

Farming for God's creation

Award winning famer, **Neil Rowe** talks to Christine Zwart about his vision, his cows and his Christian faith



As soon as somebody says 'that can't be done', then I immediately look to see if I can prove him or her wrong. In that sense I guess I have always been different from my contemporaries.

I am the manager for part of the Cumber Estate with responsibility for the livestock. I came here straight from college in 1980 and set up a new beef unit finishing up to 2000 cattle a year which would probably be called a mega farm today.

To start with I was at the high end of tech always looking for new ways of doing things both in terms of science, physical production and financial performance. I have always believed 'The cutting edge is right next to the bleeding edge!'. What I try to do is balance on the cutting edge without getting cut too often.

A change of direction

From about 1980 to 1990 I did that with beef, and I then took on the challenge of a bringing a dairy herd with a below average production to being one of the top of four or five herds in the country in terms of production. But when I was 40, I woke up one morning and realised that what we were doing was unsustainable. We were milking cows three times a day. After three years it became obvious that it was wearing me out, and was probably pushing the cows beyond their natural limits.

Supermarkets just keep pressing the price of milk down all the time, so that milk has

been sold at or below the cost of production for most of the last 25 years – it just didn't make sense any more to carry on like that. We changed our American Holstein cows for Brown Swiss which have never been modified by geneticists in the way that Holsteins have and we converted the farm to organic and put in a voluntary milking system to allow the cows to milk themselves. We took the decision in 1998 and it took two years to implement it.

Happy cows was what it was all about and giving them the freedom to choose when they want to be milked.

Happy cows was what it was all about and giving them the freedom to choose when they want to be milked. Cows are creatures of habit and if you visited the voluntary milking system at 5 pm in the afternoon you would be likely to see one of the same five cows being milked each time. The system runs 24/7 on its own without the need for a person being there. Understanding how cows think, and persuading them to want to use the technology is what I brought to the development of the concept of freedom milking. When our system was installed in 2000 about 100 other systems had been installed in the UK but only 12 of them had lasted. The voluntary milking system is about

freedom and allowing the cows control to make their own choices. The problem is that farmers like to be in control!

I was brought up in Christian family with a Brethren background but I went away from that as a teenager as often happens. I saw hypocrisy and behaviour in church leadership that I thought was unacceptable, but I don't think I ever lost my faith in God.

I left the Berkshire College of Agriculture in July 1980 and came here and married Jill in

1984. When Emma was born the next year she had a few problems which gave us a reason to get back in touch with the spiritual side of life. Then one night a good friend of ours now, but who at the time was a pretty scary professor, knocked on the door and we invited him in for a cup of tea and after about an hour he challenged Jill and I and said 'Have you ever been baptized in the Holy Spirit?' He prayed for us and we said a prayer round this table and life has never been the same since.

I have always seen farming as being part of working with God's creation and being responsible for its sustainability and stewardship. There is a verse in Genesis

about the land being fruitful and man being given dominion over it. I think that unfortunately the word dominion has been shaped by its connotation with Empire but the original meaning was about responsibility for what had been placed in your care.

Destroying the planet

So I have tried to farm always with that in mind but there came a point in the late nineties when I could see that the way we were farming and the way the whole industry was going was destroying the planet. Climate change was a reality and we were being pressed by multinational companies, supermarkets and by government policy to move down the road of high input. Life has gone out of the soil and the only way a lot of farms can now function is by putting seeds in the ground and then feeding and maintaining those crops by adding chemicals. This removes the soil's ability to be water retentive so in a drought or in a flooding situation there is no capacity in the soil to hold on to the water. That's why organic farming is attractive to me. It is by no means a specifically Christian philosophy but it incorporates a lot of sensible sustainable farming practices.

In 2008 the family who own the Estate said let us use everything we have learned about dairy farming and see if we can apply it to beef which is the Cinderella of the farming industry. If you have a dog and a stick then you are a high tech farmer in beef! So I spent two years developing

a completely new way of thinking which combined lots of things that were already out there but putting them into a system.

The milk has now gone and we have set up a beef unit with which we have won two national awards. We are producing a fantastic quality beef with half the carbon footprint per kilo of the UK average.

Farming is a difficult way of life. A farmer commits suicide every four or five days. It is partly the isolation, and also a reflection of ongoing financial pressures. Farmers also feel constantly under attack and the public read all about it and believe it, instead of celebrating one of the most successful industries we have.

Fellowship groups are key

I am a pretty laid back, optimistic sort of person. If you are at work and you are not smiling then something is wrong. I have always seen life as chapters and when one chapter closes another one will open. Key for me are the fellowship group we attend every week and two prayer triplets with people I trust absolutely. A lot of men don't have that sort of support behind them.

When I retire what I have created here is not my legacy. The legacy, if there is one, is in terms of the people I have interacted with along the way. We have had hundreds of students here and I have lectured on the freedom milking system and sustainable beef production in the UK, Ireland, USA and across Europe. We have tried to share our knowledge and expertise, and not just keep it to ourselves

As a family and as a church we support a

small Christian charity working in Moldova. Moldova is the poorest country in Europe and for seven or eight years we have been carrying out social action there, by raising funds here. For instance, in 2008, when a terrible drought affected Moldova, we went to the whole community in Marcham and said 'People in Moldova are starving' and we raised £6000 in a couple of weeks to buy and deliver seed and irrigation to get the whole system going again in two villages. It is an example of a small rural church making a difference in the world. 

about the writer

Neil Rowe is Manager of Manor Farm, Marcham where his knowledge of high-performance dairying and beef production have won him national recognition. In 2004 he was awarded a Nuffield Scholarship. He is an Ambassador for the Send a Cow a charity that works with poor African farmers to promote self-sufficiency through the development of small sustainable businesses. For 7 years Neil was churchwarden at All Saints, Marcham and he is lay chairman of Abingdon Deanery. He is married to Jill who is lay Youth and Children's Minister for the Parish and they have three children.

Pictured below: *The beef herd with The Beef House in the background. The building has been designed by Neil Rowe with cow psychology in mind. They even have a rotating hair brush that is activated by nudging and goes into reverse should their tails get caught up!*

