

Sussex cattle are the preferred breed to cope with marshy land

Kent farmer Roger Dunn has worked with Sussex cattle all his life and believes they are best suited to the marshy land he farms and also provide an excellent source of beef for his farm shop. KATIE LOMAS went to meet him.

While the best land at Goldstone Farm, near Ash, Canterbury, Kent, is used for arable and fruit crops the 'poor' pasture is the ideal grazing ground for the farm's herd of pedigree Sussex cattle.

Roger Dunn, who takes care of the livestock and the farm shop, is one of five in the business partnership – Chandler and Dunn – who farm the 600 hectares.

Mr. Dunn's brother, Paul, is in charge of the arable enterprise and the other three – cousins from the Chandler side of the partnership – take control of the fruit crops.

The first Goldstone pedigree Sussex cattle were registered by Mr. Dunn's father in 1946. Sussex cattle are indigenous to the area and although the breed has gone through many changes over the last 50 years Mr. Dunn believes they are still the best suited to the terrain of the farm and 'thrive on poor pasture'.



Roger Dunn with his Sussex cattle that have been put out to graze.



Six-month-old Sussex calves.

Although some land is suitable for cropping around a third of the farm is classed as 'marsh land', which runs down to the River Stour and is heavy clay river silt.

The 90 pedigree cows and followers graze this land with the resulting beef all being sold through the farm shop, Goldstone Butchers, started when the effects of BSE were being felt across the beef industry.

"We were getting fed up of poor prices so we started selling beef packs and it progressed from there" said Mr. Dunn "After foot-and-mouth in 2001 a small family-run abattoir opened about six miles from us so we decided to make use of that and start direct selling from the farm."

He began the venture thinking he would sell only part of the beef crop and half of the lambs, also bred on the farm, through the shop but demand dictated that all the primestock now bred on the farm would be sold this way.

"We started off with a cabin and after a while found that people were interested in coming down to the farm, which is the back of beyond, and so we converted a barn into a shop."

On a weekly basis one and a half beasts are sold over the counter along with 10 lambs and six locally sourced pigs. Another two beef carcasses and 10-12 lambs are sold to wholesalers and through a market stall each week.

Mr. Dunn aims to have the cattle ready at around 22 months of age with the steers weighing 300kg deadweight and the heifers around the 280kg mark, although this is not set in stone. The supply has to be continuous and this is where he believes the advantages of having a shop comes in.

“The beauty of having our own shop is it doesn’t matter what size the carcase is. If the animal is fit to kill, we can kill it. If we were trying to sell at market we would probably try to get a little more weight on it. Because we are supplying our own shop we can juggle things a bit to suit us.”



One of the farm’s five Sussex bulls

Beef carcasses are hung for three to four weeks and he said there was ‘just about a margin in it’. At £2.30/kg a 300kg steer would bring a return of £690.

“We’re possibly making around £100 a bullock but we only have to lose one animal and that profit goes down,” he said.

In the summer the cattle are fattened straight off grass with turnout being in April. Calving takes place twice a year – once in autumn (August to September) and once in the spring (March to April).

The autumn calvers stay out for as long as possible and when brought back inside, around November time, the cows and calves are put on a silage-based ration of 25kg silage plus waste apples and potatoes, a useful by-product from the arable and fruit enterprises.

The in-calf cows and heifers are put on a straw-based ration and as they get nearer calving around 10-12kg of silage is added to their diet.

“We want the cattle to be fit but not too fat. Once they go back out onto the grass they put it straight on again,” said Mr. Dunn.

The finishing ration is fed for 90 days and the winter fattening ration is a TMR of 25kg silage, 3.5kg starch pellets, 0.5kg protein and some minerals. “It’s not a rich mix and it’s one that these cattle can cope with. If there were some continental breeding in them they would want a stronger, more powerful ration,” he said.

One cut of silage is taken with clamp silage made for the first time last year. “We always used to round bale the silage but have now gone to clamp silage. It’s easier to use, is a better consistency and is cheaper to produce. We now spend less time mixing and feeding.”

As Mr. Dunn is the only full-time worker on the cattle side of the business with two of the arable workers do the bedding, using a straw chopper, and the feeding using a mixer wagon.

The cattle enterprise is spilt over two units, housing cows and calves on one and finishing on another, and feeding takes place every other day with enough for two days being put out each time.

The herd has five stock bulls, a mixture of home-bred and bought in bulls to keep variation in the bloodlines.

Surplus heifers and bulls deemed good enough for further breeding are sold at society sales at Ashford Market with the average price achieved for Goldstone-bred heifers recently being around £850-£900.

Around 15 to 20 heifers are kept each year as breed replacements. EBVs are recorded and he believes this is useful, as it allows him to see the improvements the cattle are making.

Mr. Dunn said the Sussex breed had gone through many changes from when it first became a recognised breed:

“They used to be known as draft oxen and were big cattle in those days. In the 1950s, when all the breeds went abroad and the trend was to get all cattle smaller, they did get smaller.

“In those days we followed the trend but as time and markets changed the continental breeds came in and everyone wanted bigger cattle again.”

Limousins were introduced to the breed in the 1980s to get larger cattle with better conformation and since then the Aberdeen-Angus breed has also been introduced to get the polled factor into the Sussex cattle.

However, Mr. Dunn has a clear idea on what he wants his cattle to look like: “We always aim for good conformation. I want to keep the size and length of the cattle, as it’s very easy to get smaller and much harder to get bigger.

“Sussex cattle used to be known as being fat and dumpy but now they have a bit more stretch about them. What the continentals did for the breed was to clean it up a bit. But I still want to keep the attributes that Sussex cattle are best known, such as their grazing ability and docile nature.”

“We have tried other breeds but on these marshes the breeds from this area are the best for the job,” said Mr. Dunn.



Butcher Ross Lake outside the shop with a selection of cuts.