

Sandisfarne

THE 100 TONNE COW HOLY GRAIL

The Sander's family's Sandisfarne herd has produced a record 91 LP100 cows, Izzy Whittaker made a trip over the water to the Isle of Man to find the secrets to their longevity success



It's a real buzz to have a cow reach the 100 tonne milestone, but for dedicated breeders Andrew and Sue Sanders in the Isle of Man that euphoric feeling has numbed with experience.

Producing a record-breaking 91 LP100 cows in the last 13 years, they have that same spark when a cow reaches the exceptional 140 tonne mark.

With the herd containing over 100 cows that are fifth lactation plus, and 20 that have had over eight calves, this unprecedented family-run farm adopts a whole herd approach with no particular favourite cows or families. All the cows receive the same attention, but naturally the Sanders have a soft spot for their 100 tonners.

Thriving on an island just 32 miles long and, at its widest point, 14 miles wide, you must take a short trip over the Irish Sea to see this world-leading herd for yourself.

ABOVE Andrew and Sue Sanders with sons Matthew and Julian when they won the Gold Cup in 2003.

LEFT Sandisfarne Terracotta Arabis EX94(9E) pictured after producing 140T. By Boileau Buck she started a 3 gens chain of LP100 cows.

Eleventh calvers that could be mistaken for fifth calvers and eighth lactation cows that look just fresh with their third – the spectacle that unfolds when you stride into the field where this first-class herd grazes will leave a lasting impression.

History

You would be forgiven for thinking that this high genetic herd must have been founded by a number of the country's leading bloodlines, but in fact the opposite is true. With Andrew's parents being beef and sheep farmers, Andrew and Sue realised that the only real way they could afford to borrow money and start a farm from scratch was to go into milk production. Purchasing a small farm in West Wales in 1976, in their first year in business they bought 27 pedigree and commercial cows over the 12 month period, but the twist in their purchasing strategy could be the first of their secrets to this LP100 trail.

Always wanting to have a long-life herd, instead of purchasing fresh heifers, Andrew purposely bought





91
100 TONNE
COWS

‘Sandisfarne produce 20% of the island’s milk’

fourth and fifth lactation cows with very good conformation from herd dispersals as he thought it would give him a better indication of their durability. Having a small budget, older cows were also a more cost-effective option and in the end their 27 purchased cows averaged a bargain £308.

Perhaps the second clue to this high production, steadfast herd is its genetic make-up. Sitting in the top 20 PLI herds in the UK, the profit-focused Sanders family have always concentrated on index, preferring a medium-sized, robust cow to suit their grazing system. Positive Lifespan, PLI, Fertility Index, Mammary and Legs and Feet composite traits have been key requirements and latterly, to increase the herd’s genetic gain, 80% genomic sires are used.

Growing organically to 460 cows, further expansion has been restrained by the land. With a very

low 12-15% culling rate the Sanders sell a lot of fresh heifers privately to mainland England to help maintain herd size; because their cows last they need to find a new outlet for a lot of new entrants to the milking herd.

Efficient milk production

Despite moving farms three times, the Sanders have been a closed herd since their first year farming, bringing their cows with them on their farming adventure. Starting in Carmarthenshire their second stop was Herefordshire and whilst there they won Farmers Weekly Dairy Farmer of the Year, the National Silage Competition, Milk Minder Manager of the

ABOVE Sandisfarne Nutmeg Primrose VG86-3yr (Gibor x VG Shottle) has a heifer calf on the ground by genomic bull Groves-Vu S-R Marland.

RIGHT Winner of the 2013 Holstein section in the Genus Long Life competition, Sandisfarne Afghan Ruby EX94(9E) LP140 is currently in her 12th lactation and in-calf to Welcome Armitage Pesky. Sired by Lord Lily, she has produced over 5%F in four lactations.





‘The herd’s low yielding group walk four kilometers a day to grass’

Year and the Ciba Geigy National Dairy Hygiene award before moving to the Isle of Man.

Things were going great in Herefordshire; the cows were milking well and making 5,000kgs from forage, bactoscan was down to five and cell count 80. The new setup was running well but as they started with no base, milk quota had always been a lingering constraint and by 1996 it was holding back progression.

Not ones to sit back and accept the production limit, various ideas were mulled over, including moving to New Zealand. Then, in a eureka moment, the Sanders stumbled across a sale advert for a farm in the Isle of Man which, amongst its details stated ‘no tax’, and more importantly, ‘no milk quota’. Four trips to the island later and the Sandisfarne herd would relocate again.

After developing the herd for six years on the island the Sanders won the 2003 Gold Cup and in 2003 and 2004 they were the highest yielding herd in the UK. Bringing their 140 cows with them over the water you may

wonder why they didn’t sell them and restock with the animals on the island, Andrew recalls: *“Our consultant had said that the farm was just soil – but it was the cows that were something special! We had been building up the herd over 20 years and we didn’t want to sell them. It was easier for us to move farms than sell the cows, we had bred the sort of cow we wanted and we didn’t want to*

ABOVE LEFT Sandisfarne Arrogant Hope EX94(8E) LP140 (EBlack x EX94(7E) LP120 F16) pictured here as an 11th calver. Last inspection as an 11th calver: 97 Legs and Feet, 94 Body, 93 Dairy Strength and Mammary.

ABOVE RIGHT Sandisfarne Addison Blackberry 2 EX92(5E) SP LP140 pictured in her 10th lactation. (Addison x EX91(2E) LP100 Sunnyboy x EX90 LP120 F16). Her 13th lactation Gdam achieved 10 brood stars via her 10 natural daughters. Addison Blackberry’s twin VG88 £215 PLI & EX90 £186 PLI Oman daughters are the highest PLI cows in the herd.

BELOW Calves are reared on pasteurised milk. Milk powder was used, but since purchasing a pasteuriser the Sanders say that calves are a lot healthier.

FARM FACTS

- **Milk contract:** IOM creameries
- **Soil type:** Clay loam over shale
- **Ft above sea level:** 350 – 650ft
- **Rainfall:** 80”
- **Acreage:** 380 owned, 500 rented
- **Parlour:** 40-point Milfos rotary





have to do it all again."

Attention to detail is key

Good stockmanship, hard work and being pro-active are amongst the top factors to why the Sanders family believe their cows have a prolonged life.

Sue continues the story: "If we have a cow die it's always a big shock to everyone – we have to have an inquest. Even our son Julian who rears the calves has only lost two in about two years. Our livestock probably get as ill as anyone, but we just spot any illness early and treat it effectively."

Having never needed to footbath the cows, their Romanian herdsman Victor is extremely good at foottrimming and if a cow shows the first sign of lameness he picks up their foot and treats accordingly. Victor's Polish side-kick Tomaz is also a big asset in the parlour and with calf rearing.

Cows are fed a strict grass diet in the summer and as their grazing land ranges from 360 to 650ft, mobility is a key requirement to

ABOVE LEFT Shottle daughter Sandisfarne Inspired Melody EX92(3E) £150 PLI pictured as a second calver. Her dam is an EX93(3E) LP100 Lord Lily. She is now due with her sixth calf to Currajugle Gonzo.

ABOVE RIGHT Sandisfarne Flame Blackberry, pictured as a third calver, is the eldest daughter of Addison Blackberry 2. At EX94(4E) she completes four gens LP100 as a seventh calver.

BELOW An 80 metre long polytunnel houses the youngstock.

perform in the herd. Low yielders can walk up to four kilometres a day to grass, whilst the highs and TLC cows walk two kilometres. "Our cows have to be very fit, like athletes," jokes Sue, "the herd is fed a flatrate in the parlour with no buffer in the warmer months. In the winter they are fed round bale silage with rolled cereal in the parlour and we also have out of parlour feeders as a top up."

Andrew adds: "Farmers have forgotten what cows are meant to do and have lost the ability to convert grazed grass. People say that you can't graze high index cows but that is rubbish. As long as you have good quality grass you can produce enough milk to milk cows three times a day."

Three years ago the Sanders stopped feeding TMR as it was proving too expensive and they wanted to get off the machinery treadmill. To compensate they invested in out-of-parlour feeders, Andrew explains: "We don't get ultimate yields, but it has taken the fixed costs out of the business and labour time was huge for making TMR. We don't use any additives in the forage and are able to wilt to 40%. Now we have no work in the sheds in the summertime."

Updates

Growing to 460 cows, Sandisfarne now makes up 20% of the milk





produced in the Isle of Man. A 40-point Milfos rotary parlour has helped to update systems to facilitate the large herd, along with a three-way automated parting gate and automatic scrapers.

The most recent development was purchasing a Bauer green bedding machine six months ago, which Andrew believes has been the greatest innovation since TMR. A 25% grant available from the Isle of Man government made the technology more accessible and to date, improvement has been seen in cell count and clinical cases of mastitis. A whopping £20,000 has also already been saved on large shipping bills caused by having to import sawdust or enviroid from the mainland.

Change of direction

Like most family farms, when the next generation joins the business you have to adapt and incorporate their ideas and vision, because ultimately they will be the ones to carry the torch. Since Andrew and Sue's younger sons Matthew and Julian started showing more interest in the business, they have wanted to incorporate other breeds into the herd to introduce hybrid vigour. Maintaining a pure Holstein nucleus and 100% pedigree status, 40% of the herd are now registered to the Ayrshire cattle society and, keeping their high index, rank seventh on the Society's PLI ranking.

Becoming a limited company in October, Matthew and Julian, who both have married Manx ladies and have young children, live a stone-throw away from the farm.

Final thoughts

A herd bred for production and culled on type, Andrew admits: *"We need every cow to perform at the highest level; we are always concentrating on growing the business and the profitability of the herd."*

Passionate, committed and devoted to their stock, hats off to Andrew and Sue Sanders – a self-starting couple that have known no boundaries in developing their first-class herd.

ABOVE LEFT Sandisfarne Infinite Arabis VG88-3yr £100 PLI. (Shottle x EX91(3E) LP110 Patron), she is now in her 7th lactation and has two VG daughters.

ABOVE RIGHT Sandisfarne Inky Faith EX91(2E) by Roylane Jordan has two VG daughters. Her dam is an LP90 VG86 Celsius.

BELOW Sandisfarne's main cow families are Blackberry, Ruby, Arabis and Biddy – all are prolific producers of 100 tonne cows.

HERD STATS

Herd size: 460
Milk yield: 9,500kgs (x2)
Cell count: 120
Calving interval: 420d
Replacement rate: 12-15%
Current Proven AI sires:
 Laurehill Classic, Coldsprings Prentice, Scientific Destry, Currajugle Gonzo, Regancrest Oman Ingles
Current Genomic AI sires:
 Matcrest Sham Charlie, Ladys-Manor RD Grafeeti, Vande Dominant Red, Welcome Armitage Pesky, Hammer-Creek Fred Krunch, Seagull-Bay Supersire, Seagull-Bay MVP, Groves-Vu S-R Marland, Ladys-Manor Graf La-Bron, De-Su RB Moonray, Vision-Gen Alright

