

**Harvey family**

Brothers John and Stuart head up their family-run business. And steering a steady course has seen the herd rise back up to the top of the APR ranking.



Herd size:	340 cows
Average yield:	13,079kg
Somatic cell count:	<100,000 cells/ml
Calving index:	397 days

Scottish dairy herd's stamina and 'staying power' sees it move back up to take the top spot

Consistent and persistent

A tight grip on meticulous herd management has seen one of the UK's top dairy herds reclaim the number-one position in this year's NMR Annual Production Report rankings. We spoke to the family behind its success to find out more

text **Rachael Porter**

There have been many awards and accolades for the Harvey family during the past five years. And already 2017 is shaping up to be a good year for their 340-cow herd, based at Beeswing in Dumfriesshire. The herd is top of the NMR Annual

Production Report ranking for the year ending September 2016, with an impressive yield of 946kg of fat and protein and 13,079kg of milk at 4.01% butterfat and 3.22% protein.

"The cows are not performing better than they were in 2015 or 2014, but

they're performing consistently – that's what's put the herd in the top slot. We've maintained yields and the others close to the top of the rankings have fallen away a little," says John, modestly.

The herd is owned and run by John, brother Stuart and his wife Charlotte,



High yielders: the milking herd is split into three groups and managed to optimise performance

and their mother Margaret. This is the second time they topped the list – the first time was in 2015 – and they have made it into the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup twice. In 2012 they were also crowned AgriScot Scottish Dairy Farm of the Year. The team at Drum Farm, which also comprises five staff, pulls together and in the same direction and that's key to their success, according to John. "It's all about the cows. If we look after the cows then they will look after us – it really is as simple as that."

It's this 'winning' philosophy that has given the herd 'staying power' or stamina, particularly during the past couple of tough years. "And it's very much down to paying attention to detail and identifying obstacles and removing them," says John.

Heifer accommodation

Three years ago, young stock housing was improved because calf and heifer rearing was identified as a limiting factor. A suspended slatted floor cubicle shed was built to house 120 young stock, aged between four months and a year old. "Previously this age range of heifers were out wintered. But we can now house them in one building."



Consistent ration: Stuart works closely with the herd's nutritionist to feed a balanced diet

A renewed focus on heifer rearing during the past four years now sees them calving down at 24 months, rather than 26 months, and that's, in part, down to the new facilities. "We've made heifers a priority – and that's easy to do when they're close by and not away in the field somewhere. We now get them bulling and served earlier and have reduced the average age at first calving."

Heifers join the NMR-recorded herd, which is milked three times a day. "We didn't sell any surplus stock in 2016. The sale price of heifers was too low, so it made sense to cull our lower end cows and bring in the new higher genetic merit heifers," explains John. "Heifer prices are picking up now, so I think surplus heifer sales will resume in 2017." During the past five years, the herd has made considerable genetic progress. "We've been milk recording for the past 10 years and in 2016 we saw, for the first time, some of our cows pass the 100-tonnes-of-milk milestone. And there's a 11-year-old cow that's set to pass the 130-tonne mark in 2017."

"Milk recording offers a wealth of health, fertility and management data. But highlighting cows with exceptional lifetime daily yields is one particularly rewarding aspect."

"It tells us that we're breeding good cows and that we're managing them well and they're not only persisting in their lactations, but they're lasting in the herd."

Transition group

The herd is split into two groups – high yielders and mid-to-low yielders. The former group is housed all year round and the latter go out to graze after first-cut silage has been taken in mid-May and stay out until October. And the Harveys have recently added a third 'transition' group of fresh calvers.

"We think that this will help to increase peak yield. We have no problem with persistency, so this is the next step to improving lactation yield for our herd," explains Stuart, adding that this group





Cosy calves: the Harveys have renewed their focus on heifer rearing and the result is a reduced age at first calving

never comprises more than 36 cows or heifers at one time. “As one joins, the cow or heifer that’s been calved the longest moves into the high yielding group.”

Cow health

The cows are fed a TMR that provides maintenance plus 36 litres, with individual cows topped up in the parlour with a 16% protein concentrate. The mid-to-low group is fed a slightly different TMR that gives them maintenance plus 34 litres.

Stuart takes charge of feeding with help from Premier Nutrition’s Donald Lawson. Health is John’s responsibility, under the guidance of vet Roddy Dunse. He visits every 10 days and helps John to carry out Johne’s disease blood screening and deliver a comprehensive vaccination programme, which protects the herd from BVD, IBR, Leptospirosis and husk. Margaret and Charlotte manage calf rearing, as well as lending a hand at milking time.

The herd’s SCC stands at less than 100,000 cells/ml and John says that the incidence of mastitis is currently in single figures – it was at around 20 cases per 100 cows per year in 2015. Another

new development at the unit is a switch to using selective dry cow therapy and he believes that this has helped to reduce the number of cases of mastitis by improving the population of flora and fauna in the udder.

“We had tried it prior to 2016, but had problems with cows that were still giving a lot of milk at drying off. Excessive milk in the udder was pushing the sealant out of the teats.

“Then, in 2016, we decided to try again and also used Velactis at drying off, which is a treatment to reduce, if not stop, milk production,” says John. “I find that a cow needs to be giving fewer than 15 litres if I want to dry her off using teat sealant only, so this product was a huge help.

“But after just three months it was withdrawn from the market. So I’m back down to being able to only dry off about 5% of the herd without using dry cow therapy. I guess it’s a start. But I’d like to reduce the proportion of cows getting antibiotic at drying off. John has very strict criteria that a cow or heifer has to meet for teat-sealant only. “She must have a SCC of less than 150,000 cells/ml at every recording and have had no mastitis infection during her

lactation. And she has to be giving fewer than 15 litres at drying off.”

Water troughs

Other recent changes include installing some new water troughs to help increase water intakes. “The ones we had we’re OK, but we’ve swapped them for large ones with a faster re-fill rate. And it has made a difference – I’m sure we’re seeing an extra litre or two per cow per day,” says Stuart.

It’s level of attention to detail that sees the herd where it is today – after one of the toughest financial years in dairying on record. “We kept our nerve when the milk prices dropped, but then our price bottomed out at 16ppl, which was a lot more than many other producers were getting.

“We didn’t want to pull the cows back too much – it was very much about balance. We set out to keep them steady – we let them run down a little when they were out at grass, but we were able to push them again so they were producing strongly on the shoulders of the season.” It’s a strategy that’s paid off and, with an accolade so early in the year, it will be interesting to see how the herd performs during the remainder of 2017. |