

'Look after the cows and the cows will look after us', is the philosophy behind one successful Shropshire herd. And although production isn't the main goal, after 15 years of natural expansion the Wilderley herd is now top of NMR's national production league.

Bill and Margaret Higgins took on the 80-hectare Wilderley Hall Farm, near Shrewsbury, in 1965 and have developed it into a family business with the past 15 years witnessing some major changes – changes enough to take the farm to 146 hectares and the 200-cow Holstein herd into top position in the latest NMR Annual Production Report. Ranked on fat and protein production, the herd averaged 852kg and yielded 12,352kg of milk at 3.89% fat and 3.01% protein on three-times-a-day milking for the year ending September 2007. "This hasn't been a quick fix," says son Bill, who farms with his parents and

and AI. The herd has been closed for the past 40 years." Very much a family-run farm, the four directors hold their daily meetings at the breakfast table to fine tune the management system they implemented in 1993 – a time when both sons were recently married and the farm would soon, in effect, be supporting three families. "We set high targets and it's been a hard slog," admits Andrew. "We've invested in new cubicles, some new housing and a new 20:20 herringbone parlour. But the milk price hasn't contributed as much as we'd hoped it would. Hopefully we will



Andrew, Margaret, Bill and son Bill Higgins: a family affair

responsibilities, we could stand in for each other to allow each of us to have breaks and holidays," says son Bill.

Team work

A high input system, cows at Wilderley Hall are milked three times a day, housed all year and calve year round. This maximises the use of the buildings and labour. While both Bills and Andrew do their share of the milking, Margaret looks after the calves.

Andrew is responsible for fertility work including AI, breeding and pedigrees. He also deals with the field work, working with contractors for silage



High production is a consequence of happy, healthy cows

Cow care comes first in top herd

High production is a consequence of keeping happy, healthy cows

brother Andrew. "We were 11th in the previous year and we've been gradually working our way up – we haven't bought in any cows or used any ET, it's all been natural growth using home-bred stock

reap some benefits now it's improved. "An important part of the restructure was the need to allow quality time out, so we wanted a seamless system that, although we would have defined

making and other harvesting operations. Bill looks after the feeding and nutrition, working with vet-turned-nutritionist Richard Vecqueray who uses the NMR records, parlour system and feedback from the herd's vet to review performance and adjust rations.

They also employ two full-time staff from Eastern Europe and four part timers – three of whom do night milking only. "This might seem a lot," says Bill. "But it's taken a long time to get this team together and we now have superb people we can trust and rely on to work to a very high standard".

The farm grows good grass that, with maize grown on 49 hectares, forms the basis of the TMR. It is mixed with their own blend of dry straights and moist feeds that may or may not include home grown wheat – depending on market prices.

Silage is analysed regularly – one cut will

be tested three times and the ration adjusted for dry matter and energy. "Richard uses the results plus records, as well as our comments on how well the cows look, to fine tune the ration," adds Bill.

Although the ration supports the high yields produced by the Wilderley herd, the team deny that any emphasis has been placed on maximising production – to the point where they see their NMR production success as a by product of their sound management.

"We want healthy, happy, long lasting cows," says Andrew. "We have a road running alongside the sheds so the herd is on view to the public 365 days a year. Many walkers and drivers stop to 'chat' to the cows and comment on how well they look."

Special groups

Huge importance is placed on dry cow management at Wilderley Hall. Both groups are fed on the dry cow TMR with haylage added to provide 'scratch factor'

and energy that can help avoid milk fever.

Cows are dried off at least six weeks pre calving, depending on body score and yield. Three weeks before calving they are moved from cubicles into loose housing and remain here until calving. They are then moved to a loose housed post calving group for at least a week where their temperature, rumen fill and dung consistency are closely monitored. "We work hard to avoid problems around calving," says Andrew. "We spray the teats to get the condition right at the point of calving and we make sure the cows gets 40 litres of tepid water, to avoid dehydration, and milking cow TMR.

"We find that this TLC for four weeks prevents problems later on. It works in 99% of cases – we see very few problems through the lactation."

Heifers enter these special groups six weeks prior to calving and this vastly reduces problems with bullying, as well as social and diet changes.

For a high yielding herd, these cows have a low cell count, averaging 180,000cells/ml with 83% of cows at less than 200,000cells/ml. Regular foot trimming keeps feet and legs in good order. "It's a shock for us to see a lame cow," says Bill.

These management policies have paid dividends. The herd had three cows that came top in the NMR/Alta Genetics Lifetime Yield Awards last year – awards that identify high daily production resulting from good fertility, production and longevity.

And while they keep the cows fit and healthy – and happy – do the Higgins feel the cows are looking after them?

"They've done well," says Bill, who is at the helm of monitoring technical performance and financial targets. "We've moved to top place with NMR and we're selling our milk through a Wiseman Tesco dedicated-supplier brand, which attracts a premium. This is important for us and we will make sure we continue to meet all the criteria within the contract, as well as achieving the health, lameness and welfare standards required.

"Our main objective, though, is to continue to enjoy working with high achievers – on both four and two legs," adds Andrew.

Karen Wright



Heifers join dry cow groups six weeks before calving