

# the dairyman

FEBRUARY 2014

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# A FUTURE TO BE PROUD OF

Dairying wasn't exactly in this couple's blood although her father was once a milkman and his grandparents owned a sheep, beef and maize operation, writes **ANNE BOSWELL**.

**W**ALTON dairy farmers Grant Wills and Karo Preston have made it their life mission to balance a successful business with a fulfilling family life – and there's no doubt they have achieved what they set out to do.

The couple had no background in dairying when they set out to develop their dairy farm, Tremeer (Cornish for “happy farm”), but that didn't deter them, and it has in no way been a disadvantage.

In 2013 the pair was proud recipients of the Waikato Ballance Farm Environment Supreme Award, as well as a host of other awards.

But it hasn't been all work and no play, as the couple and their three children have always made time together a priority, with the entire family heavily involved in a number of sports and the community.

Grant and Karo's tenuous connection to the dairy industry growing up was limited to Karo's father working as a milkman in Gisborne, and Grant's grandparents owning a sheep, beef and maize operation, that is now Tremeer.

Grant and Karo both studied at Massey University, but didn't cross paths; Grant studied AgScience with a sheep and beef emphasis, while Karo completed an English degree.

Grant went on to work for MAF Engineering in Taranaki for four years, and Karo taught at New Plymouth Girls' High School.

The pair met when Karo applied for a position in Grant's flat. They married and travelled overseas, deciding that Grant would work on the family sheep and beef farm when they returned.

## THE FARM

On their return, they faced a decision. They had intended to get involved in the home farm, but it was at a time when wool, lamb and beef prices weren't flash, so there wasn't enough income generated from the drystock farm to support two families.

“We could either find alternative work, or look at changing the enterprise,” Grant said. “Dairying was chosen as it seemed more stable and could provide better returns. As it has turned out, the



Grant Wills and Karo Preston

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GRANT WILLS

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Karo got a job teaching in Hamilton, and Grant and his father Derek converted part of the farm to dairy in 1988, starting

with 150 cows.

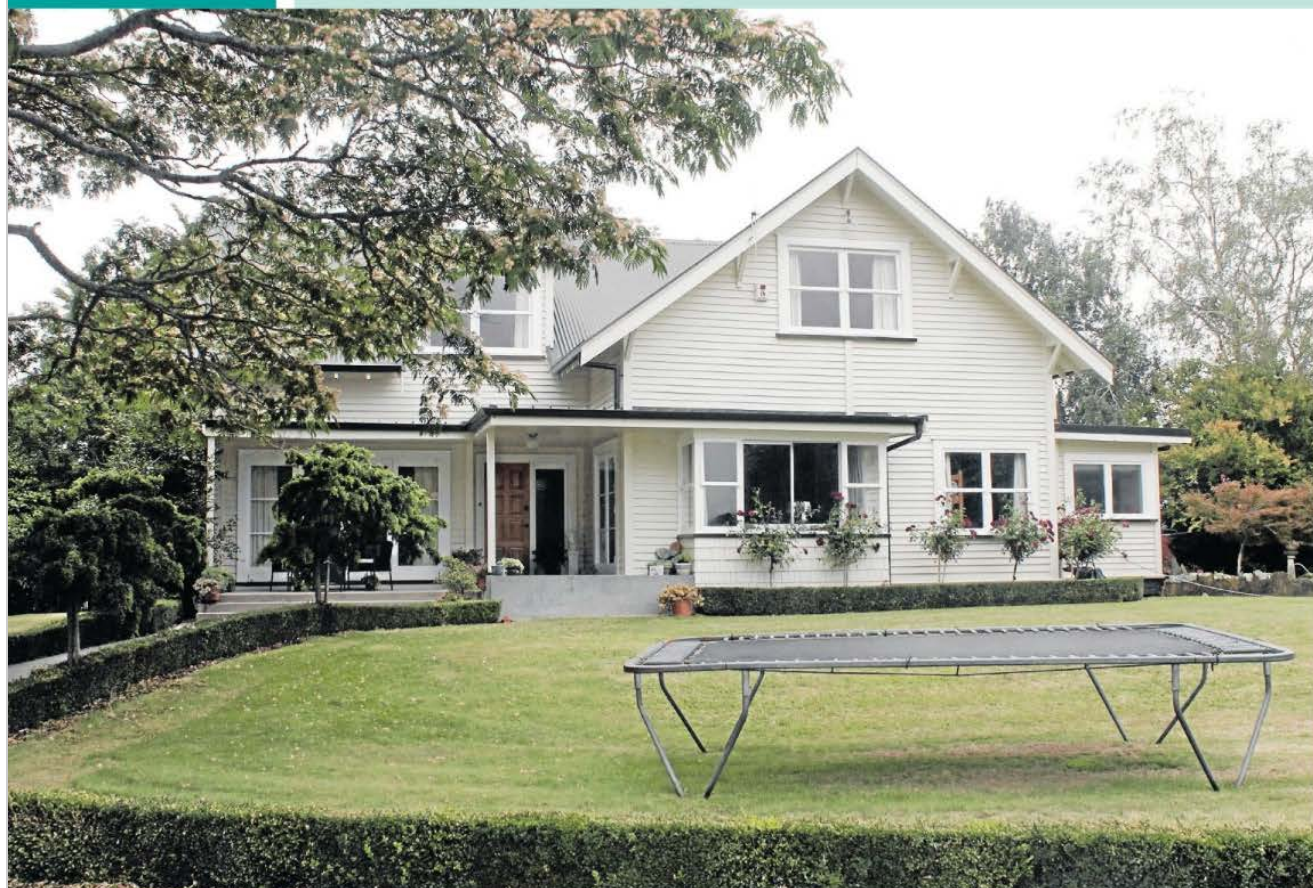
“It was an exciting year,” Grant said, fondly remembering the time he spent working with his father, which he had never had the opportunity to do before, beyond school holidays.

They extended the dairy conversion from 150 cows to 200, to 300, until the dairy farm started performing better than the rest of the farm.

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## ON FARM



Home sweet home: the couple and their three children have made family time a priority, with an emphasis on sport

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Karo says the early days were “a torrid start”.

“I was teaching, raising three children and helping on the farm when I could,” she said.

But the hard work paid off and in 1997, after sharemilking with Derek’s parents for several years, Grant and Karo were able to buy the farm. In 2003 they also bought the neighbouring farm, which was also previously owned by the family.

Today, they effectively run a herd of 635 kiwicross cows on two farms with two sheds on a total of 215ha effective. Two- and three-year-old cows are farmed on one platform and older cows on the other.

#### MATING

Grant approaches mating as a year-round process, giving

every cow the best possible chance of calving.

The herd is tail painted four weeks before mating starts. The number of non-cyclers is analysed. Depending on numbers, these non-cyclers may be run with bulls.

The Cue-Mate progesterone implant is used on any two- and three-year-old non-cyclers.

Four weeks of AB (using LIC PSS) is followed by a whole herd pregnancy scan six weeks later. At the end of January the bulls come out.

In mid-March the whole herd is scanned again. Grant says it is of utmost importance that cows are in good condition when drying off.

“We want to give every cow every opportunity to calve before September 1,” he says.

#### HERD HOMES

Tremeer has three Herd Homes, which are well-used



While the Herd Homes were the most expensive option, they were also the only option that ticked all the boxes.

GRANT WILLS

throughout the year.

Grant found he had concerns regarding pasture damage in the winter and lost feed, and he looked at a number of options to solve the problems.

“While the Herd Homes were the most expensive option, they were also the only option that ticked all the boxes,” Grant says.

The first two were completed in February 2008, and the benefits were recognised immediately, both financially

and keeping cows and staff happy.

“In the heat the Herd Homes are magic; they are 8-10 degrees cooler than outside,” Grant says. “If the herd is outside in the heat they just stand in the shade, neither grazing nor drinking. When I analysed farm performance I could see a return on investment of around 21 percent.”

Grant says the Herd Homes have had a positive impact on creating a good working environment for staff, enhancing animal health and increasing pasture use.

Feeding has become more efficient and less risky; feed bunkers are located near the Herd Homes to reduce machinery requirements, and they are able to take advantage of cheap feed contracts.

“We buy in around 150-240 tonnes of PKE, as well as ‘highpro’ meal or cottonseed or whatever is needed in the

cows' diets at that time," Grant says.

They also grow 22-24ha of maize on the dairy platform and runoff.

The herd gets two thirds of their pasture in the evening after milking, which Grant says is better because the energy levels of the grass are higher at that time of day.

#### STAFF

Grant and Karo are proud to have a capable, multi-cultural team of staff, including American sharemilkers Chad and Jan Winke, Inderjit Singh from India, and Pieter Luwes, who hails from South Africa.

Their last sharemilker, Steve Ironmonger, was with them for 12 years.

Grant says that while Chad and Jan excel in nutrition and farm performance particularly, he likes all staff to have a well-rounded knowledge of most farm practices in order for them to be able to "get on with things" and make good decisions.

All staff is involved in

regular staff meetings.

Grant and Karo also use the services of a Farmwise consultant and a nutritionist.

#### 2013 BFEA AWARDS

Grant and Karo say they entered the BFEA after they were encouraged to by a number of colleagues and past entrants.

They admit to having no expectations of winning any awards when they entered, so when they came away with the Ballance Agri-Nutrients - Nutrient Management Award, the LIC Dairy Farm Award, the Hill Laboratories Harvest Award, the Massey University Discovery Award and the Meridian Energy Excellence Award, in addition to the Supreme Award, they were staggered.

Grant and Karo had praise heaped upon them from BFEA judges, who said the excellent condition of their farm and herd was a positive reflection of the couple's

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10



Hard work: Grant and Karo effectively run two herds over two farms using two sheds.

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## ON FARM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

commitment “to balance a profitable and sustainable dairy business with being an enjoyable place to work”.

“Decision-making on the couple’s farm focuses on profitability while caring for the people, the cows and the environment. The couple’s ‘shared responsibility’ approach to staff management, and their commitment to balancing their business careers with community and family life is commendable,” judges said.

They were also impressed with the couple’s extensive use of monitoring and record keeping to constantly analyse the business and the environment. They keep up to date with technology and research advances, and have strong links to rural professionals, which helps add value to their business.

Judges also noted the excellent mapping and recording of effluent areas, with major efficiencies gained by testing



Herd home: after suffering loss of feed and damage to the pasture in winter the couple decided a herd home was the only answer.

each paddock for fertiliser requirements, and that water quality was a high priority, with waterways fenced since 2002 and an ongoing riparian planting programme.

“Feedback from the judges validated that our farming philosophies were on a commendable track,” Grant says.

“Suggestions and discussions have challenged us and helped to develop our decisions further. This had immediate positive impact on our farm business development.”

Grant says he likes to use the term ‘sustainability’ when it comes to their efforts on farm.

“We always make sure our

efforts towards sustainability are profitable too – as there is not one without the other,” he says.

“Sustainable farming is not only good for the environment but makes the farm easier to operate too.”

Grant says entering the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

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## ON-FARM

## VITAL STATS

**Location:** Walton  
**Farm size:** 215ha effective  
**Production:** 265,000kg/MS  
**Herd:** 635 KiwiCross

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

BFEA was a great way of benchmarking their progress.

"How often do you get the opportunity to have three consultants on your farm at the same time, available to give constructive advice that can improve your business, and not charge?" he says.

"It is not about winning that's the most important learning. It's about looking at where we are up to, where we've come from, and where we want to go to create our own sustainable business. It's about the business aspects, and the environmental aspects combining together to create a future that we and the community can be proud of."



Happy place: The couple had no background in dairying when they set out to develop their dairy farm, Tremeer, Cornish for "happy farm".

## FAMILY LIFE AND GOALS

Grant and Karo are less involved with the dairy platform these days, having plenty to occupy them off farm.

While Grant still manages the runoff himself, he has also been on the Fonterra Shareholder's Council since 2007, chairing the Co-operative Development Committee.

In March he will start as an associate director with DairyNZ, a position he is

looking forward to.

"I really enjoy participating in the other side of the industry too," he says.

Karo has been a new entrant teacher at Walton Primary School for 17 years now and intends to keep teaching in the job she loves.

Grant and Karo's three children Zeb (24), Beau (22) and Kelsie (21) are making their own way in the world, with Zeb farming at Te Awamutu,

and Beau and Kelsie on sports scholarships in New York.

Sports have always been an integral part of family life, with Grant and Karo coaching the kids' tennis, basketball, netball and soccer teams.

Now that part of their lives has come to a close, Grant and Karo play golf together. Grant plays tennis and basketball and Karo endures and enjoys long distance walking.

They are also now indulging in their love of travel, visiting New York once a year as well as other destinations.

Thanks to technology such as Fencepost, Grant can keep one eye on the farm while they are travelling.

Grant and Karo's next business goal is to expand their farming operation, which they hope to make happen in the next two years. They see another 10-15 years on the farm before they retire.

They also plan to continue their sporting endeavours, "as long as our bodies will allow it".

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