

Two top herds go for gold

Elizabeth Birkett, Rookhaye Farm, Bowerchalke, Salisbury

HERD FACTS

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| System: | all-year-round calving |
| Farm size: | 360 hectares |
| Herd size: | 153 pedigree Holsteins and 120 young stock |
| Yield: | 10,398kg of milk, at 3.88% fat and 3.24% protein, twice-a-day milking |
| Feed regime: | TMR and topped up in parlour (grazed from mid-April to July) |
| Calving interval: | 382 days |
| SCC: | 112,000 cells/ml |
| Milk buyer: | Sainsbury's |

Producer Liz Birkett has more than two decades of experience in managing her dairy unit and although changes have been made, her focus has remained on cow comfort, health and welfare. “Getting these right should reflect in animal performance and profitability,” she says. Managed on a high-input-high-output system, the herd is grazed from mid-April until the end of July and a TMR buffer is also fed to ensure that maintenance and milk yield requirements are met.

A former nutritionist, Liz pays close attention to rations. “I strive to provide a stress-free environment for the herd, and this includes providing high quality feed and having it readily available. I work with the Dairy Group to formulate the ration, which comprises maize and grass silage, rape, sugar beet, and minerals.”

The TMR provides maintenance plus 33 litres and cows are then topped up to yield through the parlour with an 18% protein concentrate. “Our milk contract with Sainsbury's offers a more consistent milk price throughout the year, but also offers invaluable benchmarking information,” adds Liz.

Genetics has played a vital role in improving the herd and Liz has invested heavily during the past few years. “We



Liz Birkett

select bulls on PLI – we set a minimum of £500 – as well as feet and legs, udder traits, fertility, and lifespan. Maiden heifers are served, on average, at 15 months old, with the first two services to sexed Holstein semen.”

Pregnancy rate is 22% with cows averaging 2.04 services per pregnancy and heifers averaging 1.5. “We are also just seeing the results from genomic testing, which we started in January 2018. I hope this will allow us to accelerate the herd's rate of genetic gain and to boost performance.”

Team effort

Liz fully appreciates the team effort that is required to run a successful herd and business. She employs a full-time herdsman, a full-time senior arable operator, a general farm worker, and a part-time calf rearer. She also uses relief milkers when required. Strict protocols and training are a priority to ensure consistent high standards are achieved. “From record keeping and cow hygiene, through to following health and clamp management protocols, it's important that everyone understands their role to run an efficient business that produces a high-quality product. I am proud of my team and it's important to involve them in the decision-making process.”



What the judges say

“There is a strong desire to continue to develop a strong and sustainable business at Rookhaye. Technologies are being employed, such as genomics to progress the herd's genetic merit, in a drive to keep improving the performance of the herd in all areas.”

As we approach the presentation of the 2019 Gold Cup at Dairy-Tech, we profile the final two of this year's six contenders – Liz Birkett from Salisbury Wiltshire and Andy and Rosemary King from Barrington, Somerset.

Andrew King, Barrington Organic Partnership, Barrington, Ilminster



Andy King

Andy and Rosemary King started the Barrington Organic Partnership in 2008 when they took on the tenancy of Thong Dairy Farm, near Ilminster. "The first challenge was to build a more efficient and uniform herd of cows," says Andy. "We stuck with black-and-white genetics, but looked for a more Friesian type of cow."

The herd has been closed for the past seven years and all replacements are now home bred. "The herd is now more consistent. We aim for easy-care cows with a calm temperament and that are good grazers."

No excuses

Andy says that it's the day-to-day commitment of their staff that has helped make a success of the business. Richard Coombes joined them in 2009 and is now farm manager and they have placement students each year.

Their organic status isn't considered an excuse for 'weak' performance. "We don't shy away from respectable milk yields from home-grown forages, and we monitor and manage cows to achieve good health and fertility performance," adds Andy.

Accurate records and monitoring have helped drive improvements in health and fertility. These include a

HERD FACTS

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| System | all-year-round calving, organic production |
| Farm size | 220 hectares, 150 hectares for dairy |
| Herd size | 243 Holsteins |
| Yield | 7,882kg of milk, 3.75% fat, 3.17% protein, twice-a-day milking |
| Feeding: | grazing, TMR and parlour concentrates to yield (50% milk from forage) |
| SCC | 74,000 cells/ml |
| Calving interval | 374 days |
| Milk buyer | Coombe Farm |

mobility scoring system, quarterly screening for Johne's disease through NMR, and vaccinating for IBR, leptospirosis and BVD. Calves are tagged and tested soon after birth, to identify any persistently infected calves, and vaccinated against pneumonia.

The all-year-round calving herd grazes on clover-based swards from April to October and they look for between 13kg and 14kg of dry matter from grazing per day.

About 30 hectares of red clover and 20 hectares of lucerne are grown a year; both selected for their high palatability and protein content and fed in TMR with minimal 'balancing' of the ration using a concentrate blend.

The TMR also includes high-energy forages fodder beet and wholecrop spring barley, alongside grass silage. This produces about 3,900 litres of milk per cow and is nudging on 50% of total average milk production. Cows are fed to yield in the parlour with a 16% protein cake. Just under two tonnes per cow per year are fed. "With organic concentrates 60% more expensive than non-organic feed, we will keep our focus on growing more protein on the farm," says Andy. Andy also manages the milk group for Coombe Farm. Its 26 producer suppliers, of which Barrington Organic is one, supply Waitrose's Duchy brand organic milk.

What the judges say

"Barrington is an exciting business model with clear goals. Working with key professionals from outside the business and a good use of technology allows everyone to see and monitor targets, as well as ensure continued animal welfare and fertility."

