

## THE PLAN OF...

**Philip Hill**

Selecting sires to increase the health, fertility and longevity of the dairy herd is paying dividends on this Shropshire-based family-run unit.



Lilleshall, Shropshire

Herd size:	<b>127 cows plus followers</b>
Average yield:	<b>8,295 litres</b>
Milk from forage:	<b>3,651 litres</b>
Average herd lifespan:	<b>5.6 lactations</b>



Careful sire selection adds balance – and longevity – to black-and-white herd

# Trouble-free cows offer yield and longevity

A move to more balanced breeding has resulted in a longer-life, trouble-free herd for one Shropshire-based producer. And he has his sights on breeding to improve feed conversion efficiency and his bottom line.

text **Rachael Porter**

**S**ize matters to Philip Hill when it comes to his 127-cow Holstein Friesian herd and 55 followers. It was the starting point for a breeding policy that's radically changed the type of cow he now milks on his unit at Lilleshall, near Newport in Shropshire.

The British Friesian herd was established by his father, Frank, in the 1960s and has been closed since 1971.

### **Insight: genetic foundations**

"We wanted the milk production of the Holstein but not their rangy frames

and stature. We didn't want the cows to become too tall for the unit's housing and other facilities or losing their body condition. We used a lot of F16 semen – a great sire for milk production. His daughters were the right size, but we were losing chest width and body capacity," explains Philip.

So 15 years ago, using SireMatch and additional advice from Richard Williams at CRV Avoncroft, Philip began using Holstein Friesian bulls offering less than one standard deviation above the average for stature, while at the same time selecting for plus fat and protein, a high PLI and a plus on milk yield.

Today, all sires are selected on PLI first, as stature is also now included in that

calculation. Richard also pulls out sires with good conformation – namely better udders, feet and legs – which all play a key role in increasing longevity. “Stature is still important. But I’m looking for a cow that is compact, with a deep body and chest width that offers capacity for plenty of forage.

“Thanks to SireMatch, we’re avoiding inbreeding issues and we’re also better able to refine our sire selection and match bulls to individual cows and heifers,” adds Philip.

### Plan: easy-to-manage herd

Philip explains that herd size is also important – land is a limiting factor where he farms: “So it’s very much about maximising our profit per hectare and improving efficiency. We want our cows to be more productive – and by that I mean complete more lactations in the herd. We can’t push up cow numbers. We’re looking for the cows that we do have to give us the highest returns possible.”

With that in mind, the change in breeding policy – and the type of cow that Philip is now milking – has not only resulted in a robust and productive herd of cattle, but have also helped the herd and business to better adapt to the current milk-price crisis.

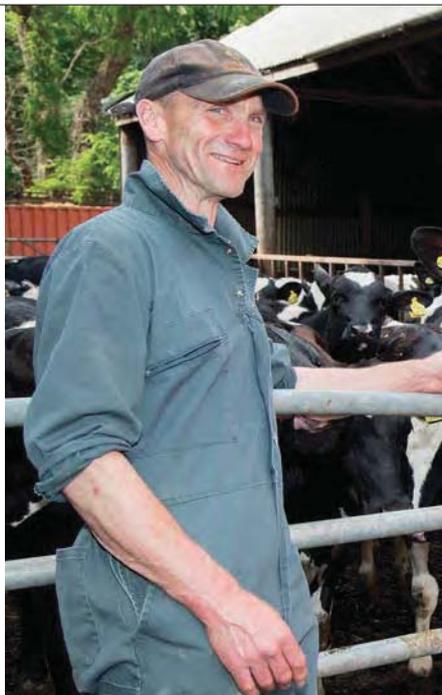
‘Trouble-free’ cows sums up Philip’s breeding goal. “I want to milk a herd where no particular cows stand out as being ‘trouble’ or difficult to manage in terms of their health or fertility. I want them all to ‘fly under the radar’, so to speak.”

He’s not far off that goal and says that, at the moment, there are just a few cows that come to mind when he thinks of the herd. The remainder just get on with their lactations with minimal fuss and stress.

The herd is managed on what Philip describes as a ‘middle of the road’ system. “We’re not chasing milk from forage or taking the intensive route,” he explains.

The herd calves all year round and the higher yielders are buffer fed during the summer. “Feeding is based on a grass silage and wholecrop ration. We’ve stopped growing maize for the herd.”

May 2016 figures show an average yield of 8,295 litres at 4.52% butterfat and 3.35% protein. Milk from forage stands at a respectable 3,651 litres – up 300 litres compared to May 2015 and 1,300 litres compared to 2014. “So that’s moving in the right direction. My target is 4,000 litres and breeding for capacity will help there,” says Philip, who sells milk to Arla.



Philip Hill: “I’m selecting sires that will help me to improve the business’ bottom line”

“The cows certainly have a big appetite for good forage.”

Fertility is good too, with 48% conceiving to first service. And Philip says that mastitis rates are also low.

### Improve: greater efficiency

He’s also looking to improve longevity. The current cow average is 5.6 lactations – that’s 49,400 litres. “The girls are almost hitting the 50,000-litre target that

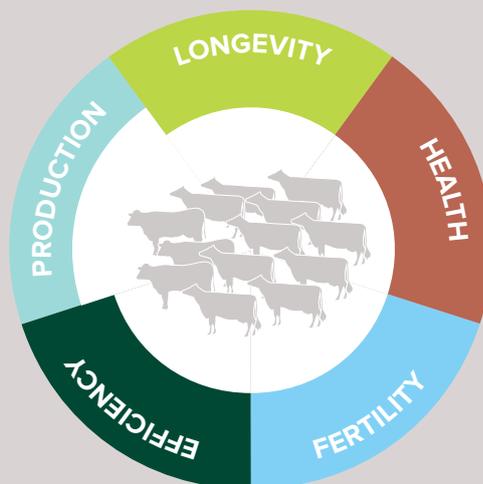
I set 10 years ago. So we’ve been moving in the right direction. I’ve many cows that have produced more than that and are still milking well. I’ve had a few hit the 100-tonne milestone and one cow that’s about to hit that target is a 12 year old in her tenth lactation. There’s no doubt that the breed strategy that we’ve adopted is working.”

He has heifers that are about to calve to Pilot, Impuls, McCormick and Levi. Sires in the AI flask include Rocky and Atlantic. “I’m very much into genomic sires now – rather than daughter proven. It’s possible to select from a wide range of sires and still get the reliability that’s key to our continued success. We’re able to make faster genetic progress, without the risk. It’s possible to speed up the rate of gain without compromise.”

As Philip’s at his limit in terms of cow numbers and he’s almost reached his milk from forage and longevity targets, he’s now set his sights on feed conversion efficiency. “I’m looking to select sires that will allow me to make big strides here and further increase my returns per hectare and the business’ bottom line.”

He says that his replacement rate is also falling, as better quality heifers join the milking herd each year. The percentage of heifers in the herd stand at 16.5% and his voluntary and involuntary cull rate totals 15%. “I want to see this at around 10%. Who knows, we may then be in a position to sell some replacement heifers.” |

#### THE PLAN IN ACTION



### What traits are key to suit the management of Philip Hill’s herd?

#### Efficiency

Efficiency is the most important, in order to produce as much milk from as few cows as possible.

#### Longevity

Profitable cows combine high production with good longevity.

#### Health

A healthy cow is usually more efficient and an efficient cow has to be healthy.

#### Fertility

Fertility is important as poor fertility is one of the most important reasons for culling cows.