

**Andrew Knowles**

Increasing yields are the result of good health, fertility and nutritional management by this progressive producer and his five-strong team of dedicated staff.



Herd size:	<b>430 cows</b>
Average yield:	<b>12,160kg</b>
Calving interval:	<b>408 days</b>
Employees:	<b>five (full time)</b>

Skilled and dedicated team is key to herd's success

# If a job's worth doing...

One Worcestershire-based herd is going from strength to strength, steadily moving up NMR's Annual Production Report rankings. But management is geared up to maximise health, fertility and efficiency – high yields are a 'happy' side effect.

text **Rachael Porter**



*Beef calves: Belgian Blue semen is used on the flying herd to produce saleable offspring*



Top team (from left to right): Austin Knowles, Andrew Owczarek, Shaun Jones, NMR milk recorder Clare Colton, Chris Gowen and Freddie Coleman

Tasty treat: chopped fodder beet forms part of the milking herd's TMR ration

**J**umping from 15th to eighth place in the latest NMR Annual Production Report rankings is no mean feat. But Austin Knowles, who runs the 430-cow herd with help from wife Faye and father Lawrence, says that pushing for yield is not something he sets out to do. "It's not a driver for us and we're not 'reinventing the wheel'. Our aim is to manage every aspect of the herd to the best of our ability and to pay close attention to detail. Good yields will always follow if we get everything else right."

And that efficiency is something that Austin says he couldn't achieve on his own. He's extremely keen to stress that much of the herd's success is down to the hard work, dedication and skill of his five-strong team, headed up by herd manager Chris Gowen.

"The ideas are ours, but it's the team that carries them through and helps us to manage the herd to the high standards that we're aiming for. They are extremely dedicated. This is vital and the key ingredient to making the whole set up work."

The set up, or system, is a flying herd, based at Hollings Hill Farm near Malvern, which is milked three times a day and calves all year round.

### Impressive yield

The herd's average yield, to September 2015, was 12,160kg of milk, with a combined fat and protein yield of 864kg, at 3.81% fat and 3.29% protein. Milk is sold to Muller.

The herd is fed a TMR during the winter, formulated with help from nutritionist David Balls. This comprises grass and maize silage, caustic wheat, chopped fodder beet, a 28% protein blend, golden flake and minerals, which supplies

maintenance plus 38 litres. "The ration really makes the difference on this unit. We do have some good genetics in the herd, and the quality of the ration allows us to tap into that potential without compromising health, fertility and longevity.

"But we're not breeding for yield or anything else for that matter – it's a flying herd. We buy our replacements, predominantly, from Denmark through Livestock Solutions."

### Beef sires

And there are no plans to rear his own replacements. "We used to breed and rear heifers, but eight years ago we had a serious outbreak of TB and lost a large batch of freshly calved heifers that we'd reared from calves. During a 12-month period we had a significant number of reactors and it was heart breaking to lose all that potential after the hard work and investment of rearing them.

"That's when we decided that we'd buy in replacements instead and, so far, it's working well for us. I'd go as far as to say that rearing young stock is a distraction from the main dairy business. I like looking at young stock, but I'm glad that I don't have any."

Instead Belgian Blue semen is used across the entire herd, which has a calving interval of 408 days. "That's a figure that's improved since we began using Genus' RMS, in October 2013. We need 35 pregnancies a month to maintain a level milk supply for our buyer. And, again, handing the responsibility of reproduction over to a skilled contractor frees up more time to focus on other aspects of dairy management," says Austin.

All calves are sold privately, at between two and six weeks old. "And I get

good prices for them – they're top quality calves."

Grazing is also key to the herd's productive and profitable success. Come mid-May, all in-calf cows and heifers are turned out and rotationally grazed on a paddock system until the end of October. Fresh-calved high yielders remain in the unit's sand-bedded cow house and are fed a TMR until, they too, are back in calf. "Sand beds are the gold standard as far as cow comfort and welfare are concerned. We can't turn them out at that point in their lactation because grazing simply wouldn't provide enough energy and other vital nutrients to support early lactation milk production and facilitate them getting back in calf," explains Austin.

### Ultimate goal

Close to 90% of cows are served at 60 days post calving. "We could push the cows harder but I'm not sure it would be economical – managing cows on a knife-edge can bring higher vet bills and replacement costs."

A job well done not only makes for a productive and profitable business – vital if Austin is going to achieve his ultimate goal of expanding the business sufficiently to accommodate his children, should they choose to join when they're older – it's also great for staff morale.

"My team is integral to the success of the herd – without them we wouldn't be where we are today and still improving. "I'm really a figure head and they're the ones that make it happen. I know I can rely on them to milk and manage the herd to my standards. They care about the cows as much as I do and they also know that they can rely on each other to do a good job." |