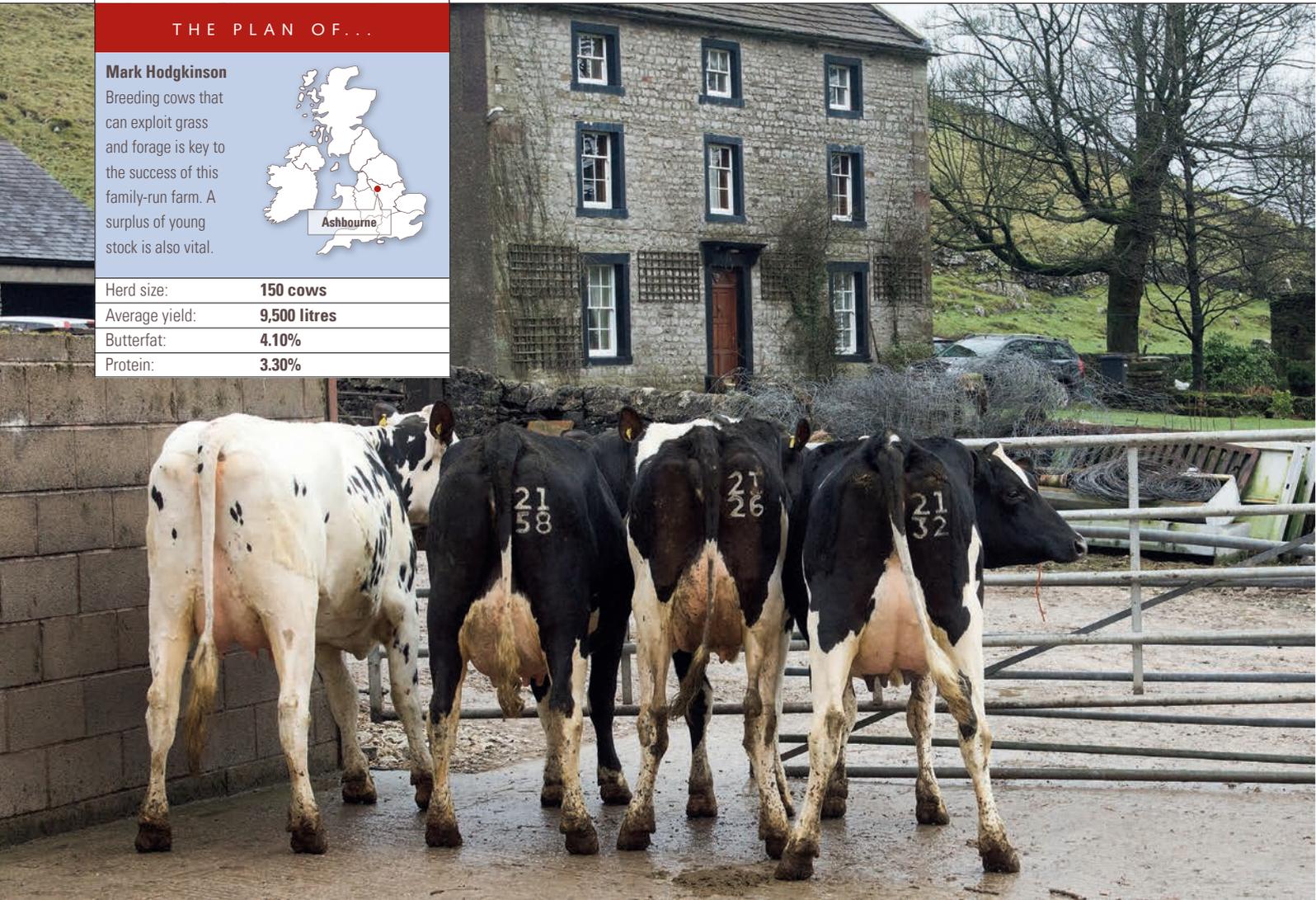


Mark Hodgkinson

Breeding cows that can exploit grass and forage is key to the success of this family-run farm. A surplus of young stock is also vital.



| | |
|----------------|---------------------|
| Herd size: | 150 cows |
| Average yield: | 9,500 litres |
| Butterfat: | 4.10% |
| Protein: | 3.30% |



Cows that can graze – and put milk in the tank

Spoilt for choice

Breeding has focused on reducing stature and improving feet and legs on one Derbyshire-based unit. And the result is a robust herd that's equipped to utilise grassland and forage – with good quality surplus heifers to sell.

text **Rachael Porter**

At 300 metres above sea level – rising to almost 400 metres, it's little wonder that much of Mark Hodgkinson's Derbyshire-based unit is unfit for dairy grazing.

There's not much he can do about the topography of the unit, but there's plenty he can do to ensure that he breeds cows that can graze on the land that is

suitable for dairy grazing and are able to utilise the grass – and the grass silage – that's grown on the 170-hectare farm. The remaining 'rough' ground is grazed by 200 Texel cross ewes and a small suckler beef herd.

"It's very much about making the best of the resources we have – it's always been the same since my grandfather, Harry,

began farming here in the mid-1930s. He founded an Ayrshire herd here in the late 1940s and my father, Stuart, began introducing Friesian bloodlines in the 1960s."

Insight: Holstein bloodlines

Mark joined the family partnership, with his father and mother Barbara in 1988 and they then had a herd sale and sold all the milking cows: "We retained all our in-calf heifers and we started again. These had Holstein bloodlines and were more like the robust, strong and dairy-like cattle that I wanted to milk and breed from," explains Mark, whose wife Lynne and son James have also since joined the family-run business.

"And we're limited as far as land is concerned, so it was key to get a little more milk from the 150-cow herd that we did have the capacity for."

The Holstein bloodlines certainly added more milk and more stature – perhaps a little too much. Today it's more about balance and extremes are to be avoided – both for Mark's herd and for producers



Mark, Lynne and James Hodgkinson

buying surplus heifers. With around 160 followers at any one time, there is a good genetic pool to select from – and from which to sell any surplus stock.

“We’ve always sold heifers and young stock and that was another reason to move towards the Holstein. We had to ensure that we breeding the kind of cows and heifers that other commercial producers want to buy and milk,” explains Mark, adding that they’ve sold surplus dairy heifers for the past 40 years through Crewe and Beeston markets and, more recently, at Leek.

The herd calves all year round, with a slight bias towards autumn. Milk is sold to Arla on a basic contract and the herd is currently averaging 9,500 litres at 4.1% butterfat and 3.3% protein.

The stature of the cows in today herd is small and more compact – ideally suited to grazing. “They’re a more manageable size. We did get to the point, about eight years ago, where cows were too big for

our system – particularly the cubicles.” So Mark began to select more for lower stature and today he avoids any Holstein sires that are more than +1 for this trait.

Plan: stature

“I’m happy with our milk yield now. I have let it ease back a little, but I’m still pushing for more from grass and forage. The target is 4,000 litres and we’re just about there. But we’re not pushing the cows with concentrates and they’re still milking well.”

Fertility did take a slight dip when Mark began breeding for yield in the 1990s, but now he selects for fertility, as well as good feet and legs. “The milkers have to walk half a mile to grazing land, so top feet and legs are essential. Again, that’s must be at least +1 on the bull proof.”

He’s also looking for chest width: “I also like to see a good plus on that trait in a sire’s proof. Body depth and capacity are

also important if I’m going to breed cows that can consume large quantities of forage.”

Sexed semen is used on heifers – they have two ‘attempts’ to get in calve before Mark switches to using conventional semen. Sexed sires in use at the moment include Delta Norbert and Newhouse Jorben. He will also use sexed semen from time to time, and with considerable success, on first-calved heifers. “It’s a sure-fire way to get a daughter from my best heifers and helps to speed up the rate of genetic gain.”

Daughters milking in the herd include Classic, Paramount and Alexander. Heifers about to calve include Fidelity and Atlantic.

Mark says he prefers the Dutch bloodlines because the resulting daughters are milky but not too big. “They’re good, strong cows with just the correct amount of stature.” And he should know – he travelled to the Netherlands four years ago to see, for himself, just what CRV Avoncroft’s stud had to offer. “I visited 18 herds in three days and saw many balanced and trouble-free cows. Most notable, at the time, were the Newhouse and Roach daughters.

Improve: uniformity

He’s still trying to emulate what he saw there, focusing on stature and making sure that any cows that are, in his eyes, still too tall are served with ‘smaller’ sires. “I’m aiming for a uniform herd of cows and that’s more difficult to achieve than it sounds. But the sires are available to help me achieve that, so I know it’s possible.”

He’s also breeding heifers that other producers are eager to milk, if sales of upwards of 40 head a year are anything to go by. “We sell them freshly calved – mainly through the market but also to a few private buyers. It can be difficult to choose which ones to sell and which ones to keep. There’s always an argument between us when it comes to selection day.

“Selling is our ‘shop window’ and we make a significant income from surplus heifer sales – we wouldn’t want to jeopardise that by selling anything other than good heifers.

“Thanks to our breeding policy – the success we’ve had with it during the past few years and the gains still to come – we should always have plenty of impressive heifers to sell and to fill our own replacement requirement. I can be sure of that.” |

Heifer investment: tomorrow’s milkers for the Hodgkinson’s herd

