



The Knowles family

Moving to a larger tenancy has given one Leicestershire-based farming family much more than just a few additional hectares and better facilities.



Herd size:	90 cows
Average yield:	10,000 litres
Unit size:	42 hectares
Target herd size:	140 cows

Better facilities and more land were the motivation for moving herd

Relocation reaps rewards

Moving from one farm to another has made 2014 a busy and stressful year for one Leicestershire-based couple. But their hard work, and a 'smooth' relocation for their herd and their business, means they are set to benefit from a larger, better equipped unit.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's been a busy and somewhat stressful dairying year for the Knowles family. Now based in Sapcote, Leicestershire, Richard and Rachael have just moved their 90-cow herd three miles down the road from Fosse Farm to Boundary Farm – their second county-council owned holding – and building work on a new cow house was almost complete when we spoke to them.

"We actually moved here at the end of July, but we ran the units along side each other for six months before the move in order to keep disruption to a minimum," explains Richard.

The disruption he refers to, of course, is that of the herd and the couple's two children. That has been minimal and the pair are pleased with how quickly and

easily the herd settled in. There was very little impact on yields or health. "We braced ourselves for some teething problems, but so far so good. We were expecting a few cases of mastitis, but we've seen just one since we moved.

"If we hadn't worked quickly to get the new cubicle shed up and the cows were spending the winter on straw yards, I suspect we'd be looking at a different story," says Richard, adding that they are indebted to Shropshire-based Paul Huxley for his speedy assistance with supplying the building in just three weeks.

More space

"Cows don't like change and we know that, so we've done everything we can

to keep management and feeding as consistent as possible. And I think we've achieved that. They certainly seem happy and I think they're more relaxed at this unit. There's more space."

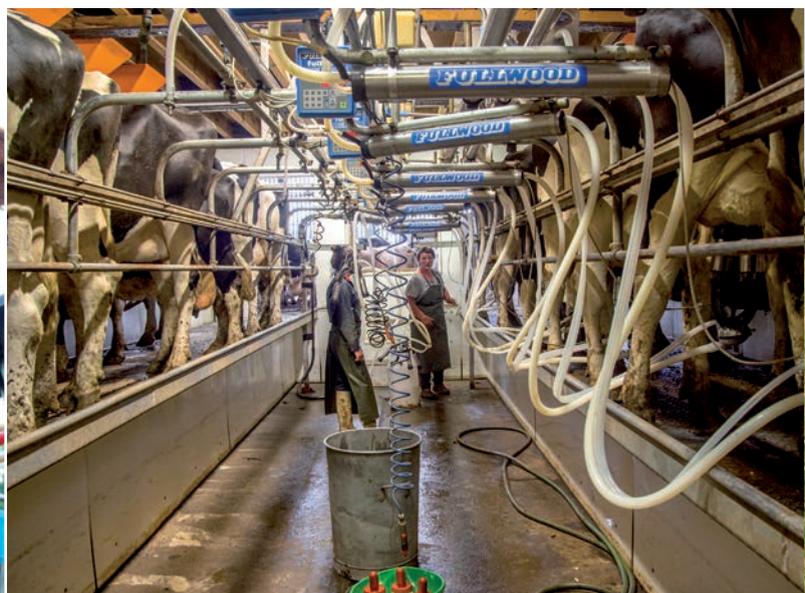
The new unit is just 12 hectares larger than the previous one. "But it also has better facilities and it's not split by a road – all the land is easily accessible. And there's better 'medium loam' land here too. We had some land alongside a river before and that was prone to flooding. All these factors mean that this unit should be easier to manage, as well as offering more space and greater flexibility."

The couple had applied for tenancies on other units, including one in Warwickshire which they came close to

Tomorrow's milkers: home-bred heifers will increase herd size



First milking: Rachael puts the 90-cow herd through the 'new' parlour





Moving day: the herd is loaded onto lorries for the three-mile trip to the new unit

getting. “We were thrilled when we got our first tenancy at Fosse Farm, back in 2001, and, with 30 hectares, it gave us a firm foothold on the dairying ladder. We could have stayed there, but we do want to expand and ‘move up’ a little. And it didn’t seem right to just sit on that tenancy. We also felt we wanted to move on and give someone else the chance to get on the ladder,” explains Richard.

“And this new tenancy is a comfortable leap for us – it’s not too big and suits us, our business plan and our herd much better.”

Richard and Rachael want to push cow numbers up to around 140 by 2016. “We were completely ‘stocked out’ at Fosse Farm so there was no way we could have done that if we’d stayed there.

“We took this tenancy with the proviso that we’d also get a new 100-cow cubicle house. And we now have two sheds that are opposite each other with an open

feed passage down the centre. That proved to be a less expensive set up to erect and it suits our needs perfectly,” explains Richard, adding that the cows will be bedded on sand.

Consistent management

The NMR-recorded herd calves all year round – to produce a level milk supply for milk buyer Arla on a Tesco contract. The herd is milked through an 8:16 herringbone parlour, which was already at the new farm and is in excellent working order. “There’s scope to expand it to a 16:16 if we need to as we increase cow numbers,” adds Richard.

The herd, which is currently averaging 10,000 litres at 4.3% butterfat and 3.5% protein with a rolling average SCC of 113,000cells/ml, is turned out in mid April and grazed through to mid October – or later if the weather allows. “We’re looking to maximise milk output per

Contented cows: the Knowles family worked hard to make the move as ‘smooth’ as possible



hectare and get as many litres from forage are possible.”

Feeding a consistent ration is also key to maximising productivity and Richard says that, in order to achieve this, it has to be the same person who feeds the cows every day. He weighs and mixes the herd’s TMR, comprising maize and grass silage, fodder beet, alfalfa, rolled wheat, soya, rapemeal, hay and minerals. This provides maintenance plus 28 litres and individual cows are topped up to yield in the parlour with an 18% protein concentrate.

The same ‘consistency’ applies to milking and that’s why Rachael has taken charge of that aspect of day-to-day management. “The cows are much calmer through the milking parlour when they see the same person every milking and the routine never varies. It has to be better for the cows, udder health and milk quality,” she says.

Yields are slowly increasing, the result of good management and attention to detail rather than deliberately ‘pushing’ the cows for more milk. “It’s natural progression, due to better genetics and fine tuning. But yield is not the be all and end all. I’d rather see yields stay the same and good cow health and fertility than see more milk in the tank and issues with production diseases and reproduction,” says Richard.

Good type

Rachael agrees and so breeding is very much focused on type, rather than yield. “We believe that if management is right then cows will milk well. And to improve longevity we select for feet and legs and good udders. We also consider chest width and we want deep, open-ribbed bodied cows. We don’t breed for stature – our cows are tall enough.”

The pair look for a minimum of five lactations: “We know that type is important. We used a high milk bull in the past and their daughters just fell to bits. We’re looking for more robust cows that will last.”

And do the couple think that they’ll ‘last’ the whole 15-year tenancy at their new unit, or will they get itchy feet again? “Securing the new tenancy was hard work but well worth the effort. That said, I have said ‘never again,’” says Rachael. “I think we’ll stay here, although I’m sure Richard has other ideas. For now, we’ll focus on the immediate future and getting this unit up into shape. After that, who knows what the future will bring.” |