

**Colin Luther**

A conventional system, managed with a super sharp eye for detail, using grass-based feeding and out-of-parlour feeders to maximise yields.



Number of cows:	90
Average yield:	11,771kg of milk
Somatic cell count:	<100,000 cells/ml
Average cow age:	Nine years

Conventional grass-based system tops the NMR production rankings

Simplicity is key to herd's success

There's delight in the detail at one Dorset-based unit. Running a dairy herd is pure pleasure for the NMR annual production report Holstein ranking topper Colin Luther. Here he shares some of the secrets behind his simple system's success.

text **Rachael Porter**

So, just how does a herd jump 25 places in just 12 months to top the NMR production rankings? Huge investment in a TMR feeding system? Buying in some of the most productive dairy genetics that money can buy? Or a switch to three-times-a-day milking with a foot firmly on the concentrate feeding pedal? No, none of these. Just good old fashioned attention to detail, hard

work and dedication. Yes, there have been investments and changes to management during the past few years at Colin Luther's family run dairy unit, based near Poole in Dorset. But nothing drastic. "This was just the year that all our breeding, husbandry and sheer hard work finally came together," says Colin, who stresses that he and wife Barbara, daughter Jacqui and son Stuart are not chasing yield.

"We're just aiming to manage the cows the very best we can in terms of cow health and welfare, feeding, fertility and breeding – everything really. Yield seems to follow if you get that all right." And getting it right they certainly are. The herd average, on a conventional summer grazing based system, is 11,771kg of milk with 853kg of fat and protein and a somatic cell count of well below 100,000 cells/ml.

"People make the assumption that, with yields like that, cows have to be housed all year round. But we're proof that they don't," says Colin, who turns out the cows as soon as weather and grass conditions allow in April and rehous in October.

He was really surprised to hear that his 90-cow herd had topped the rankings: "We run such a simple system – grazing in the summer and block-fed silage in the winter, topped up with concentrates that are fed to yield.

"In my view there's nothing fancy about what we do – we just do it as well as we possibly can."

Loose housing

The herd calves all year round, to produce a level supply of milk for buyer Milk Link.

And when it comes to breeding, much of the pedigree Foxminster herd's genetics are down to Colin. The herd was founded in 1963, when it comprised British Friesians, which were bought from pedigree sales in Dorset. Holstein breeding has resulted in today's impressive herd. The Luthers look for strong, deep bodied cows 'that can cope with grazing and last in the herd'. "They're housed in a straw yard – not cubicles. But we still avoid anything that's too big," explains Colin. "Type is high on our list – we want good feet, legs

and udders. And then milk, fat and protein – a nice balanced cow." Their philosophy is paying off. Longevity is good, with the average number of lactations for the herd standing at seven. And they're cows that also catch the eye – both in the flesh and on paper – if sales of surplus stock are anything to go by. Between 10 and 12 bulling heifers are sold each year across the UK.

Silage making

Good forage is also the basis for the herd's success and the Luthers are unusual in that they still make their own silage – using a mower conditioner and a trailed harvester. "I think this makes a big difference to quality – we can cut when we want to go and be finished in between 24 and 36 hours," says Colin, adding that Stuart keeps all the kit in tip-top condition. Growing good forage in the farm is no mean feat either – it's a 'tough' farm with some areas down to heavy yellow clay and others down to pure sand. "We're just about sea level here and only about three miles from the coast. But we do OK. Again, it's about attention to detail, knowing the land and knowing the cows."

This level of care extends to feeding. With help from BOCM nutritionist Dave Hunt, and his predecessor Peter Cade, the Luthers make sure that each cow

is fed exactly what it needs. Summer grazing and winter block-cut silage is topped up with concentrates, running at 0.36kg per litre, in the parlour and out-of-parlour feeders. The latter were installed in 2003 and certainly played a role in taking cow yields to the next level, according to Colin. "We feel we're getting plenty of milk from home-grown forage".

"Before then, we were feeding two big slugs of cake through the parlour and overloading the rumen, which wasn't good. Little and often is much better for the rumen bugs, the cows and milk yield."

Individual attention

The family has also installed a new tandem parlour – replacing an old abreast that served them well for 35 years. "It's not really made a difference to milk yield, but it's better for our backs and we're still able to give each cow individual attention," adds Colin.

"Of course, we like high yielding cows – who doesn't? And I'd much rather be milking 80 high yielding cows than 100 lower yielders. I admit that I enjoy looking after 'milky' cows and get a lot of pleasure from them. And I think the rest of the family feels the same – that's why we want to look after them properly. We give them our best and they give us their best – what more could we ask for?"

Grazing days: the herd is turned out each year in April and rehoused as late as possible, usually in October

