

Pedigree blueprint for Sussex success

By Jane Howard - Pictures: John Eveson

Michael Hind explains why the Maplesden pedigree Sussex herd at Bungehurst Farm are challenging perceptions of the Sussex breed north of Watford Gap.

ALTHOUGH he had a history of keeping Simmentals, when Michael Hind bought Bungehurst Farm in East Sussex, he knew he would be better off with a native herd.

The 162 hectares (400 acres) of permanent pasture, woodland and water meadows did not offer the best grazing, besides which his other passion was to establish and run a shoot. While it was clear the cattle would need to be thrifty and self-reliant, the jury was out with regard to which breed to choose.

As fortune would have it, the purchase of Bungehurst coincided in 2000 with the dispersal of the famous Maplesden pedigree herd of Sussex cattle established by Mick Reid just after the war.

As a result, Mike was able to purchase about 20 Maplesden cows and heifers and, as an added bonus, secure the services of Brenda Hide, previously farm manager at Maplesden.

Together, Mike and Brenda have built up the Mayfield herd which today numbers around 80 Sussex cows and followers and, not surprisingly, about 20 pedigree Simmentals.

So why did the decision lie with the Sussex?

"Mention Sussex to most farmers north of Watford Gap and they think of small dark cattle and fat heifers" explains Mike.

"But thanks to the breed development programme which started in the 1970s using Limousins and has continued over the past 40 years, much has changed.

"The modern Sussex provides a useful combination of a thrifty, docile, milky cow producing offspring which can be pushed hard to finish at 10-12 months. On that basis, we have a profitable enterprise here at Bungehurst."

The Sussex cows at Bungehurst are split, with about 40 in the pedigree Mayfield herd and the remainder, some of which are a Sussex/Simm cross, in a commercial herd.

Modern suckler herd

The aim for the pedigree herd has always been to produce cattle - bulls and heifers - which are big enough to take their place in any modern suckler herd and those that don't make the grade in terms of their size, are moved across to the commercial herd.



Mike Hind and Brenda Hide at Bungehurst Farm, East Sussex



Show bull Mayfield General 1st top priced at 4,400gns.



Simmental calves from Sussex and Simmental cross Sussex cows - part of the commercial herd.



Simmental sired calf from Simmental cross Sussex cow.

Once in the pedigree herd, each cow is reassessed after her second calf to ensure her offspring are also delivering.

The bull calves from both herds are all kept entire. The majority are pushed hard to be sold off the farm as finished bull beef before they are 12 months old.

The best pedigree pair are kept for the show ring with perhaps another three or four being sold for breeding, usually for suckler herds but increasingly into the dairy industry as farmers recognise the Sussex as a useful bull for their heifers.

The reputation of Mayfield bulls is such they command very good prices, for example Mayfield General 1st, a 20-month-old bull which reached top price at the Sussex Society Sale last autumn when he sold for 4,400gns. Others have sold privately for well in excess of that figure.

As there are only a few Sussex herds in the UK breeding bulls, finding new genetic lines is always a thorny issue.

It is a problem not helped by the fact that DEFRA bans the import of semen from the two countries – South Africa and Australia – where there are large Sussex populations.

In the past 10 years Bungehurst has purchased bulls from other breeders using five different lines: Wellington, Supreme, Major, General and Intelligent – but where is next on the cards?

"In order to extend the gene pool and to push forward a programme to make all our cattle polled, four years ago we purchased a Red Angus bull, Leachman Red Partner," says Brenda.

"He was used on half our pedigree cows and 100 per cent of the first cross heifers were polled. We then used a pure but polled Sussex bull, Slaughtam General, on these A cows and 50 per cent of their B heifers were polled.

First polled

"Conveniently we're killing two birds with one stone and we now have our first polled C heifers on the ground, all of which can be registered in the full pedigree herd book.

"It's a successful project and one we might well repeat in the future with another Angus line."

While numbers have been building, the majority of the pure Sussex heifer calves have been retained at Bungehurst for breeding or, if not big enough, finished and sold in the fat market. A Simmental bull is always used on the commercial Sussex cows and these cross heifers are in demand.

For two years, the entire female crop went to Yorkshire to JSR Farms as they developed their stabiliser cattle and many have been sent to Scotland. In order to generate these sales, the farm has had to gain BVD- free accreditation and Brenda is convinced this is the way forward for all pedigree breeders, especially for those selling bulls.

The day-to-day care of the cattle at Bungehurst is carried out by Brenda, with help three days a week from stockman Mark Cornwall. The cattle stay out as long as the ground will stand it – this usually means early December as this is heavy Wealden clay – they are then fed on straw and hay until they begin calve in March when silage is also offered.



Pedigree Sussex cow and calf – part of the Mayfield herd.



A development bull. The breed has benefited from a programme started in the 1970s



Sussex heifers are sold privately if not required for breeding.

An interesting comparison sees the yards of Simmental cattle eating six bales of silage a week against the two used by the same number of Sussex.

When it comes to fertility, Brenda takes no prisoners: "With limited labour and a busy summer showing season, we can't afford to spin out our calving pattern and so we take a fairly tough line when it comes to fertility.

"The bulls are put in with the cows at the end of May but are taken out eight weeks later. Any cows not in calf at that point go to the fat market and while we may make exceptions for the heifers, it is black and white with the cows. But even so, the herd includes plenty of cows in their teens," says Brenda.

"Using this policy it would be unusual if more than two or three weren't in calf after two cycles and 85 per cent calve in the first three weeks with only 15 per cent in the latter.

"Another advantage of using a native breed is their ease of calving. This year, we only intervened once and for the last two years we have not lost a single calf, which at the end of the day makes a significant impact on the bottom line."

In the spring, the cows and calves are turned out on to permanent pasture without any supplementary feeding.

"As the summers look likely to get hotter and drier here in the South East, the ability of the Sussex to thrive and milk well on dry pasture will be more important.

Calves rationed

"In August, we split the cows with bull calves from those with heifers. Creep feeders are put in and using a 15 per cent beef nut, the heifer calves are rationed to 1kg a day, while the bull calves are on ad-lib," she added.

At some point in November, weather dependent, the bull calves are weaned and brought in where they continue on ad-lib nuts plus barley straw.

From Christmas, the local butcher draws two a week, which get sent less than a mile up the road to the local Tottingworth abattoir. By April, all the bulls, except those retained for breeding, will have gone which conveniently leaves the pen empty for the cows to calve down again for another year.

"These bullocks – all between 10 and 12 months old – are killing out between 280kg and 320kg deadweight, an ideal size for the local independent retail butcher, who also appreciates the very lean quality of the carcass. As a result, he is happy to pay over the odds and picks up the killing charge," says Brenda.

Showing cattle at summer shows has always been an important part of the calendar at Bungehurst and has proved to be an excellent shop window for the breed and the Mayfield herd.

With the 2010 show season now in full swing, the Mayfield Sussex cattle have already been to the Heathfield, Surrey County, South of England and Royal Norfolk shows and, this weekend, sees the team turn out again at the Kent County Show. For the first time the policy is to show 'development' cattle alongside the more traditional types and Brenda is quite clear why.

"While there are many things about our native breeds, like thrift and temperament that are as important as ever, we must keep pushing forward when it comes to polling.

"And if that means moving on from some of the established breed standards, then so be it."

It's a brave policy but one that seems to be paying off. One yearling bull, Mayfield Poll Captain 2nd, which is 1/12th Angus, has twice been male champion this year and has attracted a great deal of interest from breeders wanting to buy into the Bungehurst blueprint for the future.

FARM FACTS

- 162ha (400 acres); 142ha (350 acres) permanent pasture and water meadows; 20ha (50 acres set-aside/game cover)
- Contract out silage making and hay baling
- Entry Level Stewardship land

- 200 keep sheep on farm from November to March
- 40 pedigree Sussex cattle and 20 pedigree Simmentals
- 40 commercial Sussex cattle put to Simmental bull
- All bull calves not kept for breeding sold off as bull beef
- All heifers not kept for replacements are sold privately
- Show ring success includes inter-breed champion at Surrey County Show and champion Sussex cow for Mayfield Snowdrop 4th at the Royal Show