

## Jersey and Friesian cross-bred herds shine through

# Going for gold



The 2017 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup competition finalists have been announced and, in the first of three articles, we take a closer look at two of the six herds. First up we profile a Jersey herd and a grassland-based spring calving herd, which are both in the running to win this coveted award.

text **Karen Wright**

## Thomas Dickinson, Doncaster, South Yorkshire



*Thomas Dickinson*

Thomas Dickinson took on the management of his family's 163 hectare dairy and arable unit in 2013, succeeding his parents John and Susan.

Switching to Jerseys, from Holsteins, 10 years ago has given the business a stronger relationship, and a more sustainable contract, with milk buyer Longley Farms. "We've no regrets and we like the fact that our milk is used for high-end products, like Longley butter and yoghurts," says Thomas, adding that they must meet strict criteria and register all stock with the Jersey Cattle Society. "That's so that customers buying Longley are guaranteed genuine Jersey milk products."

Also keen to promote their milk locally, they have set up a vending machine at the village pub. This sells around 400 litres of milk a week. "It promotes the industry in much the same way as Open Farm Sunday. Interaction with the public in a positive way is important." Now with 270 cows, there are no plans for further herd expansion. "Housing is limited," says Thomas. "We can only accommodate 190 cows in cubicles so we always have a group of cows outdoors throughout the year."

Day-to-day responsibility for the herd lies, predominantly, with herd manager Richard Saxby, assistant Josh Szczoczarz and dairy worker Andrew Jennings.

### Breeding goals

The Thurlstone herd meets Longley's requirement for a year-round milk supply and also maximises its use of grazed grass and home-grown forages by block calving 40% of the herd in spring and the remaining 60% in autumn. Around 60% of milk is produced from home-grown forage – mainly grazed grass with lucerne, fodder beet, grass and maize silage fed in a TMR.

Keen to maintain genetic improvement,

Thomas and Richard set breeding goals to improve milk quality and maintain feet and legs. They use a mating program to help maintain type and avoid inbreeding. And they are genetically evaluating the herd, to give them a base with a view to genomic testing young stock. Mating is in two 10-week blocks and around 55% of cows are in calf at 100 days. "We breed between 65% and 70% of the cows to dairy bulls and we're using more sexed semen. It costs £1,500 to rear a heifer to calve at two years old, so I want to make sure it's money well spent."

During the next 12 months, Thomas

### Herd facts

System:	Spring and autumn block calving
Herd size:	270 Jerseys, plus 183 followers and 100 Hereford x Jersey store cattle
Average yield:	5,675kg of milk, at 5.6% fat and 4.0% protein
SCC:	136,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	383 days

wants to reduce borrowings significantly. “We’re not planning any major investments, but we will make improvements,” he says, adding that in 2016 they spent £30,000 on new cubicle mattresses and toppers. And they have a

regular programme of maintaining cow tracks and fences. His focus is to make even better use of the farm’s resources and play to its strengths. “It’s really important that you know your own farm, its limitations and its strengths

and that you manage it to the best advantage, providing a good environment for both cows and staff. We must also ensure we’re working closely with our milk buyer to produce the right product for the market.”

## Andrew and Rachel Giles, Glasbury, Herefordshire



Andrew Giles

Just four miles from Hay-on-Wye and sited on 174 hectares of grassland at Glasbury, Andrew and Rachel Giles follow some fundamental principles in managing their dairy unit. “You must look after the soil and the grassland, and monitor growth religiously,” says Andrew, adding that it’s equally important to breed the type of cow that can perform well on the system.

“For us that’s a cross-bred Friesian that isn’t too heavy, so the herd can graze from February to November on a tight stocking rate without causing damage to the land. She must have superb fertility to fall into the spring block calving pattern – we look to complete calvings in 11 weeks and get more than 75% back in calf in six weeks,” he says, adding that in 2016 they achieved 78%.

The couple breed for milk quality and health traits, using a mix of Friesian and Jersey genetics and select bulls that will maintain milk quality and cow size. “We calve heifers at 23 months old and achieve this by weighing young stock at regular intervals so we know they are on target. And our replacement rate is 22%.”

Fundamental to the success of the herd is the team. The unit is run by Andrew and Rachel, farm foreman Tom Williams, who has a small equity share in the business, herd manager John Thomas, and assistant herdsman Tom Freeman.

Once the cows calve they are turned out, weather-permitting. Half the land is on

alluvial loams and the other is on higher ground with shallower soils. It’s all free-draining, so the 1,200mm of rain a year is not a problem.

“Our main job, and key to success here, is grass farming,” says Andrew. “Our aim is to grow and utilise the maximum amount of grass that the soil type and weather allows – currently 13 tonnes of dry matter per hectare.”

Starting in February, grass is measured weekly and recorded on Agrinet. This helps to produce a grazing plan that meets the cows’ nutritional needs.

### Body condition

Having cows in the correct body condition score at calving is also important and preparations start early by moving the heifers to once-a-day milking from September each year and grazing them in the more outlying paddocks.

“We want cows to calve and transition into the milking herd easily and start cycling,” explains Andrew. “When you’re calving 550 cows in 10 or 12 weeks you don’t want many retained cleansings. And cases of milk fever are a nightmare. These disorders are largely preventable with the correct management.”

AI starts in May and all cows are bred to dairy bulls for the first five or six weeks,

Herd facts	
System:	Spring calving, grass based
Herd size:	550 cross-bred Friesian cows, plus 275 young stock
Average yield:	5,316kg, at 4.43% fat and 3.50% protein
SCC:	130,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	375 days

then easy calving beef bulls are used. “We’re achieving submission rates of between 90% and 95% in three weeks and conception rates of between 55% and 60%. And 78% of our cows are usually in calf at six weeks.”

Performance is carefully monitored – be it by NMR, Agrinet, through the Arla farm assurance schemes and, importantly, with their local discussion group Wye Graze, which sets benchmarks for similar dairy units in the area.

“The aim here is to control costs and be technically efficient in order to make sure that we make a profit even when milk prices are low, like they were in 2016. This, I think, is an important factor in encouraging young people into dairying.” |

