

Focusing on cow needs delivers production gains

A breeding, feeding and housing strategy focusing on cow type has helped a Norfolk dairy herd double milk output while only increasing the number of cows by 50 percent. *British Dairying* reports.

The dairy cow herd is a key part of the 5,000 acre Colman Estate near Norwich, taking its place among the sugar beet, potato and cereal enterprises. Since 2000 the herd, based at Home Farm, Bixley, has been managed by Ian Bond Webster who used to run the Writtle College dairy herd before it was disbanded.

"At the time the average yield at Home Farm was 7,500 litres a cow," says Ian. "I was told by the then farm manager that the aim was to increase the yield to 9,000 litres."

A dozen years on and the herd has grown from 150 cows to 220 yielding an average of 10,400 litres of milk a cow sold per year and an NMR lactation yield of 11,300 litres. Ian believes there is no single reason for the improvement in output which has meant investing in improved housing and feeding systems.

"It is all about lifting the barriers that might stop cows milking. Modern large dairy cows must maintain their intake of feed and water. The first priority was to improve the water system giving cows greater and freer access to drinkers. Next came the feeding areas which were extended allowing cattle access to the feed they



Larger cubicles have been an important improvement in the buildings upgrade at Home Farm.

needed when they needed it."

The cows were also given more freedom to roam due to the installation of loafing areas. Despite being in a part of the country where it might be assumed that maintaining grazing would be a challenge, lower yielders are outside throughout the summer, with

only higher yielders inside during the summer months. Both groups have access to a TMR ration at all times.

Although the earlier improvements had made a significant difference to the efficiency and productivity of the herd, three years ago Ian, in consultation with

the estate, decided that the system was not adequate for the needs of the herd's modern dairy cows. So a new housing shed was built. It meant a reduction in the number of cubicles from 130 to 100—but those cubicles were much larger to accommodate the larger cows.

A loose housing yard was also



Ian Bond Webster.

added, along with another shed with 68 cubicles for younger stock. The farm carries 160 youngstock with up to 30 sold as pedigree yearlings or bulling heifers at specialist pedigree sales.

"The new housing gives the cows so much more room to feed, rest and display bulling," says Ian.

"Expense meant that we were not able to extend the parlour and increase the herd size. But the unit has been designed so that it can be enlarged to take at least 400 cows."

The investment in improved housing and feeding gives the cows the freedom they need. But the farm has also invested in a breeding programme that delivers cows that make the best of their environment.

"I've adopted the policy of focusing on Profitable Lifetime Index (PLI). Of course production is important, but high levels of production can only be maintained if a cow is fit and healthy. I'm glad that we are now moving away

from the extreme Holsteins that we saw in the past."

In the past three years Ian has used the Bullsemen.com bulls Alliance and Toystory. These bulls emerged from data generated by a mating computer programme that Ian uses.

"We have some Toystory straws left and will also be re-ordering some Alliance semen," says Ian.

"Both bulls are classic high type and production bulls with added reliability traits. We certainly have more very good and excellent cows and our culling rate has stayed at 21% despite a significant increase in production per cow. We also score very highly on NMR's Daily Lifetime Yield Index."

The commitment to Alliance is understandable given the overriding long-term strategy Ian has adopted. This Canyon Breeze Allen son is a renowned improver of dams, being particularly strong for his mammary traits and legs and feet.

As well as using the best genetics, the farm's new housing system gives cows the space and freedom to bull in a relaxed manner. This improves service rates with current PD rates at over 80%.

But Ian acknowledges there is still room for improvement. A cell count of 210 puts the herd in the top milk band, but he believes it is still too high. The aim is to get the calving index down from its current level of 407 days to 400 days over the next year.

Ian is pleased that production gains achieved have made a significant difference to herd margins over the past year. The herd is on



Easier access to quality feed has been one of the improvements made.

an Arla contract and the use of a Butterfat+ feed from Trident has meant more bonuses.

"I hope that the investment we have made in the herd will allow us to continue building the operation in the coming years," says Ian.

Meeting targets

Ben Watts of Kite Consulting has worked with Ian at both Bixley Farm and Writtle. He says that the focus of the farm is on maximizing the performance of cows by concentrating on their health.

"Ian and his team are happy to measure, monitor and discuss the performance of the cows," says Ben. "We regularly set targets for the herd and work out a strategy to ensure those targets are met."

One of those targets is mastitis. The current mastitis rate is just under 40 cases per hundred cows a year—much better than the national average of around 50 per 100 cows. But the aim is to bring

the levels down to below 35 per 100 cows, a strategy that involves consultation between Ian, his herdsmen David Bolderstone and Tom Maitland, Ben Watts and vet David Stocton from Chapplefield Vets.

This same strategic approach is taken with genetics with bulls chosen for their functionality and commercial potential.

Ben Watts continues: "Ian is a very good breeder starting with the right bulls and then using his skill and experience to get the cows into calf. The focus is on conception and that is demonstrated by the calving index which is nearing 400 days."

Future priorities for the herd include getting more milk from forage—quite a challenge in one of the driest parts of the country where spring rainfall has dropped dramatically in the last few years.

"The aim is to get around a third of milk from forage so we are looking at options such as planting chicory and lucerne," says Ben.