough clean out is vital – not just on this farm but on the finisher's unit as well."

This attention to detail is what makes or breaks the system, and Mr Moody has got it down to a fine art. "We are now onto batch 103, which means I have reared about 13,000 calves, and counting."

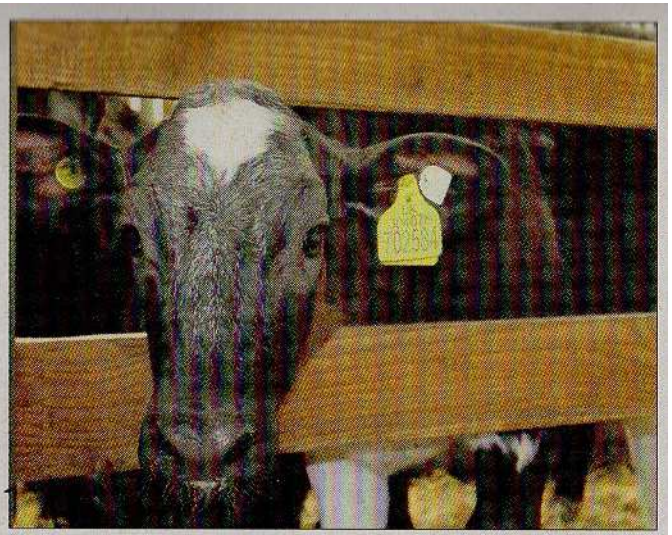
Calf rearing

- **Calf throughput:** About 13,000 since 2004
- **Arrival liveweight:** Aberdeen-Angus, 45kg minimum; other breeds, 50kg+
- **Age on arrival:** Two to four weeks
- **Weaning:** At six weeks on-farm
- **Calf milk replacer:** 19kg/calf
- **Rearing nuts:** 220kg/calf
- **Departing liveweight:** 124kg
- **Average liveweight gain:** 0.9kg/day

to run the milk machines, the whole system is very green. "The milk machines take 3-3.5kW to run, so we are one of the few people who use all the electricity we produce. We also use £2,500 of mains electricity a year, but I think each calf probably only costs us £1 in electricity to rear."

Mr Moody put in a borehole after losing a couple of calves to copper poisoning, which turned out to be a build up of high copper in the mains water, milk powder and feed. He also took advice from buildings and ventilation adviser Jamie Robertson, who suggested raising the ridge on the sheds to tackle pneumonia.

"Although we are quite high up, the sheds are protected on most sides by trees, and we use micro-



Calves consume 19kg of powder on average over the milking period.