



Much has been said and claimed in recent times about some of the 'new breeds on the block'. So, International Poultry Production visited Crown Chicken in Norfolk, England to find out how much substance there was to these recent revelations, and to look at the Hubbard Flex.

Crown Chicken produces some 400,000 broilers a week, three quarters of which it processes itself and the remainder is supplied to other processors in East Anglia.

Strong foundations

The company was founded in the 1960s by the well known British poultry entrepreneur B. J. Gooderham and subsequently became a part of The Anglian Food Group which, in turn, was acquired by Hilldown Holdings.

In 1993 the then management effected a management buy out from Hilldown Holdings. In addition to broilers, Crown has a feed milling division, which supplies other broiler organisations, as well as pigs, ducks and turkeys.

Currently, the company produces 100% of its own hatching egg requirements from its 10 broiler breeder farms which are all

A great gut feeling

located in the East Anglian region. These eggs are processed through the company's own hatchery which was re-equipped with Petersime AirStreamer machines a year ago.

This was found to be a very worthwhile investment as hatchability of eggs from young flocks rose by 1-2% and that from older flocks by 3-4%. Overall, average hatchability is over 83%. Current production equates to just short of half a million hatching eggs a week.

Some three years ago Crown trialed three batches of Hubbard Flex broilers on their commercial broiler farms and they were very pleased with the results.

As at that time they were having some issues with their then current breeds, Crown decided to place a flock of breeders so that they could evaluate the Hubbard Flex in more depth and as a total package. So, a flock of 15,000 Hubbard Flex breeders was

placed in March 2005 and by December of that year they were processing broilers from that flock through their own processing plant. Very quickly they liked what they saw and further flocks of the Hubbard breeder were placed.

Data analysis

Currently, the Hubbard Flex accounts for some 50% of the throughput at Crown and a decision on whether to further increase this will be taken shortly after all available data has been fully analysed and the company satisfied that their early impression of the Flex is well founded.

The Hubbard Flex appears to have more persistency in lay and, while other breeders at Crown tend to drop off a little after 40 weeks of lay, the Flex just keeps laying and





g from Hubbard

maintains shell quality longer. Other breeds might be slightly better in early lay, but when one looks at egg numbers to 60 weeks there was little difference between the main breeds used at Crown.

In addition, the Flex is giving a better early egg size which, in turn, is reflected in the resulting early lay day old chicks. Needless to say, this has a significant commercial knock on effect at broiler level.

The broiler chicks Crown produce go on to a variety of local farms that range in house size from 6,000 to 48,000 bird capacity. Typically, broiler flocks are placed as hatched at a stocking rate which will ultimately deliver 38kg liveweight per m².

Depopulation occurs at an average of 38.0 days. Recently, a farm of two 14,000 broiler houses gave an average weight of 2.39kg at an FCR of 1.71 and a mortality of just 2.62% for the Flex at 41.1 days. Typical early per-

formance results in a 160-170g seven day weight with good uniformity coupled to a livability of 99.3-99.4% to seven days.

However, the real benefits to Crown come from another direction. The processing plant has been really surprised at how clean the Flex birds are. This reflects the fact that scour is not seen in the broiler cycle and medication, therefore, is not required.

Improved product

While this is obviously a plus in today's consumer driven world, it also gives Crown financial savings on the farm and makes life so much easier in the processing plant.

Needless to say, clean feathers correlate to improved product and product keeping qualities, which is very relevant in the markets that Crown supply.

Crown reckon that 'the improved gut strength' of The Hubbard Flex is financially advantageous to them and arises from something positive in the bird that makes the Hubbard Flex far less prone to scouring.

Compared to other breeds at the processing plant the Hubbard Flex also has a very favourable reject rate, especially when it comes to hock burn and foot pad problems.

This is probably not surprising when one considers that this bird is less prone to scour and the beneficial impact that this, in turn, has on litter quality.

Wise acquisition

Much has happened at Hubbard since it joined the Grimaud Group and the indications are that the Group made a wise acquisition when they purchased Hubbard.

However, as is said in England, the 'proof of the pudding is in the eating' and so the long term success for Hubbard will depend on the performance of the Flex, and other products, by discerning customers such as Crown. ■

Because of avian influenza restrictions in Norfolk at the time of our visit some of these pictures are of Hubbard stock elsewhere in Europe.

