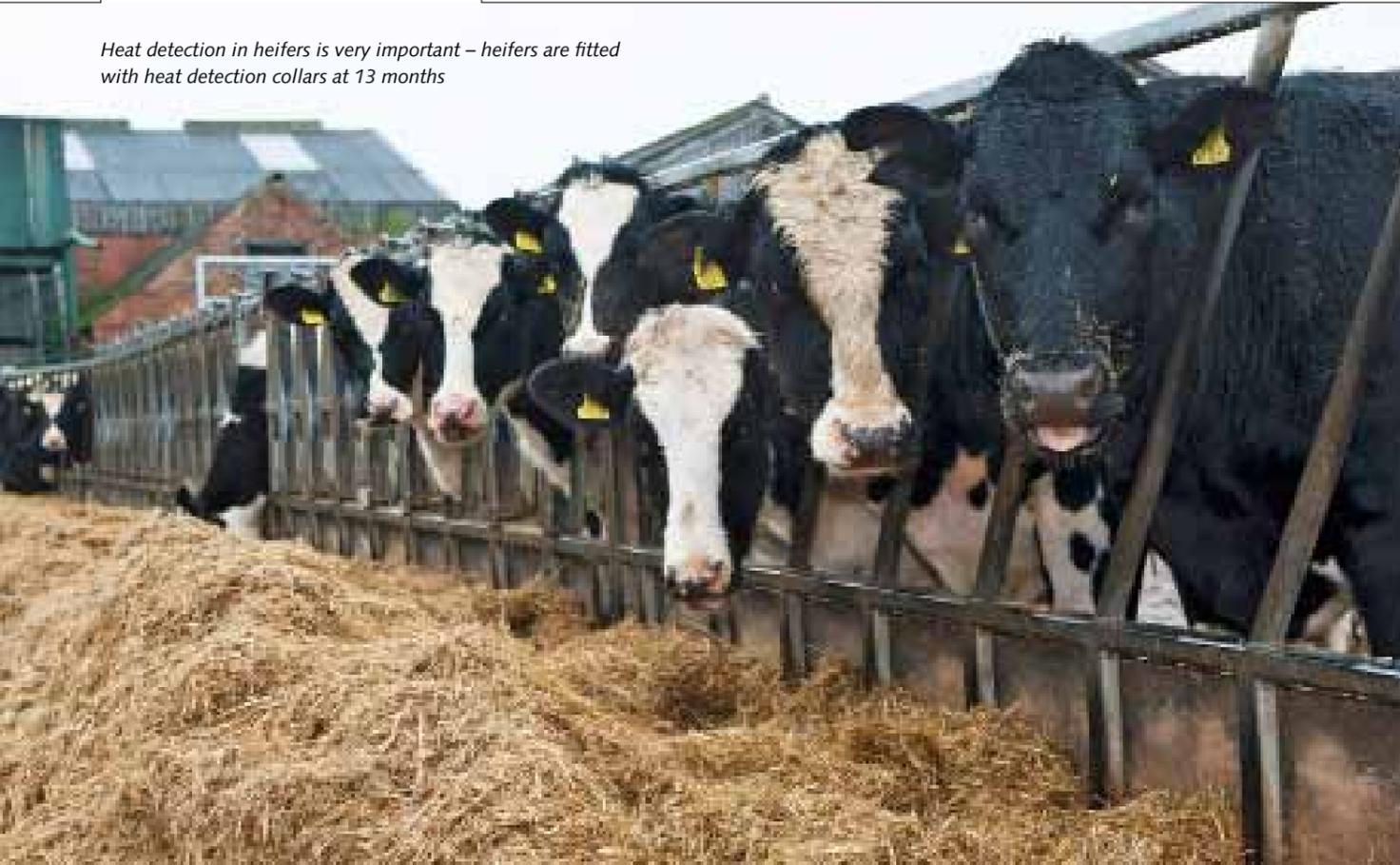


Heat detection in heifers is very important – heifers are fitted with heat detection collars at 13 months



Gold Cup winning herd steps out with new heat detection system

Something in the way she moves

All cow and heifer movements in the North Yorkshire based Miresdale herd are now monitored through the farm's new heat detection service. By recording how cows move, not how much they move, submission rates have improved by 20% and pregnancy diagnosis results are looking equally promising.

text **Karen Wright**

The NMR/RABDF Gold Cup winning Miresdale herd has worn pedometers for eight years. But the system was wearing out and producer Geoff Spence was looking to replace it. "We'd increased

herd size to 400 cows and we want to increase it further so needed a robust and easy-to-use system that helps our management and doesn't add to the workload."

Keen to keep up with technology, he looked at the new systems now on the market. "Technology moves on, but I knew what I wanted a system to do," says Geoff. "It needed to be hard-wearing, reliable and accessible by the whole team – and good value for money."

"After doing our research we came down in favour of NMR's Silent Herdsman, mainly because it was reliably tested and was already working well on large and small units. And I liked the predicted six-to-nine year battery life in the processor on the collar, which means it would last around the lifetime of the cow. So if we get to the stage of a collar per cow there will be no maintenance or hassle of changing batteries. With a 400-plus herd this is very attractive."

To start with, Geoff bought 100 collars in March 2012 and put them on all newly calved cows as well as 13-month-old heifers. One Silent Herdsman antenna was fitted in the centre of the cubicle housing and this picks up cow movements within 100 metres, which offers plenty of coverage for the whole building.

Strong signals

Another antenna was then fitted in the heifer shed with a booster across the

yard. This relays a signal back to the office PC and has a span of up to three kilometres so, in this case, it is well within reach of the farm office.

The herd is high yielding, producing on average 10,600kg on twice-a-day milking. Calving is all year round with a current calving interval of 389 days. Geoff and his herdsman John France hope to trim a few days off this.

Through careful management and feeding, they aim to serve cows around 45 days after calving. "There's no point in waiting. If she's fit and well then she's served," adds John. "But we do need to make sure heat detection is accurate."

Heifer heats

The same importance is placed on picking up heifer heats. "We look to serve heifers at 14 or 15 months old so they calve into the herd at two years old. On top of this, we are using sexed semen on the heifers so it's even more important that oestrus detection is accurate."

Growth in herd size at Lowfields Farm, Brompton, has been from home-bred heifers and, by using sexed semen, this will continue and it will also keep providing some surplus heifers for sale. "One of our biggest challenges is breeding good cows that suit our system and enable us to run a tight ship," admits Geoff. "And our staff is our greatest asset. It's important to have a herdsman that understands cattle breeding and knows the cows and families within the herd. John is a great asset to us here and he is taking responsibility nowadays for most of the breeding decisions."

Geoff Spence: "I like the six to nine year battery life in the Silent Herdsman processors"



John France: "We get regular updates on the office PC and on our mobile phones"

While Geoff is not in favour of leaving a computer to make breeding decisions for the herd, he is not 'anti' electronic systems or technological developments that will improve herd management and complement the team's work.

Movement pattern

"This is where a heat detection system comes into its own. It works 24/7 and, in the case of Silent Herdsman, it tells us when a cow's movement pattern has changed. This is far more accurate than just telling us if she's walked more or less on any one day.

"Also, it doesn't mean to say we don't walk round the cows and record bullings. We do this regularly between 3.30am to 9.30pm, but the Silent Herdsman system is an extra pair of eyes and

works even more hours than we do." Geoff and John will pop into the farm office regularly to get updates on heat activity from the touch screen PC. Silent Herdsman updates the list every two hours. But when they are out and about, or even away from the farm, they can access this list using their iPhones, or from an email address that is programmed into the system.

"If I am away I can look at the list of cows showing signs of heat on my phone and then talk to John about breeding plans. We do our own AI so we can make sure we serve cows at the best time and don't miss any."

So how successful has the system been so far? "It's still quite early days," says Geoff. "But what I do know is that it's picking up 98% of heats or cystic cows. With our previous device that figure was closer to 70%."

Average calving to first service is currently 45 days – well ahead of industry benchmarks. The level of subsequent services, within the targeted 18 to 24 days, is 39%, again ahead of the industry average. Only 5% of the herd currently has a service interval greater than 50 days.

The herd is due to move into a new house later in December and Geoff hopes that more space will also play a part in improving fertility performance. "It's already on target but there's always scope to improve – we'd like to knock a few days off the calving interval and increase the rolling 35% success rate to first service. Many factors play a part here but I am confident that improved cow comfort combined with Silent Herdsman will allow us to move up a gear." |