

Safer handling supports staff and herd productivity

Handling cattle safely starts with calm staff and cows. We spoke to a behavioural specialist for some tips and pointers on how to achieve this and why training is key to success.

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Safe working with cattle is not about strength, but about understanding them. Safe handling practices not only protect producers and staff, but also improve animal welfare and productivity. “Handling cattle is about respect,” says Kingshay vet and training consultant Michael Head. “If you understand how they think and move, you’ll be able to work smarter and not harder.”

Each year, around 100 UK farm staff are injured by cattle – a sobering reminder that cow safety starts with safe handling. Cattle are creatures of habit, and their reactions are shaped by experience. Every animal is different and reactions may differ depending on age, breed and how they have been handled previously. Continuous positive handling builds trust, reduces stress, improves welfare and ultimately creates a much safer working environment

Michael Head:
“Training is an insurance policy that keeps staff safe”

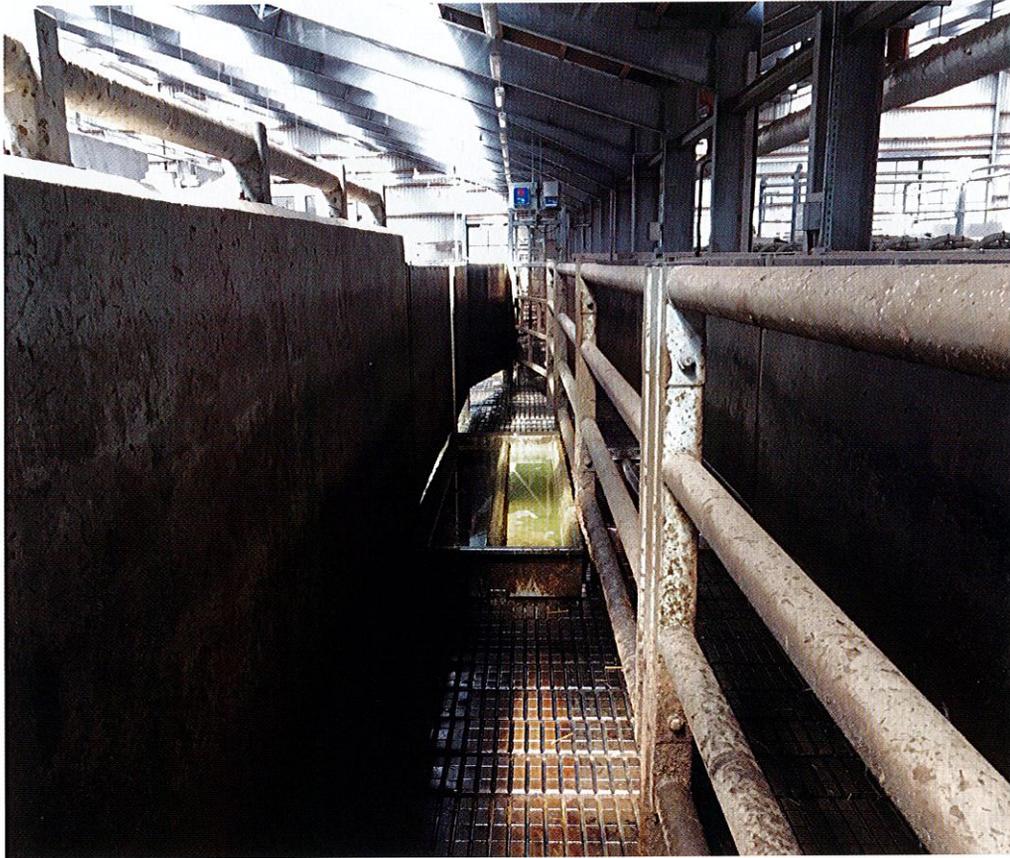


for both cattle and handlers. “A cow’s mood can be seen in her body,” explains Mr Head. “If she is calm, she has soft eyes. Showing the whites of the eyes, tail swishing, or pinned ears are signs of stress, and stressed cows can lead to accidents and poorer milk production.” When observing cattle, look closely at head and tail positions. When a cow is calm and relaxed, her head sits in a neutral position. As tension rises, the head draws inward toward the chest in a defensive, antagonistic posture. A lowered head often signals curiosity or submission, while a raised head suggests heightened alertness.

Tail position

Tail position is equally revealing. During grazing or casual walking, the tail hangs loosely. When a cow feels cold, unwell, or frightened, she tucks her tail tightly – a clear sign of vulnerability. A slightly tense tail can indicate curiosity, a perceived threat, or even sexual excitement. A raised tail reflects confidence, and when lifted high during galloping or kicking, it signals excitement or playfulness.

“If cattle display signs of fear or heightened energy, give them space and time to settle. It’s the simplest way to prevent accidents and injuries,” says Mr Head.



Handling system: well-designed setup has closed sides

One of the most important concepts in cattle handling is the flight zone – the animal’s personal space. Invading this space puts pressure on the animal, causing them to move. Dairy cows, handled daily, tend to have smaller flight zones than beef cattle. Whatever the breed, respecting this invisible ‘bubble’ keeps animals calm and cooperative.

The shoulder marks the point of balance, which determines movement direction. Standing behind it moves the cow forward and in front moves her back. “With this in mind, a good way to move an animal through a race is by walking from front to back against their flow and they will move forwards as you reach the point of balance and continue to walk past them,” says Mr Head. “Think of the point of balance as a steering wheel. Use it gently and never forcefully.”

Panoramic vision

He adds that cattle have almost panoramic vision, at 330°, but their depth perception is limited. “This makes them highly sensitive to shadows and sudden movements. They also have blind spots directly behind and directly in front of them, which is important to consider when setting up a crush.

“If the crush is positioned too close to a wall, the cow may perceive it as a dead end. Moving from bright areas into darker spaces takes time for their eyes to adjust, so ensure good lighting and avoid sharp contrasts.” For smoother handling, producers should place the crush in an open area with plenty of space and light. “And remember that cattle also have extremely acute hearing, so loud noises such as shouting, banging, or crashing can startle them and increase stress.”

Handling facilities play a huge role in reducing stress. Curved races encourage natural movement, while solid

walls block distractions. Good lighting and non-slip flooring prevent fear and injury.

To help its members deliver on the company’s commitment to treat all animals with kindness, First Milk recently hosted a series of practical workshops led by Mr Head.

These sessions provided hands-on guidance in safe and effective cattle-handling techniques, ensuring a working environment that protects both people and animals. The training highlighted how understanding animal behaviour and using low-stress methods can make everyday tasks easier, safer, and more efficient. Creating stress-free environments is a worthwhile investment, but it must go hand in hand with equipping staff with the right skills and confidence. Cattle-handling courses coach practical techniques and behavioural cues that reduce risk and improve welfare. “Rather than viewing training as a cost, look at it as an insurance policy that keeps the dairy team safe and cows happy, calm and productive,” he adds. |

Cattle-handling safety tips

- Plan an escape route before entering a pen
- Never isolate yourself with cattle in confined spaces
- Use tools like flags or paddles to extend reach, but never for hitting
- Move at the cow’s pace, not yours – rushing causes panic
- Make first experiences positive because cows have long memories – a bad start makes future handling harder