

Cow welfare and staff training are high on the agenda for two top herds

Two more herds race for gold

The second in our series of three articles puts two more finalists in the 2018 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup under the spotlight. Both dairy businesses are familiar with show-casing their approach to dairying, and keen to achieve high standards of cow and staff management while pursuing efficient milk production.

text **Karen Wright**



Tom and Karen Halton, Congleton, Cheshire

A move from Holsteins to a three-way cross-bred Holstein, Montbeliarde and Swedish Red herd, as well as maintaining a closed herd, has resulted in health, production and fertility benefits, according to Tom and Karen Halton.

Tom's interest in cross breeding took the herd's breeding programme down this route in 2010 and since then the herd has expanded – entirely with home-bred heifers – to 560 cows plus 300 followers. Heifers are reared on a dedicated young stock unit.

Their 222 hectares of tenanted land supports the dairy business. It comprises 48.5 hectares of maize plus permanent and temporary grassland, along with 12 hectares of maize and 20 hectares of wholecrop, which are bought in to provide the diet for summer grazing and a TMR. The herd is housed during winter and cows are fed in the parlour and milked three times a day through a Dairymaster Rapid Exit 20:40 swing over. This is soon to be extended to a 28:56 system.

“Our cows are averaging 35 litres a day, a pregnancy rate of 33% with 69% of cows in calf by 100 days,” says Karen. “The average age at first calving is 23.8 months. The aim is to breed strong, healthy cows with longevity and health benefits resulting in low maintenance cows that look after themselves. “Good quality, easy rearing calves are a bonus from our cross-breeding strategy.”

Cross breeding also contributes to herd health and welfare – factors that are priorities on the unit. “We follow a vaccination programme for IBR, BVD

and Lepto, and adhere to tight controls for TB and Johne's. These are our main disease risks.

“For Johne's, we quarterly screen each cow and follow our control plan religiously. Any female that is a potential threat, or any of her daughters, are not used for breeding replacements. Instead they are put to the Aberdeen Angus bull as heifers and the British Blue bull as cows,” adds Karen.

Best practice winner

The Johne's protocols followed in this herd earned the team the national HerdWise Best Practice award in 2016. And the team – 12 full- and part-time staff including Karen, Tom, son Jack, herd manager Simon Broomhall and his assistant, son Brooke – are all conversant with the herd health plans.

Lameness monitoring is another example of this. Tom monitors lameness each morning, and herd staff will check the cows in the yard. Any affected cow will be recorded on the team's WhatsApp group.

“We provide full training for our staff and we go on regular courses – from cow signals and medicine use, through to software training workshops and team management courses. We're also members of discussion groups, as well as grassland and grazing workshops.

“I am sure our staff training and their willingness to follow protocols gives us the attention to detail that is needed to maintain high productivity alongside high herd health and welfare. This, and advice from our vet and adviser, has



Cow welfare is second nature to Karen and Tom Halton

meant that antibiotic use has been substantially reduced, with only 4% of cows being treated with antibiotics at drying off,” says Tom.

While animal welfare is second nature to the Haltons, Karen says the connection with the public through the on-farm events that they host provides a great opportunity for them to showcase good practice in an area that is attracting increasing consumer and media attention.

Herd facts

System:	All-year-round calving
Herd size:	560 Three-way-cross: Holstein Montbeliarde Swedish Red cows, 300 heifers
Average yield:	10,300kg at 3.90% fat and 3.3% protein
SCC:	125,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	373 days

Philip Metcalfe, Metcalfe Farms, Leyburn, North Yorkshire



Philip Metcalfe: "Staff are a vital component in the success of the unit"

A rapid expansion programme during the past two years and the integration of three Holstein herds has taken cow numbers up from 900 to 1,300 at Washfold Farm. But, through attention to detail, the team headed up by Philip Metcalfe has kept cow performance on track.

During the past 12 months the pedigree Holstein herd, which is milked three times a day, has increased average yield by 1,600kg to the current 10,800kg at 4.00% fat and 3.25% protein. Somatic cell count has dropped by 30,000 cells/ml to 124,000 cells/ml and the calving interval is now 403 days.

Part of Metcalfe Farms, a farming and

haulage business based in Leyburn in the Yorkshire Dales and run by three brothers. The dairy business occupies 525 of the 1,300 farmed hectares. Only 200 hectares is owned, with the rest rented.

Significant investment has been made in the dairy, which has allowed for the herd expansion. This includes adding a rotary parlour and additional cow accommodation. An anaerobic digester uses manure from the dairy herd and generates electricity for the business.

"We have the capacity to further expand cow numbers," says Philip. "But, just at the moment, we're consolidating and fine-tuning, and making sure all our protocols are on track."

To this end, Philip is investing in new calf accommodation to increase the number of pens for the young dairy heifer calves and dairy bull and beef-cross calves. "I am a firm believer in getting calves off to the very best start, both our replacements and the dairy bull and beef-cross calves. We have a good buyer for these calves, so it's vital that we maintain our reputation as a source of well-grown, healthy stock. Many of these calves are reared for beef." And the same consistency and quality is seen in the dairy stock. A keen Holstein breeder – Philip can never imagine

milking anything but Holsteins – a third of the herd is classified either VG or EX. "We have classified with Holstein UK for more than 20 years. It's a vital tool for breeding because we get an independent opinion on our stock."

Philip selects sires that score well for type and avoid extremes. "High locomotion score is vital, and we look for a PLI that's greater than 600," he explains. "We also look for a minimum of 700kg of milk, and positive butterfat and protein percentages." His aim is to breed a uniform herd of cows and he typically uses one sire across the whole herd for 12 months before switching to a different one.

Group management

The unit's system has been designed to accommodate the Holstein cows with correctly sized cubicles and handling equipment. Cows are housed – and calve – all year round, to provide a level supply of milk for milk buyer Paynes Dairies. They are managed in groups of 120, which allows for closer attention to detail.

Staff are a vital component on this unit. "I have line managers in charge of key areas such as milking, calving, calves, hygiene, and cow health. We hold regular staff meetings and keep everyone up to date through Facebook messenger." The unit's workforce is British and comes from the local community and, certainly among the milking team, they are offered a flexible rota to suit their lifestyles and other commitments. The majority have been recruited from outside agriculture.

"We provide a staff induction," adds Philip. "We explain carefully what's expected of them. And we offer regular training sessions for specialist areas and encourage communication and feedback that might help fine-tune our system. We can always improve." |

Cubicles are roomy enough to accommodate the Holstein cows



Herd facts

System:	Housed and calving all year round
Herd size:	1,300 Holstein cows, 850 young stock
Average yield:	10,800kg, 4.00% fat and 3.25% protein
SCC:	124,000 cells/ml
Calving interval:	403 days