

# Investment in automation reaps rewards

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**O**akland Farm Eggs Ltd and Oakland Foods Ltd are part of a progressive, family business located in Shropshire, UK and run by Aled Griffiths, his wife Olwyn and two sons Elwyn and Gareth.

The business was founded on its current site back in 1971 following a trip to the States by Aled Griffiths, where he saw the benefits of large, single site egg production units and the economies of scale that they can achieve.

Today, the operation is one of the most progressive in the UK with 1.6 million layers on a single site and 1.6 million replacements coming from three units on two additional sites. Staggered age of birds provides continuous balanced egg production at the layer site.

## Centre of excellence

The operation is now one of the top five egg production companies in the UK and last year was established as a Hy-Line Centre of Production Excellence. Feed, originally made on site, is now bought in from an external supplier – Lloyds Animal Feeds – with Griffiths supplying grain from their arable enterprise.

The last 20 years has seen big changes in the marketing of eggs produced at the

**Summarised flock information downloaded back to one of the on site handheld computers.**



**Part of the busy in line egg packing plant with graders linked directly to Flockdata via fibre optic cables.**

site. The thinking behind the business has always been to mass produce eggs as cheaply as possible and to sell them into the mass market. Although in recent years there has been increased demand in the UK for eggs from non-cage systems, the philosophy at Oaklands is that, for the foreseeable future, there will be significant demand for fresh value eggs produced by birds in cages both in the consumer and processing markets.

In the early 1980s, eggs from the farm went into a producer co-operative but the business wanted to become involved in marketing and wanted to ranch pack.

After some joint venture and contract packing agreements, in 2002 the company started marketing its own label eggs as Oakland Farm Eggs. Current large customers include Express Dairies, Foods Service and Iceland stores.

With the establishment of egg breaking and boiling plants within the last two years, liquid and boiled eggs are also part of the product range. Also, to meet demand for non-cage and niche eggs, contracts have been established with external free range and organic egg producers as well as intensive egg producers.

The operation is the largest in-line egg grading and packing plant in the UK. Eggs are conveyed from 15 production units into the packing plant with two Stalkaat Electra graders. Surplus eggs from the packing station are sent to the on site breaking plant where liquid egg is produced by Oaklands Foods Ltd to sup-

ply Framptons Ltd, Memory Lane Cakes Ltd and others.

The current belt clean, cage production units result from a continuous policy of reinvesting and expansion and a business objective to be totally in control of their production and sales. The success of the business to date is attributed to 12 points. An open minded approach has been important and the fact that all investment has been done with borrowed money has meant that every project has had to be justified along with its financial return.

## Programme of investment

Investment in automation and modern equipment has been key, along with continuing efforts to reduce the cost of production and to improve physical and financial performance.

This programme of investment to help meet the business objectives has recently been extended to a new data handling system to process the information coming from the production units and egg packing plant. The key to good business management and planning is ready access to up to date information.

A major installation of Flockdata Layers from UK based Chris Belyavin (Technical) Ltd has recently been completed aimed at providing key production information not only to the decision makers within the business, but also to relevant

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personnel out on the production units. The system embraces some key features to ensure rapid processing of information and feedback to staff.

The installation comprises a multi-user system running on a Windows network with a server and three additional PCs on site, plus additional access to data by an office 12 miles away.

Key site staff have also been equipped with handheld computers. They are used to record information gathered in the sheds such as mortality, feed and water consumption, electricity usage and house temperatures.

The pocket computers are returned to the office on a daily basis, excluding weekends, and the records are transferred to the Flockdata database at the click of the mouse.

Flock summaries are also fed back to the handhelds at the same time so that the staff can view the performance of each flock and call up required performance related information out on site, thus avoiding having to visit the farm office to access key information on any particular day.

#### Easy electronic transfer

An operation the size of Oakland Eggs generates a lot of information from the egg packing centre alone. To manually process all of the grading dockets, allocating them to flocks, would be a massive task. Flockdata has been linked to the software running on the grader computers, allowing data to be transferred electronically to the Flockdata database through one of the networked PCs linked to the graders via fibre optic cables.

This allows the data to be transferred very quickly.

Grading records for every flock are downloaded, including the number of eggs and their weights for each individual grading category and the overall number of eggs graded and the average egg weight.

At the end of each day once grading is complete, the data is transferred over the cables and imported into the Flockdata software. The routine takes less than five minutes to complete for an entire day's grading results. This system means that grading returns do not have to be manually entered into the Flockdata program, drastically reducing data entry time and virtually eliminating the possibility of human input errors.

#### User flexibility

Flockdata produces information in tabular and graphic format with a lot of flexibility to enable the user to produce the data they want in their chosen format.

Comparisons with targets and forecasting are additional key components essential for the efficient management of a business such as Oakland Eggs.

The system will also produce detailed financial information relating to individual flocks, sites or enterprises and such information can be password protected so that access to these sensitive areas of the system is restricted to only those users authorised to do so.

The last 35 years has seen this family business grow to a modern, efficient operation with an annual turnover in excess of £20 million taking into account all aspects of the farming enterprise.

Their slogan for the future of egg production is 'where the market takes us we will go!' Alongside efficient, modern production facilities now operates a sophisticated data handling system. ■

#### *Connecting a handheld computer to Flockdata on the site office computer network.*

