

Wiltshire dairy farming family, Bob and Sally Russell and sons Jonathan and Tom, are rightfully proud of their pedigree Holsteins.

They see these top-class animals as a strong foundation for their business as herd management moves from one generation to the next.

Sally and Bob Russell have worked hard to establish the Churchstar herd at Church Farm, Brinkworth, north Wiltshire. Bob moved to the farm when he married Sally and in 42 years they have built up the herd that now ranks among the best in the county. Having inherited this keen interest in cows, both Tom and Jonathan – the fifth generation of the family at Church Farm – are keen to continue the herd's development. Currently averaging 10,800kg on twice-a-day milking and producing around 740kg of fat and protein, the 91 cows also boast fine classifications; the results of careful breeding, according to Bob.

"It's not been all about maximising production and in four decades I've never picked a bull for production," he says. "I've always gone for type. If the cow has good legs and feet to get around and has a good udder then I can get the milk out of her. And, most importantly, she will have staying power with few problems along the way hopefully." This strategy has paid dividends. The cows have produced the milk and the Russells have classification results that they – and particularly Bob – are very proud of. Forty seven cows are classified VG, 13 are EX and the rest are rated Good+. At the same time, their animals have the staying



Bob, Jonathan, Sally and Tom Russell

power only found in cows with the vital credentials in the feet, legs and udder departments. "We have 11 cows out of the 91 that are 10 years old or more and classified EX91 or better. And we've got five that are more than 12 years old," adds Bob, who can reel off data from his NMR reports from the past 40 years.

Going strong

And picking out their best example of longevity, they quote their pet cow 'Granny' who is 14 years old, classified EX90 and has yielded 138,000kg in her 11 lactations.



Churchstar cows: wider cubicles and sand bedding adds to cow comfort and udder health

"She's currently giving 46.2kg a day at 4.02% fat and 3.18% protein and has produced six daughters, four classified VG and two awaiting classification. What's more, she's still going strong – she's healthy and tidy and has never needed to see the foot trimmer." While Bob admits that breeding good cows – not for the show ring but as

how best to move the herd forward. "We could accommodate more cows and expand to 140," says Tom. "I think an increase in cow numbers would be good, and perhaps we let yields drop back a bit and opt for a slightly more extensive system." "At our current level of production and on twice-a-day milking some cows are on a

"I have always placed a lot of store in these figures, even 30 years ago when NMR produced lifetime averages for us. But today's average daily yield shows up more clearly those fit cows with good production, health and fertility. This data is vital to the development of the herd." And to make sure cows meet their longevity expectations, the Russells have widened the cubicle housing in their 10-year-old shed to ensure there's enough room for the larger Holstein cow. They have also used sand in the cubicles for the past 25 years and this, along with good parlour hygiene routines, keeps somatic cell counts at or under 120,000cells/ml.

With the farmland centred around the farmstead and the building layout well organised life is fairly easy on the cows' feet and legs and there are few problems each year. Ongoing improvements lie in calving age and they have worked hard to bring down the heifer calving age closer to two years old. The combination of breeding and management has secured the Russells top prices for their milk, qualifying for the bonuses for constituents and hygiene quality given by Cadburys. And while Bob and Sally want to see their high standards maintained, they also see that the herd must progress and they are encouraged by the reasons behind their sons' ideas and their enthusiasm for the herd. "As long as the cows always have a smile on their faces and are happy and healthy they will produce good quality milk. However the herd develops, this must remain the goal," says Bob.

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Promoting pedigree cows with pride

Next generation built on solid foundations



Tom Russell: "Good parlour hygiene contributes to low cell counts"

animals well suited to their forage and grazing system – could easily be a full time hobby, he appreciates that each cow must pay her way. This is a sentiment echoed by Sally who holds the purse strings and makes sure operations are commercial. And while both Tom and Jonathan are keen to continue Bob's breeding philosophy and appreciate the strengths of their cows, they are discussing

knife edge at peak lactation and there's no margin for any error in cow nutrition or health management. If we ease off a bit we can reduce concentrate feed from 4 tonnes per cow per year and rely more on grazed grass and maize and grass silage made on the farm's 190 acres."

Heifer sales

At the same time, Jonathan wants to maintain the low 14% replacement rate which would leave more heifers to sell, particularly since they have started using sexed semen. This is a valuable contribution to the business that needs to support all three families. "We already have buyers for surplus stock and this is a market we could develop more," adds Jonathan.

It does mean that longevity must be maintained and the Russells have made sure that their management does everything possible to enhance this. "We're keen on lifetime yields," says Bob, again referring to his valuable NMR figures.