

A stepless CMATIC transmission

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Dan Slee

Having gone from milking 150 cows 15 years ago to over 400 today, the Slee family’s machinery requirements have grown pretty rapidly too.

While a decade ago a 140hp frontline tractor working alongside a 110hp loader tractor and an aged scraper tractor were more than capable of handling the day-to-day jobs, today there are three frontline workhorses grafting away together with a pair of telehandlers to handle the mixed workload on the 283ha farm.

“We grow a decent amount of cereals to include in the ration as well as regularly freshening up our rotational grass/clover leys, so we’re generally pretty busy with fieldwork in addition to the run-of-the-mill dairy chores,” explains Dan Slee.

“We like to do as much of the work as possible ourselves which means we need reliable kit that’s on top of the job.”

We’ve always run a mix of colours on the tractor fleet but for the last decade or so we’ve settled on CLAAS ARION for our main machines.”

WHY CLAAS?

“About 12 years ago we were looking to change our frontline tractor. We had a very proactive salesman at our local CLAAS dealer, HAMBLYS, and he persuaded me to try an ARION.

“It was the right thing to do. I immediately liked its ride comfort and the intuitive control layout. So in 2013 we took the plunge with an ARION 630 and we’ve stuck with them ever since. We’ve had four to date – two 630s, a 650 and most recently a 660 with a stepless CMATIC transmission.

“The tractors have proved to be decent, dependable workhorses but it’s our relationship with HAMBLYS that really clinches the deal. They’ve got an excellent team in the workshop, the parts department and in sales. Nothing is too much effort for them – we have a bit of banter, nobody takes themselves too seriously but at the end of the day I know any issues we might have with the tractors are sorted straight away.”

POWER PLAYER

Now just over three years old, the Slee’s ARION 660 has proved not only reliable but also more than capable of pretty much anything the family throw at it. That said, the 7000-hour 2016 650 is still more than able to hold its own.

“We went for the 660 last time because we needed something capable of putting out over 200hp, particularly when working on our steep ground with a loaded slurry tanker or front and rear mowers,” explains Dan.



Dan Slee



“The 650 used to struggle in those situations but when it came out of warranty it had a bit of extra ‘help’ and will now match the 660 for most tasks. That said, extra horsepower is always welcome and I’d imagine we’ll go for more ponies with the next tractor!”

TRANSMISSION CHOICE

The key difference between the Slee’s two ARION is in the transmission department. While the nine-year-old 650 sports a six-speed, four range HEXASHIFT powershift box, the newer 660 has CLAAS CMATIC stepless CVT.

“For years we’d gone with mechanical and semi-mechanical gearboxes in our tractors, probably more because that’s what we knew rather than for any good reason. But having driven different machines of a range of varying colours equipped with stepless gearboxes, I could see the benefits a CVT could bring and so on the latest tractor we went for the CMATIC.

“I love the lazy driving style. You just flick the tractor into one of three easily tweak-able cruise control speeds and it sorts itself out, getting up to pace without any further input from me.

“On the road I hardly ever touch the throttle or brake pedals, I just leave it to its own devices, pulling back on the stick when I need to slow up.

“In the field, with the PTO running I know the transmission controller will automatically work to vary gearbox ratios to maintain a set speed at the shaft.

“It’s just such a relaxed driving experience. I personally would never go back but for the older operators on the farm who prefer to stick with what they know, the 650’s HEXASHIFT box provides that air of familiarity.”

CAB AND CONTROLS

It’s that familiarity that makes it easy for drivers to switch between the two tractors despite their different drivelines.

“I really like the touchscreen and the functionality it provides to tweak the whole control set-up. Although I tend to run all my hydraulic services through the armrest switches, having the ability to re-assign different spool-valves to the different coloured paddles is really useful, especially when using front-mounted kit like the mowers.

“The comfort the four-point cab suspension provides is unmatched, especially working in combination with the new front axle. The double-wishbone set-up on the older ARION made for a really comfortable ride but its 16 grease nipples did require quite a bit of maintenance. Having just four on the new tractor is just a breeze.”

Ease of maintenance is an important factor for Dan. With a background as a mechanic, he undertakes a lot of the fleet servicing himself.

“It’s clear in the design of the machines that CLAAS still puts thought into how straightforward it is to service its tractors and how easy it is to get hold of parts.

“The guys in the stores at HAMBLYS know exactly what you’re talking about when you ring up and ask for bits. We’re fortunate to be on the weekly delivery round so we don’t have to keep running to the depot if we don’t need to, they’re just dropped on the doorstep.”

THE FUTURE

“We’ll always look at the competition when it comes to changing our frontline tractors but the likelihood is that we’ll have another CLAAS.

“They offer a really good value for money for the horsepower and the dealer back-up is just superb – it would take something really big to make us look anywhere else.”