

THE PETWORTH HERD



We are never quite sure when the Petworth Herd was first established. They were certainly here in 1782, the year in which the Third Earl of Egremont developed Stag Park.

The land was cleared of forest and scrub, hedges were planted and the land was underdrained. Many of these drains are still working today.

The farmhouse and model farmstead were raised in a single calendar year to accommodate the Sussex Herd plus the various hay barns, granaries and stables required to operate a mixed livestock and arable farm of 650 acres. Reference is made in Arthur Young's *Agriculture of West Sussex 1793*, to the Third Earl's contribution to improve the Sussex Breed and the 'Veritable Garden' he had created from scrubland.

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The Herd today numbers 45 cows, 12 in-calf heifers, 10 maiden heifers and two stock bulls. Gradually increasing to 60 breeding cows. All females are out-wintered on maize stubble and fed silage and straw. The cows return to Stag Park in mid-April when calving commences. Creep feed is introduced in September to calves in preparation for weaning in October/November. A few bull calves are retained entire and reared on for bulls, the remainder being steered. The steers are sold fat at 24 to 29 months of age.

The farm is fully committed to two Countryside Stewardship schemes. The Stag Park scheme, now in its third year, has 160 acres of old permanent pasture where the cows summer graze alongside a flock of commercial ewes kept for fat lamb production. A small flock of pedigree Southdown sheep are also kept in order to provide rams for crossing. During the C.S.S. of ten years, considerable improvements will be achieved by restoring old buildings and ponds, as they were 200 years ago .

The second C.S.S. at Rotherbridge is two years into its second 10-year scheme. Here the terrain is of floodable riverside meadow of some 150 acres. We have raised the summer water levels in selected areas to encourage wading birds to remain in summer and nest. The river Rother, once a means of moving freight into the area from Arundel, boasts a number of features such as locks and sluices. These are to be opened up and preserved. The meadows provide ideal summer grazing for the Sussex in-calf heifers and yearling steers and heifers. They graze from May to October in most seasons, although prolonged rain can cause flash flooding. They are an integral part of the scheme to keep the sward grazed and provide dung pats for the insect and beetle population. Another example of how the Sussex will do well on moderate grazing. In this regard they are second to none and always look the part.

The two bulls that are to be used in the coming year as herd sires are Petworth Regent 4th, a bull that walks well and is of good confirmation, and Mayfield Major 1st, bred by Mr. K.D. Hind. Mayfield Major won numerous first prize cards and championships in 2002 and was made 'Bull of the Year' – an exciting prospect indeed!

We have all been through a very difficult period in the beef industry, most would say we still are, but could there be a glimmer of hope for breeders whose aim is to produce cattle of quality? The store market suggests this may be so. There are consumers out there who prefer beef that tastes as it used to. It is our job to find them and supply them.

An invitation goes out to anyone who would like to visit Petworth and inspect the Sussex cattle. This may ultimately assist breeders in achieving this endeavour.

John Giffin May 2003

