

**Billockby Hall Farm**

A 'walk before you run' approach, with a strong team of staff following strict procedures and protocols, is key to the continued success of this expanding herd



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|----------------------------|---------------|
| Number of cows: | 370 |
| Expanding to: | 700 |
| Lifetime daily yield: | 14.3kg |
| Conception to 1st service: | 60% |

What should be the real focus when producers expand cow numbers? Increasing herd size or putting protocols – and good staff – in place before increasing the pressure on labour and other resources?

Definitely the latter, according to Billockby Hall Farm's herd manager John Kirkbride and with his experience of running large herds he should know. "Putting a strong, capable and committed team in place and working to strict management protocols is the only way to go if you want to successfully expand," he says.

"You have to get everything right before you start to increase cow numbers and pressure on labour and resources. If not it could all fall apart."

Dedicated team

John heads a team of four full-time staff, which also includes herdsman Henry Barham, youngstock manager Patrick Allmond and feeding technician Sean Kingman.

They're all dedicated to managing the 370-cow herd, which is owned by Henry Alston and based at Billockby near Great Yarmouth in Norfolk. Monthly team meetings, with Henry, are a chance to air any problems or issues and make sure that everyone is pulling in the same direction and working towards the same goals.

This is vital because the pedigree Bure herd is expanding. "We're investing and growing the business because we want economies of scale and we also

Following set procedures is key to successful large herd management

Protocols protect herd productivity

Investment and expansion are vital to 'future proof' one Norfolk-based herd. And a measured approach, with a focus on 'getting everything right' before increasing cow numbers, will ensure that the herd and business stay on track.

text **Rachael Porter**

want to 'future proof' the herd," says Henry Alston. "We're looking to expand while at the same time improve cow health, welfare and comfort. And we're growing in phases to keep risk to a minimum and to make sure that we get things right from the start."

To date a Fullwood 24:48 swing-over parlour, complete with an ADF automatic dipping and flushing system, has been installed in a new building that also contains the farm office, a sorting/holding area and space for another 24:48 swing-over parlour to sit alongside the new one when the herd enters the next phase of expansion.

The parlour, through which the cows are milked three times a day, replaced a rather tired 25-year-old herringbone, but this is still used to milk freshly calved and 'antibiotic' cows separately from the main herd – great for controlling mastitis infection within the milking herd, and it will be invaluable when the herd reaches the optimum numbers. There are also plans to build additional sand-bedded cow cubicle housing at the unit, together with more silage clamps and a feed store, as the herd grows.

No rush

"We're in no rush to expand – taking your time and increasing in 50-or-so cow increments is also important. Our expansion timetable shows we will be up to around 400 soon and up to around 470 by the end of the year," explains John. Ultimately, cow numbers will increase to around 700 cows, but there's no pressure

to get there quickly. "We'll increase numbers as and when we're ready and we'll find the very best staff along the way. At the moment we've enough staff,



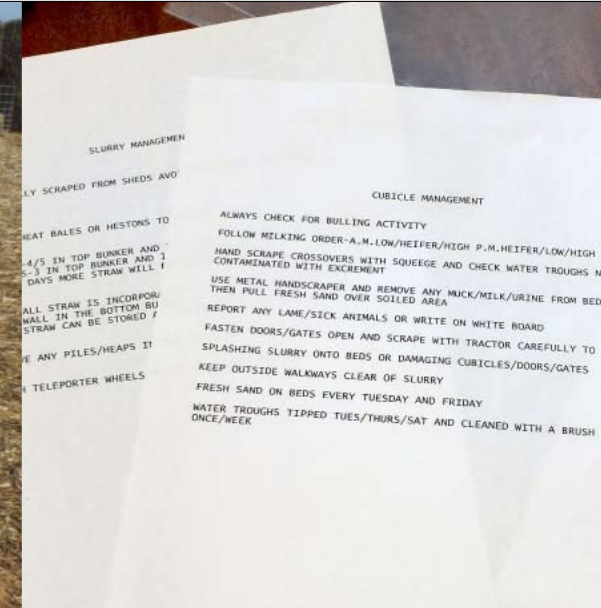
Star treatment: tomorrow's milkers are given the best possible start, housed in individual hutches and fed carefully following strict procedures

including relief milkers, to increase up to 400 cows. I reckon you need one full-time person for every 100 cows. So beyond 400, we'll be looking to recruit someone to join the team."

This cow-to-man ratio, with protocols and procedures in place, ensures that

management and husbandry is tip-top, which in turn means that the herd is healthy, fertile, productive and profitable.

"Our culling rate is low and our health problems are minimal because we focus on cow health and comfort, we monitor



Clear instructions: procedures are written down to ensure consistent management

all health parameters against targets using Kite's Health Monitor System, and this also monitors reasons for culling, so we know why every cow leaves the farm.

It's all about maximising lifetime daily yield. Ours is in the UK's top 5% – at



Comfort zone: cow welfare is a top priority at the expanding unit



Tip top: keeping water troughs clean is key to maximising intakes Parlour investment: a 24:48 swing-over has slashed milking time

14.3kg. And that success starts with good transitional cow management,” says John, who is the herd’s ‘fertility specialist’. “Everyone in the team has their strengths and that’s mine. Getting cows in calf and getting them to calve easily is the basis of the success for this herd – just like any other.”

Trouble-free calvings

He’s looking for cows to calve unassisted. In his experience, intervention at calving can be the start of a whole set of health, fertility and production problems. “Our cows calve at the right condition score and they calve easily on their own. There are very few assisted calvings and we see very few problems – just two cases of milk fever in 2011 and four ‘dirty’ cows with retained cleansings. We’ve only had one LDA in five years,” he adds, which is just one in more than 1,800 calvings.

The transition cows are fed a simple TMR using grass, maize, advanced DCAB and a little straw. “We have hardly changed this mix at all for more than four years. It works so we leave it alone. We do not overstock the transition yard and Sean ensures that the feed is ‘pushed up’ regularly.”

In terms of getting cows in calf, Kite Consulting’s consultant Ben Watts sets targets each month for the number of pregnancies required and the number of cows that need to be served to achieve this. “If we serve the number of cows required, we get the pregnancies. It’s as simple as that,” he says.

It’s a logical approach and it starts with heat detection. But again, because the cows are in the peak of health then heats are strong. “It’s easy to spot a cow bulling in this herd and it’s something that we’re all responsible for,” says John. “We have installed a heat detection system in the

new parlour but it only pushed up our detection rate by about 3%. We were already getting 60% of the herd in calf to first service, so we were doing really well without the technology. Having said that, the system will be invaluable as herd size increases.”

Heat detection and transitional cow management aside, John says that record keeping, protocols and procedures form the backbone of how the herd is run.

NMR InterHerd produces data that can be analysed, with Ben’s help, using InterHerd Plus and Kite Health Monitor and this helps to pick up any problems or spot areas of management that need polish. “They can also create a bit of competition, which is a great motivator. We’re all trained in AI, so we can see who is getting the most cows in calf. And while we all try to out do each other, the business is benefiting.”

Quality bonus

The same can be said for milking – milkers are paid a bonus linked to milk quality, which can be easily achieved if they stick to the milking routine protocols.

“It’s a great incentive and our milkers compete to pick up mastitis cases and problems linked to milk quality. We look closely at the milk filters and they pride themselves on having the cleanest filter after a milking. And again it keeps them motivated and on their toes – and it helps to ensure that milk quality and udder health and hygiene are the very best that they can be,” explains John.

Time budgets, calculated using Firststep, show that cows are achieving in excess of 14 hours lying times on their ‘beach’ beds – three hours more than the UK herd average. This is helped by the efficient approach to day-to-day

management. “We aim to get the cows ‘fed-to-bed’ in 45 minutes.”

There are feeding protocols in place – the herd is fed a full TMR ration, with the high yield group housed all year round and the low groups being turned out to grass during the spring and summer.

And protocols extend to calf feeding with a coloured-tape system. Calf pens are marked with tape so anyone can feed the calves.

“They just look at the sheet and know, for example, that blue tape means that calves are being weaned and only need to be fed milk once a day,” says John.

“It’s fool proof, I suppose. Or at least that’s the plan.”

He admits that sometimes there is resistance to a protocol or a procedure being introduced.

“A staff member may not see the point or the possible benefit of doing something a certain way. So the best way to sell it to them is to agree to be flexible and review it if it doesn’t work.”

This approach means that herd management constantly evolves and improves and builds strong foundations for expansion.

Strong team

Protocols and procedures are only as good as the staff following them, so a strong team is important.

John has no real concerns about recruiting good staff when the time comes.

He says that there are a lot of good herds people out there looking for a position.

“And a job at a new large unit like this, with good working conditions and facilities, would be attractive.

“So no, I don’t worry about staffing. I concentrate on the cows and the job in hand – just like the rest of the team.” |