

The Birkle family

Attention to detail – from breeding through to feeding – has seen this Leicestershire-based pedigree herd grow in stature during the past 40 years.



Herd size:	200 cows
Average yield:	10,000kg
Herd classification:	78 EX 78 VG 16 GP
Total annual production	1.8 million litres



Andrew and Mimi Birkle



Out-of-parlour feeders top up individual cows

Herd has the 'wow' factor – and plenty of production power

Stature and substance

Breeding, feeding and on-farm technology are all key to the ongoing success of one Leicestershire-based dairy herd. We visited the award-winning pedigree herd to meet the brains behind the business and to find out more

text **Rachael Porter**

Andrew and Mimi Birkle's 200-cow pedigree Whinchat herd, based at Dungehill Farm in Wymeswold, was runner up in Holstein UK's national Holstein Premier Herd competition in 2013.

It has some impressive bloodlines and astounding examples of good type with herd classifications revealing a total of 78 EX, 78 VG and 16 GP cows.

But there's also plenty of milk – and staying power. The NMR-recorded herd averages 10,000kg, at 3.85% fat and 3.15% protein. This is sold to local Stilton Cheese maker Long Clawson Dairies.

Average number of lactation for the herd is 2.8. It was around 3.5 in 2013, but 64 heifers have since been added to the herd. "If I send a cow off before she's completed five lactations, I feel like I've failed." Andrew has just sent one cow off after 12 lactations. Whinchat Astre Tippy produced 140 tonnes of milk in her lifetime.

Firm foundations

Excellent cow families are the foundation of this award-winning herd, which is managed with help from son Leo. Andrew lists several, including Farrah,

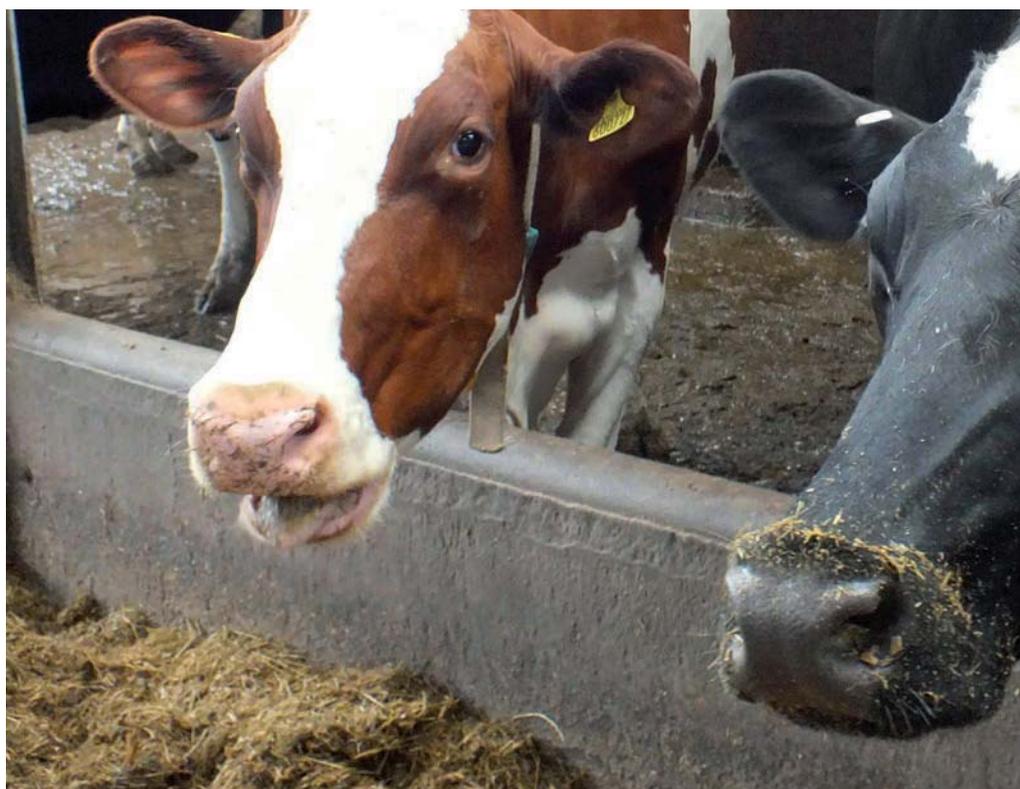
Savy, Savoire Faire, Zandra and Beaujolais. "We have more out of the Farrah family than any other and they're all tremendous cattle. But I'm pleased with all the cow families – they've all done really well."

He aims to breed tall and large-framed cows. "But not too big, as I know that they can struggle to cope on some dairy management systems.

"Good udders and feet and legs are also vital. I'd say that breeding a well-balanced animal is the most important thing – whether she's big or small.

"I want functional cows that will produce between 50 tonnes and 60 tonnes of milk in five lactations. And I milk them every day so I want something that's nice to look at."

He does this by breeding all the cows and heifers in his herd as individuals. "Rather than breed animals in groups, I prefer to look at each one in isolation."





Recycled bedding is produced on farm



The 'PosiCare' arm allows milking from the side



Cow comfort is excellent at Dungehill Farm

There are at least 10 different bulls in the AI flask at any one time, mainly a mixture of US and Canadian sires, but also including some from the UK and Europe.

"I'm looking for a type score of at least three and a high plus for fat and protein, to suit my current milk buyer, as well as good udders, feet and legs."

Proven bulls

He has some Picston Shottle in the flask – as well as daughters and granddaughters already milking in the herd by the UK-bred sire. "In fact some of our best cows are by Shottle. He is, without a doubt, the best UK-bred bull there's ever been."

Andrew also has a bull by Shottle and out of one of his best cows. He sells three or four bulls for breeding each year.

He's not a big fan of genomic sires, preferring to use mainly daughter-proven bulls. "I'm more comfortable

using proven sires – I trust their proofs. And I think they're better value for money. You know you're going to get what you pay for."

The unit has a total of 240 young stock and between 20 and 30 heifers and young cows are sold each year. And winning the Holstein herd competition, be it at local or regional or national level, helps to continue to raise the profile of the herd. "A trophy and a certificate are very nice. But it's the prestige of winning that means the most. It's recognition for years of careful breeding and hard work," says Andrew.

Andrew and Leo share the milking – twice a day through a 20:20 Westfalia herringbone parlour. It's a little unconventional as it has 'PosiCare' arms, which allows the cows to be milked from the side, rather than through the back legs. "As far as I know it's the only one like it in the UK," says Andrew.

"We milked from the side in our old parlour and I wanted to continue to do that in our new one. This special arm is from Europe and it works well for us. I just feel that the clusters hang better on the udder. And it's a better position to attach the cluster from."

Expanding production

The herd is run as one group and fed a TMR that provides maintenance plus 20 litres. Individuals are then fed to yield with concentrates through the parlour and out-of-parlour feeders.

Cubicle housing was expanded two years ago. Feeding space was an issue, so a feed passage has been added, plus another row of beds. There's now space for 180 milkers.

"We're not looking to expand the herd, but I want to increase production," says Andrew. "I'd like to produce two million litres a year. We're at 1.8 million at the moment, so we're almost there." |



Cost-saving slurry separation

Using recycled bedding is saving the Birkle's between £15,000 and £20,000 each year, as they're no longer buying in sawdust for cubicle bedding. The unit's slurry separator broke down – for good – in 2013, so Andrew decided to buy a new system. "But this one makes the solids a bit drier – around 37% dry matter compared to just 30%."

He says that the cost of the system – Bauer's FAN separator – was surprisingly low, helped by the fact that the infrastructure for the previous separator was already there. But, none the less, he says it'll have paid for itself in 18 months.

"I don't have to buy in any bedding for the cubicles at all now," Andrew says. Somatic cell counts have remained steady – at less than 100,000 cells/ml – and mastitis cases have also remained

static. DairyCo and vet James Breen, from The University of Nottingham, carried out trial work and tested the bedding, to see just how 'clean' it really was.

"I took samples immediately after it left the separator, from four places across the cubicle after the cow had laid on it, and samples from the front of the cubicle too," explains Andrew.

"The resulting bug counts were surprisingly low – I had expected them to be higher.

"And the bugs that are there are bugs from my herd – there's nothing new there to challenge my cows."

Andrew says that the trial work served to allay any fears that the bedding wasn't dry or 'clean' enough for use in the cubicles. "And Defra has said 'yes' – it's OK to use it."