

Grazing a high genetic merit herd for 10 months of the year and feeding a non-protein nitrogen supplement are just some of the secrets behind one Isle of Man-based producer's successful dairy business. We spoke to him and found out more.



Ashley Kinvig: "It's a myth when people say that the Holstein can't graze – it can"

Bucking the trend of limiting high genetic merit herds' access to grazing is Isle of Man-based producer Ashley Kinvig. His 110-cow pedigree Holstein herd, currently averaging 9,000 litres of milk with some individual cows topping 15,000 litres, is grazed from mid-February through to mid-November. "Our herd is proof that high genetic merit Holstein type cows can be grazed with considerable success," he says. "If you turn them out to good grazing then they will graze. They have everything they need – four legs and a mouth. It's a myth when people say that this type of cow can't graze – it can." Ashley's cows graze for around 10 months of each year – although they are topped up with silage. "I do feed a lot of silage – about two tonnes a day during the spring and summer months and around five tonnes per day during the

winter – but the cows still go out and harvest as much forage for themselves as they can. It's all about good grassland management." Based at Ballakissack in Santon, Ashley farms in partnership with his wife Sandra, with help from sons Neal and Michael. "The herd is strip grazed and we start at the far end of a field so the cows are not trampling the aftermath each time they travel to and from the milking parlour. And they're turned onto a fresh piece every day.

Simple system

"It's a simple system that helps to keep the grass swards tidy and productive." The type of cow that he's looking to breed is also 'tidy and productive' and what he describes as well balanced, with plenty of milk and good type too. "When selecting sires I'm looking for good feet and legs

and udders and a plus value on milk. I tend to use North American sires, as well as British and Dutch. I'm not biased by origin – it's all about the figures." And it's also about success in the rings – both show and sale. Ashley likes to show cattle from his Santon herd and he gets a welcome additional income from selling surplus stock. "I sell freshly calved heifers in batches of five – usually my mid-range stock – at Kendall and Lancaster. I keep the best for my herd as well as those in the lower end, which won't command a good price at market. The latter stay here for a lactation before I sell them on." His heifers average around 10,000 litres, with some topping 11,000 litres. At the moment he's seeing some excellent

prices at market at the moment. In excess of £2,000 for a heifer is not uncommon. And Ashley has also had recent success in the show ring. A Stormatic daughter – Sandash Stormatic Nicola – took the heifer championship at the Isle of Man Holstein Spring Show, which was held in May. She calved in November and is currently averaging 37 litres of milk a day.

Dutch Bull

"I'm trying to breed the type of cow that I want to show and that the typical commercial producer will also want to milk – a balanced, trouble-free animal that can look after herself." Daughters by sires including Storm, Lord Lily, Lister, Valiant, Outside, Stormatic and Shottle make up the herd, which comprises eight Excellent and more than 20 VG cows, as well as many more Good plus animals. It's all about supplying what the market demands and for this reason he's been using some red-and-white sires recently – most notably Dutch bull Classic. "Going forward, I think there's going to a lot of interest in red-and-white cows and heifers. And I don't want to miss that opportunity."



Ashley aims to breed balanced, trouble-free cows that can look after themselves

feeding includes parlour-fed concentrates, with home-grown rolled oats and minerals fed alongside the grass silage through a mixer wagon. And until recently, the ration also included around 1kg/cow/day of a 30% protein meal – typically costing £300-£400/tonne on the island – but this has now been replaced by 100g/cow/day of Alltech's new non-protein nitrogen concentrate Optigen fed through the

since we made the switch. The cost savings are certainly a bonus and we hope to see other benefits in time with the potential for further ration adjustments."

Economic sense

High quality grass silage is the mainstay of Ashley's herd's ration, and it may well be that the extra space from feeding the supplement is ultimately contributing to higher dry matter intakes. "And higher intakes of home grown feed would certainly be a good thing, particularly given the premium that we have to pay for bought in feed here on the island, and we may also see additional performance benefits as well," he says. Ashley will continue to tweak the ration and also hopes to reduce cow numbers in the future. "I'd like to get down to about 80 cows. It makes economic sense to milk fewer higher yielding cows.

"And since the cows are lasting longer in the herd it would also give me the opportunity – and make better business sense – to sell more stock. And it will free up more time to focus on breeding – an aspect of managing the herd that I really enjoy."

And once again Ashley will be bucking the trend towards larger herds. "And I'll be exploding another myth, proof that you don't have to be big to be profitable. You just have to be efficient and make sure you're producing what the market demands – be that milk or robust, high yielding cows."

Rachael Porter

Top genetic merit herd thrives on extended grazing system

Grazing 'against the grain'



Cows are grazed from mid-February to mid-November

The herd calves all year round, to ensure a level milk supply for Ashley's buyer – the Isle of Man Creamery. He says he produces between 2,800 and 3,000 litres each day, which equates to just over a million litres a year. And he's recently won the 2008/2009 'steady milk production' award from the creamery – well-deserved recognition for his efforts. Milk quality is impressive too, with somatic cell counts averaging 160,000 cells/ml. "With a figure like this it hardly surprising that we only get the occasional case of mastitis," says Ashley. Sound nutrition is also key to the success of the Sandash herd. Supplementary

mixer wagon alongside the silage, rolled oats and minerals. While the net reduction in feed costs of 10p/cow/day is greatly valued by Ashley Kinvig, this was not the main reason for first considering the change of approach. "We'd been seeing far too many foot problems in the herd and I began to wonder if it could be a nutritional issue and if it could be linked to the way we were feeding extra protein," he explains. "The opportunity to replace the high protein rape meal with this concentrate seemed to offer a solution and so far this has proved to be the case. We have certainly had far fewer foot problems