

EBLEX Improved Herd Awards 2014

Black Ven Herd wins Most Improved Herd Award for the Sussex breed



The Black Ven herd, owned by the Buchanan family of Nutley, East Sussex, has been recognised by EBLEX as the Most Improved Herd of Sussex cattle in England for 2014.

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.

Black Ven farm was bought in 1976, by Libby and her late husband, Bill Buchanan. Libby, now 91, has a lifetime's experience in agriculture. She

grew up on her father's moorland farm in Yorkshire and joined the Land Army during the Second World War. She went on to be the first woman to read agriculture in Oxford, after which she was an advisor to the Secretary of State for Agriculture, Sir Thomas Dugdale.

She moved to Canada in the mid-1950s and met Bill, who worked for Canadian National Railways. He was posted to the United Kingdom in 1967 bringing Libby back to her homeland with a renewed ambition to have her own farm. In 1976, they purchased Black Ven Farm, an idyllic Sussex farm on the edge of the Ashdown Forest.

Just two years later, Bill fell from a tree on the farm and broke his back, leaving him reliant on a wheelchair. He went on to take up two new roles advising British Rail on transport for disabled and chairing the Prince of Wales's Advisory Committee on Disability.

In 1977, Libby decided to establish a pedigree herd of cattle, ideally wanting a native breed that was suited to the soil and grassland of Sussex. She bought four Sussex cows with their heifer calves at foot and, acknowledging Bill's Canadian roots, the couple decided to use native Indian tribe names as family names of their foundation cows.

Today, the farm is 300 acres of organic grassland, ideally suited to rearing beef and sheep enterprises. They now have a herd of 30 breeding cows, a total of 76 pedigree Sussex cattle including followers. Running alongside is a flock of 55 breeding ewes, a mixture of Mule and Suffolk ewes crossed to Southdown rams for spring lamb production.

Since Bill's death in 2007, the livestock enterprise has been jointly managed with her daughter Elizabeth, who combines this with a number of consultancies which demand at least three days a week away from the farm.

In addition to the permanent grassland, the farm has an additional parcel of 50 acres woodland, which is managed by Libby's son Jamie. The farm has been organic since 1998; the family has reinstated hedgerows and has an ongoing tree planting programme.

They make their own forage and aim for self-sufficiency, rearing cattle on a forage-based diet, buying in only straw. The Sussex breed thrives off grass so they avoid the unnecessary cost of concentrate except for any bulls being reared for breeding, and the stock bulls are fed a small amount during the winter months to maintain condition. Cows might be fed a little after calving to ensure they come into milk.

Annual production system

To avoid poaching, cattle are housed when the autumn weather breaks. Cows are fed on straw to maintain a leaner condition up to calving, after which they are given silage. Calving starts in January and

runs through to March when lambing commences.

Calves are weaned at housing, when they are seven to nine months of age. It is a crucial part of the management system of the herd that the calves are weaned within sight of their mothers. This has been found to reduce stress and both cows and calves settle quickly.

Using tools to guide herd replacements decisions

The Buchanans' look at potential heifer replacements in the new year, with a view to selling steers and surplus heifers as stores at 12 to 14 months of age, through the organic market.

Retained heifers are turned out and, by midsummer, when they are beginning to grow into their frames, decisions are made on the five or six heifers they will keep for the herd. Performance figures, appearance, breeding and advice from close friends in the Sussex Society determine the decisions.

These heifers run with a bull after their second winter and are calved in advance of the main herd. The family built a new barn in 2010 which provides four separate yards with a capacity for seven cows in each. The deliberately low stocking rate decreases the incidence of disease, lowers stress and provides a facility which promotes good bonding between mother and new-born calf.

Seven or eight years ago, Libby obtained some frozen semen from two long since deceased bulls, stored by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust, and used it on eight of their best cows. The object was to use the best of the old bloodlines to bring genetic variety promoting strength through hybrid vigour and to ensure that the best qualities of the original breed were not lost.

Three years ago, the Buchanan's purchased their current stock bull, "Trottenden Formidable VIII". He is a classic Sussex Bull, who has turned many heads and won numerous awards in the show ring when owned by his breeders, C E & W S Milson. With his second crop of calves now born it seems his progeny are following in his footsteps and he was a most worthwhile investment.



Two young bulls (286 and 197), sired by Formidable, have been shown successfully at Heathfield, Surrey and South of England shows this year. Both are classic examples of the Sussex breed, and will be sold in due course.

The Black Ven cows have good maternal production value figures, providing an animal's economic value in terms of its genetic potential to produce females for breeding and animals with quality beef carcass characteristics. Last year 13 out of 23 dams were in the top 10 per cent of the whole breed.

Trottenden Formidable is just outside top 10 per cent for beef value and to date 2013 and 2014 calves are showing good maternal production values.

Based on estimated breeding values (EBVs), bull calves from cows with high figures and strong family lines will be given a chance to grow on, although the majority of bull calves are castrated at birth. Four have been kept entire this year with some promising young examples from their sire "Formidable".

Conformation is vital when it comes to selections including first class shape, length and backend. Animals must be a good size with a straight back. They must have well-set teeth and a jaw to ensure efficient feeding and correct legs and feet to promote good locomotion. The Black Ven herd has been performance recorded since 2000 and there has been a massive improvement within the herd in recent years. Parentage is viewed alongside the animal's figures; fundamentally Black Ven is an organic beef herd, so Beef Value is important. Maternal traits also play an important part in giving the calf the start it needs to develop into a strong animal.

"Through performance recording, breeders have access to more tools in their toolbox," said Elizabeth.

“This provides informed guidance when breeders make selections on heifer replacements and which productive mothers to retain in the herd.”

Selling their produce:

The family prefers to sell stock privately from the farm, giving buyers the opportunity to see the herd and the farm system which has produced the cattle. The society sales at Ashford in November and April are always an added option.

Leading to success this year

Through closely monitoring their female lines and recording genetic potential, the Buchanans have built up increasing knowledge of the capabilities of the Black Ven herd. Blending the best family lines with the influence of Trottenden Formidable is creating a hugely positive result and this bull’s influence is shown in the progress of the herd over the last two years.

“The Sussex remains an important breed in today’s changing world,” Elizabeth said.

“These animals do well on little and with ever rising input costs and increasing climate change, where extremes of weather are becoming more common, the resilient Sussex animal comes into its own.”

In the future, the family hopes to move toward finishing their own animals, with an objective of rearing more bulls in order to maximise income from the farm. This is dependent on being able to provide enough suitable buildings and land to accommodate more animals.

The Buchanan family is on a continuing mission of constant improvement for their organic herd. Using the EBLEX performance data combined with a relentless focus on management, their ambitions are looking very achievable.

