

Sussex Cattle Society

An honour bestowed by the King

As the number of herds of Sussex cattle continue to grow, The Sussex Cattle Society is honoured to announce that following The King's accession to the throne and a review of all his patronages, His Majesty has agreed to continue his patronage and support for this long-established native breed.

Will Hurley, President of the Society said, "His Majesty's decision to honour us with his Patronage means the world to all Sussex Cattle breeders. For decades he has worked tirelessly to support native breeds and the fact that Windsor has the largest pedigree Sussex herd in the country is a huge source of pride to our Society. His Majesty's patronage is a rare honour in which we take the greatest pride".

Beef farmers are increasingly choosing Sussex cattle for lots of different reasons, reflecting the ability of the breed to deliver a profitable return under very different management systems. In larger commercial enterprises greater attention is now paid to breeding values with decisions being data driven, something The Sussex Cattle Society has encouraged by making Signet recording free to all its members. However, at the other end of the spectrum a lot of the newer herds have been established to capitalise on the breeds suitability for extensive, low grade conservation grazing schemes especially as pedigree Sussex are on the native breed at risk register and so eligible for a supplementary payment.

Sussex cattle deliver a profit under many systems

The Titsey Herd

Strangely enough many of you will have driven through the Titsey Estate near Oxted, Surrey, without realising it. In 1984 a strip of land across the farm was purchased for the new M25 motorway including a sizeable plot to build Clacket Lane Services near Junction 5. Just one of the many events in the long history of an estate first recorded in 1534.

In 1979 Titsey was established as a private charitable trust for the public good and soon after public access was granted. Over the years the acreage has waxed and waned. Pitchfont, the home farm of the estate, comprises 350 acres of permanent grass and a further 300 arable – mainly milling wheat, feed barley and maize.

Bill Peters arrived at Pitchfont as farm manager in 1986 when the principal income came from 130 pedigree Holstein cows, but in 2009 the decision was taken to come out of dairy and establish a suckler herd that would run alongside an increased arable enterprise.

Bill, with the owner Mr David Innes, had then to decide which breed of beef cattle to buy. At the time most large commercial herds were using Continental breeds, with natives seen as a niche market providing tastier beef but economically difficult to justify on any scale.

But with a great deal of low grade grassland

at Titsey, the increasing likelihood of summer droughts in the South East and lots of public access across the land, a thrifty, docile, self-sufficient breed which would finish on far from perfect pasture, seemed a more obvious choice. And being in the South East the decision was made to go with the local Sussex breed.

Despite having spent a lifetime breeding and judging dairy cattle Bill knew exactly what type of suckler cow he was looking for in his foundation stock. "I firmly believe in setting a goal and sticking to it. I knew what I was looking for and one of the main reasons for choosing Sussex was that I knew I would have a good selection of cows, heifers and bulls to choose from.

"Mention Sussex to most farmers who haven't seen them and they think of small dark cattle and fat heifers, but in recent years there has been a great deal of breed development, and today the modern Sussex cow is much longer and leaner – I only need them fat on the day they go to market. I wanted a cow with a good topline, a good carry in the udder and a quiet temperament. And down the line I also wanted longevity as a long breeding life reduces the depreciation on each animal and impacts on the bottom line. Having her first calf at three, I would expect each cow to deliver me 10 calves





Sussex cattle without issue, after that, they only return to the bull if they are still producing and raising good strong calves but there are plenty of cows in the yard right now doing just that.”

Today there are 120 pedigree breeding Sussex cows and four stock bulls at Titsey. Two thirds calve in the spring and the rest in the

autumn, though with a growing customer base requiring year-round beef, this split will likely even out in the future.

One bull goes in with the maiden heifers in May and then other bulls are turned out in groups with the spring-calved cows and their calves in June. They graze extensively and stay outside until the weather turns, usually in November when they all come in and get weaned. At this point most of the bull calves are cut, with about 10 kept entire which are reviewed again in the spring and either kept to sell on as breeding bulls or fattened as bull beef. All the males are fed on ad-lib grass and maize silage with supplementary rolled barley, and stay housed until they are fat and ready to kill. The heifer calves overwinter on good quality forage and are turned out again the following spring.

The two year old spring calving heifers are over wintered on ad-lib hay. They calve in March a month before the cows which ensures they get close attention. “One of the great things about Sussex is that they are easy calvers. Last year we calved 150 head. We had to help maybe half a dozen heifers but the cows will generally just get on with it by themselves. And should we get problems it is usually down to the choice of bull and we will move these on if that proves to be the case”.

The aim is to see 100 animals a year leaving the farm as fat cattle with the rest being kept as replacements or sold as breeding stock. They are finished at between 18 and 24 months aiming for a 320-350kg U4 carcass killing out around 57%. Bill is aware that they will have greater fat covering than that required by the supermarket trade, but he says butchers in this part of the world want it and know how to butcher Sussex.

The Outwood Butchers, a local independent, had not considered selling Sussex beef before Bill knocked at their door: now they take a bullock every fortnight. In addition, Steve Conisbee, of F. Conisbee & Son, believed to be the second oldest butcher in the country, also takes some to supplement his own homebred Sussex. “The Sussex gives depth of flavour, consistently marbling well and a good converter of grass and forage. I find the animals never cut as fat as they look, you have to ignore the fat deposits at the tailhead and brisket. If they were an Angus cross looking that fat, they would be over fat but that’s not

the case for the Sussex.” There is also a popular pub on the Titsey Estate that only sells homegrown beef and any spare go through the fat ring at Hailsham market.

The Goldstone Herd

Roger Dunn is finishing steers at 20 months on an extensive system at his farm on the Kent marshes..

The 600 hectare farm at Goldstone is flat land, 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 160 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 to calve the heifers at two and half years.

“The herd was established by my 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, we have 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, heifers and the castrated bulls – are turned out in March/ April until they are weaned in November. The location of the buildings means the cattle are wintered in the centre of the operation, an

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ideal situation for maximising the by-products of the other enterprises such as apples, pears and potatoes. Apart from these by-products, 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 yearlings are then turned back out in the spring and some of the steers will be ready to kill off grass by the autumn. The remainder are overwintered on the same total mixed ration with at least two 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 260 kg (54%) producing 171kg of sellable meat retailing at over £2000 and representing a significant profit once all costs have been accounted for.

Concludes Roger “This extensive system works well here on the Kent marshes. The Sussex cows are very hardy requiring little input in return for an annual live calf. Last year we put all our cows to Sussex bulls of which 21 were heifers. Of these, two were empty, and from the others 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.”

The Trottenden Herd

Vanessa McNaughton farms at Trottenden in Kent, a 75 Ha farm outside Goudhurst of which 68 Ha is permanent pasture with the remainder in small parcels of woodland. The pedigree Sussex herd was started there in



The Burke Trophy

1972 and now comprises around 30 suckler cows, with the followers sold for breeding or finishing in their own beef box scheme. The cows are kept outside for as long as the ground allows, and then fed on grass silage during housing. As excellent converters of forage, Sussex cattle at the farm are ideally suited to this low input system and appreciated for their easy calving and docile nature.

Grant income has always been important and the farm has been in stewardship schemes since they became available, and from 2024 has been in Higher Level Stewardship. The advantage of running a pedigree Sussex herd in this scheme is that the breed is on the native breed at risk register which pays a supplement on land grazed in GS7 (regeneration towards species rich grassland) and WD6 (creation of wood pasture).



Goldstone Herd

Recent Highlights

In order to encourage more young people to get involved in the breed, last year The Society established a "Next Generation" group. Open to anyone from 16 to 30 (ish!) there is a programme of events throughout the year to generate interest in the breed and pass on best practice. Educational workshops have included "Selecting breeding heifers, including best use of Signet data" and "Show etiquette and choosing a show team".

And on that subject Sussex have had some notable interbreed success on the show circuit in the past couple of years.

In 2022 the team was reserve in the



prestigious Burke Trophy, and Jane Howard's Sussex Bull "Coopers Regent 3rd" was judged supreme male champion at the 2023 South of England show. 2024 saw the Society run its first ever on-line pedigree breeding sale. Twenty three bulls were entered, five sold in excess of 5,000 guineas and a top price of 7,200gns for J&S Harmer's two year old bull Offham Poll Crusader 9th set a record for Sussex bulls.

Interest in Sussex as a breed with a useful carcass, an ability to thrive on less than perfect pasture, easy calving, longevity and importantly a very bidable temperament make it well suited to today's market and demand looks set to continue to rise. ■

This year Sussex cattle classes will be held at shows throughout the South East as well as the Suffolk County and Royal Norfolk Show.

For further information contact:

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Bill Peter's Titsey Herd