

Thomas Edwards – Young Farmer Focus

Thomas Edwards is a third-generation dairy farmer with a passion for organic farming that has resulted in him taking a leading role in the family's 680-acre organic farm on the Gloucestershire/Monmouthshire border.

The business, which includes an organic dairy herd, beef enterprise and farm shop, has embraced change and 29-year-old Thomas now manages all the day-to-day activities on the farm and its six employees.

The organic dairy enterprise encompasses a herd of 240 pedigree Holstein and Brown Swiss cattle, and 155 followers, with milk being sold to OMSCo (Organic Milk Suppliers Co-operative).

Severndale Farm has supplied OMSCo for more than a decade, having taken the decision to convert to organic over 15 years ago, following years of conventional dairy farming. A decision which was driven by the farm's suitability to organic production, including its abundant clover leys.

"The dairy herd currently produces about 7,500 litres/cow, with an average fat content of 3.90% and protein content of 3.15%. The herd is on a predominantly forage based system, with the cows only being housed for a couple of months over the winter period," explains Thomas. "In addition to a significant area of grassland, we also grow some whole crop barley and peas, and straight barley."

Upon leaving Hartpury college in 2004 having spent a year studying for a National Award in Agriculture, Thomas gained experience across a variety of different farms, including a year working in America, driving a combine from Texas to Canada as part of the '2,000 mile harvest' with Beckley Harvesting.

Opportunities to broaden horizons

When OMSCo organised a young farmer exchange trip to America last year with long-term partner Organic Valley, the world's largest organic-only food company, for the sale and distribution of organic dairy products, Thomas jumped at the opportunity to return to the US.

"We're part of OMSCo's US premium pool. OMSCo produces dairy products which are USDA certified organic under the EU-US equivalency agreement and we farm to that standard," he explains.

"Therefore, it was great to have the opportunity to go back to America to see where some of our milk

ends up in the form of cheese and other dairy products.”

“Over the past four years, OMSCo and Organic Valley have developed a highly successful international partnership, which is based upon a shared vision to increase the profile of organic dairy across the world.

“Therefore, when the idea for the exchange was established, I knew it would be a fantastic opportunity for the young members to start building relationships with one another for the future.

“It was great to meet our farmer member counterparts in the US, and experience the sheer passion they have for organic farming. I learnt first-hand how they cope with the different climate, soils and varied environments. They follow the same farming principles and share the same values as us, and their enthusiasm inspired me to look at introducing some new homeopathic techniques at home.

“I’ve since introduced seaweed to the feed, and have also tried feeding shots of organic yoghurt for the treatment of calf scours.

“However, the best part of the tour to America was having the opportunity to spend time with other young farmers, and since we’ve returned I’ve been able to build on the friendships made through OMSCo’s ‘NextGen’; a group which is run for the young farmers, by the young farmers within our co-operative.

“Our vision is to learn from one another and share ideas, and being part of this group makes me feel that I’m part of something bigger than my individual farm.

“As members, we’re an open-minded group, and so if there’s a question we want to discuss, there’s always someone experienced to give practical advice. It’s all about working together to come up with positive solutions.

“There are regular training days held and farm walks taking place, but the social side is important too. We’re building relationships and in turn, a network of young organic farmers that will influence the future of our co-operative.”

More than just organic dairy

In addition to the organic dairy herd, Thomas also has a herd of 120 Aberdeen-Angus and Hereford beef cattle including youngstock. All the bull calves are sold before they’re weaned, and the heifers are kept and reared, and the meat sold through the on-site farm shop - a successful diversification

project for the Edwards family.

“We’ve always kept a few beef cattle on the farm, but a key driver in us boosting the size of the herd was the farm shop, and the demand that came as a result of it and on average we’re now supplying one animal a week,” Thomas explains.

The shop, which was initially an aspiration of Thomas’ father, has continued to grow month-on-month since its establishment three and a half years ago, and also scooped FARMA’s ‘small farm shop of the year’ award in 2016.

“The shop has gone down a treat with the locals, and is very well supported. This past Christmas was fantastic, as we held our first ‘proper’ Christmas fayre with the local community. This included stalls selling items from local craftsman, a children’s area with Santa’s elves running colouring workshops, and local brewery tastings.

“I’ve also taken responsibility for Open Farm Sunday, which we’ve run for four years, purely to help the local community understand what we do as farmers.

“We have a lot of footpaths running through our land and often get questions from walkers about the farm, so we saw this as an opportunity to open up the farm gates and let everybody see what we do. Again, it’s been a great success for us with more than 3,000 visitors last year, which is over seven times the original attendance numbers.

“We offer the local community and school children the chance to see a cow be milked for the first time, and to get up close to a tractor. I think it’s important to give them an opportunity to understand where their food comes from, as many children under ten think that milk comes from a supermarket, and without these events they might not know any different.”

The future

Thomas aspires to grow the dairy herd in years to come, as well as making the farm completely self-sufficient in terms of energy and feed.

“We operate a combination of paddock grazing to provide the cows with fresh grass every day, and a short winter housing system where they’re fed on a total mixed ration.

“The cows receive a mixed ration of our own home-produced feed and small proportion of purchased protein such as organic soya and pulses. However, it’s a future aspiration for everything consumed on

the farm to be grown from the farm, making the most of what we already have, and becoming more efficient.

“We’ve also considered renewables as a potential energy source for us, such as a wind turbine or a small scale anaerobic digestion plant.

“Over the next twelve months, I think that the organic dairy market will remain stable, and I’m looking forward to building the young farmer’s network within the co-operative over this time.

“If I could give any advice to my fellow young farmers across the industry, it would be to stress the important of cross-farm learning, and travelling to experience different farming systems and environments, as these experiences have all helped me in the management role that I’m in today.

“In terms of business advice, I’d recommend always shopping around for a better deal, and taking the time to choose the right staff, and treat them well. Your employees will help you to look after the farm, so it’s important to look after them in return.”