

Ben Bennett, Lower Norton Farm

South West Calf Rearers



The chance to secure a regular income and the satisfaction of producing quick results with livestock, are Ben Bennett's sound reasons for deciding to grasp the opportunity of becoming a Contract Calf Rearer for Blade Farming SW. Having made this decision and also made some key changes to the management of their farm, Ben and his parents have been fine tuning their farming system to optimise the performance on their 90 hectare mixed farm in East Cornwall.

Ben first approached Blade Farming about calf rearing in 2006, having joined the business after completing an Agricultural degree at Seale Hayne. A thorough review of the farm and the options open, indicated that their needed to be an alternative enterprise on the farm, which could utilise some of the buildings available. Calf rearing was an obvious choice, and Ben's enthusiasm to make this new enterprise successful has been rewarded with consistently good animal performance within the unit.

Calves arrive on the unit between two and four weeks old from the Blade Farming calf collection centre at Honiton in East Devon. The day after arrival, the calves are weighed, vaccinated with Rispoval4 intra-nasal vaccine and tagged with an electronic tag linked to the Electronic Identification (EID) system. The unit rears 100 calves in each batch, and for ease of management Ben "would like all these calves arriving in one load, and have two or three days of madness rather than have the intake spread over two weeks." Calves are fed on milk replacer twice a day for the first week before being moved onto once a day feed. Blade have a calf rearing ration formulated to their own unique specifications, and this as well as fresh, bright barley straw are available for the calves all the time. Calves are dis-budded and castrated if necessary after about two weeks on the unit. The Bennett's are always keen to help other people learn and get involved in farming, and they work with the local Duchy Agricultural College to give the students the chance to learn basic stock husbandry tasks. "If you have got 100 calves to dis-bud, a bunch of willing volunteers are well worth having" says Ben, "and it saves me a lot of time as well!"



Calves are weaned completely when they are eating at least 1.5 kgs a day of dry feed and they receive their second dose of Rispoval4 soon after. These extra few days on milk reduce the check in growth rates associated with weaning, ensuring that Ben keeps the calves growing and get the results that he is striving to produce. The final dose of vaccine is administered three weeks later, often as the calves are having their final weighing before leaving the unit.

Commercial calf rearing is a new experience for Ben, and the initiatives and partnerships that Blade Farming have in place have undoubtedly helped the success and the performance of the calves at Lower Norton Farm. The working relationship with Rob Drysdale and Pat Shaw from Westpoint Vets has been extremely useful to Ben. He is able to discuss health issues with either of them at any time, and between them and Blade a full Herd health plan has been drawn up for the calves which addresses specific problems that he has encountered. This health plan is regularly reviewed with the Vets to make sure that calf health is not compromised. Other partnerships with vaccine suppliers Pfizer and feed suppliers Mole Valley Farmers are also continuing to prove to be beneficial.



Always keen to learn more about calf rearing, particularly if it helps to improve the performance in his own unit, Ben has welcomed the setting up of the 'South West Calf Rearers' group. As part of the Farm Health Planning Initiative, the group have regular meetings and forums that give all the Blade Calf rearers the chance to meet up and discuss with each other any issues that they have with calf rearing. Importantly as well, all the units are now benchmarked with each other, so rearers can compare their own unit's performance with their colleagues. This makes for interesting, positive discussions and often leads to ideas that the Rearers can take home and implement on their own units. Discussions and topics for Speakers are generally aimed at improving calf health and therefore performance in the units, as the majority of the calves that pass through the units go on to Blade franchised finishing units. The Finishers, like the calf rearers, also have tight performance criteria to meet, and health problems during the rearing stages are quick to show up on the finishing units.

The unit at Lower Norton farm has made good use of the buildings available. As Blade provide calves and the majority of the inputs, it does not tie up too much capital for the Bennett's, and has given Ben the chance to establish his 'own' enterprise on the farm. Labour saving equipment such as the purpose built calf crush, linked to the EID system is extremely useful. Automatic



identification of the calves and recording of weights, mean Ben can easily monitor calf growth rates from the luxury of the armchair. The hand held recording device that he also uses makes treatments easy to record, and these too can be downloaded to his computer at the push of a button. All the data is transferred electronically to the central database in the Blade office where the key performance criteria are assessed and records are stored for further interpretation.



Performance of the calves is very important for the unit to remain viable. Growth rates in excess of 1.0kg / hd / day have been achieved, and it is Ben's aim that all the calves in a batch should exceed this and at the same time keep within his limits for feed and milk powder usage. Attention to detail will determine whether or not this is achieved, but with all the expertise that is available on the unit it is a very realistic target. Some actual performance figures for calf batch numbers 6 and 7 are shown in the table below.

Batch no.	6		7	
	Target	Actual	Target	Actual
Performance				
Days on Farm (d)	77	83	77	82
DLWG (kg/d)	0.9	0.87	0.9	1.04
Milk Powder (Kgs)	22	20	22	19
Dry Feed Intake (Kgs)	158	155	158	178.5
Arrival Weight (Kgs)	50	58	50	55
Departure Weight (Kgs)	110	130	110	133
No. of calves	100	100	100	100
Losses	1	1	1	3

Performance figures for Lower Norton Farm

Ben enjoys calf rearing and finds it very satisfying to turn around a bunch of calves in less than 12 weeks. "It's fantastic to see them going up onto the lorry as a level bunch of calves, knowing that I have done all I can to produce healthy calves for the finishers. For beef producers to prosper we all need to play our part in the production chain, and by being a Blade calf rearer, I believe I have a part to play in improving the quality of meat available on the Supermarket shelf." South West calf rearers all have their part to play in the production chain, and the initiative plans to keep these rearers at the forefront of the calf rearing profession.



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