

For those of you who may be reading this herd focus and expecting to hear about a long herd history with championship glories in the ring you may be a little disappointed.

However in contrast you will hear about my very short journey and experiences of starting up a Sussex herd from scratch only a few years ago in August 2013 and how they now fit into our whole farm system.

But first we have to go back a little further to where my enthusiasm all started for cattle; I was very fortunate to have grown up at Mapsons Farm near Chichester, West Sussex. Back then it was a 750 acre mixed farm with a dairy herd which had followed my parents from East Sussex when they took on the Church tenancy on in the late 70's.

It was a wonderful place to grow up and I loved the hustle and bustle of 24/7 farming. There was always a herdsman to get in the way of, or a calf to feed, but most importantly there was always fresh cold milk to drink straight from the bulk tank.

As much as the dramas of managing the dairy herd were probably a huge stress to my father, for me, chasing the cows along the beach when they got out, or on the rare occasion watching a surgical procedure during a vets visit, all seemed rather exciting!

However, things were to change as the industry was under a lot of pressure. Fast forward to 2000 and I remember sitting in my study at Wye Agricultural College when my parents phoned to tell me that they had decided to sell the herd. It was a sad moment but it was the right decision. At the time milk prices were being



*The first four heifers back from the sale.
I don't think they thought much of my hat after their long journey from Ashford.*

squeezed, BSE was headlining and with retrospect the Foot & Mouth crisis was to come the following year.

I returned to the farm in 2003 after Wye but it certainly had a different feel about it. The cows had gone, many of the men had moved on, the parlour was gathering dust and the grass had been ploughed up. It certainly smelt different, but wasn't that the smell of home....? It was the end of an era.

In the years to come many of the cattle barns were converted into potato storage to accommodate the rapidly expanding potato enterprise, the silage clamps became the horse livery yard and the parlour became the horse-radish factory, all getting a makeover and a new lease of life. The business as a result adapted and survived.

After the cows went in 2000, I witnessed over a period of time, the soils becoming harder to work/cultivate and they lost the ability to retain moisture in dry periods due to the depleting organic matter put in by the cattle manure as well as no longer having grass in the rotation.

As a young farmer looking to the future this problem was at the forefront of my mind and with the dream of cattle returning to the farm in one form or another, an article about Sussex cattle in the South East Farmer in the August of 2013 ignited my imagination, and there was to be a sale.

The sale was in fact on the next day and I remember sitting on the combine frantically trying to look up the sale details on my phone while trying not to drive the combine into the ditch.

Eventually I decided to ring up the auctioneers at Ashford and spoke to Mark Cleverdon. By now it was around 8 o'clock at night and no doubt Mark had better things to be doing than talking to me the night before a large sale. He probably had a chuckle to himself when he put the phone down after convincing me that it would not be a good idea to bid for the cows over the phone while trying to harvest the wheat. My dilemma was how to convince my father to cover me on the combine without telling him where I was going.

The experience of the sale was second to none and like all top auctioneers Mark picked me out of the crowd for some banter "**managed to put your Father on the combine then Mr Monnington????**" followed by laughter from the crowd.

That day I bought four Sussex in calf heifers and it was a race to get home before the cows did, as I hadn't broken the news to my father. I made it into the farm yard just as the lorry pulled in and the look on my parent's faces was quite a picture.

The following spring I bought four more maiden heifers and to date; the breeding females are made up from eight different herds.

It is worth mentioning that we entered into the Biobest High Health scheme once we became a closed herd, which in turn showed that we are free of all the nasties.

This I feel is a real credit to the society members who I bought stock from.

The two cows that have excelled the most in every way on the farm have been Meres Valentino 7th and Meres Ethelreda 3rd. Both being very low maintenance, while producing cracking offspring and thus vying for top spot.

I also bought a slightly older cow High Weald Poll Prebble 6th who caught my eye and has done extremely well and keeps the rest of the herd in check.

My choice for a bull was Mayfield Captain 5th. I looked at 4 bulls that year but he was by far the best one. He

won many awards for the Mayfield Herd when he was on the show circuit and really hasn't let me down as a working bull either.

He passes on some fantastic maternal traits with no calving difficulties to date. This should not be a surprise as his mother is a Mayfield Snowdrop.

For those who enjoy their statistics he has averaged 78% female calves over the last two seasons. He also passes on his larger frame and incredibly good feet as well as an increase in the rump area seen here in one of his 22 month old heifers "Mapsons Valentino 1st".

Most importantly he has managed to take the herd up to a total of 53 head in a very short period of time.



High Weald Poll Prebble 6th the Grandmother of the herd but well respected

So what does the future look like for the Mapsons herd and how do they fit into our whole farm system?

Well poorer areas of the farm have been reverted back to grassland, the meadows are now being grazed again, as are the horse paddocks during a spring flush which in turn keeps parasitic worm populations down for the equine and prevents laminitis.

The cows are fed on a mixed ration of hay, straw and stock feed potatoes during the winter, all of which are by products of the other farm enterprises and are then returned to the soil in the form of manure.

With the reintroduction of the cows we are already seeing our soils and arable yields benefit greatly, and with the increase of biodiversity the sky larks are back singing at Mapsons Farm and the rare orchids have reappeared due to the opening up of the dense swards.

For me the Sussex have lived up to all my expectations; easy to manage, low maintenance, great temperament, easy calving, great fertility and an absolute pleasure to have on the farm. I really couldn't imagine having another breed and when the general public see the Sussex cattle in the field or taste their meat there is a hugely positive reaction. I can't help but feel the future of the Sussex breed is a positive one.

Tom Monnington



Mapsons Valentino 1st one of Captains offspring