

Introduction



By Wilma Finlay

David woke me up at 3am and said ‘That’s it, we’re giving up’. I didn’t need to ask what he meant because it was all we had been thinking about for weeks. We couldn’t actually talk about it without arguing. Our attempt at keeping the dairy calves with their mothers had failed.

The stillness of our bedroom on that crisp March night in 2013 was in stark contrast to the crushing chaos of the dairy shed, just a few minutes’ walk from the farmhouse. With the inevitable decision now made, a weight lifted off my shoulders as my heart broke.

For the previous five years we had been working towards a complete transformation of our dairy farming system. Our goal was to put an end to the standard industry practice of removing dairy calves from their mothers soon after birth.

We wanted to prove to a cynical industry that it was possible to do dairy differently; to design a kinder method of dairy farming – a system where the distressing, heart wrenching bawling of mothers forcibly separated from their newly born calves need no longer be heard.

Dairy cows produce a lot more milk than a calf needs, so we designed a farming system where we would share the milk with the calf, moving from twice-a-day milking to once-a-day, and letting the calf stay with its mother. We had sunk everything we had and

more into this grand experiment – emotionally, financially and, worse than that, we had done all this very publicly. But our new system didn't work.

The calves were drinking almost all of the milk their mothers were producing, which meant we had virtually no milk to sell. Our original plan had been to keep the dairy cows and their calves together until the cow was close to calving again. At that point, we had figured, the cow would be losing interest in her calf and getting ready for the birth of her next one. Meanwhile the calf, at almost a year old, would be spending most of its time playing with its mates rather than needing attention, or milk, from its mum. But even at this stage, with the calves just four months old, this system was bankrupting us. You only had to lift the lid of the milk tank to see there was hardly enough milk to make ice-cream, far less make cheese. The monthly milk cheque that the farm relied on as its main source of income was laughably small.

David went through all sorts of scenarios as to how he could keep it going. The most delusional was that he'd milk the cows 365 days of the year to save on staff costs. Considering he was already working 70 hour weeks, this was not a realistic option. We started to talk about how we would begin the separation of the cows and calves. We couldn't just stop immediately and make the calves go 'cold turkey'. David came up with a plan to separate them overnight and then, after milking the cows first thing in the morning, we'd re-unite them with their calves for the rest of the day. 'You never know, that might actually work' he said more in hope than expectation.

...

With the benefit of hindsight, we now understand the importance of this painful experience in helping us design a cow-with-calf dairy farming system that could work, but there was nothing inevitable about it at the time. Cow-with-calf dairy farming was virtually unheard of back then, and it had certainly never been done at scale in a manner that allowed both the mother and her calf to thrive. The early pioneers of cow-with-calf dairy were farming at a micro scale, a handful of cows and a small volume of milk that was easy to sell locally. We were trying to do something very different, with more than 100 cows and half a million litres of milk.

Our farm, Rainton, is a family-farm sized enterprise in south west Scotland, in the very heart of Scotland's industrial dairy country. It's the type of dairy farm that's being squeezed out of existence as intensive, 'big dairy' expands ever onwards, removing dairy cows from green pastures and enclosing them in indoor mega-sheds 365 days of the year.

David and I firmly believed that intensification shouldn't be the inevitable future of a farming sector his family had been part of for generations. We wanted to find another way. Now, as we look out at the cows and calves contentedly grazing the grasses and herbs in our fields, we know without a doubt that there is, but finding that alternative path wasn't easy.

A comment I've noticed cropping up on our social media posts recently is 'why can't everyone farm this way?' This book is an answer, of sorts, to that question, but we hope it is more than that. Our planet stands at a tipping point of ecological and climate catastrophe. How we farm at Rainton today isn't just about keeping dairy cows and their calves together, it's about acknowledging that nature knows what it's doing a damn sight better than humans do.

The journey that David and I have been on together spans thirty

years, and it's taken fifteen of those years to get to the point where we can say, with confidence, that this system works. It works for the cows and calves, it works for us and our team, it works for our customers, it works for wildlife and it works for the planet. We think it can work for other family-sized farms too.

David and I were born within a few months of each other. We are now both in our late 60s. While David's family is long-lived, cancer has been in the background for much of my adult life, coming to the fore every now and then. It's here once again, and this time it's not going away. We understand what this means for our future. For that reason, and many more, now feels like a good time to write about our journey and what it has taught us.

Farming needs to change, and it needs to change quickly. The most important thing we have learned is that change is possible, and that in itself gives us hope. Our experience has proven to us that the transformation of complex eco-systems for the benefit of planet, animals and people is not only possible, it's beautiful and it's immensely rewarding.

But we also know that change isn't easy, and that transformation takes time. The need for transformation across so many systems is frighteningly urgent. We hope that sharing our experience might help to show how system change can happen, what it takes as well as what can help to make it all work.

So, this is our story.