

College aims to bring back dairy cows

NEWTON RIGG

Work is underway at Newton Rigg College to bring back dairy cows. **Jennifer MacKenzie** reports

WHEN York-based Askham Bryan College's Liz Philip and her team made their pitch to take over Newton Rigg College, Penrith, in December 2010, they pledged they would bring back the dairy cows.

Just a year on from the merger of the colleges in August 2011, and with progress at Newton Rigg under principal Wes Johnson far exceeding expectations, that commitment to the £1.9m investment is coming to fruition.

Full planning permission has been granted for a modern 250-cow unit on a green-field site at the college's Sewborwens Farm, tenders have gone out for the work, the college is in the initial stages of applying for a

grant from Defra – and dairy cattle are arriving.

“Dairying has always been key to our plans for Newton Rigg,” said chief executive Mrs Philip. “The Cumbrian agricultural community was indignant that its college had turned its back on dairying after 2001's foot-and-mouth epidemic which continues to fuel emotion.

“It's fundamental and goes right back to the reason land-based colleges began. It was to feed the nation which is a hugely important task. When you consider that 80 per cent of the population drink milk in some form

every day, not to invest in dairying was wrong.”

Embarking on a project of such scale – the £1.9m includes investment in the dairy cattle, as well as the building and fitting out the new dairy unit – has not been undertaken lightly and Mrs Philip has had the backing of the Askham Bryan board of governors as well as those at Newton Rigg, chaired by Alan Bowe.

Also pivotal to the new plans is the knowledge and involvement of Newton Rigg farm manager Jonathan Fisher, a former dairy farmer and pedigree



FUTURE PLANS: from left Wes Johnson, Newton Rigg campus principal; Alan Bowe, chairman of governors; and Liz Philip, chief executive, with Holstein heifers which recently arrived at Sewborwens – Pictures: Jennifer MacKenzie

dairy cattle breeder.

Valuable input has come from hands-on dairy farmers in the county – in particular, Peter Holliday, of Dobcross Hall, Dalston, and Kevin Wilson, of Wood Farm, Thursby, and vet David Black, of Paragon, Dalston, who will ensure the unit has maximum cattle comfort and minimise disease.

The plans are for two new adjacent buildings at Sewborwens – one a cubicle house with the other hous-

ing the parlour, handling and teaching facilities, dry cows and those needing extra supervision.

Observation galleries are planned and the unit will incorporate the latest environmental technology, including solar panels and rainwater collection. The facilities will provide the highest standards of teaching for the next generation of dairy farmers, as well as a showcase for the farming community in general.

“The timing of the dairy unit is quite difficult. We would like to get on with it now, but we can't progress until we have had our application for a grant to Defra appraised, but our aim is to get cattle into the new housing by the spring of next year,” said Mrs Philip.

She emphasised that while the unit would be run commercially and sustainably, it would also be a project of national significance.

While significant invest-

ment, both financially in facilities and in enabling the recovery of Newton Rigg has been made over the past year, the portfolio at Askham Bryan has been added to with the purchase of the 340-acre Askham Richard farm.

The total acreage farmed between both colleges is 2,400 acres and, once the Newton Rigg dairy herd is re-established, 460 cows will be milked on the two sites, there will be 1,400 ewes, 135 beef cattle and an arable operation offering a wide range of educational opportunities for students by sharing these resources.

The revitalisation of Newton Rigg has attracted support from the local community and agri-industry and, in turn, full-time student recruitment is up by 33 per cent for the academic year starting in September.

Two key subjects have been agriculture and forestry. Recruitment to agriculture courses has increased by 315 per cent and forestry, which has been lacking a further education facility for nine years, has attracted a good intake.

The college's target for students the college receives grant on in 2012-13 was 1,500. However, the recruitment is 250 more than this,

which will have positive implications for funding next year. In 2007, the grant was for only 450 students.

Turnover in 2007 was £9.5m, now it is £25.8m, which is quite an achievement for a public sector organisation in a recession.

The college has moved up from a grade four in 2009 to a grade two following Ofsted inspections, one of only five colleges out of 49 further education establishments to achieve such an improve-



EXISTING HERD: Angus and Angus cross heifers at Sewborwens Farm

ment in the current inspection cycle.

Mrs Philip acknowledges it is a huge credit to the staff who have been very flexible during the changes.

Newton Rigg and Askham Bryan jointly have 81 jobs to fill, 36 of which are new roles.

Other highlights of the year have included:

- An inaugural grassland event, Grassland North, organised in conjunction with agricultural machinery experts Carrs Billington, which attracted 3,500 people;

- The re-launch of the Newton Rigg Society, spearheaded by former lecturer John Rigg, of Penrith, which attracted 90 people to its first lunch at the college;

- A spring countryside day for the general public, which attracted crowds of about 2,000.

While the new dairy unit will be a major milestone for Newton Rigg, plans are already under way to create a National Centre for the Uplands at the college's hill farm, Low Becksdale, Mungrisdale, in the Lake District National Park.

The college has been successful in its bid to the Prince's Countryside Fund, which will enable the plans to be progressed. Former college head of agriculture and now governor, Andrew Humphries, has been instrumental in these plans.

The college wants to appoint a director for the centre and has employed a new uplands agricultural lecturer, Paul Flynn, who will be developing a foundation degree.