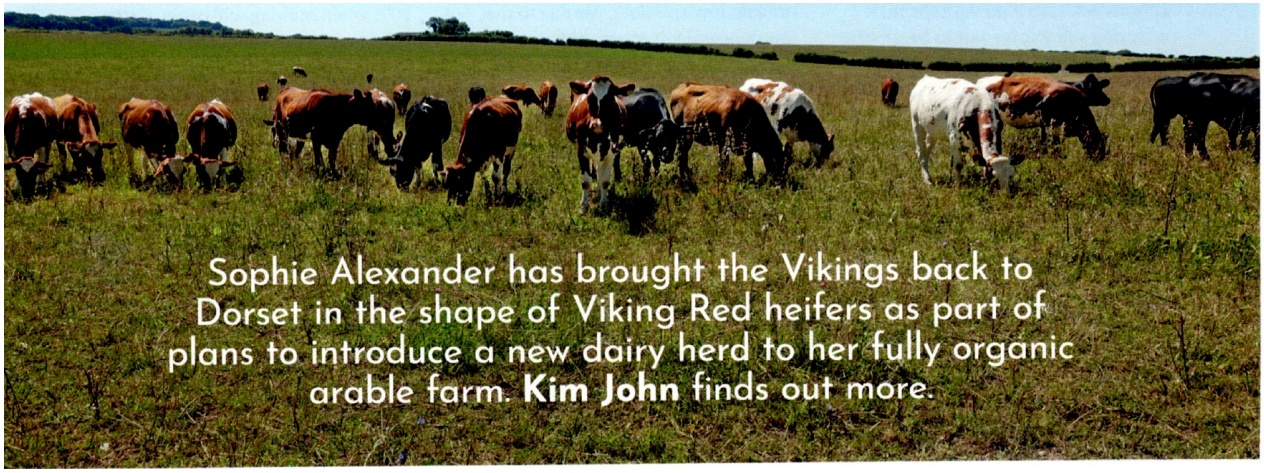
THE VIKING REDS OF DORSET

Sophie Alexander has brought Viking Red heifers to Hemsworth Farm as part of her plans to introduce a new dairy herd to her fully organic arable farm.

By Kim John | Land & Business, September 2020 | CLA



Viking Red cattle grazing at Hemsworth Farm.

Sophie Alexander came to Hemsworth Farm, a 1,000-acre arable farm, in 2011. At the time the chalkland farm was already partially converted to organic and by 2014 Sophie had made the decision to go 100% organic.

“First and foremost, it had to be a financial business decision,” she says. “A farm this size has to be financially viable. I drew a direct comparison between the two systems and quite quickly the results demonstrated that the organic crops were producing a higher margin. I then made the decision to go 100% organic. Plus, it worked in conjunction with my own inclinations.”

As CLA Dorset Branch Committee Vice Chairman, Chairman of grain marketing company Organic Arable, and member of the Soil Association Farmers and Growers Board, Sophie’s credentials as an organic farmer are well established. Hemsworth is one of the 28 UK Agri-Epi satellite farms, which are a network of commercial operations covering all major agricultural commodities.

For six years Sophie had a grazing agreement with a local farmer who grazed his replacement heifers at Hemsworth Farm. Integrated into the organic arable rotation, the livestock contributed to the increase in soil fertility and soil biology, primarily grazing on the grass-clover leys.



Sophie Alexander with her Viking Reds.

In 2018, Sophie began investigating the introduction of her own organic dairy herd. “Having someone else’s cows graze the land worked well and it was an easy solution to needing livestock on the farm, but with a two to three-year lead in time to start an entirely new dairy enterprise, I had to make the decision. The basic payment scheme is going and I had to find another income source to plug that gap.”

During March and April 2020, Sophie took delivery of 300 Viking Red heifers from Sweden, however, the Covid-19 pandemic almost put a stop to that. It has also caused delays in the build of the milking parlour, which was due to break ground in June but was pushed back to August.

Upon delivery of the heifers, 50% were run with Stabiliser bulls with the other 50% artificially inseminated using sexed semen from Viking Genetics. By the end of July they were all running with ten Stabiliser bulls. The intention is that all will be ready to calve end of February/March 2021 with the male offspring suitable for sale as beef cattle to maximise productivity.

Sophie is working in partnership with Oliver Chedgey, who started Roaming Dairy and Share Farms, an organic dairy herd with Tim May at the Kingsclere Estate in Berkshire. Oliver is three years ahead of Sophie, having built a Jersey cross NZ Friesian herd from 150 to over 300 milking cows in 2018. He also has expertise in once a day milking.

Whilst the size of Kingsclere Estate means Oliver uses an entirely mobile milking parlour that moves around the arable rotation with the cows, the smaller Hemsworth Farm allows Sophie to build a static parlour. Both the herds are working to block spring calving once a day milking with the cows grazing diverse herbal leys through the growing season and outwintering on silage, hay and cover crops on the resilient chalk soils. Oliver will be providing the labour and overall management and the pair have a

contract similar to a contract farming agreement in place.

The multispecies herbal leys provide a varied and nutrient rich forage diet with the deep rooting characteristics of the different plants accessing minerals and micronutrients benefitting the livestock. The root depth of many of the legumes and grasses also makes them resistant to drought while providing a valuable habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.

Extensive organic dairy operations tend to have low antibiotic use due to the outdoor and low stress existence of the herd. All fodder is either from grass or silage cut on the farm with no, or very little, concentrate fed in addition. “It’s this that provides flexibility, for example in a wet winter we can dry the cows off early”, explains Oliver.

With the parlour situated centrally on the farm, the cows will walk no more than 2km once a day for milking. Sophie and Oliver agree that once a day milking provides a better work-life balance. “It’s a lifestyle choice for the farmer,” says Oliver. “Nowadays a good work-life balance is important as it could help attract the younger generation or even those outside of farming into the industry”. It’s worth pointing out though that the system is not for every breed of cow, or indeed every farmer. The cows are dried off in December and not milked again until February or March, which provides both the herdsman and the cows time to rest.

Why Viking Reds?

Sophie spent a lot of time researching different breeds of cow that would suit her requirements as she needed a hardy breed that could winter out, with high health, good feet, udders and renowned fertility and easy calving. She quickly established that Jersey mixes would not work well for beef and meeting a variety of herds. She finally settled on the Viking Red, which is a hybrid cross between Swedish and Danish Red and Finnish Ayrshire.

Preparing for 2021



Cattle tracks being installed at Hemsworth Farm.

On the ground, work has begun to put in the infrastructure ready for spring 2021 when milking will begin. Cattle tracks are being established and the layout of fields are being changed to accommodate the central location of the parlour. The parlour is modelled on a New Zealand system, a 24/48 swing over parlour and positioned where there was already existing infrastructure. As it was located near to the farmyard, planning was easier.

The technology of the milking itself will not be too high-tech. Sophie says: “You cannot work an extensive grazing system with robots, which need to be in constant use.” Sophie will be hiring a herdsman to manage the dairy and is quite specific in her requirements of the right person for the job.

One of the downsides of the static parlour is that there will be dirty water to manage, which has a negative impact on the carbon offsetting of the farm. Sophie has been investigating ways in which to manage this, including the introduction of an innovative plasma technology. “It is a massive capital investment and I’m not sure that Hemsworth is big enough to justify it.”

Organic milk has seen an upturn in the past decade and the sector is growing. Sophie concludes: “Dairy is my diversification; I want to diversify into more farming.”

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