

**Nick Sercombe**

Nick and his wife Louisa are finally realising their decade-long dream of milking their own cows – with the added bonus of doing it on a state-of-the-art dairy unit.



Herd size:	300
Average yield:	9,000 litres
Unit size:	445 hectares
Planned expansion:	Up to 600+ cows

Managing a large herd on a new unit realises couple's dairy dream

The very best of both worlds

A 10-year wait to get a firm foothold on the dairying ladder has finally paid off for one Leicestershire-based couple, who are now managing a unit that's bigger and better equipped than they every dreamed. We spoke to them to find out more.

text **Rachael Porter**

Being named runner up in Promar's Milkfinder Manager of the year competition – and also being highly commended at this year's Cream Awards – are the icing on the cake for producer Nick Sercombe.

He's farm manager at Knaptoft Hall Farm, near Lutterworth in Leicestershire, and is charged with looking after the Hall

family's recently expanded herd. Nick's wife, Louisa, has recently given up her job as a Promar farm business secretary to join him at the unit and will take on responsibility for calf rearing.

"And I can't wait – we've been waiting a long time for this. We're finally realising our dream of managing a dairy business together," she says.

The couple's dream was to run their own herd, possibly on a county council holding. They've had a few cows of their own since 2005, mainly Jerseys and Holstein Friesians that they liked to show, which were run at Nick's brother's dairy unit near Melton Mowbray. Numbers had expanded to 60 by 2010 and by 2012 they had started to lose hope of finding a



Cow house: sand-bedded cubicles offer improved cow comfort



Feed-fence design: self-locking yokes also help when managing a large herd



New rotary: 50-point parlour

tenancy. They'd decided to wait for just 12 more months and, if unable to secure one, to sell the herd.

But then their luck turned in 2013. Louisa was contracted to carry out some farm secretarial work for Knaptoft Hall Farm and was told that the business was looking for a new manager. "So I mentioned it to Nick," she says. "And he decided to apply. He beat 50 other applicants and got the job. It felt right – like it was meant to be." That was in October 2013 and the good fortune continued – the couple were also able to take their cows with them. Neville Hall bought some of the Sercombe's herd – they contributed to the herd's expansion from 240 cows to today's 300 head.

"But we also kept ownership of some cows. It's great to be able to continue with our pedigree prefix, particularly because we enjoy showing and taking part in herd competitions.

"And we also have the opportunity to manage them on one of the newest and best equipped units in the UK," explains Nick.

New facilities

The dairy unit is, indeed, brand new. A 50-point Dairymaster rotary parlour and sand-bedded cubicle housing for up to 500 cows was built on green land in 2014/2015. It replaces the 445-hectare farm's existing and somewhat dilapidated facilities.

The herd was moved to the new set up on

September 21, 2015. "It's been extremely exciting and the cows were very quick to adapt to the new parlour," says Nick.

"I haven't milked cows for eight years and I never really liked it," adds Louise. "But milking in the rotary is a pleasure. There's no stress – for the cows or the milkers – and it's quiet and easy to operate."

The collecting yard has a backing gate with a scraper on it – Louisa says that this is a UK first. And the cows are happy to come in to be milked: "They seem to enjoy a little trip on the roundabout!"

It's also quick. It was taking four hours to milk the herd through the old 24:12 herringbone parlour, but now it takes just 80 minutes.

Nick had hand in the new site's design and says that he's always preferred rotary parlours, particularly for larger herds. "We have plans to increase cow numbers to 650 cows and the new parlour can easily handle a herd of that size. It is capable of milking 230 cows per hour. And the housing has also been designed and positioned so that it can be easily expanded when cow numbers increase.

Yields increased when Nick took over the management of the herd – from around 7,000 litres to 9,000 litres, at 4.05% butterfat and 3.50% protein.

"Individual cows are averaging 34 litres a day at the moment and we've certainly seen a few extra litres since moving to the new set up."

Improved cow comfort has certainly made a difference, according to Louisa. "The old cubicles were built in the 1960s and they were so short that even I couldn't lie down in them," she says.

The herd is calved all year round and managed – and split – into four groups: high and low yielders, freshly calved cows and heifers. "Come the spring, I think we'll turn out the low yielding group and the far-off dry cows to grass, but the other groups will remain inside and fed a TMR. It gives us more control over their ration," says Nick.

Free rein

The TMR comprises maize, wholecrop and grass silages plus a blend and provides the high yielding group with maintenance plus 30 litres. Individuals are topped up to yield with concentrates fed at a rate of 0.4kg/litre.

With the free rein that Nick has to run the herd his way, and multimillion-pound facilities to do it with, it's little wonder that he and Louisa no longer have a hankering to run their own unit.

"In many ways we already are," says Nick. "It's just like having our own unit. I have daily meetings with Neville, but he trusts me to make key decisions. We also have a regular salary and fewer financial worries than we would if this were our own business. We're doing what we love – what more is there to say?" |

