

THE BOXTED HERD

Boxted Farm in Upchurch has been in the occupation of the Stevens Family since the mid 1860s, the farm originally being rented from Lord Harris and then purchased from him in 1918, when the partnership of F. Stevens & Sons was formed by Winifred, the indomitable widow of the late Frank Stevens, and her five sons. At Winifred's death in 1959 the partnership were farming approximately 660 acres including 66 at Rainham and 230 at Canterbury. This acreage supported livestock (sheep and cattle), arable (potatoes, cereals), hops and fruit (cherries, plums, apples and pears). Each brother specialised in a particular area, and the cattle were in the care of Gerald Stevens, assisted by his son, Leslie.

Until the 1960's cattle were always bought in as stores for fattening and many were brought down by train from Scotland. In the 1950's Sussex steers were bought from the COPTON herd of J. A. Bensted & Son, Faversham, winners of the small herds competition on many occasions. These steers were successfully shown at East Kent Fatstock Shows at Canterbury.

Following this success Gerald founded the Boxted Herd of Pedigree Sussex Cattle in 1962 when seven in-calf heifers were purchased from the COPTON herd. The previous year COPTON heifers had founded the MURTON herd of Guy Minter, and had also been foundation Stock of the AYLESFORD and NORWOOD herds. These heifers included COPTON CHARMER and COPTON SNOWDROP that still feature in the pedigrees of dams in the herd today. These heifers all calved in the winter of 62/63 producing the first BOXTED calves.



*Reserve Champion at the East Kent Fatstock Show at Canterbury, December 1960.
Leslie Stevens showing a Sussex Steer bred by J.A. Bensted & Son,
with David and Gerald Stevens looking on*

At the Sussex Cattle Society's Spring Show in 1963 the Reserve Champion SALTWOOD KEYSTONE, bred by J.H.E. Hobbs of Hythe, Kent, was purchased, and for the next four years became the Herd Stock Bull. Five maiden heifers were purchased in April 1963 from the COPTON Herd, together with a further four heifers from the AYLESFORD Herd of B. W. Kemsley & Son of Maidstone.

At the Maidstone Sale in September 1965 a maiden heifer, SCOTNEY LOCK HEEDLESS 100th, proved a significant purchase. She had been shown the previous summer winning 1st and Reserve Female Champion Heathfield, 1st Sussex, 3rd Royal Show and 2nd Edenbridge, and introduced the Boxted Herd's most successful dam line.

At the Society's Spring Show and Sale in 1966 WATSTOCK DESPOT 22nd, bred by G. & O. Fenwick of Edenbridge, was purchased to serve the KEYSTONE bull's daughters. He proved a very successful Stock Bull and several BOXTED DESPOT bulls were bred from him.

Bulls continued to be purchased at Society Shows and Sales. PETWORTH PLAYBOY 74th was purchased from Leconfield Farms Ltd. and was later replaced by PETWORTH WARSPITE 14th. At the Society Autumn Show & Sale, October 1979, the Champion, John Dinnis & Sons' HOPE HOUSE REGENT 3rd, was purchased. He had been shown with great success earlier in the summer winning Champion Sussex at both the Kent and Royal Shows and was Bull of the Year 1979.

The Herd joined the MLC Pedigree Weight Recording Scheme in the early 1970s and all calves were weighed at approx. 100-day intervals and weights adjusted to give 100, 200, 300, 400, and 500 day weights. As a result of this several bull calves were sent to the MLC Bull Performance Testing Station at Stoneleigh. Bull calves were weaned at approximately 6 months of age and sent to Stoneleigh. Sussex bulls were performance tested and compared with other red native breeds (Devon, Lincoln Red and Sussex) for a period of 6 months. Les served on the management committee for a number of years. At the end of the test bulls were weighed, measured, scanned and judged and a report was published comparing each bull with the test average for 400 day weight, withers height, fat depth, feed conversion and conformation score.

The Breed Development Scheme of 1982 had a major impact on the herd with Limousin bulls used to serve cows via A.I. (MMB FANFARON and MMB INTELLIGENT being most widely used). Several other Limousin bulls were also used including INGTHORPE SPARTAN, GOLDHILL SNOOPY and HALLINGBURY SOLOMON. To speed up the breeding programme bull calves were kept from MMB FANFARON and MMB INTELLIGENT and were sent on grass trials that were being run at Wye College.

In October 1985 the Champion at the Society Autumn Show & Sale, AYLESFORD GENERAL 24th, was purchased. He had previously won 1st and Reserve Champion Norfolk, 1st and Reserve Breed Champion and one of Best Pair Yearlings RASE and 2nd Kent 1985 only being beaten by his sire PETWORTH GENERAL 26th, the Burke Trophy winner.

At the end of December 1986 the partnership of F. Stevens and Sons was dissolved. Leslie with his sons, David and Mark, formed a new partnership, L. Stevens and Sons, and took over the ownership of the herd. At this point approximately 2/3 of the cows were homebred with the remainder bought in. Since 1986 purchases of females have been rare and today all cows are homebred with the exception of one. The area of the farm had now reduced to 300 acres.

By 2004, with the exception of 32 acres pears, 12 acres of plums and 14 acres of barley, all remaining acreage is grass. The herd graze approximately 50 acres, the yearlings another 25 acres and the rest is used to graze a flock of 250 ewes and for hay/silage production.

Due mainly to the fruit harvest the herd is now spring-calving, most of the autumn-calving cows either being culled, or calving delayed until the spring. Due to the lack of summer grass growth on the fields at Holywell, calves are creep-fed from approx 100 days old until weaning in December. Cows then out-winter and are fed only big bale silage, unless they have a poor condition score and are brought in for the winter. Calves born later than the end of April are brought in with their dams for the winter months. Again big bale silage is fed but cows are given a small amount of concentrates. All yearling stock are turned out at the end of April after scanning, steers being brought in for fattening in the autumn. Most of the yearling heifers then out-winter, only younger or fattening heifers being brought in.

The herd in 2004 consists of 34 Cows, all but one older cow with Breed Development Bloodlines. The Stock Bulls used to serve the cows this year are both homebred, three year old BOXTED MAJOR 1st (son of MURTON MAJOR 5th) and two year old BOXTED PREMIER 1st (son of ELBRIDGE PREMIER 4th). LYES

REGENT 2nd was purchased last spring to introduce a different sire line and served mainly the younger cows that were related to BOXTED MAJOR 1st. He has been used this year to serve the maiden heifers. All three of these are Grade C bulls and it is a policy of the herd to try and retain the 1/8 Limousin bloodlines to ensure that the herd offspring have excellent conformation with good eye muscles and little fat depth whilst retaining all other Sussex characteristics.



Some of the herd with their calves grazing in March 2004

The herd has weight recorded for 35 years and yearlings scanned for the last 3 years. The results have enabled only heifers of above breed average weight and above average Beef Values to be retained in the herd. Usually only one or two bull calves are kept from the higher rated cows, the remainder steered from birth.

The twice-yearly BLUP analysis has also enabled poorer rated cows to be culled early. This has resulted in several female lines disappearing from the herd. However good the figures on paper may be, animals retained must maintain the Boxted standards of sound structure, correct mobility, winter hardiness and the ability to put on flesh economically.

In the future the herd must continue to improve the breeding qualities and confirmation with lack of fat to maintain existing markets and to compete with other breeds. The effect of the Single Farm Payment in 2005 on the herd is not yet fully known, but one benefit may be that steers can be finished at a younger age without the penalty of not claiming a second Beef Special Premium. The management of the herd may well have to be adapted to accommodate these changes.

We thank the Sussex Cattle Society for allowing our herd to be reviewed in their Breeders Directory and members are always welcome to visit. One thing we have learnt from this Herd Focus is how few good quality photographs we have of our animals and a digital camera will definitely be on Les's Christmas Present List!

David Stevens April 2004



*3 year old Boxted Major 1st 16578C bred from Murton Major 5th and Boxted Belinda 20th.
He has a Beef Value of SX40 and a calving value of SX0C.*