

**Mark Harvey**

A management approach based on consistency, as well as the full use of data, drives performance and delivers top level results.



Number of cows:	390
Average milk yield	9,600kg
Unit size:	728 hectares
Heat detection rate:	61%

Developing a consistent system and gathering management information, which allows problems to be identified and corrective action to be taken, underpins the performance at Hinton St Mary Farms. So says farm manager Mark Harvey, who runs the Velcourt-managed unit, near Sturminster Newton in Dorset.

“Cows like consistency, the rumen needs consistency, staff appreciate consistency and a consistent approach makes it easier to manage a herd as it means we can develop meaningful benchmarks,” he says.

The unit was previously run by the owner, Anthony Pitt-Rivers, and Velcourt took over in 2003. Since then, cow numbers have increased from 330 to 390 and yields have also risen from 7,780 to 9,600 litres sold. Mark has more than 30 years of dairy experience and has been employed by Velcourt for 10 years.

Steady flow

The whole approach at Hinton St Mary is about steady and undeviating management of the 390-cow herd. The aim is to have 330 cows in milk all year round with 30 calvings per month. “Fertility drives production so we need a steady flow of fresh calved animals. This also means that the grouping system can work efficiently.”

Mark runs three milking groups with a group of 70 elite cows who average more than 40 litres per day, a group on 100 fresh calvers and heifers and a final group of 160 mid- and late-lactation

Protocols are the lynch pin for tip-top performance and a healthy profit

It's all down to consistency

Running a system that keeps the herd, the business and the books on an even keel is the secret to success on one Dorset-based unit.

And gathering and analysing management data is where it all starts. We spoke to the man in charge to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

cows. In addition he has three dry groups – a far-off group, a transition group and a close-up calving group.

“If we keep the number of calvings each month at roughly 30 we can avoid overcrowding. We achieve this fairly well

but, if there is a bottle neck at the moment, then it is in the close-up dry cows. We are looking to put up a new building so the transition and ‘close-up’ cows are housed under the same roof.”

The herd is housed all year round

All cows – and these heifers – are bred using Genus' reproductive management system



Hoof care: cows use the footbath twice a day after each milking



Ladies in waiting: a 'close-up' group of dry cows

although the far-off dry group do sometimes go out to graze and low yielders go out to loaf during the summer.

The herd is TMR fed with a diet comprising 70% maize silage and 30% grass silage. This is fed with a blend, beet pulp, molasses, chopped straw and minerals. And even the ration is mixed according to a set protocol to ensure even presentation.

Mark likes maize to be in the clamp for at least three months before it is fed to ensure high starch degradability and

less variability in the forage as fed. He usually includes wholecrop in the diet and plans to reintroduce it next year, growing enough to allow it to be fed 365 days of the year.

Fertility performance

As a steady flow of calvings is central to the system, all cows are bred by Genus ABS Reproductive Management Systems (RMS).

“Previously we carried out all the heat detection ourselves and, while fertility was acceptable, I felt we were missing a trick. Making the time to watch cows often didn't happen as we were busy with other tasks.

“But now our RMS technician, Charlotte Powell, is focussed on breeding the cows and heifers and she's an integral member of the team. Fertility performance is monitored regularly and the system gives me the data that tells me all I need to know – I know exactly what is going on.”

Heat detection rate is currently running at 61% while pregnancy rate is 20%, compared to the UK average of 13%.

Mark also pays close attention to the type of cow he is breeding. “Eight years ago we had a wide range of cow types ranging from extreme Holsteins to more typically British Friesian types.

“But I want a consistent herd of similar animals, cows that can compete and are comfortable in the environment with no bullies and no weaklings.

“Longevity and durability, with a balanced cow with good feet and udders is important to me. I am not interested in extremes.”

Mark has used the Genus GMS mating programme. All cows were scored by breeding advisor Julia Turney and a breeding plan was developed. Now all heifers and three year old animals are scored annually.

Mark is currently using bulls such as Shottle, BlueSky and Homestead.

Breeding consistent cows has also allowed heifers to be reared in more even batches. The current average calving age is 772 days. Heifers are also bred by RMS and Mark is using sexed semen on the heifers to accelerate the rate of genetic gain and reduce calving problems.

Data is the other key element of the management approach. “With the system we have we can set realistic benchmarks and monitor performance,” Mark explains. “The key to all the information I use is that it must help me manage the cows, identify problems and develop solutions to them.”

Regular footbathing

Mark receives regular fertility updates as part of RMS, uses KPI targets developed by Velcourt and also uses NMR Herd Companion and the Genus Herd Health Report. He believes the information has been particularly valuable when trying to restrict the impact of lameness and mastitis.

“Mastitis runs at 33 cases per 100 cows. It was higher than this but we have used bacteriology to identify the specific bugs and have a management protocol per bug.

“On the lameness front we had a big problem with digital dermatitis when I first came but by implementing routine foot trimming and regular footbathing we have reduced the impact. Cows are footbathed twice daily after milking while all dry cows and youngstock are foot bathed three times a week.

“You will never beat these problems but you can manage them. The staff understands the importance of a consistent approach and appreciates that preventative actions are preferably to treating cows.” |