

**Ian and David Nixon**

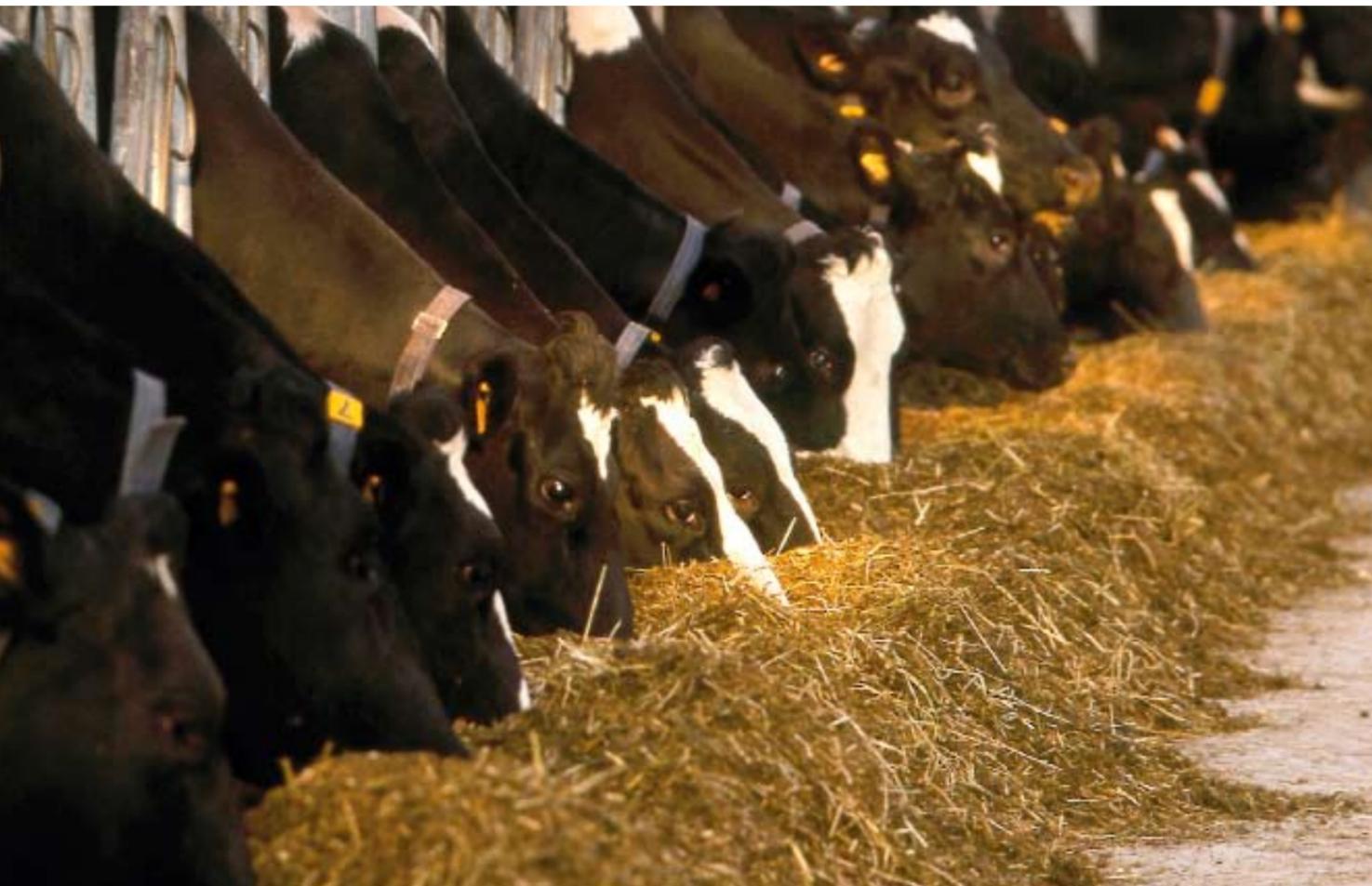
A sharp focus on forage is ensuring that this family-run dairy unit continues to go from strength to strength, despite rising bought-in feed prices



Number of cows:	285
Average milk yield	9,500 litres
Forage hectares:	122
Maize silage yield:	more than 50t/ha

**B**rothers Ian and David Nixon of Upper Farm in Ridgewardine, near Market Drayton in Shropshire, have a simple mantra: "If we're not moving forwards then we're standing still, at best, and probably going backwards." That applies to forage quality as much as investment in a new parlour and livestock housing. Unusually for a farming family, Ian and David have run the farm jointly for more than 20 years, and their sons Will and Joe are following in their footsteps. Such a harmonious workforce is rare in farming. But at Upper Farm it has created a vibrant and successful dairy farming business.

*Balanced diet: the Nixon's dairy herd is fed a ration containing a mixture of maize and grass silage, as well as wholecrop wheat*



Maize plays a key role in moving business forward

## Feed-cost focus

A progressive Shropshire-based family is backing a big investment in a new parlour and housing with a sharp focus on maize quality to keep production costs at bay. We paid them a visit to find out more about their forage policy.

text **Rachael Porter**

"The challenge used to be getting sufficient protein into animals, but with feed prices the way they are, and no sign of them falling, energy is the focus now," says Ian. The goal is to hold or reduce bought-in feed costs.

### Impressive cobs

This year high performing Agiraxx maize silage has impressed them both, delivering well above 50t/ha, despite

the season, as well as a good nutritional analysis.

"The cobs were impressive," says Ian. Optimising the forage ration lies at the heart of their business, with 23 hectares of forage maize grown alongside 19 hectares of wholecrop wheat and 80 hectares of grass silage. Identifying the right mix of forages to drive cow intakes is a task out-sourced to nutritionist Nick Sharpe of GP Feeds. "The maize is



*Maize plays a key role for the Nixon family, from left to right: Ian, Will, David and Joe*

certainly valued for its consistency in the ration," adds Ian.

The brand new 25:50 swing-over Fullwood parlour sprung into action in December and quickly made a positive impact on workloads. "The 20:20 we installed in 1983 could manage 80 cows/hour, but now two men can milk between 140 and 150 cows/hour." A rotary parlour was rejected on cost grounds and a robot on complexity. "We have a traditional system that suits our labour availability," explains Ian.

The system is computer controlled, with milk resistance readings indicating potential mastitis or bulling issues. Rural Development funding, through Advantage West Midlands, helped finance the cow identification and segregation aspects of the new operation.

Half the bought-in ration is fed in the parlour, the rest mixed in with the forage through a Shelbourne Reynolds feeder wagon. "We prefer the vertical spiral augur to rotary machines, as we think it gives a better mix," says David.

### Forage quality

The 285 Holstein milkers are home-bred under the Clockhill herd name, with all replacements reared on-farm. Average yield is 9,500 litres, supplied to Wiseman on a Tesco liquid contract, on a cost-plus price plan, based on

group average Promar performance data. "We're looking for a price rise to reflect the continuing increases in input costs," says Ian.

With that rising cost of feed very much in mind, optimising forage supplies is an important goal. "What we clamp is key. Without it we just couldn't afford to subsidise with bought-in feed. Our goal is to always enhance forage quality." Maize area is limited to 23 hectares, just enough to meet the herd's needs, mainly due to heavier soils that prevent contractor AR Richards from accessing fields without road access. "Our land is too heavy to be able to take equipment across other fields," explains Ian.

With its high yield, prominent well-filled cobs and optimal maturity Agiraxx has won the brothers' favour and secured top honours in the keenly-contested Newcastle and District Agricultural Society award. Other crops of the same variety were placed third and fourth.

In 2010, four hectares of the RAGT variety was trialled, alongside Surprise and Ixxes. "As a first crop of maize it yielded better and with bigger cobs than we expected," says Ian Grandfield, who is marketing the variety in 2011 through the Green Bow Group.

Evaluations across all soil types, drilling dates and production systems have shown it to be very reliable. "It is a real producers' variety. Its big cobs lean out

between the rows, which is just what a grower wants to see."

Results from official NIAB trials show it gave the best whole plant digestibility and starch results at the Cheshire site and was in the top three at Bicton.

### Full maturity

Maize was harvested at Upper Farm on October 20 at full maturity, in what was a late year for the area. It is complemented by Humber wholecrop wheat and grass silage. Protein levels of between 17 and 18% testify to the quality of grass grown and silage management, which includes the use of liquid ammonium sulphate fertiliser.

"We look for a consistent and small chop size, mostly between 12 and 15mm. But not less than 10mm, as this can start to damage fibre, and not more than 20mm to prevent cattle selecting out components, which can send milk yield crashing," says David. "We'll ask the contractor to make adjustments to ensure we get what we're looking for."

And cows are not pushed excessively. "We don't want to increase herd health problems," he adds.

"That is all part of our robust and traditional approach to milk production, which looks set to keep pressure on production costs, while optimising milk yield." |