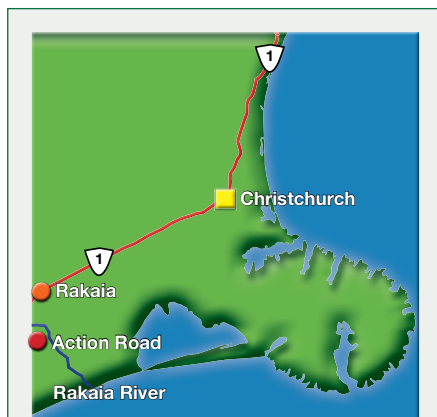




# ‘Their farm’ – cows, grass and loyal staff

David Luff – rapid regrassing and focus on low residuals means there’s always high-quality feed on hand.

*The faith of backers, the dedication of three women, and a determination to ‘surge ahead’ have meant progress for an award-winning Canterbury couple.*



**Property:** Acton Dairy  
**Owners:** Dairy Holdings (DHL)  
**50:50 sharemilkers:** David and Lee Luff  
**Cows:** 720 crossbred and Friesian cross  
**Production:** 1325kg milksolids (MS)/ha 2008/09  
**Supplement:** 140kg dry matter (DM)/cow baleage, hay and molasses  
**Farm dairy:** 38-aside herringbone  
**Irrigation:** 3 Briggs Rotorainers  
**Staff:** Three fulltime  
**Nitrogen:** 179kg urea/ha

People and grass are a winning combination for Canterbury sharemilkers David and Lee Luff.

Although, at age 34, they started in dairying later than many, that combination of people and grass has served them well in their eight years of dairying. It’s also helped them surge ahead, from farm manager to 50:50 sharemilking 720 cows in just three years.

Their staff of three young women are treated like family and in return are extremely loyal and hardworking.

“We had a guy who works in the district tell me he thought the farm was looking the best he’d ever seen it,” David said.

“I told him to go and tell the girls because it wouldn’t be like that without them.”

Lee said they really appreciated that.

“They’re such a big part of this.”

David is a former West Coast coalminer, and the wide open Canterbury Plains are a long way from the depths of the mines. He’s a hardy, no-frills, get-on-with-it kind of guy but the enthusiasm and passion is clear when he talks about “their farm”, cows and grass and their staff.

“We’d never have been able to make the

progress we have in any other industry and the last three years have been ... well, just amazing really,” he said.

“Don’t get me wrong – it can be a tough life too. There’s long hours and hard work. There’s days when things don’t go right and you feel like chucking it in, but really it’s a fantastic lifestyle and we love working for ourselves.”

## Defining point

Lee too marvels at what they’ve been able to achieve so far, and both pinpoint their move to working for the corporate farming company Dairy Holdings (DHL) as the defining moment in their career to date.

They had been managing for “great sharemilkers” Margaret and Graeme Dalley at Culverden, but the farm was sold. In 2006, they took on the job managing Acton Dairy, on the highly fertile south bank of the Rakaia River, and at the end of that season were judged runner-up in DHL’s managed farms section based on performance and profit.

“Profit is what it comes down to,” David said.

“We can’t make any progress without it. And that’s all driven by grass production,

pasture management and people.”

DHL's focus on its staff meant the company, through supervisor Graeme Blair, knew the couple wanted to progress. They helped them start by moving them up to 26 percent lower-order sharemilking on the farm, and were happy to allow David and Lee to lease 135 in-calf heifers to DHL on Acton, so they could then milk them through the 2007/08 season.

“It meant we were getting a share in the milk income from those cows, the lease income and at the end of the season we were guaranteed to still have the same number of cows,” he said.

That year they also bought and reared 74 calves and were recognised as DHL's top-performing lower-order sharemilkers.

In the 2008/09 season, they bought 235 more in-calf heifers, repeated the deal and lifted their contract to 35 percent. Despite a tough season, they managed 1325kg milk solids (MS)/ha and were runners-up in the lower-order section of DHL's performance awards.

This season, they've managed to make the big step up to 50:50 sharemilking with the support of Westpac and some careful cow-purchasing decisions.

## Better placed

Although milk prices have tumbled, the couple have their sights set on the horizon and, through their low-cost farming system, are better placed than many to pay down debt and continue business growth.

Last year's 1350kg MS/ha was produced using just 110kg dry matter (DM)/cow of baleage and hay in the autumn and around 25kg DM/cow of molasses over the difficult spring.

The couple don't have a feed-out wagon. “Using such little silage, I just can't justify the cost,” said David.

Instead he uses a \$2000 flat deck trailer towed behind the tractor and feeds baleage out by hand.

Last year's costs on their 35 percent contract came out at \$1.37/kg MS and this year on their 50:50 contract they're budgeting on \$1.69/kg MS.

Much of the farm's ability to grow what he estimates to be around 18t DM/ha of high-quality grass he puts down to the rapid regressing programme made possible by an arrangement with DHL shareholder Alan Pye. That arrangement allows him to crop 24ha of potatoes each year in the fertile soils of the dairy farm.

One of his properties is next door to Action Dairy and land from it is added into the milking platform as part of the arrangement.

“It means the whole farm is regressed in around eight years,” he said.

“It also gives us flexibility over spring, because we know which paddocks are going to be ploughed up for spuds later



David and Lee Luff set up the new break.

in September so they're the ones we can sacrifice if things get wet.”

This year they wintered 170 cows on 5.8ha of a 5.5-6t DM/ha crop of rape on the farm for the first time to reduce costs, and those paddocks are next to go into potatoes. Around 70 cows were also wintered on the “long acre”, grazing nearby roadsides and around sheds on a neighbour's cropping farm.

Both David and Lee work alongside their staff, although Lee is recovering from knee reconstruction surgery.

They don't plate the farm weekly, but David does walk it frequently and is out shifting irrigators most days over summer. He estimates covers by eye and keeps pasture quality high by focusing strongly on low residuals that at their maximum are 1400kg DM/ha.

Staff are all aware of what the low residual looks like, and David discusses break sizes and paddock allocation with them every day.

“The young age of pastures, the soils and the climate means this residual really works for this farm,” he said.

## Finely balanced

Little silage is made off the milking platform. Feed demand and supply are finely balanced on Acton. Calving begins on 1 August with the spring rotation planner, which allocates a specific area of pasture/cow calved, followed closely up until 30 September.

This year only artificially bred (AB) cows

will be reared. Typically AB is carried out for four weeks but this year may be extended to five to six weeks. No CIDRs are used at mating and non-cyclers are run with the bull.

Empty rates are usually seven to nine percent after a 12-week mating period. The farm uses inductions at around eight percent this year and has a calving spread of eight weeks.

## Investors in People

This year, David and Lee were assessed under the Investors in People standard as part of DHL's programme to ensure employment practices across its business are of a high standard (see pages 84,85).

The couple achieved the internationally recognised standard, assessor Sarah Watson commenting that there was a high level of mutual respect within the farm team, along with a high level of communication at all levels.

Manager Anna Law, 26, returned this season after a year away while 19-year-old Calla Pumpa has been with them for over two years. She has just been offered a modern-day apprenticeship through Agriculture ITO and, like Anna, is keen to progress further in the dairy industry.

Eighteen year old Tamzin Smith joined the team fulltime once she left school late last year, having relief-milked on the farm. She's unsure about her future career but has been a real asset this season with Lee injured.

David and the staff acknowledge that ➤





The Acton team from left, Lee Luff, Tamzin Smith, Anna Law, Calla Pumpa and David Luff.

he pushes them along and has high expectations but the women appreciate it and say they've learned much.

Usually there are only two fulltime

employees with staff trained in all aspects of the farm's activities including pasture allocation, feed budgeting and animal health.

Most mornings David meets the staff to discuss what needs to be done for the day, and formal meetings are held once a month where health and safety or any problems are dealt with.

"If there are problems day to day, I just say my piece and get on with it," he said. "I don't hold grudges and I encourage them to sort things out pretty honestly."

Lee said everyone gets on well together. "There's no cattiness and we have a bit of fun."

### Self referees

Although they've never had to advertise for staff, when the couple interview people they offer referees on themselves so prospective staff can find out what they're like as employers.

"We think it's fair enough that it goes both ways and they know what we're like before they accept the job," Lee said.

"We're very open with them. They know what our plans and goals are."

Long term, David and Lee want to pay down debt and would ideally like to expand their business by taking on another sharemilking job while still at Acton.

They know their biggest asset is their staff and their best means of making progress will always be turning as much high-quality grass directly into milk as they can. **D**

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