

HERD FOCUS : COOPERS HERD

My grandparents were farmers in Chandlers Ford, Hampshire and while I grew up spending a lot of time on their farm (now a housing estate!) my parents did not farm. But I guess it's in the genes, and in 1999 husband Adrian and I fulfilled a lifelong dream and purchased Coopers Farm in Stonegate. A typical High Weald 90 acre farm of permanent pasture and woodland. What we didn't realise then was what a slice of Sussex cattle history we were buying into.

We purchased the farm from Mick and Nimah Reid, hugely influential and successful Sussex breeders and owners of the famous Maplesden herd. I well remember going to the Maplesden dispersal herd in September 2000 and being completely star struck – I knew then that sooner or later I would have to have some.



It would have been much sooner had not Brenda Hide, Mick Reid's stockwoman and her husband Tom arrived at Coopers and offered to help with my potential cattle enterprise. Get the seed corn right said Brenda and you'll never look back. As the weeks slipped by and none of the cows I found got Brenda's approval I was beginning to wonder if it would ever happen but then Mick Cushing had a dispersal sale of his Coombe Ash herd and I was now the owner of three in-calf heifers and three maiden heifers, all with Maplesden in their bloodlines. Happy days.

A few more handpicked purchases along the way including most notably a Snowdrop from Bridget Kirsch, a Lofty Lily and a Delia from Roger Dunn and Laurel Stevens' much loved Poplars Darkey 86th and the herd was on its way. Fifteen cows and then of course we needed a bull. Over the years we have had some cracking Mayfield bulls from Michael Hind – a Supreme, a General, a Major and a Captain and of course Gorgeous George aka Goldstone Regent 7th from Chandler & Dunn.

Tom and Brenda have most generously taught me everything I know about cattle management and also introduced me to the art of showing. First nervous outing was with two steers to Edenbridge entered in the native beef class. We came third and fifth out of five and I was hooked. I'm glad to have been to Smithfield Show at Olympia and to The Royal before both finished and many more along the way. There have been a few interbreed successes – best Group of Three and reserve Junior Bull at The Royal Norfolk Show stand out and we have been pleased to win the Small Herd competition and the Sussex Bull and Female of the Year on a few occasions.



All the cows overwinter on hay, with no supplementary feed and calve in February and March. This means the calves are quite strong at turnout and can make best use of the good spring grass. I leave all the bull calves entire for two reasons. Firstly the extra growth compensates for the vet's fee to castrate them in the autumn and secondly although I've picked out the ones to keep as bulls at birth there can be surprises. This does however mean having to split the cows in the early autumn into those with heifer calves and those with bull calves but then the bull calves can be on a bigger ration of creep feed before they are weaned.

After weaning all the youngstock - except the bulls which get much more - overwinter on a daily mixed grain ration of 1kg/per head and then are turned out in the spring. The steers are sold as stores in the autumn.

When it comes to selecting which heifers to keep I pick the best two or three – preferably polled, always dark and then I try and make sure there are always at least two of each of the six core lines in the herd – Snowdrop, Daffodil, Darkey, Delia, Lofty Lily and Heedless

In recent years we have started breeding a few bulls. For me a docile temperament is crucially important as is a dark colour and then the jury's out on polled or not polled. Definitely the market is wanting polled but its difficult when quite often clearly the best candidates are not. Even if I'm not showing them I do get them all halter trained as from experience I know how much easier it is to manage a big bull when you can easily handle him.



In writing this I realise The Coopers Herd is twenty one years old this year. It's been a wonderful voyage of discovery, it still is, and I'd just like to thank all the wonderful people in the Society who I have met along the way and who have so freely given of their time and advice. Much appreciated.

Jane Howard

