



# Dorset herd rises to top

Praise for whole team in NMR/RABDF Gold Cup



David and Nick Cobb and herd manager Paul Crocker with Gold Cup



Cows are milked three times a day through a rotary parlour



David and Nick Cobb on land that borders the Jurassic Coastline



The dedicated team at West Chaldon

When most of his young farming friends were starry-eyed about tractors, Nick Cobb had already taken a shine to the dairy side of the family business. Hard work and dedication – by him and the whole team – has culminated in winning the 2008 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup.

The fourth generation of Cobbs at West Chaldon, near Dorchester in Dorset, Nick Cobb oversees the running of the 700-cow Holstein herd. The award spotlights all areas of the business – dairy herd management as well as the wider environmental management and future strategies – and having a larger herd doesn't make it any easier to succeed in the competition. In fact, there's even more areas for the judges to find holes in and more boxes to tick. But after two years in the finalist line-up the Cobbs have stolen the limelight. Nick's great grandfather took over the tenancy of West Chaldon in 1928. Dairy has always been a core part of the business but the structure has changed during the past 80 years. Nick remembers relief milking – with his now feed manager Geoff Banyard – in four separate herds as a school boy, and helping with a different herd each weekend. "I always had a passion for the dairy side of the business," says Nick who admits he was 'hands on' with the cows at just eight years of

age. "By the time I was 12, I knew my interests firmly lay with the cows and not the tractors."

Then followed four years at college and a chance to travel – working with dairy herds in other countries. "I also learnt a lot from HUK's Young Members Association."

### Putting the team first

By the time Nick came back home his father David and Uncle Alan had amalgamated four of the herds to three and during the past 10 years they have streamlined the dairy operation down to one unit.

Nick spent eight years milking at the Northground site that grew from 150 cows to 350 cows. And he has continued to milk regularly until last September when his time became taken up completely with running the business.

Putting his team first, Nick is proud of their joint efforts and feels the Gold Cup is a just reward. "No way could you win the Gold Cup single-handed – however many cows you

have," says Nick. "Without the co-operation and dedication of our team the herd wouldn't thrive, there'd be no milk in the tank and the business simply wouldn't survive."

West Chaldon dairy is run by a sizeable team of dedicated staff. Herd manager Paul Crocker is at the helm with feed manager Geoff Banyard, herdsperson Dawn Talbot and youngstock rearers Ian and Lyn Belt and Nikki Crocker. There's also a team of general dairy staff – six Poles who between them milk the herd three times a day and spend a total of 16 hours each day in the 24-point rotary parlour.

Supporting the team is vet Mark Brunell – who is on the farm weekly – and nutritionist Mike Bray. Both have been involved with the herd for about eight years. "We have quarterly meetings with the whole team," says Nick.

A more recent addition to the team is Tom Cato as apprentice large herd manager. "His two-year training package includes a foreign placement and on leaving he should be able to run a medium to large-size dairy herd," says Nick, adding that they intend to run the apprenticeship scheme for the next 10 years and train five people.

It's an initiative that has appealed to other parties too and may well be

developed on a larger scale within the industry.

The Chalclyffe herd calves year round and is split into six groups, depending on stage of lactation and age. There's a separate heifer group and also a hospital wing that, Paul says with great pride, is sometimes empty.

Somatic cell count stands at 140,000 cells/ml, with a calving interval of 387 days and a replacement rate of 21%. Heifers average 24.5 months old when they calve.

A low incidence of disease is testament to the team's efforts and is also thanks to NMR's herd management tool InterHerd, according to Nick. "We have a routine and success comes down to doing the job properly every day. And this is aided by InterHerd, particularly its herd health features. With help from our vet we can analyse the data on herd health, tackle existing problems and hopefully prevent any new ones – it's invaluable," adds Nick.

He says InterHerd is also helping with administration. "Dawn is able to look at the monthly vet and feed costs and reconcile them with our bills – it helps us to keep better track of costs – something that's vital since input prices have spiralled upwards during the past 12 months.

Average yields are 11,687kg at 4.05% fat and 3.11% protein for recording year ended September 30, 2007. Milk is sold to Dairy Crest on a Marks and Spencer contract.

### Eye on environment

Nick and his team also have an eye on the environment, particularly since most of the farm falls into a NVZ. Part of it is along the Jurassic Coastline. Preparations have already been made for the introduction of the water framework directive – two boreholes have been installed to provide water for the dairy herd. And they are taking part in a project with the RSPB that will look at ground nesting birds.

"Our goal is to enjoy farming and the environment we live and work in. We want to make a profit – and re-invest. And ultimately we want to create a place where people love to come to work."

"Each member of staff is a vital cog in the workings of the business. They're all specialists in their fields and that's key to our success. I honestly believe that they could get 11,000 litres out of any herd. They've got the ability to make rational and intelligent decisions and I give them that freedom too."

Karen Wright



Some of the 700 cows of the Chalclyffe herd