

# VETS WITH A HISTORY LOOK TO THE FUTURE



Based in the pleasant Cheshire town of Nantwich, the ultra modern Veterinary Group that carries the town's name is continually striving to offer local farmers the most modern and effective healthcare and disease prevention strategies, as Simon Gee found out

Whilst not the oldest practice in the UK, Nantwich Veterinary Group (NVG) can trace its history back beyond 1877. This was the year in which retired partner Brian Wilson's grandfather took over the veterinary work based a few miles from Nantwich, situated in the heart of Cheshire's dairy heartland. He was succeeded in the practice by his son Tom, who in turn passed the baton on to his nephew Brian, who remains involved in the business today.

Over time, the practice has seen many significant changes. Mr Wilson remembers there being just two full time vets in 1948, himself and Jimmy McWilliam, plus his uncle Tom, who was semi-retired. Rural practice in those days meant training opportunities were few and far between and Mr Wilson admits that he learned about pregnancy diagnosis through a correspondence course.

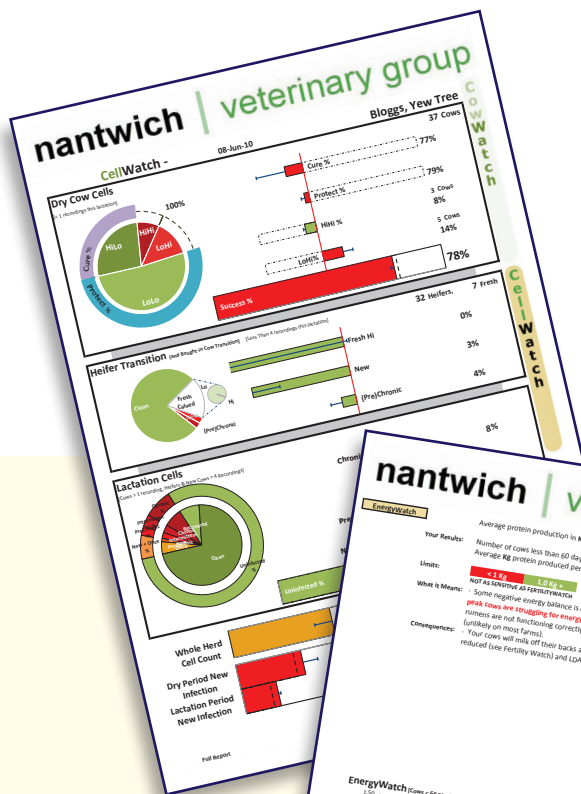
The dairy breed of choice up to the Second World War had been the dairy Shorthorn, but this changed to the British Friesian in the years after 1945 and Jimmy, who came from a Shorthorn background and was always known as 'Mr Mac', soon became an enthusiastic fan of the British Friesian breed and acted as the veterinary consultant to the local Club and at

sales in the area throughout his career.

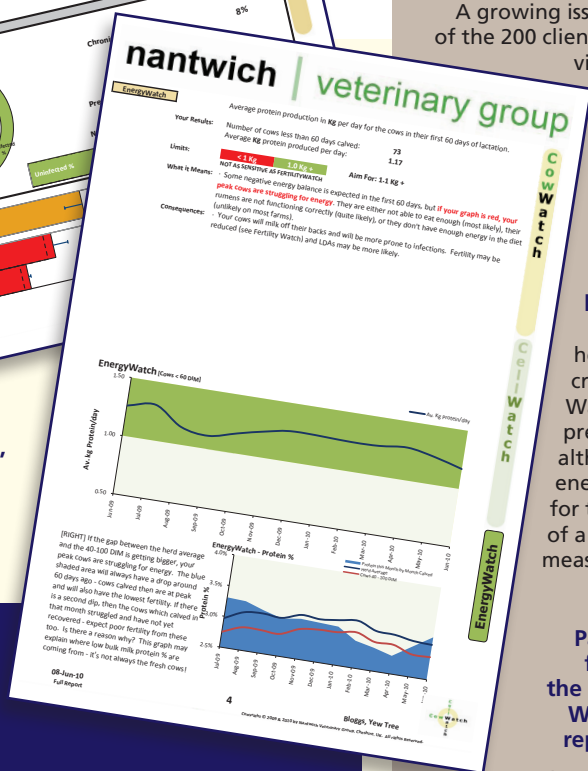
NVG grew to become the largest single practice specialising in dairy cattle in the UK, although it covers other farm species and also has specialist equine and small animal teams. There are currently 12 farm vets involved, and best known to Journal readers are Neil Howie, a second generation Nuffield Scholar who has contributed articles for many years, and Rob George, another willing contributor and still involved with his family's *Brynhyfryd* herd in West Wales. Also heavily involved with the local Club following Mr Mac's retirement was Tim Briggs, who with Neil and Rob continues to offer local breeders the benefit of his experience with pedigree dairy cattle.

Talking with Mr Wilson, Neil and Rob, it's obvious they accept that the relationship between vets and clients has changed considerably in the last few decades. Farmers have become better educated and are more likely to seek specialist skills, meaning that they can no longer be regarded as loyal clients unless they receive the level of service and expertise they demand. This has been forced upon farmers by increased herd size and/or less labour, meaning that quality decision-making time has been eroded. NVG sees it as their role to take up some of this slack and offer their clients their expertise instead. Neil points out that too often advice is given to continually cut costs, when the real solution is to reduce waste instead.

It quickly becomes apparent that NVG has always been progressive in their approach. This manifests itself in the treatment of disease; they

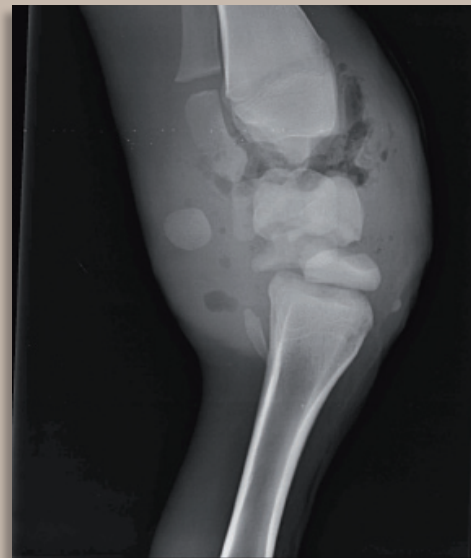


**LEFT** From left-right: Rob George, Brian Wilson, Neil Howie and Tim Briggs at the new large animal unit.



**LEFT** Pages from the Cow Watch report.

**RIGHT** Calf with septic arthritis of approximately 2 weeks duration. Note complete instability of intercarpal joint, fractures within and a large gas shadow can be seen. This carries a hopeless prognosis and the calf was subsequently euthanased.



were one of the first practices to operate to correct displaced abomasums, in the approach to preventative care and even in the recruitment of specialist staff, as the majority of the farm team come from a farming background. Recruitment is essential to provide a succession in the practice, which is happy to take on recent graduates.

In terms of preventing disease, Neil describes an animal that becomes ill as being an indicator of a defective system rather than just a recipient for drugs. Indeed, he feels the ideal scenario would be for vets to be able to avoid prescribing any drugs at all because the systems their clients operate meant that good animal health made treatment unnecessary.

Neil has been doing a lot of work on the cost of heifer rearing. His research, which is backed up by similar work done elsewhere, suggests that the cost of rearing a Holstein heifer to calve at two-years-old should be in the region of £1200. As fresh calved heifers are currently commanding around £1800, this means there is a £600 advantage in rearing a healthy replacement. The poorer this rearing is, the higher the replacement cost and the lower the advantage becomes; Neil suggests this figure may drop beneath

£200 in poorer systems. He also points out that a well-reared heifer is likely to have a longer herd life and so be more profitable.

Neil has recently taken on the role of Health Manager to combat the growing problems associated with biosecurity in clients' herds and assist where there are new breakdowns. TB has been increasing in frequency in the south of the practice area, and a recent bugbear has emerged in the form of Mycoplasma, a genus of bacteria that lack a cell wall and so are unaffected by many common antibiotics. Infection often results in respiratory disease and infected animals also exhibit signs of severe ear ache. Calfhood infections may lead to defective udder development and mastitis after calving.

A growing issue for the practice has been fertility and around 80 of the 200 client herds are now having regular fertility visits. These visits are an ideal point of contact with the cow and are purposely kept separate from other routine visits so that the advisory element can be fully dealt with. Rob describes fertility as an area where co-operation with nutritionists is vital and only by working together can progress be made where there is a fertility problem. He also recognises that it is essential to deliver advice that is appropriate to the client and that there is no 'one size fits all' approach.

### Pedigree herds

Classification is a service Rob regards highly, as he says it encourages breeders to look at their cows critically and more farmers should become involved. Warming to the theme, he goes on to say that financial pressure is almost always the root of all problems, although pedigree breeders are often their own worst enemies as they are inclined to keep unprofitable cows for the wrong reasons, such as back pedigree or the lack of a heifer calf. He feels that evaluation systems are not measuring survivability accurately and that even the most

commercially-minded farmers tend to like their best looking cows most. Neil responds that lifetime production is the best guide to whether a farmer is breeding the correct type of cow and that the current national average of around 25,000 kg is 'pathetic'.

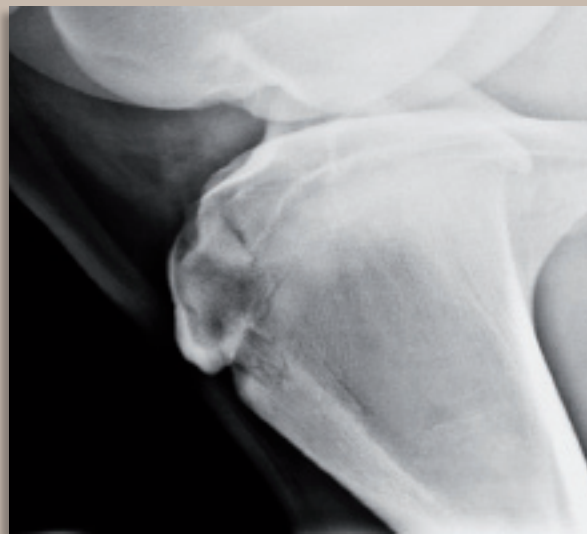
### Innovation

An example of the initiative shown by NVG to assist their clients is the recent launch of Cow Watch, a service that picks up information collected by milk recording services and translates it into an easy to understand report. The service was developed by Stuart Russell, one

of the practice's younger vets who was recruited direct from veterinary school. NVG has set up Dairy Cow Watch Ltd to market the service, which they are keen to offer to herds all over the country, not just in their existing practice area. However, the service is only provided with the knowledge and co-operation of a client's own vet and costs £30 per month or £100 for a one-off report. Cow Watch includes a unique concept in a negative energy balance graph, which can be a vital early indicator of potential problems before they occur.

Also demonstrating the desire in the practice to offer the best was the opening last year of their new Large Animal Unit on land bought from Ian Williamson of the *Wardle* herd. This magnificent new building offers state of the art scanning and diagnostic equipment as well as isolation and embryo transfer facilities. The facility is equally able to handle cows and horses and has already started to bring in new clients seeking accurate diagnosis of problems in highly valuable animals.

Neil has spent thirty years at Nantwich Veterinary Group, which is not bad for someone who intended to stay for just six months to gain experience. He has been involved in constant development at the practice throughout that time, and has seen his profession alter the way they deal with their clients. Every day, even after three decades, he's prepared to say that he doesn't know how best to deal with every problem he comes across, but he has a colleague who can. With a total of 25 vets at NVG, and the acquired knowledge and experience of Mr Wilson still readily available, plus a substantial investment in the latest technology, Neil is confident that he and his colleagues can offer the dairy herds of Cheshire and beyond the best in veterinary care and advice.



**ABOVE** Yearling heifer with per-acute onset lameness involving marked stifle effusion. Note that the tibial tuberosity growth plate is still open. No clinical abnormalities are apparent and a diagnosis of soft tissue injury was made, which responded well to rest.

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