

THE PLAN OF...

Bill Holland
Restoring cow numbers to pre-business split levels and improving longevity have been the motivators for this dairy herd.



Herd size:	280 cows
Average yield:	9,500 litres
Butterfat:	4.20%
Protein:	3.50%



Home-bred replacements have helped to 'replenish' herd

Onwards and upwards

Dairy breeding has focused on longevity to boost milking herd size with home-reared replacements on one Derbyshire-based unit. And the result is a healthy, productive and uniform herd that now has a few surplus heifers to sell.

text Rachael Porter

Longevity is key to successful breeding at Bill and Jenny Holland's Ashbourne-based unit. The commercial herd was split in 2014, when his brother took approximately one third of the 300-cow herd to set up his own unit. So Bill has been focussing on rearing replacements to get milking cow numbers back up to

that level. He's at 280 at the moment, plus 320 followers, and he says that he's not far off being back to full capacity, which would now be around 320 milkers. "Breeding long-life cows has been our focus. That way we can increase the size of our herd and also, very quickly, be back in a position to sell surplus heifers.

That's a vital extra revenue stream for our business and, with milk price volatility, it's even more important that we are in a position to generate an income from heifer sales."

Insight: restocking

Bill is the third generation of his family to run Harehill Farm, in Sudbury. His grandfather Albert established a herd of Ayrshires that was then bred to Friesians by his father Don and then took a route towards Holstein breeding.

"The herd is very much Holstein now. My father set us on this path 25 years ago when he was looking to breed more milk and stature into the herd," explains Bill. The all-year-round calving herd is managed on a system where the herd is



Bill Holland: "I'm aiming for a uniform herd, comprising similar cows that all suit our system"

predominantly housed all year round. "Although we do try to get the low yielding late lactation cows out to grass in the summer."

Housing throughout the year 'evolved' during the past three years, mainly because Bill and his staff have been busy with building work. "But it actually suits our set up – and helps to reduce the TB risk. It's also easier to feed a consistent TMR ration when the cows are housed." Bill works with his nutritionist, brother George, for feeding and purchasing advice.

The herd, which is managed as three (fresh, medium and low) groups, is fed a TMR all year round, with individuals topped up to yield with concentrates in the parlour. Two groups are housed on cubicles with mattresses bedded with sawdust and the third 'fresh' group is housed in a straw yard. "Housing is up to capacity now and I'm looking to install another shed with 100 cubicles so I can reduce stocking rate down to 85% – I think that would be better for herd health and fertility. More importantly, it will allow us to put cows in the groups that we want to put them in, rather than putting them where we have space. It should take pressure off us and the cows."

Plan: longevity

The type of sires used on the herd has changed a little, predominantly in a bid to improve longevity and ensure that cows complete more lactations in the milking herd. "We do keep an eye on solids, due to the milk contract that we have at the moment. Milk is currently sold to Arla on a solids contract with a small Tesco supplier premium.

"And we've brought the size of cows back a little – smaller and more compact cows will last longer. But we're still looking for plenty of capacity and a big frame. I like my cull cows to realise £800."

Pushing for longevity is not only key to building cow numbers back up to where

they were, but also for ensuring that there's a surplus. "We had some TB trouble, which hampered our bid to increase herd size. That's passed now, but I think a surplus is also our 'insurance policy' against any future positive TB tests," says Bill adding that, on average, heifers calve for the first time at 26 months old.

He rears around 160 heifers each year and, now he's not in a huge rush to expand any further until the new cubicle shed is built, he may look to sell a few now that heifer prices have firmed a little.

Other traits he's looking for are good feet and legs, although there are few lameness issues in the herd. "We want it to stay that way and housing all year round means that feet and legs are more important than ever."

"Balanced breeding is what we're about – and that's why the Dutch sires from

CRV Avoncroft tick all the boxes for our herd. It's about avoiding the extremes and breeding daughters that are trouble free and easy to manage."

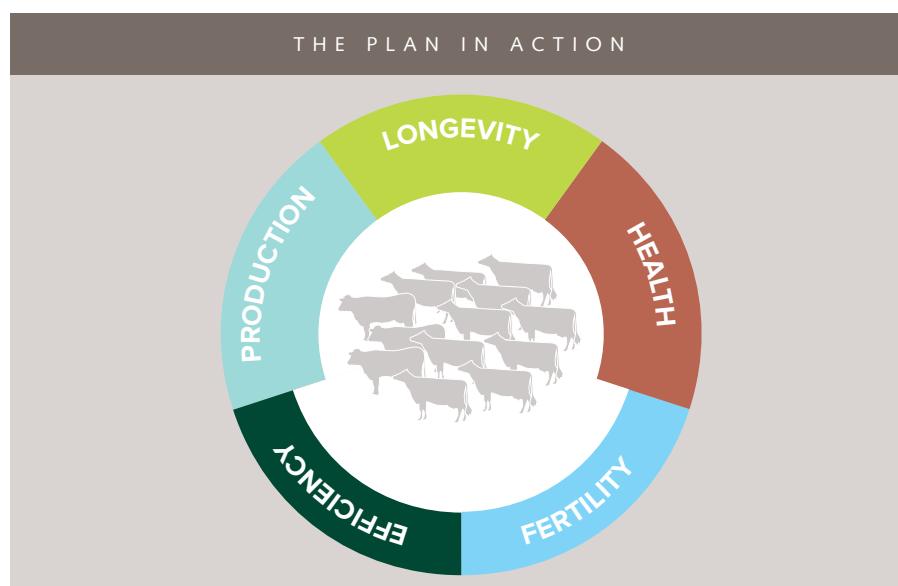
The herd average yield is 9,500 litres at 4.20% butterfat and 3.50% protein, with a somatic cell count of less than 100,000 cells/ml. "I'm happy with that – particularly when you consider the high proportion of heifers in the herd. I'd rather stay here than see yields around 10,000 litres and hassle with production diseases and poor fertility."

Improve: uniformity

Bills says that he's aiming for a 'uniform' herd: "That's better for cubicle housing, feeding and all other aspects of management. I want similar cows so that they all suit my system."

Daughters in the herd at the moment include Cricket and Atlantic. "I'm breeding heifers that I'd like to milk myself, even though there will come a point when I'm selling some as fresh calvers. There's a lot of satisfaction to be had from milking healthy cows and heifers."

Bill does have some heifers to sell. "We're a high health status herd. We've always been a closed herd and we're free from Johne's disease and all the other 'nasties'. That helps with demand for our stock. But that's just part of the attraction. The heifers have to look like they're going to last for a long time in the herd and perform well too."



What traits are key to suit the management of Mark Cash's herd?

Health

Good health boosts efficiency and leads to high lifetime production

Longevity

Longevity is strongly related to herd health and fertility

Production

High components and milk solids result in profitable lifetime production