In late July 2014, I arrived in Christchurch in the South Island of New Zealand. I had left one of the best summers the UK has seen, and was greeted off the plane by a harsh sub-zero wind. Like many of the UK’s youngstock over the festive period I had to adapt quickly to this change in temperature. With a weekend to shake off the jet lag and start into some form of marathon training for my race at the end of my stay in New Zealand, I was well ready for day 1 of practice with the new team in Ashburton, Canterbury. Calving had just started when I arrived and the emergency calls began to roll in thick and fast! I was in a small practice, with only 30 clients on the books, but when the average herd size of these farms is just shy of 1000 cows, you’re never short of something to do! I was the additional fourth vet in the practice, and was looking forward to getting involved with the new clients.

The farming systems in this particular practice were more varied than the rest of New Zealand. Canterbury is remarkably flat, with a thin layer of topsoil over a gravel base. This means that the soil is leached of everything, from minerals to nitrates. With growing pressure on nitrate levels across the country, there has been steady uptake in housed systems. We had two new ‘barn’ systems with 600 and 1500 cows, which gave a good opportunity to get involved, bringing some of my experience from the UK. The infrastructure was impressive, but many aspects of management required attention. Cows were slowly getting used to cubicles and a TMR diet, and the staff were finding out what worked and what didn’t in these systems. The practice also boasted the largest extensive robotic system in the world. After a failed planning attempt for a ‘barn’ to house the cattle, the remaining scenario was 9 Lely Astronaut robots, with 600 cows grazing a platform around the shed. The results were sub-optimal to say the least, and whilst robotic milking technology has come on leaps and bounds, cows feet have the very same composition in the southern hemisphere as here, and therefore, struggle to deal with large walking distances and reduced lying times. The remainder of farms were more typical of my expectations, with some very well run block calving units. The grassland management across New Zealand was very impressive, so they are able to make the most of the incredible grass growth in the region, up to 24 tonnes of dry matter per hectare of irrigated land. There is a very high proportion of share milking in NZ. The farm is typically owned by a separate party to the herd of cows and the milk cheque is split in various ways depending on who provides labour, palm kernel (the main external feed source) and other extra costs. On other occasions, all is owned by one party but instead of employing a herd manager, there is a low order share milker who receives a profit share as payment. This really motivates the work force, and provides good opportunities for young aspiring farmers. Something that did strike me during my time in NZ was the massive number of farmers under the age of 35, a generation of people who struggle to start farming in this country, due to either motivation, or opportunity. If the farm owner felt the herd were not performing as they should, he would seek a new herd. This meant that many of the new unestablished farmers live a very unsettled life of rotating around the country with their herd, hoping to secure a longer term opportunity.

Whilst Beeston castle provides me with an enjoyable view when in the area, it was somewhat overshadowed by the New Zealand scenery. Canterbury is so flat that you always have a striking mountainous backdrop, with some of the best sunsets over the snow-capped mountains. I worked a large proportion of out of hours whilst in the South Island. Partly due to the time of year, size of practice and to provide some relief for the couple who had recently started the practice, and had a youngster who was dead set on causing havoc. My work consisted mainly of emergency calls for many a calving and sick cow, and cover for the routines on some of the all year round calving herds and larger block calving herds. This meant the practice owners could rest a little after a very hectic first 18 months of business, before the onslaught of the reproductive season, when I would be in the North Island for my second job. I relished the opportunity to work on some new farms, and enjoyed the responsibilities of the locum position.

My ‘working-trip’ had started and I was learning lots from the vets and farmers, time was already rattling by, and I realised my trip was soon to fly-by, in retrospect, I was correct! The farmers had a real enthusiasm for everything they were doing and were very eager to learn and try new things. For a locum/part-time vet it can be difficult to establish relationships with new clients over a short period of time, but the ‘kiwis’ were very accommodating and interested in learning from my experiences too. I was able to get involved in the large housed unit, which was struggling with yields and mastitis rates, and provided a report of my findings, and suggestions for improvement, after a detailed look around the farm. One suggestion was to split a 350 cow cubicle shed into two halves to provide a heifer group with some much needed TLC, something I had put a one month time frame on. There was concrete to be broken up and cubicles to be cut out to allow another passageway. Thirty-six hours later the job was completed, with marked immediate benefit, they felt. I hope

Continued on back page
Report from Down Under

Continued from front page

my expectations for introducing change are not annoyingly high after my trip away, but it is always nice to work alongside enthusiastic and motivated people who embrace change. Many of the suggestions seemed simple and obvious coming from the UK where cow comfort is prioritised, realising that longevity is a key profitability factor, and that happy, comfortable cows live longer. This is not to knock the New Zealand farmers, it is a new concept and they are learning very quickly. They have other priorities which come from the nature of block calving. Parlour hygiene on 90% of units was remarkably high, something I feel we can definitely learn from, and their record keeping and ability to simplify key management tasks of large numbers of animals was impressive, on the whole.

Large batch disbud sessions began to fill the afternoons, with workers busy with the daily routine jobs at this time of year, the vets provided the extra labour to complete the job. I was highly impressed at the technique used to disbud in New Zealand. Sedation of the calves allowed the vets to carry out disbudding, removal of supernumerary teats and vaccination in a stress-free and very timely manner, for both the calves and workforce. As with the UK, focus has been placed on heifer rearing, and getting heifers to the correct size and stature for first calving. This is an area with dramatic and rapid economic benefit for all farmers, and an area with great room for improvement in many cases. With food conversion efficiency at its highest in the youngest calves, great importance has been placed on growth rates from an early age, and as part of this many were using Metacam anti-inflammatory as a strategy to reduce the impact of disbudding. If this stress-free disbud is a service you would be interested in for large batches of calves, please don’t hesitate to contact us.

With the current worldwide demand for milk not meeting supply, the New Zealand ‘payout’ is nearly half of what it was last year, currently at $4.80 per kg of milk solids. The farms are all strictly budgeted by bank managers, so when there is a price drop, they can certainly feel the pressure to reduce expenditure in all areas. There is accurate cost-benefit analysis for most inputs into the farming system, in particular, veterinary investment. In times gone past, they would’ve cut numbers of non-bullers for synchrony by half to reduce immediate spend, but nowadays, for most businesses, it has become part of the yearly routine as an investment in the herd to prevent increased culls and reduced productivity the following year, which are far more profit damaging than reducing the vet spend. The seasonal nature of the farming system employed in NZ, allows for accurate number crunching and therefore, a very real understanding of the on farm economic drivers.

Despite the ‘working holiday’ nature of my trip, which obviously I have stressed to the partners here, I did manage to get some time off in the South Island to explore some of the world’s most spectacular scenery. Skiing and snowboarding featured heavily until I managed to dislocate and fracture my elbow. The ski fields are small by European standards, but I can’t remember queuing for a lift, which makes for some relentlessly tiring days on the snow. Nothing a slab of NZ venison can’t remedy! Once injured, I stuck to walking some of the most well-known, and trodden, trails in the Queenstown area. I also managed a trip to the glaciers where I was able to ‘throw myself out of a perfectly good aeroplane’, and get ‘choppered’ on and off the glacier for a day’s ice hiking! A more sedate trip to Milford Sound, many more miles, followed by a day around Christchurch ended part one of my trip! A few days at home for a family wedding, provided a timely interlude for my arm to heal up, ready for part 2 of my Australasian adventure! Look out for my next newsletter update in March, for an insight into the importance placed on reproductive performance on the other side of the planet!