

The Salehurst Herd

Parsonage Farm is in the Parish of Salehurst, adjacent to the church, in the picturesque Rother Valley. It is a mixed farm of 400 acres, with another 200 of rented pasture, producing hops, cattle, sheep, pigs, and arable crops comprising wheat, barley, beans and lupins. We produce most of our feed from the farm. Hops were traditionally our main enterprise, the farm being particularly suited to this crop, and we still grow some, although on a much reduced acreage. Some of the land is unsuitable for cultivation, being either too low lying, and subject to flooding, or too steep.

My family have farmed here since the 1880's, and I am the fifth generation. I farm in partnership with my wife, Lynn, and we have three children. Our daughter and eldest son are with us on the farm, and our youngest son is currently studying agriculture at Harper Adams. They are all interested in becoming involved in the business.

All of us in farming have been through very difficult times since the mid 1990's, what with falling prices, BSE, Foot & Mouth, uncertainty in the farm payments regime, not to mention increasing regulation and bureaucracy, and in our own particular case, the collapse of the hop market.

We had been rearing calves and selling strong stores or finished animals for many years, buying in calves from local dairy herds. With the decline in the numbers of herds in the area, it became apparent that our raw material would not be so readily attainable. We had also become concerned with the temperaments of the cattle we were rearing. They were increasingly from Continental crosses, mostly Blondes and Limousin, and had some interesting experiences with them.

We had always liked the Sussex, and bought them when available over the years. I have proved to myself on more than one occasion how they will continue to "do" long after their Continental and even Hereford mates in a group had fallen away, and needed extra feeding. We also knew of their excellent eating qualities, always choosing a Sussex for the freezer, and the odd sales we made to friends.

We had always sold our stock through the local auction markets, and although I believe in this method to obtain a fair price, it was becoming clear that the large multiples were having an increasing dominance over the market. I was unhappy with this development, and was looking for an alternative.

Putting all these factors together, it was clear we needed to change the way we operated. Drawing on all our experiences and knowledge, we decided on a new direction - direct selling of our products to the consumer. Our research showed that we were situated in a well populated, reasonably affluent area, with an increasing interest and awareness of the provenance of their food by the public.

The next step was to look at producing what was needed. We started a sheep flock, buying some Romney ewes and using Romney and Texel rams on them. We had always kept a pig or two for home consumption and the odd freezer sale to friends, so we increased the herd, buying a Berkshire boar and sows. Next we considered the beef. We knew it had to be Sussex - but crossbred or pure? Bought in stock or home bred? We decided to go the whole hog, and start a pedigree herd as we were both interested in and had affection for the local breed (you will notice a hint of sentimentality creeping in here!)

To sum up, the Sussex would give us all we needed in our new venture. A hardy, thrifty, docile breed, that we could handle safely, would finish easily of home produced feed, mainly forage, produce top quality meat, and as a bonus, was truly local, another plus point in the direct selling strategy.

Our next job was to buy stock. When we started looking the breed was still in the doldrums. A good time to buy - but there was not a lot of stock available. We also decided to use development blood where possible, as we believed the improvements made to the breed had produced a much more commercially viable carcass. I have to say here that had the breed not developed, it would have been questionable as to whether we would have used it at all. Our first purchase was from John Lewis' Holm Place Herd, with 6 heifers and a bull, Formidable 3rd, Max as he is known, had become a bit of a local character with his laid back approach to life, and his fondness for a scratched back over the gate. He has also produced some good offspring, some of his daughters having just calved for the first time. We added to the herd with heifers from the Offham, Highfields, Boxted and others and from our own breeding. The time came when we needed another bull to use on our own heifers. After much thought and deliberation, (and nearly losing a calf after dehorning it last spring) we decided to go polled. We believe it to be the way forward, and it was a good time to start with a young herd. So we bought Mayfield Red Captain from Mr. Hind, a Sussex cross Red Angus. We are waiting for his first calves to be born as I write.

We have built the herd up to about 40 breeding females, and would like to increase. We cannot at present keep up with the demand from the shop, all stock not needed for breeding are being sold over the counter. Our limiting factor is winter housing. We would like to out-winter our stock but it is not possible on our mostly heavier soils. We started calving in February/March, and this has worked well. But in order to provide a continuous supply of finished cattle we decided to autumn calve about half of the herd. We calved them outside last year, and it worked very well. We were a bit late in the season October/November, so we will bring forward the calving period to August/September. Although this will clash with harvest and hop picking, we think it will be worth it. I wish we could keep the cattle outside all year round, but it is not possible for us.

When deciding on a herd prefix, we were astonished to discover how many names were spoken for and just how many herds had come and gone over the years. All of the three obvious choices, i.e. Parsonage and Redlands, (two of our farms' names) and our first choice, Salehurst, were already used. The Salehurst herd was no longer in existence, but permission had to be sought from the owners of the prefix, or their descendants, to be able to use them. After talking to Sue at the office, and following up with local enquiries, we traced the owners of our preferred choice down to Mrs. Farley, whose father had farmed at the Robertsbridge Mill Farm, until the 19060's. She still lives in the village, and I contacted her and asked for permission, and after consulting her brothers, she was delighted to allow us to use the prefix. Our thanks go to the family for their co-operation.

We are now into our fourth calving and last autumn we calved the first of our own heifers. This spring will see the first calves born to our new bull and we are eagerly awaiting the results.

The shop is now established and we have built a solid reputation for our meat. Sussex beef has led the way in this and we are constantly complimented on its excellent quality. The customers keep returning for more. So it must be true! We have always had problems keeping up with the demand and we now wonder how big our herd will have to become to supply all our needs. Time will tell!

We would like to thank all of those in the Society for all their help and advice when we established our herd. Sue, in the office, has always been very helpful, and Brenda Hide and John Lewis deserve a mention for their guidance and the benefit of their experience. Thanks also to many others, too many to mention, who have been ready and willing to talk cattle and advise if necessary. We have enjoyed the friendliness and hospitality shown to us when we first joined, and we now always look forward to the meetings. It has been a pleasure as well as a successful venture, and it is good to be able to mix pleasure and business.

*Andrew Hoad
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