

THE WRIGHT HERD

From Draft Cattle to Prime Beef :

Although the 'Wright' herd is a relatively new name to the Sussex cattle Society, its family origins can be traced back to an age when the cattle were bred for an entirely different reason than for the prime beef they now produce today.

Before the days of the tractor, the field-work on Conghurst, a traditional mixed Wealden farm belonging to my ancestors the Pipers, was done by horses and oxen. The horses did the heavier work, ploughing and cultivations, while the oxen were used for lighter jobs, mainly harrowing and drawing the carts and wagons.

These oxen were the local breed of cattle, the Red Sussex. They were used for their strength and temperament, being particularly docile and easy to train to work either in teams, pairs or individually. The working cattle were housed in lodges, in two's, being the way they would work, The other cows were housed in yards with lodges around them for shelter, where they would calve before being turned out to grass, with their calves, for the summer. At this time, a bull would be run with them.

In the 1920's, with the arrival of the first tractors, the oxen's role was taken over by the horse, so that they ceased to be draft animals but became a herd for producing beef and gradually grew in numbers, which by 1970 had reached 70 breeding cows plus their followers.

In order to accommodate this increased number at grass, most of the young stock were taken down to Lamb Farm, East Guldeford, near Rye (another of the Pipers' farms) for the summer; and the cows were split into two with the earliest calved cows, their calves and a bull being driven to another of the farms at Heronden, near Sandhurst. This 'driving' caused much interest and, in some cases, alarm, as the herd went through Sandhurst; it also became a logistical nightmare to try to stop the calves in particular visiting gardens, which had no gates!



CONGHURST OXEN TEAM

Jesse Foster with his six-strong team of Conghurst Farm oxen, which he handled exclusively. He claimed they were very docile and would do everything except sit up and beg! They were, however, prone to kick savagely if annoyed by someone strange.

Although slower than horses, oxen could plough the same acreage, rarely needing to rest, and a basic diet of oat-straw made them cheap to keep. Spans or pairs were always harnessed together, and all were named, like Pert & Lively, Duke & Diamond, Lark & Linnet, Star & Vine, Quick & Nimble, Turk & Tiger, Trip & Troller.

With the oxen specially decorated Jesse took much pride in the annual journey to Etchingam Station to collect the London hoppers, allowing plenty of time for the first stop at the Woolpack, Hurst Green. It was a tradition on the Conghurst estate that as soon as a young pair of oxen had been broken in they should be christened at the Woolpack on their first journey to the station. Then numerous glasses of beer were also poured down the throats of the travelling company.

The herd was a closed herd of pure-bred cows but a pedigree bull was always purchased to cover the cows and maintain the true Sussex qualities of strength, temperament and excellent meat. The cows at this time were a beautiful deep red chestnut colour, of solid square confirmation, with elegant up-swept horns.

Although they are a docile breed, like any other good parent, the cows are very protective of their offspring, and during the 1950's, as more and more regulations came into force and there was need to handle the cattle more often (TB testing, ear-tagging, etc:), the beautiful up-swept horns became a pretty dangerous weapon! As a consequence, all the cows were dehorned and a policy of dehorning the calves was introduced; however, a horned pedigree Sussex bull was still used, so that there was no interference with the genetic make-up of the herd. With very few exceptions, this helped to maintain their docile nature.

In the 1960's there was a useful but limited demand for Sussex cattle from South Africa and, the then, Rhodesia because of their qualities of meat, tolerance to heat and sunshine and their all-over dark colouring. Unlike the Hereford, the favoured breed for export to those countries at the time, the Sussex did not have a white face, which attracted the tsetse fly, causing endless eye problems.

At the same time, the Sussex Herd Society opened their books to pure-bred herds, such as the Conghurst herd, to become pedigree. A number of cows were registered, but unfortunately that trade was rather short lived and so the benefit was never realised.

As Conghurst was a mixed farm, there was a fair acreage of hops, which required large quantities of manure in order to produce the best results; this was supplied from the yards where the cattle had been housed during the winter. Ironically it was usually the oxen which pulled the carts to transport this to the strategically placed piles, (mixens – because it was mixed by hand once or maybe twice during the summer to help break it down and thereby create a really good product) and then again to take it on into the hop gardens during the autumn/winter to be spread.

During the late 1960s, the Piper partnership decided to amicably split and the herd was divided equally between Conghurst and Lamb Farm.

In the 1970's, with the hop industry shrinking and the need to either intensify or leave the industry, the latter took place, so that the need for copious quantities of manure declined. As farming changed, specialisation became all important, so the 'mixed'



Jesse Fisher with four of the Conghurst oxen team in front of the Moor Schools. The Britannia tableau was part of Hawkhurst celebrations for Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1897. The National Schools were built in 1863 at a cost of £1,600.



The Conghurst, Hawkhurst, Kent Oxen at home. On the pair with heads down the yoke has slipped forward to the horns and shows how the bows, equivalent to the horse's collar are pushed up through the yoke. The pair in the foreground has just been released from the pole.



A team of oxen outside the Colonnade a Highgate about 1890, possibly from Conghurst, one of the last farms to work a team of oxen. Driving the team was by means of the ox-goad, a thin hazel stick with an iron tip, used in conjunction with a few guttural phrases such as 'mothawoot' and 'yahaawoot'.

farm gradually disappeared and Conghurst became a sheep and arable farm, Therefore the Conghurst Herd of Pure-bred Sussex Cattle ceased to exist at Conghurst. At the time, it was thought to be one of the oldest, having its origins, not essentially as a beef herd, but as a major draft animal on the farm for many years.

So, despite the demise of the Conghurst herd , the herd still remained at Lamb Farm and the policy of being a closed herd, with the exception of the purchasing of only the very 'traditional' Sussex bred pedigree bulls continued under the guidance of my Grandfather Alex Piper.

I took over the stewardship of the herd in 1990 just prior to the onset of the BSE crises, followed by the foot and mouth disaster and then the restrictions due to Bluetongue. Luckily the herd survived them all and with the demand for English breeds of cattle on 'green scheme' low input grazing, it made commercial sense to pedigree register the females in the herd when the society opened up its herd books again in mid 2000.

The herd has evolved greatly since the days of been a draft animal and continues to graze the old traditional herb rich pastures of Romney Marsh, in harmony with a large pure Romney flock. The old grasses may not be the most productive in the terms of quantity, but the quality together with the slow maturing of the breed produces prime beef with the fullest flavour possible.

Simon Wright April 2012



