



### Sue & Martin Staples

A new parlour, more cows, and continuous disease monitoring are contributing to a strong and sustainable dairy business that's fit for the future



Herd size:	<b>180 cows</b>
Average yield:	<b>6,000 litres</b>
Milking parlour:	<b>24:24 herringbone</b>
Average SCC:	<b>163,000 cells/ml</b>

Parlour-based tech for monitoring health and fertility aids trouble-free expansion

# Aiming for an 'all-green' future

Investing in the latest technology and disease monitoring is paying dividends for one Leicestershire-based herd.

We find out more about its recent expansion and a long-term commitment to tackling Johne's disease.

text **Rachael Porter**

**I**ncreasing cow numbers, installing a new parlour and continuing to wage war on Johne's disease all contributed to a busy few years for Leicestershire-based producers Sue and Martin Staples.

They run their 180-cow herd of pedigree Guernseys and Jerseys (60 and 120 head, respectively), plus 100 followers, at

Burton on the Wolds, near Loughborough, with help from Martin's brother Dave and Martin's son William. Sue milks every evening and other day-to-day management tasks shared between them all, as well as two relief milkers.

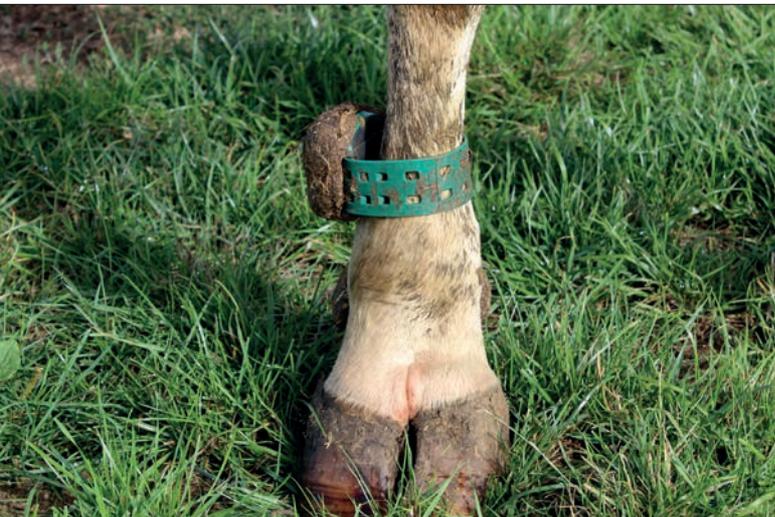
The herd calves from April through to December. "It's good to have a four-

month break from calving, not least because it means that we can thoroughly wash, disinfect and 'rest' the calving pens and calf housing facilities," says Sue.

Pneumonia was also proving to be problematic, so avoiding calving at the height of calf pneumonia season was

*Good grazers: the pedigree Jersey and Guernsey herd is turned out to grass in February, if conditions allow*





Monitoring activity: pedometers assist with heat detection



Modern parlour: it takes fewer than two hours to milk the herd

another benefit of making this switch – almost 20 years ago. “And now, even though we begin calving in late spring, we still vaccinate all calves to protect them against respiratory disease. It’s so simple to do and well worth the investment. It’s an insurance policy and it saves on vet costs and labour, as well as reducing antibiotic use and ensuring that our young stock get off to the best possible start.”

### Extended grazing

The herd is managed on a conventional system – strip grazed during the spring and summer and housed during the winter. “But our grazing season is extended,” says Sue. “Depending on the weather and grass growth, cows can be turned out as early as February and can remain out, part time, until Christmas. That’s just one of the benefits of running a Channel Island herd – they’re hardy breeds and good grazers.”

The milkers are always buffer fed during the summer, but this year they were back on the full winter TMR by July when the severe drought halted grass growth.

“And they’ve been on it ever since – we’ve never had a summer like it,” says Sue. “We grow wheat on the unit, which is usually harvested for grain. But we’ve had to sacrifice all 14 hectares of it to make wholecrop wheat, to see the herd through the winter. We’ve never had to do that before.”

The ration currently comprises grass and maize silage, as well as wholecrop wheat and fodder beet – the Staples grow five hectares each year for winter feeding – as well as a protein blend. “This year’s fodder beet crop isn’t looking great, thanks to the weather, but the maize looks OK. We’ll have to wait and see and balance the ration

accordingly, if quality or yields are compromised,” adds Sue.

The herd is currently averaging around 6,000 litres, at 5.29% butterfat and 3.88% protein and a somatic cell count of 163,000 cells/ml. Milk is sold to Arla, on a solids contract. The TMR supplies maintenance plus 18 litres and individual cows are topped up to yield in the 24:24 herringbone milking parlour with an 18% protein concentrate. The parlour is another recent investment, installed just eight years ago and replacing a 12-unit abreast system.

“It takes fewer than two hours for one person to milk the herd now. It’s fully automated, with auto ID and pedometers that monitor activity and assist with heat detection. That said, it took us longer to adjust to the new set up than it did the cows.”

### Herd expansion

Other things have changed too. Cow number have almost doubled during the past five years. The business bought more land surrounding the farm, taking the total hectareage to 170, which allowed the Staples to expand the herd by around 80 head. “We hope to be up to 200 milkers by the end of 2019,” says Sue. “But it depends on how things pan out – namely how many replacement heifers we have coming through during the next 12 months.”

Heat stress has had a significant impact on the herd this summer: “Hot weather doesn’t usually bother Guernseys or Jerseys, but this year has been an exception,” says Sue. “They’ve shown signs of heat stress and have actively sought shade, which we’ve not seen before. Going back to the winter ration early also unsettled them.”

She believes that this is why, after many years of Johne’s disease testing and

monitoring, they’ve recently seen a spike in ‘amber’ cows. “We did have our Johne’s ‘watch’ list down to just one page – that’s four ‘red’ and six ‘amber’ cows. But our most recent milk-test screening, through NMR’s HerdWise, has seen quite a few more cows come back as ‘amber’. And I really do think it’s the result of heat and nutritional stress during the past few months.” Sue says that, for her, this underlines the need to continually test and monitor the herd. “We know it’s there and that a cow can ‘fight off’ the disease if she’s healthy and stress-free. But we also know that factors, such as nutritional stress or a difficult calving – anything that knocks her back – can ‘trigger’ Johne’s if she’s carrying it.”

### Johne’s prevention

Sue is eager to carry out another milk test soon, to see how the herd is holding up. “And I’m hoping that some of those ‘amber’ cows have returned to ‘green’.” In the meantime, she and Martin and the team will continue to adhere to Johne’s prevention protocols – namely culling red cows as soon as possible and calving ‘amber’ cows away from the rest of the herd and ensuring that their calves receive colostrum – usually frozen for the purpose – from ‘green’ cows.

“We are getting on top of the disease, but we’ll never be rid of it,” says Sue. “For us it’s about continual monitoring and minimising risk. If we ever got to the point of all cows testing ‘green’, we’d still milk test. This recent period of stress and ‘spike’ in ‘amber’ cows underlines that it’s an insidious disease, which lurks under the surface. When it’s so easy to carry out Johne’s testing – using milk recording samples – and relatively low cost to do, why take the risk?” |