



The Windel family

Long lasting, easy-to-manage Ayrshires are key to the success of this Wiltshire-based herd. And the family that runs it is totally dedicated to the breed



Herd size:	101 cows
Average yield:	8,215 litres
Average milk price:	35.47ppl (2012/2013)
Somatic cell count:	97,000 cells/ml

This year sees a new herd shine at the top of NMR annual production report rankings for the Ayrshire breed.

The Windel family's pedigree Wroughton herd, based near Swindon in Wiltshire, has moved around in the top 20 or so herds for the past 30 years or more and even headed the list back in the 1980s. But this year it moved from eighth position to first and Mike Windel is obviously delighted.

"We set out to produce as much milk as we can, as cost effectively as possible. Topping the ranking for the Ayrshire breed is just a 'side effect' of that, but a very happy one."

He says that secret to the herd's success is a mixture of close attention to detail and good genetics.

"Everything came together for us in 2013. We calved down a nice group of heifers and they all milked very well. I think that, and the excellent silage that we made in 2012 despite the difficult conditions, gave us the edge," he says.

Full control

Mike, who farms in partnership with his wife Rosemary and son Russell, explains that they make all their own silage, as well as working as contractors on other units. "We consistently produce good forage for the herd, whatever the weather throws at us, and I think that has really helped milk yields during the past few years."

Key to success is being able to make silage at exactly the right time:

Careful sire selection and precise feeding are key to maximising production

Purist's passion breeds success

What does it take to rise to the top of NMR's annual production report rankings? We spoke to a leading Ayrshire breeder to find out his – and his herd's – secrets to success.

text **Rachael Porter**



Sure footing: strong feet and legs contribute to a long and productive herd life



Easy on the eye: these girls have beauty and plenty of brawn when it comes to milking well – and lasting for several lactations – in the herd

“We’re not at the mercy of contractors – we can go when conditions are optimal and we can get the job done in three or four days.”

Three cuts are taken each year off 48 hectares at the unit and a further 20 hectares of grass keep. “We like to chop it quite long – we don’t want ‘minced’ grass – and all silage is clamped, with the exception of a few square bales that are made from third cut.”

Mike says that silage always analyses well. “In fact our second cut was better than our first cut in 2013 and even in the wet summer of 2012 we made some good silage.”

This silage is fed as part of a mixed ration, which also comprises a blend, a moist feed called ‘forage boost’ and molasses. An 18% crude protein concentrate is fed to yield through out-of-parlour feeders (OPFs) and a 16% crude protein concentrate is also fed in the parlour, at a rate of 2kg/head.

“I think using out-of-parlour feeders is a key ingredient in our herd’s success. We’re feeding them little and often, so there’s not digestive upset. We can ease up individual feed rates slowly and we’re not wasting concentrate by chucking it in a mixer wagon and feeding it to the wrong cows,” says Mike, who has been using OPFs on his unit for 30 years.

Impressive yields

The average yield for the 101-cow herd was 8,215kg of milk at 4.10% butterfat and 3.27% protein for the ending September 2013. Heifers averaged an impressive 7,281kg of milk at 4.55% butterfat and 3.43% protein. Milk price averaged 35.47ppl for 2012/2013.

“We’ve had a run of good luck with heifer calves – we’ve produced plenty of them. So we’ve quite a high percentage of heifers in the herd – at least 25% at the moment.”

Mike explains that these are all home-bred pure Ayrshires using sires from the UK’s Ayrshire Cattle Society (ACS), some from Canada and his own bull.

His passion for the breed stretches back more than 40 years. His father began dairying with Ayrshires back in the 1940s, before slowly switching to British Friesians. It was in 1972, when Mike’s family moved to the tenant farm where the business is still based today, that his uncle gave him nine Ayrshires. “And it all snowballed from there. I decided that Ayrshires were the way I wanted to go.” Today about 10% of the herd is served by the home-bred bull, with AI used on the rest. Mike uses some young bull semen from the ACS and he still has some Winston in the AI flask: “But I have to use him with care to avoid inbreeding. I also use some Belgian Blue semen on the lower genetic end of the herd.”

Long-lasting cows

“I select for type, so that they last for several lactations in the herd. I don’t set a minimum for yield. I believe that if they’re fed well then we’ll get results as far as milk production goes.”

That said, it’s a ‘milky’ herd with some exceptional cow families, including Diane and Janet. One cow – Diva – has broken the 10,000-litre barrier and quite a few produce more than 9,000 litres in a 305-day lactation.

Health and fertility are good. Partly due to the Ayrshire breed, says Mike, adding

that feet are extremely strong. “We don’t push the cows to get back in calf – we calve all year round to satisfy our milk contract to supply Waitrose – so we’re not too worried about the calving interval.”

This stands at 417 days. The rolling average somatic cell count is 97,000 cells/ml and mastitis incidence is low – just a couple of cases each month. The herd attracts attention from across the UK and abroad. Semen from Wroughton bulls has been exported to the US, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Switzerland. “The first Ayrshire calf from a UK sire for 100 years was born in Switzerland in 2013 and that was by our bull called Lord Winston.”

He’s no longer alive, but Wroughton Ridgeway, who replaced him, is also proving popular with Mike and other breeders.

Pure approach

“For me it has to be pure Ayrshire and that’s why my cows last so long in the herd. Eight or nine lactations are the average,” says Mike, who also likes to show his cattle at local and national shows when he has the time.

One of his cows – Wroughton Alice – held the world record for lifetime yield for a pure Ayrshire at 128.4 tonnes in 12 lactations. “I think she still holds the UK record. And I’ve some cows in the herd at the moment that are getting close to breaking the 100-tonne barrier.

“For me, that’s what it’s all about – cows that produce a lot of milk during several lactations. It’s very rewarding, on a job-satisfaction level, to milk healthy, trouble-free cows that get back in calf easily. And it makes good financial sense too.” |