

NATIONAL HOLSTEIN SHOW PREVIEW

Balancing profit with enjoying farming is a winning formula

By Ann Hardy

Taking part in a few select agricultural shows is an important part of the farming calendar for Jeremy Dennis, who farms near Ivybridge, Devon.

The next event for him and his Dinnaton herd will be February's National Holstein Show.

"We don't go to many shows because of the constraints on our time, but it's important to remind people of who we are," says Jeremy.

Livestock sales are a significant part of the farm's annual income. "We've had to focus on the shows we feel will be our prime shop windows.

"That often means the National Holstein Show and the Royal Cornwall."

Citing the ability of a show to invigorate and refresh, away from the day-to-day grind of the farm, Jeremy says: "It's so easy to become isolated at the end of the farm track and keep plodding away at the same thing."

He doesn't profess to have the type of big-money show herd that so often grabs the headlines, but his cattle are the home-bred, rock-solid type that have been the fabric of the show circuit – and the farming industry – for many generations.

Jeremy's family has farmed much of the land at Fardel Barton, in Cornwood, since the 1940s. The farm has a history which can be traced back at least 1,100 years.

The herd he and his father Derek have developed began in the fairly traditional way with British Friesian genetics.

Today, with the infusion of a few elite North American em-

bryos, it is bred single-mindedly along the Holstein path.

'Optimum' performance

While this route provides the potential to succeed in the modern-day show ring, it is one which Jeremy is certain gives him scope to earn the greatest commercial reward.

With an annual margin over all purchased feed on course for £1,950 (average for cows and heifers) from a yield recently brought back down from 10,500 litres to around the 8,500 litres, Jeremy believes he has near optimum performance for both the health and profitability of his herd.

"We were producing 10,500 litres at a time when consultants were pushing numbers, but we recognised that while this may have suited someone else's situation, it wasn't suiting ours," he says.

"The higher yields generally created extra pressure and from a husbandry point of view, I don't think a farmer likes to see his animals put under undue stress.

"Once you go to 10,500 litres and beyond, the herd requires constant monitoring and greater challenges of understanding. Since we found it reduced our enjoyment of farming, it was a recipe for potential disillusion.

"You have got to enjoy what you are doing but you also have to be profitable. I'm happy we've settled at a level where the balance is about right."

Alongside the change in the herd's production has come a rethink of the feeding regime, also reflected in a change in cropping strategy and a shift of emphasis towards home-

grown feed.

The farm's 315 hectares (780 acres) are situated to the south west of Dartmoor in an area where average rainfall is around 152mm (60in).

Until recently it was divided between 93 hectares (230 acres) of grass cut last year for first-cut silage, 86 hectares (212 acres) of maize, and 18 hectares (44 acres) of triticale.

Jeremy feels the emphasis on maize was limiting long fibre intake.

"We found a three inch chop length for the wholecrop triticale is perfect for a healthy rumen mat, so we decided to increase the acreage of triticale to 120, cut back the maize to 150 and combine this with a three-inch chop for the grass silage," he says.

Health improvements

The ratio of maize to grass silage in the total mixed ration has changed from as much as 80:20 to around 65:35 and some 5kg triticale is currently fed, with the aim of increasing this to 10kg.

The response, he says, has been 'dramatic', with noticeable improvements in health (also seen through the dung), while milk yields are comfortably edging upwards.

The breeding policy at Fardel Barton places the emphasis squarely on creating longevity. There is a strong focus on legs and feet, udder conformation and body depth, while sires currently selected must have at least a Profitable Lifetime Index (PLI) of £90.

The results in conformation are impressive – some 140 cows are currently classified VG or EX.

Remarking on the compatibility of his policy with the

demands of the show ring, Jeremy says: "We breed large cattle here, which happen to suit the showground, because we know that once they come to the end of their life, you can hang meat on that frame and they'll make considerable cull cows."

But a healthy trade in breeding stock is also an important component of the farm's income.

This has been maintained largely because of a fairly low replacement rate at 20 per cent and exclusive breeding to Holstein bloodlines, despite the herd's recent expansion from 140 to 320 milkers.

"We reckon that having black and white breeding stock for sale adds the equivalent of two extra milk cheques a year to our income," says Jeremy.

"Our breeding programme is designed to enable us to sell around 40 to 60 freshly-calved cows or heifers every year."

Selling most through the new market at Sedgemoor, he firmly believes this is the way they reach their genuine value.

"We have always been great supporters of markets, simply because they are an outstanding way of realising the true value of the animal," says Jeremy, who has regular buyers from Cornwall, Cumbria and many other counties for his stock.

But being prepared to sell your best is important for on-going trade.



320

The number of milkers now in the Dinnaton herd following an expansion from 140

"Some people think selling is about selling the worst from the farm but to me, it's often about selling your best as a promotion for the herd. There's nothing more pleasurable than hearing that you've done a good job and pleased your customer."

Of the two animals Jeremy will take to next month's show - Dinnaton Jud For Total Eclipse EX and freshly-calved heifer, Dinnaton Out Duplex Cordelia VG87 - the heifer will go through to the Holstein UK centenary sale, where only 26 elite cattle will be offered.

Pride in quality

"I genuinely think she is the best quality animal we have sold off this farm," says Jeremy, who claims the decision to lose her wasn't hard.

"I still have her family - her mother has just had a Shottle heifer calf and we have her sisters. For me, the pinnacle of

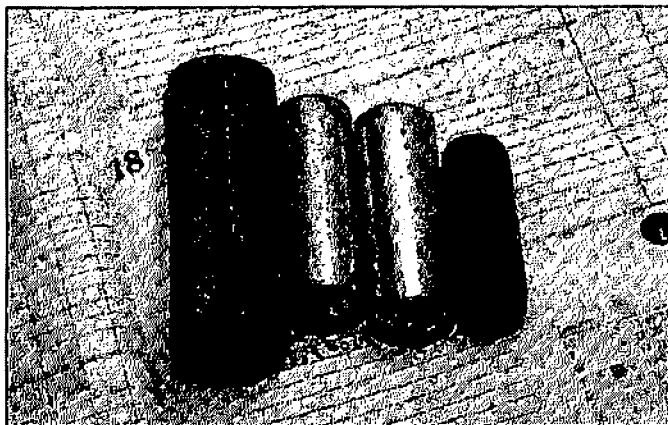
any farming career is to be able to sell your best animal in its prime."

In the show ring next month, Cordelia and her herdmate will stand alongside the cream of the Holstein breed, which are sure to present stiff competition. But this, according to Jeremy, is just what it is all about.

"For me, showing is not about winning - I don't do that very often.

"It's the opportunity to be among other like-minded cattle breeders and having the opportunity to chat about the industry.

"There are some fantastic cattle in the country and just to be lined up with them will be an incredible experience."



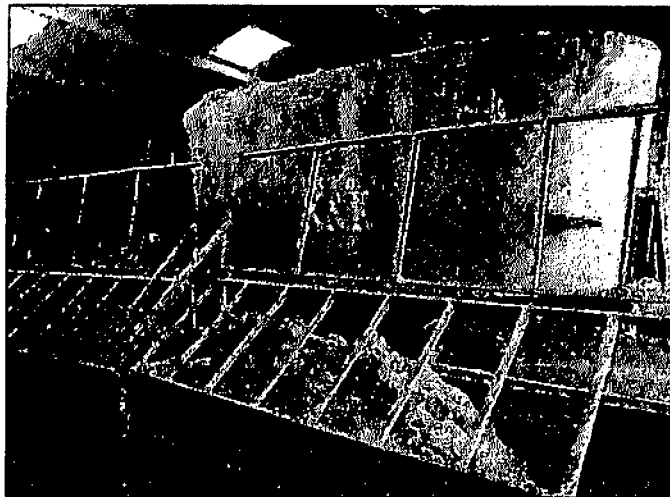
Boluses consist of a magnet, magnesium to help prevent milk fever and iodine to help produce thriving calves.



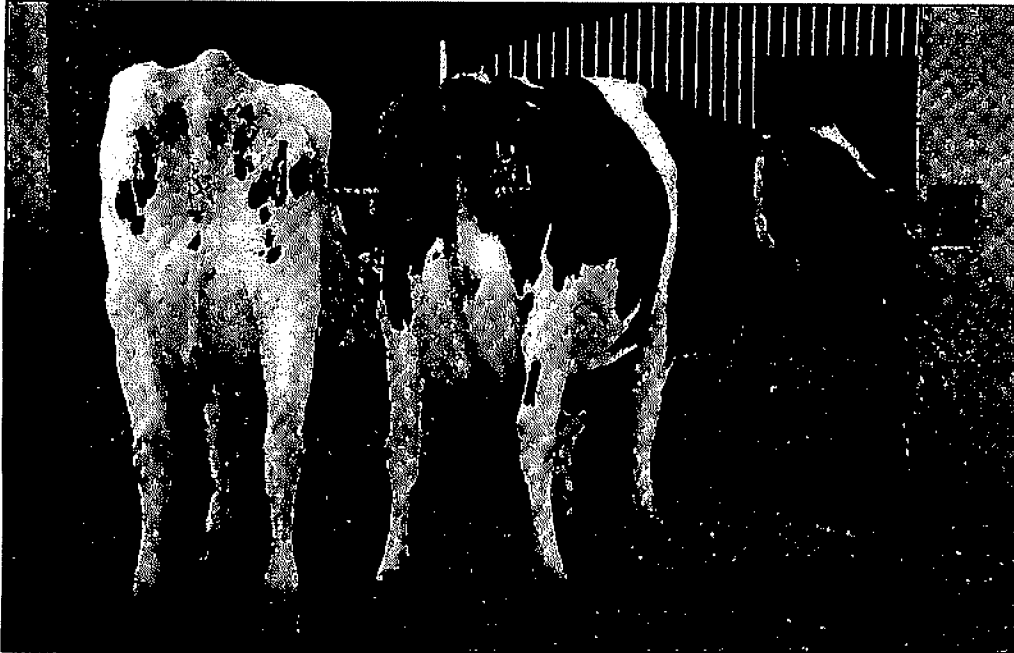
Calves, the future of the business.



Jeremy Dennis giving boluses to dry cows.



The feeder wagon.



Dinnaton Out Duplex Cordelia (left) and Dinnaton Jud For Total Eclipse to be shown at the National Holstein Show.

PICTURES: John Eveson



Triticale wholecrop has increased from 18 hectares (44 acres) to 48 (120 acres) this year.