

Cream of crop rises to the top

One Hampshire-based producer has scooped a prestigious production award and also has a close eye on cow comfort, health and sustainability. We spoke to her to find out more.

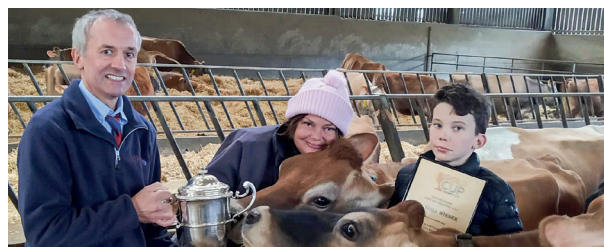
TEXT RACHAEL PORTER





COMPANY PROFILE

Name	Tracey Bunney
Location	Winchester, Hampshire
Herd size	271 cows plus 70 followers
Unit size	122 hectares (dairy)
Average yield	7,986 litres



It was her father's ambition to breed the top Jersey, based on production, in the country and this was the year that Tracey Bunney realised his dream. Her Hampshire-based pedigree Jersey herd was crowned winner of the 2019 Lilyhill Cup, which is awarded to the highest ranked Jersey herd in the NMR/ RABDF Gold Cup competition.

"He always bred big cows that produced plenty of milk. And that's what I strive for too," says Tracey, who farms at Avington Manor Farm near Winchester. "Dad passed away seven years ago, but he'd have been thrilled – just as we are – with our win."

That said, she says she doesn't set out to win competitions: "That's just the cherry on top for us. First and foremost, we want to milk healthy and happy cows. High milk yields are a side effect of good breeding and management. So we make health, fertility and cow comfort a priority, as well as choosing the best Jersey sires to use on our herd." Today Tracey, who is the third generation to manage the herd, runs the dairy business in partnership with her mother Sue. Her father, John, founded the herd – a mixture of Guernseys and Jerseys – in 1954 when they moved to Hampshire, from Devon. And since then the Lakedale herd has become pure Jersey. Tracey's two young sons, Billy and Barney, are enthusiastic dairymen. "They're both keen on spending time with the cows and helping out of the unit," says Tracey.

Sue still plays a key role in managing the dairy business, but is predominantly office based. She looks after the accounts and the paperwork. So it really is a family run business, with help from three full-time employees who also work on the arable enterprise.

Summer grazing

The Bunneys run a 271-cow herd, plus 60 followers, on an all-year-round calving system. Cows are fed a TMR all year round. This comprises grass and maize silage, home-grown lucerne, molasses, golden flake and the rumen buffer Equaliser, to maximise diet efficiency. Individual cows are topped up to yield in the parlour with a 16% protein concentrate, to a maximum of 4kg a day, dropping to 0.5kg per day for low yielders.

Cows are grazed through summer on either a paddock or strip-grazing system, depending on grass growth. Low yielders are turned out to graze from April and the higher yielders are turned out after first-cut silage. Depending on grass growth, grassland is managed on either a paddock or strip-grazing system.

The herd is milked through a 20:20 herringbone parlour, twice a day, and average yield is 7,986kg of milk with a combined fat and protein of 689kg. The herd's highest yielding cow, Lakedale Clipper Ripple, produced 13,900kg of milk. This is testament to the influence of breeding on the herd – as well as tip-top management. Somatic cell

count stands at 193,000 cells/ml and milk is sold to Arla. The farm comprises 565 hectares, with 122 hectares allocated to the dairy enterprise and used for grazing and growing grass and maize silage, as well as lucerne. The remainder is in an arable rotation. This provides plenty of straw for the three sheds where the cows are loose housed. These are mucked out every six to eight weeks. "The sheds are relatively new and designed for cow comfort. I like to see cows in deep, clean straw beds."

'Special' group

In the winter the herd is split into three groups: highs, lows and what Tracey calls a 'special' group. "These are cows and heifers that have calved within the past two months. They're housed next to the dry cow and calving area, so I can keep a closer eye on them."

Dry cows are housed three weeks prior to calving and fed a straw-based DCAB ration.

With more than 60 years of pedigree breeding behind the herd, continuing the legacy of her father, and her grandfather Jack, are important to Tracey. "Dad always preferred Jerseys and it's the same for me. They have personality and produce plenty of high-component milk." When selecting sires, Tracey chooses bulls from the US, Canada and Denmark. "The North American sires offer stature and size and the Danish offer milk and good components. So we'll use Canadian or US semen and then cross back with a Danish sire to add back some butterfat." Larger, taller Jerseys have always been on the agenda, particularly back when her father was in charge. "We have land that can be prone to poaching, so back then it was about keeping the cows' udders up and out of the mud. We've preferred breeding taller Jerseys ever since and high milk yield is also high on our list of 'must haves'."

Only sires that are positive for milk and components are used, with good feet and legs. "We have around five different Jersey sires in the flask at any one time. Sires currently in the AI flask include: Daybreak, Colton, Janko, Principal, Rodney, Quintana and Visionary.

The Bunneys have also had success at breeding their own bulls, which have had a significant influence on the herd during the past 10 years. Their most recent home-bred sire is Lakedale Brahms Ben. All Jersey semen used on the herd's top cows and all heifers is sexed. Belgian Blue semen is used on lower genetic merit cows and calves are reared and sold as stores at 12 months old. The Bunneys also recently began using Wagyu semen: "To try something a little different," says Tracey. "We're confident that, coupled with the marbling in Jersey beef, the Wagyu cross will produce a highly marketable beef." The family has built a strong commercial herd that offers the next generation – Barney and Billy – a future in farming should their interest in the herd continue to develop. |

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NMR's Bryan Radford presents Tracey Bunney, and her son Barney, with the Lilyhill Cup