



Brian Coombe

A herd manager, who runs his own cows along side his boss' pedigree herd, has risen to the top of the NMR APR rankings for the Ayrshire breed.



Herd size: **35 plus 35 followers**

Average yield: **8,943kg**

'Companion' herd size: **160 Holsteins**

Holstein herd average: **8,000kg**

'Evolving' herd tops list and excels in mixed management system

Unique set up with top results

A herd manager's own Ayrshire herd, which he runs along side his employer's herd, has topped the NMR Annual Production Report ranking for the breed and swayed management towards cross-breeding on one Cornwall-based unit.

text **Rachael Porter**

It's an unusual set up that is yielding extraordinary results. Brian Coombe's pedigree Ayrshire herd is unique not only in that it's top of the NMR Annual Production Report rankings, but also because it's run as part of another herd – the Harvey brothers' 160-strong pedigree Holstein Friesian herd.

Brian is the herd manager of both herds,

which are run as one at Lamorna Farm, in North Petherwin near Launceston. His cows have been there for four years – he's been working at the unit for more than five years now and bought his first two cows in 2010 as a gift for his wife Sharon and their daughter Evelyn. "And it just grew from there really. Milking something that wasn't black-and-white added some

interest for me and, as a family, we're really passionate about cows – that's all breeds and not just Ayrshires. Sharon and I like to show cattle and Evelyn likes to take part in the young handlers' class."

He bought a few more Ayrshire maiden heifers from sales and markets and, coupled with home-bred heifers, today his herd numbers 35 milking cows plus 35



Tomorrow's milkers: young stock for both herds now comprise Ayrshire and Ayrshire crosses



Top genetics: Brian uses sires to breed heifers with good milk yield and type

followers. Cow families include Polkadot, Peach, Dewdrop, Bidy, Snowy and Candy. “They’re all great cow families and ideal foundations on which to build a herd,” says Brian, adding that he’s currently using US sire Lagace Mordicus and British sire Rosehill Mandaville to maintain milk and further improve type.

Not that there’s much wrong with the cows he has. They’re producing a lot of milk – more than any other NMR recorded Ayrshire herd – and enough to push the herd up from second place in the rankings for the past few years to first position with an average combined fat and protein yield of 659kg and 8,943kg of milk for the year ending September 2014.

He puts his success down to breeding, feeding and ‘a good dash of luck’. But Brian’s painstaking attention to detail indicates that it’s a huge dollop of good management – not chance – that sees the herd where it is today.

Crucial details

Brian stresses how important it is to know your stock. “Then it’s easy to spot when something is wrong. And making sure that you get the small things – the details – spot on is also vital. Every little thing contributes to the bigger picture – the herd’s continued good health, fertility, productivity and profitability.”

He had a suspicion that the Ayrshire herd could be in with a chance of topping the ranking this year. “I know the cows are milking well. And they’re producing more milk than their black-and-white counterparts – almost 1,000 litres more if you take the herd average,” explains Brian.

Little wonder, then, that the Harveys have given Brian free reign when it comes to

the direction that the Holstein Friesian herd’s breeding is now taking. An Ayrshire sweeper bull is now used on the Holstein Friesian cows. “And most of our young stock is now Ayrshire cross – we used a high PLI Ayrshire bull on all maiden heifers and the resulting cross-bred heifers are then crossed again using another Ayrshire bull.

“I think the Ayrshire herd’s performance is just too good to ignore. It works because these cows suit our system and our set up. They’re easy to manage, with tough feet, they’re more fertile and easier to get back in calf, and they’re aggressive eaters.”

It’s this characteristic in particular that is behind their impressive milk production, which compares to around 8,000 litres of milk, at 4.06% butterfat and 3.31% protein, for the Holstein Friesians. Both herds calve all year round and milk is sold to Dairy Crest.

All the cows are managed as one herd on a relatively intensive system – just milk recorded separately. They graze in the

summer on silage aftermaths and buffer feeding at 60% of the typical winter ration continued.

This TMR comprises grass and maize silage, plus crimped grain, a 22% blend containing sugar beet, bicarbonate, lime flour, urea, minerals and a high protein liquid molasses.

It provides maintenance plus 28 litres and individual cows are then topped up to yield using out-of-parlour feeders and a 17% protein concentrate.

“The ration is very appetising – when we first put it out in front of the cows it looks and smells so good that I could be tempted to eat it. I think the Ayrshire certainly eat more of it than the Holstein Friesians.

“The Ayrshires seem to eat non stop – they have plenty of body capacity.”

Own tenancy

As it is, Brian has some top yielding, efficient cattle in his herd. And, in the not-too-distant future, he hopes to have more.

It’s been a closed herd for the past two years, but Brian hasn’t ruled out buying in more stock: “If the animal and the price is right.”

He’d also like to have his own farm tenancy one day. “Just 60 cows would be enough for me to get started, but I’m in no hurry,” says Brian, who has been milking and managing other people’s herds for the past 27 years. “I’ve always wanted my own place but, despite my best efforts, it’s never happened.

“This route I’m taking, with my own cows, seems to be continually evolving and I think it will lead to me realising my dream one day. But this current set up works well at the moment – for me, my family, the cows and the Harveys.

“I think that realising another of my dreams, to top the NMR APR ranking, will more than suffice for now.” |

The two herds are milked through a simple 12:24 herringbone with no in-parlour feeders

