

BEEF FARMER

"Going Native" ...is more profitable than you imagined

Beef Farmer reports on the commercial success of farmers using modern Sussex cattle. In very recent history no one would have questioned that the future of the UK beef industry was inextricably linked to the big continental breeds. With superior muscle development and lean carcass quality they looked invincible; the native breeds were increasingly seen as a niche market, definitely providing tastier beef but economically difficult to justify on a farm of any scale.

But as they say, what goes around comes around and maybe there's a sea change afoot? Global warming will undoubtedly reduce the quality of the grass grown in many parts of the UK (and there's nothing to suggest that the price of the fertiliser needed to address this will reduce) and labour costs will continue to rise. Set against these economic givens, the native breeds - which finish on far from perfect pasture, and are much more self sufficient than their continental cousins, are not looking such a foolish bet.

Typical "modern" Sussex heifer

But as UK beef producers begin to consider the need for more native blood, the big players - like the Angus and Hereford - may not get it all their own way. Mention Sussex to most farmers north of the Thames and they think of small dark cattle and fat heifers, but thanks to a quiet revolution in breeding terms it may be time to reconsider the breed if you are thinking of "going native".

Two farms in the South East both produce "modern" Sussex cattle, but where one is finishing twelve month old bull beef at around 320kg A/W, the other is killing 20 month heifers at the same weight but without the use of concentrates. Both farms have far from perfect pasture and employ minimal labour, yet both operations show an excellent return on investment.

Bull Beef

Bunghurst Farm in Sussex is in the middle of the High Weald, an area of Outstanding Natural Beauty but renowned for its heavy clay. The 350 acres of mixed grassland, water meadows and woodland supports herds of pedigree Simmental and Sussex cattle, 50 cows in total, plus another 30 commercial Sussex and Sussex X cattle.

The majority of the Sussex cattle stay out as long as the ground will stand it - usually early December - and are then fed on straw and hay until they begin calving in March when silage is also offered. An interesting comparison sees the yards of Simmental cattle eating six bales of silage a week against the two used by the same number of Sussex. The cows are turned out in April and the bulls arrive at the end of May but are then taken out eight weeks later. Brenda Hide, farm manager at Bunghurst, who is solely responsible for all the cattle, takes no prisoners when it comes to fertility. "Any cows not in calf after eight weeks go to the fat market - and while we may make exceptions for the heifers, with the cows it's black and white, even so the herd includes plenty of cows in their teens."

"With limited labour we can't afford to spin out our calving pattern and using this policy 85% of our cattle calve in the first three weeks and 15% in the latter. With some 50 Sussex cattle it would be unusual if more than two or three weren't in calf after two cycles with the bull."

"Another advantage of the Sussex is their ease of calving. This year we only intervened once and for the last two years we have not lost a single calf, which at the end of the day makes a significant impact on the bottom line".

The cattle are then turned out onto permanent pasture - and even in the driest summers receive no supplementary feeding - until August when the cows with bull calves are split from those with heifers. Creep feeders are put in and using a 15% beef nut, the heifer calves are rationed to 1kg a day each while the bull calves are on ad-lib.

At some point in November, weather dependent, the bull calves are weaned and brought in where they continue on ad-lib nuts plus barley straw. From Christmas, the local butcher draws two a week, which get sent less than a mile up the road to the local Tootingworth abattoir. By April all the bulls, except those retained for breeding, will have gone which conveniently leaves the pen empty for the cows to calve down again for another year.

These Sussex bulls, all between ten and twelve months old, are killing out between 280 and 320kg D/W, an ideal size for the local independent retail butcher, who also appreciates the very lean quality of the carcass. As a result he is happy to pay over the odds - currently £2.95/kg D/W - and picks up the killing charge.

Continues Brenda "This system works well for us as it requires little labour, minimal housing and a quick return on each cow. It would not have been possible to push the traditional Sussex in such a way, but thanks to the development blood that was introduced in the seventies, mainly Limousin and Angus, the modern Sussex offers a hardy, docile animal but one that can be pushed fairly hard without getting too fat. On that basis the Sussex herds at Bungehurst represent a profitable enterprise".

Extensive Approach

At the other end of the spectrum Roger Dunn in Kent is finishing heifers at 20 months that have never seen a beef nut in their lives.

The 600 hectare farm at Goldstone in East Kent is flat marshland, whipped by winds that storm in off the North Sea, not the most hospitable of environments. About 200 hectares is down to fruit, 200 to arable and the poorer pasture that is not suitable for cropping is grazed by a herd of some 90 Sussex cows and followers. These are split into two groups one calving in March/April and the other in September/October, a system that allows them to calve the heifers at two and half years.

The herd was first established by Roger's father with a nucleus of traditional Sussex cattle.

Using a Red Angus bull he was very keen to develop polled cattle and so was one of the early pioneers of breed development. While the majority of the Goldstone cattle are now polled, Roger has continued the development programme using Salers to introduce more scale.

Interestingly however, he is now wary of going too far down this route having found that anything with more than about 1/16th continental blood proves too expensive to finish on the quality of the pasture found at Goldstone.

The spring born calves at the farm are turned out in March/April and as all the bull calves are castrated they stay together until they are weaned in November. The location of the buildings means the cattle are

Bull beef at 12 months

wintered in the centre of the operation, an ideal situation for maximising the by-products of the other enterprises such as apples, pears and potatoes. Apart from these, the calves are fed on silage analysed and then mixed with a Keenan feeder to give a total mixed ration with a 16% protein level. This is fed ad-lib with each animal consuming about 20kg of silage a day.

These cattle are then turned back out in the spring and some of the heifers will be ready to kill off grass by the autumn. The remainder are overwintered on the same total mixed ration with around four being drawn off each week to be slaughtered locally and then sold through the on-farm shop.

The most recently killed steer was sixteen months old, live weight 478kg, dead weight 260kg (54%) producing 171kg of sellable meat. See Chart 1. In the farm shop, this retailed for £1435 representing a significant profit once all costs had been accounted for.

Chart 1			
Cut	Amount kg	Price £/kg	Total £
Mince	16.0	5.75	92.00
Braising	45.0	7.00	315.00
Shin	3.0	5.75	17.25
Forerib	12.0	10.00	120.00
Brisket	6.0	6.50	39.00
Burgers & Sausages	22.5	5.00	112.50
Sirloin	10.0	16.50	165.00
Fillet	3.0	28.00	84.00
Topside	39.0	8.50	331.50
Rump	10.0	13.00	130.00
Leg	5.0	5.75	28.75
TOTAL	171.5		£1435.00

Concludes Roger "This extensive system works well here on the Kent marshes. The Sussex cows we have here are very hardy requiring little input in return for an annual live calf. Last year we put 94 cows to our Sussex bulls of which 12 were heifers. Of these two were empty, and of the other 92 we had 100% live calves with just 3 assists, one major and two tugs. With this level of fertility and self sufficiency, our Sussex suckler herd fits very well into this busy farm where all too often there seem to be more pressing things to attend to".

Autumn Show and Sale

Both these breeders send quality pedigree heifers and bulls to the Sussex Society spring and autumn Show and Sales. The next Hobbs Parker sale at Ashford market is on October 20th.