

We meet the first two competition finalists

# Gold in their sights



The 2018 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup finalists have been announced and, in the first of a series of three articles, we take a closer look at two of the six herds. First up, we profile two high-yielding pedigree herds that are no strangers to the competition and have already enjoyed considerable dairy success during the past few years.

text **Rachael Porter**

## James & Eleanor Tomlinson, Preston, Lancashire

This is the fourth time that the Tomlinson's 270-cow pedigree Bilsrow herd has made the final. The family has been crowned runner up on all three previous competitions and James and Eleanor hope that this is the year that they finally lift the golden trophy.

"I did say that we'd not enter again, but we've had another good year. Things are going well, and we thought: 'why not give it another shot'," says James.

There have been several changes at the 166-hectare unit, based at Bilsborrow Hall Farm near Preston in Lancashire, which include buying more land, registering the business as a limited company, and officially becoming a 'free-range milk' producer. All have served to keep the business moving forwards, making the most of opportunities and meeting challenges head on.

The all-year-round calving herd, which averaged 11,042kg of milk at 4.37% butterfat and 3.16% protein for the year ending September 2017, is run as a family unit and generates income through both milk and surplus stock sales. Managed on a conventional system, cows are grazed during the summer and housed in winter.

"But there have been some changes this year. The cows now graze for a minimum of 150 days a year – from early May to mid-October – to meet our milk buyer's 'free range' criteria and command a premium," explains James.

Milk – just shy of three million litres each year – is sold to Lancashire-based Pakeeza Dairies, which produces yoghurt and smoothies.

James was attracted by the milk price

premium, of course, but he says it's also about putting across a positive image of the industry. "We're close to an urban area and, although we were previously grazing for at least four months of the year, people have commented on how nice it is to see the cows out at grass."

Such a move has meant that a closer eye on fertility was vital. "My only real concern about committing to the free-range promise was the potential impact on fertility. So we stepped up our management – particularly heat detection – to ensure that even though the cows are grazing for longer that we wouldn't miss any. And we've maintained, if not slightly improved, the fertility performance," he says.

### Recent changes

Calving index is a respectable 387 days and 55% of cows are back in calf at 100 days in milk. The voluntary waiting period is 40 days and the average number of services per pregnancy is 2.6.

The couple have also registered as a limited company this year, to help streamline the business and increase efficiency. And they've bought more land – 16-hectares next to the farm. "We bought the land in May – it was an opportunity not to be missed."

The Tomlinsons are also selling more freshly calved heifers – around 100 head a year, which is 30% more than 2017. "We are using more sexed semen now. We've been using it for five years and it's now used across all maiden heifers. This means that we have more surplus heifers to sell," explains James.

Cow numbers are increasing gradually, by around 12 cows per year. "We're not



James and Eleanor Tomlinson

actively pushing up numbers, it's a natural growth really, so it won't impact on the efficiency or the herd. We're still able to focus on running a tight ship and fine tuning management as we go."

The future will see the couple invest in a new milking parlour and slurry handling system – they're the factors limiting any significant expansion. "We're still at the planning stage but this should happen in the next three to five years. Then we may look at a more considerable expansion of the herd."

### Herd facts

System:	<b>All-year-round calving</b>
Herd size:	<b>270 Holsteins, plus 320 young stock (including breeding bulls)</b>
Average yield:	<b>11,042kg at 4.37% fat and 3.16% protein</b>
SCC:	<b>113,000 cells/ml</b>
Calving interval:	<b>387 days</b>

## Harvey family, Beeswing, Dumfriesshire



Brothers John and Stuart Harvey

Another herd to previously make the final line up, in 2014 and 2015, is that belonging to the Harvey family, based at Beeswing in Dumfriesshire.

The herd was NMR's highest Holstein production herd in the organisation's latest Annual Production Report for the year ending September 2017 and for three out of the past five years it's remained in the top three.

John Harvey says that their success is merely a side effect of managing the herd as well as they possibly can and always looking to improve. "We are very driven – we're not for sitting back when things are going well. We always want to do things better."

The 335-cow herd averaged 13,662kg of milk, at 3.85% butterfat and 3.18% protein, on three-times-a-day milking, for the year ending September 2017.

The Harvey's Killywhan pedigree herd also boasts 46 out of the top 50 highest yielding Holsteins in Scotland, as well as many more in the top 100.

The herd is permanently housed except for one group, of around 100 mid-lactation cows, which is turned out to graze at the end of May, if conditions are suitable. The unit's 225 head of young stock also graze during the summer.

The herd is fed a TMR, offering maintenance plus 36 litres, and individual cows are topped up to yield with concentrates fed through the parlour. Cows calve all year round, ensuring a level milk supply for buyer Lactalis.

John says that dairying is like juggling – there are always a lot of balls in the air. He and his brother Stuart and mother Margaret work closely together to make sure nothing is 'dropped' or overlooked. "We all have our own strengths but we all know exactly what's going on in every area of herd and business management. There's good teamwork."

### Mastitis vaccine

Cow health is important to the team and 18 months ago they began using mastitis vaccine to prevent E. coli mastitis in the herd. Rates have now dropped from 20% to below 10%. "Using this has also allowed us to reduce antibiotic use for the herd – particularly dry cow therapy. We've been working closely with our vet to use it selectively and we're down to just 15% of the herd," says John.

There's also been an increased focus on fertility, with a move towards transition cow scoring and monitoring. "Our nutritionist is keeping a closer eye on dry cows and it's paying dividends," he explains.

Rumen fill and body condition score are monitored, as well as the incidence of

any production diseases or LDAs post calving. "Having some fresh eyes on that – and someone to spot any patterns in the data – will help to minimise any issues associated with the transition period. This is a stressful time for the cow and she needs specialist care to avoid health and fertility issues during the following lactation.

With this in mind, the Harveys now have a transition group of fresh-calved cows within the milking herd. "It pays to have them together in one place. If there are any problems then they can be easily spotted, and we can intervene early. They're not hidden in a larger group. We have a voluntary waiting period of 60 days because we believe that it allows the cows to maintain their peak yields for longer."

He says that the family's focus will remain on optimising and improving herd management. "It's about looking at the small things and the bigger picture.

"And it's great to do well in production rankings and competitions. It serves to underline that what we're doing is being done well and it spurs us on to keep management on track and to strive to do even better."

### Herd facts

System:	All-year-round calving
Herd size:	326 Holstein Friesians, plus 225 young stock
Average yield:	13,662kg of milk at 3.85% fat and 3.18% protein
SCC:	87,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	404 days

Housed system: the Harveys' herd tucks into the TMR ration

