

# THE SAXONHURST HERD

When we were asked to write the 'Herd Focus' we fell into panic and wondered what on earth we could write about – being a new herd and having little history might not make for interesting reading, but anyway here goes!

We bought Warren farm in July 1999 having viewed it through 'Rose coloured Spectacles'. We fell in love with the place, set in a beautiful location with a small house and the farm incorporating approximately 80 acres of pasture, 20 acres of woodland and some outbuildings. A typical wealden farm that had been a home for dairy cattle for three generations. Like so many farms of this size it had gone from providing a wage for three or four employees too not being able to sustain a wage for one. Sadly the cattle were sold and the farm put on the market, one can only imagine what an emotional wrench it must have been for the previous owners.



The farm was in a poor state, all the hedges were overgrown, ditches were blocked, there were no fences and a lot of the pasture was in need of re-seeding. The house needed complete renovation and the buildings were falling down, other than that it was great! The old dairy was left just as it was the day they put down the clusters for the last time.

In the first couple of years we renovated and extended the house, converted an old cart lodge and grain store into a holiday let, and got stuck into the hedging, ditching, fencing and re-seeding of the worst leys.

Simon had always liked the look of Sussex Cattle since his college days at Plumpton. A native breed that had a fantastic temperament and would finish on fresh air! Surely this was too good to be true. Having been bought up on a sheep farm I was more than happy to have cattle! Despite the fact that I thought that the 'Sussex Cattle Society' was a society based in Sussex for cattle of no particular breed, I took to my new role like a duck to water.

At the same time Simon had been looking into the possibility of organic production, as it was something which we both believed in and it was a growing market. It fitted in well with the countryside stewardship scheme we were involved with and we thought we were in the right location for an organic box scheme. The decision was made, Sussex Cattle it had to be, and so we started our two-year simultaneous conversion with the Soil Association converting land and livestock alongside each other.

We heard through the grapevine of four cows for sale with calves at foot and thought they would be good to start us off! They were the last of a herd dispersal and we now know why, bad feet, udders you name it, I fondly called them the 'Heffalumps' - but not that fondly as they were duly moved on. Then we had the pleasure of buying some decent stock from Les Stevens of the Boxted Herd. I can remember looking at them in the most atrocious weather, as we stood in the pouring rain on the marshes we picked out eight maiden heifers. Les had some lovely animals all with above average EBV figures, which are always a useful guide. These have been the basis of our herd.

We looked into hiring a bull but decided to purchase our own. We bought a Wellington bull from James Holdstock in the Spring Show and Sale. His pet name was 'Norman' a two year old he was heavy boned but still like a leggy teenager with the potential to turn into something rather nice (which he did). The haulier turned up and we had to lead him across two fields to the heifers - he behaved impeccably, and so the Saxonhurst Herd was born.



“Norman” (Elbridge Wellington 5th)

The next couple of years were a steep learning curve, calving our new heifers taught us a lot. Norman’s calves were beautiful but a little on the large side which wasn’t without its’ problems. We kept Norman for three more years deciding to artificially inseminate his daughters, but although successful this became more impractical as numbers grew and so Norman was sold on.

Our next bull ‘Hernevally General’ won the best stock bull in the small herds competition two years running and he produced some sensible size calves. Some of his offspring are now going into the herd and we have moved on to a new bull whose first calves are being born as you read this article

The herd has now reached its maximum size for the available land we have. Next year we will calve 21 and all but two cows are now homebred. Our heifers are generally sold ‘in-calf’ and steers are all finished at thirty months on home-grown grass/haylage. We do not buy any feed in just organically approved mineral licks. The meat is sold via our own organic box scheme or through local organic farm shops. Last year we became farm assured, joined the Organic Livestock Marketing Scheme and sold several steers to Marks & Spencers.

We do not routinely worm or vaccinate (except for blue tongue). The calves are left on their dams for at least nine months, and all cattle are kept in as stress free an environment as possible, with good management very few health problems arise.

In 2005 & 2006 we tried our hand at some showing with a lot of help and encouragement from our part time stockman Ralph Sheppard. We took out two in calf heifers and a young bull ‘Alfred’ that we had bred from Norman . We did very well as novices gaining a string of rosettes the heifers winning 2nd and 3rd at The Royal in a class of fourteen. Although very rewarding needless to say it is time consuming and we haven’t been seen in the show ring for a couple of years but hopefully we will be back!



“Paddy” Our Stock Bull



*Simon and Nicky Bish -  
March ‘09*

“Bish Beef”