



FARMING IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS: CASE STUDY SERIES

Hatton Manor Farm, 'Proper Good Dairy' in the Shropshire Hills

INTRODUCTION

Jaci and Tristan Dale have been running their organic dairy operation together for over 15 years. Hatton Manor Farm operates as a Spring Block Calving dairy, with calving of their 280 cows running from March through May. The cows follow the natural rhythm of the season as they go into their lactation alongside the increase in grass growth.

In addition to being efficient, this dovetails nicely with the organic system because most of the milk being produced is from forage - pastures rich in grasses and nitrogen-fixing clover. Where concentrates are necessary, they're certified organic, with strict standards. This is an important detail for Jaci:

"It's something that we sometimes forget about when we're talking about organic food, that it isn't just the way the animals are treated or the way that I farm on my farm, but it's the feed that I buy...the organic standards are more than just sprays and fertilisers. There's all kinds of things that they have to fit in an environmental way."

Years ago, the Dales did briefly return to conventional non-organic production because it made economic sense at the time, but they quickly found that it wasn't their preference and re-certified. They think of organic as 'the original regen' - "it is the only farming and food standard that's enshrined in law" - and it's a whole-farm system that aligns with their values, farming approach and business model.

BUILDING A BRAND

Proper Good Dairy is a well-known name across Shropshire, and the Dales have no regrets in having paid for the services of a consultant to help with brand design from the outset. "I think for anybody who's wanting to move into direct sales, getting that right is really important", Jaci explains.

They use social media to market their product and share their story, and have done very little paid advertising, with the exception of the occasional parish magazine, which they feel is an important way to connect with their local surrounding communities.

Mostly though, they rely on word of mouth for their sales, with taste, freshness, low food miles and their organic status being what separates them from the crowd.



OUTREACH

Jaci and Tristan have had CEVAS (the Countryside Educational Visits Accreditation Scheme) training, which supports farmers with the tools, knowledge and practical guidance needed to host safe and impactful farm visits for young people.

They also participate in Open Farm Sunday as a way to engage with the public and increase the visibility and understanding of farming. They feel that this is essential in a time when there is so much confusion and misinformation in the media about food and farming.

They are keen to continue to develop their on-farm education offer.



PROPER GOOD DAIRY

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A UNIQUE SALES MODEL

Proper Good Dairy is known across South Shropshire for the novelty of its 'milk vending machines'. This initiative began in 2019 as a creative response to an opportunity offered by Shropshire Council when closing out an EU funded project.

"My husband doesn't do things by halves" Jaci explains, "...so it was never going to be just one milk vending machine at the farm gate. Long story short, we had four milk vending machines in different places." This increased as their following grew, and customers became accustomed to using the refillable glass bottles, building on the desire for 'plastic-free'. This has since expanded, with the map on the website populated with dozens of little milk bottle icons signifying the many independent shops and machines across the county - even as far as Wolverhampton - stocking Proper Good Dairy, including the farm itself.

"We're now supplying about 60 shops altogether. So we've grown even over the last six months - our sales have more than doubled, which is incredible, really."

But with 280 cows, the Dales are producing more milk than can be sold directly, so are also members of an organic cooperative called *Organic Herd*. So the vast majority of their milk is collected from the farm gate to go into a range of organic products for commercial sale. They have had a positive experience with the cooperative, feeling that its an organisation that looks after its producers.



CUSTOMER CARE DURING COVID

When Covid hit, five of the six vending machines remained accessible to the public, but the Dales had to get creative to meet the needs to customers.

"We decided to do these little pop ups in two places, Craven Arms and Clun. We bottled milk, took it to those places, set up in the car park, took various things that we were also selling cheese and butter, and we sourced some veg boxes from somebody that we knew."

'Food Loops' and pop ups like this are an example of how producers can be nimble during crisis and respond in creative ways to support both their communities and fellow producers.

BUILDING TRUST

For a time as they were setting up the business, Jaci traded at a local farmers' market as a way to share their story and build awareness of their product - a really valuable experience to connect with customers face-to-face, which has been lost in the era of large centralised retailers.

The Dales have has customers ask questions about freshness from the vending machines, or feel like its extra effort to rinse the reusable bottle, but through consistent quality and good communication about how to properly use the vending machines, they have built trust with a loyal customer base. They acknowledge that the vending machine model doesn't appeal to everyone, and so having bottles in shops with 'use by' dates stamped on them offers an alternative so that there are options for every preference.

News about the Bovaer feed additive being used in Arla milk trials across the UK has brought a great deal of attention to the dairy industry, with many people contacting the Dales for comment. They feel that their recent increase in sales may be partly due to this concern over invisible additives, and issues surrounding transparency and traceability from large companies: ***"People are suddenly realising that food isn't necessarily all the same, and when you buy direct you can be much more confident that what you're buying is what you expect it to be."***

