

Adrian Ivory

QUALITY SCOUT REPORT

Adrian Ivory's visit to an abattoir in Scunthorpe and a burger factory in Dunbia.

Having been asked by McDonald's to be its "Scout with a Clout" I was a little daunted at first, but saw it as a great opportunity to look through an area of the red meat supply chain that has always intrigued me.

My visit included a guided tour around the Esca Food Solutions operation in Scunthorpe, where all McDonald's burgers are produced, and the site of one of its dedicated slaughter houses, Dunbia (Sawley).

Much as I was determined to uncover a hidden truth about the product or prove McDonald's claim to sell 100% British beef is false. I have to admit, I failed.

Traceability

Burgers from the 7000 head of cattle bought each week are either 100% British or 100% Irish, and never a mixture of the two. Of that, 40% is from the Irish Republic, 11% from Northern Ireland and the remainder from Scotland, England and Wales. This led me to my first question, that of traceability. I was shown a number of sealed "bins" which arrive at the plant. If seals are broken, the product is immediately rejected. These bins are batched and their contents, even when on the production line, can be traced back to farmer level.

Esca staff conduct spot checks at all of its dedicated abattoirs, with inspectors demanding to be on the factory floor within five minutes of arrival, so there is no opportunity for any anomalies to be quickly covered up.

Although I've walked through processing plants before to see my cattle graded, the ESCA plant was a real eye-opener: the efficiency and cleanliness really impressed.

Cleaning

Machines are stripped down every night for rigorous cleaning. Personnel are also rather passionate about their jobs, with no questions swerved or left unanswered. The one area where McDonald's cannot be faulted is consistency. Every batch

of burgers is computer-checked for fat content, with more flank or forequarter added when needed to ensure uniformity. Each line is then checked for taste and consistency, so it's no wonder McDonald's prides itself on only one complaint for every 8.3m burgers sold.

I was also shown the quality-testing lab, before witnessing the cooking process - 120 seconds for quarter-pounders and 45 seconds for regular burgers. My only complaint here would be the bland, dry roll that comes with the burger.

The commitment of the team sourcing cattle at the Dunbia abattoir was incredibly strong and the technical guys were certainly focused on factory efficiency. However, the one thing that did leave me slightly disappointed was their confusing animal handling facility.

Payment

In my mind, the purpose of a lairage is to unload cattle in the calmest possible manner, reducing stress wherever possible. But here cattle leave the tailboard straight in to a race, have ear tags checked and are given an additional kill number tag, adding to the stress of unloading. The main lairage was also some distance from the killing pen, which I felt needed altering.

I would have preferred to have seen a slicker unloading operation. There is investment planned in the lairage to coincide with the investment made on the killing side, so maybe some of my points may be picked up.

One matter close to every beef farmer's heart is price and it was good to learn that McDonald's paid an extra 5% during foot-and-mouth to ensure supply. That is now coming to an end for beef producers, but it is continuing for pig producers. When it comes to normal pricing, they pay in line with the UK beef base price, which is currently around the 245p/kg deadweight depending on your region.

Overall the efficiency and consistency of what goes in to one of Britain's best-known fast food chains is incredibly impressive. All that's left for me now is to encourage McDonald's to let me take a look around one of its outlets closer to home.