

farm management

Virtual farm tours: let your fingers do the walking

Imagine just opening up your computer to “visit” farms from all over the country and beyond – well now you can with Teagasc’s online virtual farm tours. And they are particularly valuable if you are planning new facilities.

Francis Quigley
Teagasc Farm Machinery & Milking Machine Specialist



Francis Quigley started building a portfolio of virtual tours during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Virtual farm tours are having a big impact in the farm building design area. Viewed on your phone or computer they are a high-tech way for farmers and advisors to ‘visit’ different farms without leaving home.

We first started building a portfolio of virtual tours because of Covid restrictions which prevented people visiting farms in person. The value of these virtual tours rapidly became apparent and they are now a vital tool not only for advisors and farmers but also for agricultural teachers and students.

Most farmers will undertake a major building project such as a milking parlour once or maybe twice in a generation. Other buildings such as a calf house or cubicle shed might go 15-25 years before being replaced.

Ideas

Farmers sometimes look at new building projects in isolation rather than as part of the whole farm, and may decide on a design based solely on the available piece of ground. Gathering ideas from other designs and layouts is a very important part of the design process.

It is vital to get out and visit other farms at an early stage. You will get inspiration for your design and find out what might work on your farm

and, equally important, what won't.

Organising in-person visits is not always that easy. First you have to identify farms that are worth going to see, then organise a time and date that suits both you and the host. Then you might need to travel a long distance to get there. You often have to give a full day to each visit. And even then, you might only have an hour or two on the farm.

Another challenge is that you may

not know what to look for on the visit. Nonetheless you have to remember all that you have seen. Not so easy. What you take away from a farm visit, real or virtual, will depend on where you are in your decision making process. You won't be thinking about drainage systems if you're still trying to decide between a conventional or robotic milking system.

Wouldn't it be great if you could find a farm close by that you could

Virtual Farmyard Tours

 Herringbone Milking Parlours	 Rotary Milking Parlours	 Robotic Milking Parlours
 General Farm Buildings	 Calf Housing	 Beef Units

There are currently 20 different virtual tours available on the Teagasc website.

visit as often as you need. Assuming, of course, that the farm has got everything right. These virtual tours help farmers see how the best planned farms are set up, how they have laid out different elements such as gates, pens, doors, even drains and how to use space and resources better.

Advisors use these tours to give smart advice based on what's working well for other farms. An advisor and farmer viewing the virtual farm tours together is a great way for everyone involved to share ideas and work together to design better, more efficient, farms for the future.

"Even when out on a farm visit I find that people often have a hard time visualising how a plan or idea might look," says James Mullane, a Teagasc Business & Technology Advisor (Dairy) based in Co Tipperary.

"Also, when you describe something you are never sure how the other person is understanding your idea. I often find that I will have an initial meeting on site and then a follow-up meeting will be done over Zoom.

"When describing an idea or layout I will regularly open up one of the virtual tours and take the client through the design on screen," explains James.

"We can jump from one tour to another and look at elements that would work well. It's equally important to show them design features that would not work in their situation and explain why."

There are currently 20 different virtual tours available on the Teagasc website. These include a range of conventional herringbone milking parlours, rotary and robotic milking parlours. There are also a number of sheep, beef and poultry buildings and a range of calf sheds available to tour on Virtual Farmyard Tours on teagasc.ie.

The tours have proved extremely popular being accessed over 35,000 times by people looking for ideas and inspiration for their project.

Included in each of the tours is a fully dimensioned floor plan. There are also videos and photos of key design elements included. I have a keen eye for detail but I often find that I see design elements in the virtual tours that I missed on an actual farm visit.

A really big advantage with using the virtual tour is that it generates a very lively and constructive conversation about the project.

With the client better able to visualise the elements within their proposed design they are much more confident in giving an opinion on what they like, and don't like and what they think will work for their farm. This allows for a much more useful and productive meeting with the design team.



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How the tours work

Teagasc Poultry Advisor Rebecca Tierney has been using the virtual tours in her work.

"Due to biosecurity restrictions, gaining access to poultry units can be difficult for training and education," says Rebecca. "By using the virtual tours, students can gain an understanding of the flow of a poultry unit, look at the layout, the equipment used and size of the units."

The virtual farm tours are used primarily with students on the DkIT Level 5 Poultry course. This is often the first time students have any engagement with the poultry industry.



**Teagasc Poultry Advisor
Rebecca Tierney**

Biosecurity

"The tours are excellent as they allow us to access poultry units without going there, it eliminates biosecurity risks and makes the lectures more engaging for students," says Rebecca.

"The tours include floor plans, videos of the various elements such as egg belts and manure belts in the unit. The photos allow me to show the unit in more detail in terms of equipment and the unit fully stocked with birds.

"Even with a large group in the classroom, everyone can see clearly what I am talking about. With a large group out on site and looking at a small element, people at the back of the group can often miss out on the finer details."



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