**RISING TO THE CHALLENGE**

Guernsey farmers describe how their businesses have thrived in a competitive environment.

**Julian Ogier, Le Hechet Farm, Castel, Guernsey**

Rising to the challenge ….. Yes we are tackling some challenges and coming out well on the other side.

Thriving! I’m sure it is going to happen shortly. Forever optimistic - that’s a good way to describe farmers throughout the world isn’t it.

What do we mean by thriving? Is it the shiny tractors in the yard, the big house, the Caribbean holiday (I have to throw this one in as this has very quickly become a bit of an addiction for our family), having a business that continues to move forward or is it being able to offer our family a good standard of living and the chance to take on a sound viable business if they so wish?

In reality thriving is best described by or achieved by a combination of so many things and here in Guernsey we are very lucky to have most of these within our grasp.

I know that a lot of people looking at our dairy industry from outside the island might say “how can you fail to thrive with a milk price like that “!

The truth of the matter is that every industry looks better or easier to run when looked at from the outside.

Dairying in Guernsey has its own set of challenges …availability of rented land, land prices, labour prices, and no access to livestock markets, freight charges for every tonne of goods shipped in; we all have our challenges wherever we farm.

Maybe the one we all share, and in my mind of such great importance is that of arresting the fall in breed fertility and maintaining genetic diversity but I’m sure that people far more qualified to cover this topic will expand on this .

However although stating these negative points I must point out that I would not like to be farming anywhere other than in Guernsey.

The dairy industry can be viewed as a chain and here in Guernsey we are very lucky that every link is strong. The chain is only as strong as the weakest link they say.

We, in Guernsey have committed farmers, strong political backing from the islands government , a quality state owned dairy handling the pasteurisation and manufacture of our dairy products, a good milk delivery network, a very strong loyal customer base and not forgetting the main item a fantastic consistently improving , pedigree Guernsey cow.
If I can elaborate a little on some of these items - committed farmers, with only 16 or 17 of us I have asked myself before, ‘am I very privileged or just plain daft?’ Just in case you are wondering, the answer is privileged. The fact is that today’s farmers are in the game because they want to be and feel that they are doing a good job.

I read in the farming press a few months ago that committed farmers don’t need encouraging, as they won’t be discouraged.

Today’s farmers are aware of the importance of connecting with their customers, displaying their awareness of environmental issues, and despite what some may want you to think, the absolute importance of keeping our iconic cow in conditions of high welfare.

If I can turn to the point on strong political backing. Very often we can look here and quickly jump to the conclusion that politicians are interfering in issues that they may not have an in depth knowledge about (have I got away with that? You know what I mean don’t you!) The truth of the matter is that here in Guernsey politicians have a good grasp of all the key issues that affect us.

They understand the need to maintain the small amount of open land we have left, although the law does seem to lack teeth here, large gardens, tree planting and amenity use of agricultural land does concern us.

They recognise the need to maintain diversity in our business and most of all they understand the importance of maintaining the truly iconic breed of Guernsey cattle.

The States of Guernsey offer this industry many things which can too easily be overlooked. It’s not just the 50% share in costs they offer in some farm services such as AI and milk recording, it is a great number of things, and farmers are truly appreciative.

Back to the chain and the dairy is my next link.

Over the last few years the dairy has moved itself onto a strong business footing, an experienced board has shown consistent profits which are good for all of us. They feel they are making money to reinvest in the business. We feel we can squeeze a few pence out of them next time the price review comes around again.

While we are talking about the dairy it is a good point to link in with a strong customer base.

We have always said that local people want local milk but over the last decade many things have changed in Guernsey, many of the major customers for milk, some of the supermarkets, most of the business sector, are not locally owned and although we daren’t say it out loud we did question just how loyal these people would be if it came to the push. (I am sure you are aware that milk on the shelves in Guernsey carries a higher price than Channel Island milk in the UK).
Well only a few months ago islanders were put to the test and what a great result.

The dairy suffered a breakdown of an essential item in the pasteurization plant and were unable to process any liquid milk for a couple of days.

Not wanting to let islanders down, the dairy and some of the supermarkets were given permission to import a small amount of liquid milk. Customers in the main avoided this imported milk, as though it were radioactive. One supermarket apparently asked the supplier to come and pick “the stuff up” as it just wasn't selling.

After the plant was repaired supermarkets were slow to restock with our milk as it took time to move the small amount of imported milk they had. It was likened to trying to sell red roses the day after Valentine’s Day or trying to sell brussel sprouts after Christmas.

People know what they like around here… and it’s not change!

All local farmers have to work at maintaining this loyalty and right now we have to level out our production profile. Our spring flush is too great and our winter dip has resulted in a small amount of milk being imported to maintain supply. Loyalty will be very quickly eroded if we cannot keep production in line with demand and with few surplus cows about it’s a fine line between just enough and not enough,

This autumn we are about to be paid on a seasonality basis rather than flat line or fixed price system.

Would you call this a carrot or stick approach, a bit of both I suppose.

Over the past few months farmers have digested this new pricing scheme and on the whole have accepted it. It will bring benefits to all parties concerned.

I must get back to my topic thriving…..in a challenging environment

My wife and I started our business 17 years ago at a time when dairy farming in Guernsey was looking like it had a bumpy road ahead of it. Remembering my earlier point of not being discouraged, I had worked on a dairy farm when I left school at 15 then I went to agricultural college in Dorset in the early eighties. Returning to the island I took a job with an agricultural merchant. This business changed hands and I left and moved into a completely different office job ….. I hated it. I think the boss could tell because I got the bullet, quite quickly ….. lack of commitment was stated….. I agreed whole heartedly.

Luckily for me my wife’s parents had a successful farming business (the rumour that I married her for her parents land holding is just that, a rumour). Fortunately Katherine’s parents gave us the opportunity of taking over the farm and we jumped at the chance.
We invested heavily in the early years, which I am very glad about now. But one step at a time, new cubicle house new slurry store, first step. Then extra cows from Bill Luff bringing us up to 70-80 cows. Next came a new milking plant and then another shed. Banks were keen to lend then and parents were keen to secure loans. I don’t know if either would take me on now!

We continue to keep our cow numbers around this figure as this suits our available grazing, our style of management, and our family input of labour, and this returns a satisfactory income.

Seven years ago we added an ice cream enterprise to our core business. My wife and her sister run this arm of things. It’s like a lot of good idea’s, a farmer thinks of the idea, gets all enthusiastic then leaves his wife and her sister to do all the work. My involvement is transferring the milk from the milk tank to their ice cream making room.

However, I never get to see the money this business makes, I do get my holiday though and Katherine gets, well, whatever she likes! Thank goodness she’s not here.

Thriving - Yes we are, nice house, nice holiday, viable business and making money. Not a vast amount but I think farmers are a group of people who know how to appreciate everything life has to offer and above all know the difference between ambition and greed.

Thriving yes without a doubt.

Challenges yes … Bring them on, we won’t be discouraged.