



Recording a large beef herd The Elbridge Herd



The Elbridge Herd is one of the largest herds of Sussex Cattle in the country and is owned by E.H.Holdstock and Son, who are based just outside of Canterbury in Kent. The farm is run by James and Clare Holdstock who have been joined back on the farm by daughter Verity and son George over the last couple of years. The business farms around 1800 acres, with arable, potatoes and top fruit running alongside the cattle. The herd was established in 1946 when John Holdstock, (James' father and the son referred to in E H Holdstock & Son) bought his first four Sussex females. The herd has now grown to 200 breeding cows which are split between spring and autumn calving. Since Spring 2015 the daily management of the herd has been taken over by Martin Russell who has brought great dedication and enthusiasm for herd improvement.

“We see that the huge advantage of the Sussex breed is their ability to thrive on extensive rearing systems and not requiring large quantities of manufactured concentrates. Quite a lot of our summer grazing for the cows is on poor quality pasture and this is where the Sussex's thriftiness comes into its own”, says Verity. “The Elbridge Herd was one of the first herds to join the Signet weight recording scheme. This has been a very useful tool when making comparisons between animals, prior to selection, for both bulls and heifers. Over the years, both frame and type have improved and live weight gain has increased despite minimal concentrate use”.

“Signet gives us a framework so that we can benchmark our herd against others and see where our strengths and weakness's lie” says Verity. “It is also a great tool when looking at buying in animals as it can give us confidence of the breeding value of the animal and how they will benefit our herd. In our breeding objectives we aim to maintain the especially desirable Sussex traits of good temperament, milkiness, sound feet,

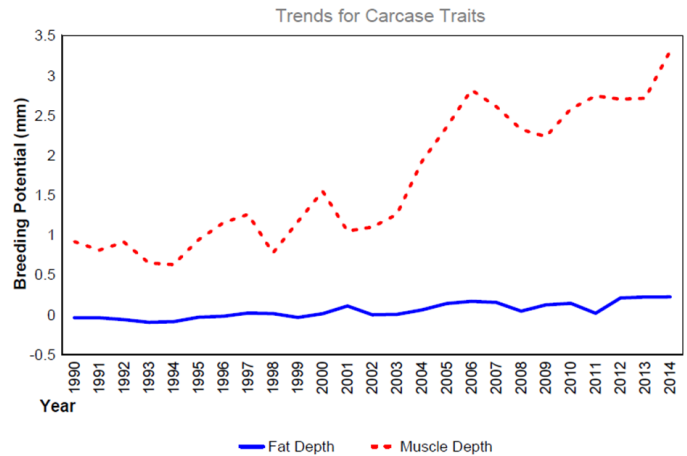
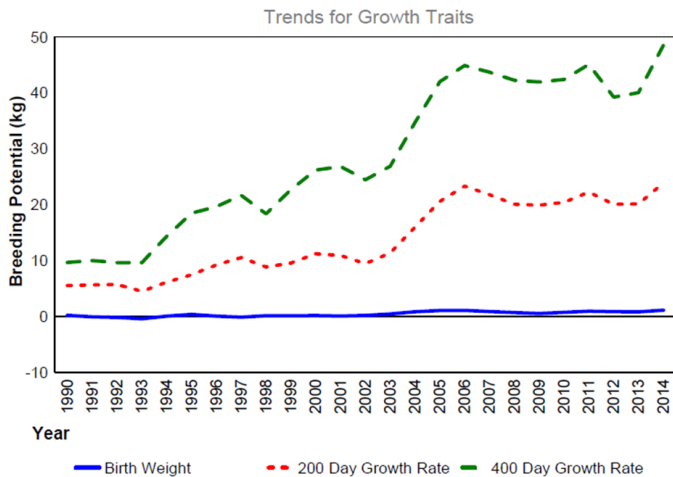


longevity and good food conversion, whilst improving frame and shape. We keep many of our own heifers as replacements as well as selling individuals and batches to other breeders. We have found that over the years the SIGNET cow maternal value gives a very good start when selecting heifers”.



“We keep a large proportion of bull calves entire, meaning that we have greater choice when selecting breeding bulls. We select bulls that strike a good balance between good muscular shape and frame size. The SIGNET ultrasound scanning is very beneficial when it comes to selecting bulls and provides factual figures on muscle depth which aids the selection process alongside the breeders eye. Over the last year we have been putting additional focus back into our breeding bull selection, something which has been reflected clearly in our weight and scanning figures”.

“We had a short period where we didn’t scan or record our weights through SIGNET, but having now returned to the programme it is clear to see the benefits and it is good to see that our figures have continued to improve”.



The overall performance of the cattle within the Elbridge herd has been improving vastly over time. This is consistent with the improvements made within the recorded Sussex cattle population as a whole. Both 200-day and 400-day growth rates have shown a dramatic increase and with the improvement of muscle depth across the loin, it is clear to see that Elbridge’s cattle have a strong future and will provide an excellent advert for the Sussex breed.

For more information about Signet’s beef recording and ultrasound service, please contact Steve West at Stephen.west@ahdb.org.uk or call 02476 478829.