

# EBLEX Improved Herd Awards 2013

## Boxted Herd wins Most Improved Herd Award for the Sussex breed



*Boxted Endeavour is in the top one per cent of the breed for muscle depth and 200 and 400 days weight EBVs*

The Boxted herd owned by Leslie Stevens and his two son's David and Mark, of Lower Halstow, in Kent, has been recognised by EBLEX as the Most Improved Herd of Sussex cattle in England for 2013.

The award is presented by the EBLEX Beef Better Returns Programme (BRP) to the recorded herd that shows the greatest genetic gain for commercial characteristics over a 12-month period. There is a separate award for each of 10 UK breeds.

The Stevens family have farmed Boxted Farm since the mid-1860s, when they began renting the farm before eventually purchased it in 1918. David and Mark Stevens have been farming the land in partnership with their father, Leslie, since 1986.

The farm has changed shape over the years and now covers 126 hectares, which is mostly grassland, with the exception of 12 hectares of pears and 4 hectares of plums. Most of the grassland consists of long term leys for grazing, hay and silage production. In addition to the Sussex cattle, Boxted Farm is also home to a flock of 250 Suffolk cross and Texel commercial ewes, which lamb indoors in between January and March.

David's grandfather, Gerald, founded the Boxted Sussex herd in 1962, having had success at shows with Sussex steers. The herd's foundation cattle included seven in-calf heifers purchased from the Copton herd, some of which still feature in the pedigrees of dams in the herd today. During the following 20 years, the herd was grown and enhanced by the occasional purchase of females from dispersal sales. Since then only home-bred heifers have been retained in the herd, which now totals 34 cows.

### **Production system**

To fit in with the fruit harvest, the majority of the main herd calves outdoors in the spring. The herd grazes light ground which dries out in the summer, so due to the lack of summer grass growth calves are creep-fed from around 100 days old until they are weaned in December. The majority of the cows are then out-wintered on big bale silage.

Calves born later than April are brought in with their dams for the winter months. Again they are fed big bale silage, but cows are supplemented with a small amount of concentrates. Yearling stock are turned out at the end of April after scanning. Most of the yearling heifers then out-winter, with only younger or fattening heifers being brought in. Heifers calve for the first time at three years of age, which suits the Spring Calving system.

All calves are weighed at birth, and then at around 100 days of age in July, when they start supplementing grass with creep. They are weighed every 100 days thereafter, so again in mid-October which coincides nicely with the end of fruit picking.

The herd is a member of a health scheme and has elite health status, having been free of BVD, Leptosirosis, Johne's and IBR for at least two years.

### **Nearly forty years of recording**

The Boxted herd joined the MLC Pedigree Weight Recording Scheme in the early 1970s and has been weight recorded ever since. In 2002, the Stevens' began scanning yearlings, which has enabled them to be more selective and retain only heifers of above breed average weight and above average Beef Values in the herd. Usually only one or two bull calves are kept from the higher rated cows, the remainder being castrated at birth and reared as steers. As part of the Beefbreeder scheme Signet produce twice-yearly breeding evaluations, which has enabled poorer rated cows to be culled early, resulting in several female lines disappearing from the herd.

Year	Number of cattle weighed	Average 100 Day Adjusted Weight (kg)	Number of cattle weighed	Average 200 Day Adjusted Weight (kg)	Number of cattle weighed	Average 300 Day Adjusted Weight (kg)	Number of cattle weighed	Average 400 Day Adjusted Weight (kg)
1972	16	122	37	214	21	308	8	395
2012	31	152	28	263	22	344	25	422

Over the last 40 years, birth weights and live weight gains within the herd have increased together with the overall size of the cows as shown in the table above. Limousin bloodlines, introduced as part of the Sussex Cattle Society's breed development scheme in the 1980's, have had a major influence on these trends.

Speaking about their selection policy, David said: "Having good figures on paper is important, however the animals that are retained must maintain the Boxted standards. This means they must have sound structure, correct mobility, winter hardiness and the ability to put on flesh economically."

Replacement heifers are selected at between one and two years old, with the emphasis on keeping those with the highest figures and which display the correct breed characteristics. Any surplus females are sold as two year old maiden heifers in society sales.

400 day weight and muscle depth are important values for females within the herd and are equally significant when selecting a bull, although there is also an element of checking them visually, which is where David's father Leslie plays a key role! They like bulls which have good length, height and muscle conformation, as well as having a good temperament, which they judge by halter training all bull calves.

Bull calves that aren't retained for breeding and not registered with the breed society will be fed on and sold in July or August for bull beef. If they are registered, but not kept as a stock bull within the herd, they are usually sold at two years old at the Sussex Society's Spring Show and Sale in Ashford Market. The majority of steers from the herd are sold as stores in April, at approximately 400 days of age through Ashford Market, although a few are kept for fat stock shows the following Christmas.

All bulls used in the Boxted herd are "Grade C or D" bulls and it is a policy of the Stevens' to try and retain the 1/8 Limousin bloodlines to ensure that offspring have excellent conformation with good eye muscles and minimum fat, while keeping all other Sussex characteristics.

The bulls currently used on the herd include Piper Polled Duke 1<sup>st</sup>, a 3 year old bull who was bought privately at 400 days old and sired around 60 per cent of the calves in the herd this year. They also used Holm Place Wellington 5<sup>th</sup> in place of Boxted Endeavour 1<sup>st</sup>, who has been selected for semen export to South Africa so is unavailable to use this year. Boxted Endeavour 1<sup>st</sup> is in the top one per cent of the breed for muscle depth and 200 and 400 days weight EBVs.

The Boxted herd has had a number of show successes, winning the breed society's Intermediate Herd Competition eight times since the year 2000. They are very pleased and surprised to win the Improved Herd Award according to David, who describes improving the herd as a continuous process.

"There's been an element of natural progression over the last few years, as we've been selling off poorer muscled and older cows," he said.

"Looking ahead, we must continue to improve the breeding qualities and conformation with a lack of fat in order to maintain existing markets and to compete with other breeds.

"Our biggest challenge at the moment is probably finding another stock bull with good figures from an elite herd that isn't related. We are looking for one now!"