

# Sussex cattle prove the

Sussex cattle have proved to be the ideal breed to thrive and prosper on the Titsey Estate in Surrey. Jane Howard reports.

**W**hen Bill Peters arrived at Pitchfont, the home farm to Titsey Estate near Oxted, Surrey, as farm manager in 1986, the principal income came from 130 pedigree Holstein cows, but in 2009 the decision was taken to come out of dairy and establish a suckler herd which would run alongside an increased arable enterprise.

Mr Peters, along with the estate owner, David Innes, had to decide which breed of beef cattle to buy. At the time, most large, commercial herds were using continental breeds, with natives seen as a niche market providing tastier beef but

economically difficult to justify on any scale.

But with a great deal of low grade grassland at Titsey, the increasing likelihood of summer droughts in the South East and lots of public access across the land, a thrifty, docile, self-sufficient breed which would finish on far from perfect pasture, seemed a more obvious choice. And being in the South East, the decision was made to go with the local Sussex breed.

Despite having spent a lifetime breeding and judging dairy cattle, Mr Peters knew exactly what type of suckler cow he was looking for in his foundation stock.

He says: "I firmly believe in



All males are fed ad-lib grass and maize silage with supplementary rolled barley.



## SUSSEX CATTLE SOCIETY

Tel: 01580 880105

[www.sussexcattlesociety.org.uk](http://www.sussexcattlesociety.org.uk)

setting a goal and sticking to it. I knew what I was looking for and one of the main reasons for choosing the Sussex was I knew I would have a good selection of cows, heifers and bulls to choose from.

### Leaner

"Mention Sussex to most farmers who have not seen them and they think of small dark cattle and fat heifers, but in recent years there has been a great deal of breed development and today the modern Sussex cow is much longer and leaner – I only need them fat on the day they go to market.

"I wanted a cow with a good topline, a good carry in the udder and a quiet temperament. And down the line I also wanted longevity as a long breeding life reduces the depreciation on each animal and impacts on the bottom line.

"Having her first calf at three, I would expect each cow to deliver me 10 calves without issue, after that, they only return to the bull if

they are still producing and raising good strong calves but there are plenty of cows in the yard right now doing just that."

Today there are 120 pedigree breeding Sussex cows and four stock bulls at Titsey. Two-thirds calve in spring and the rest in autumn, though with a growing customer base requiring year-round beef, this split will likely even out in the future.

One bull goes in with the maiden heifers in May and then other bulls are turned out in groups with the spring-calving cows and their calves in June. They graze extensively and stay outside until the weather turns, usually in November, when they all come in and get weaned.

At this point most of the bull calves are castrated, with about 10 kept entire which are reviewed again in spring and either kept to sell on as breeding bulls or fattened as bull beef.

All the males are fed ad-lib grass and maize silage with supplementary rolled barley, and stay housed until

# their commercial worth



they are fat and ready for slaughter. The heifer calves over-winter on good quality forage and are turned out again the following spring.

## Spring-calving

The two-year-old spring-calving heifers are over-wintered on ad-lib hay. They calve in March, a month before the cows, which ensures they get close attention.

Mr Peters says: "One of the great things about Sussex cattle is they are easy calvers. Last year we calved 150 head. We had to help maybe half a dozen heifers, but the cows will generally just get on with it by themselves. And should we get problems it is usually down to the choice of bull and we will move these on if that proves to be the case."

There are currently four pedigree bulls at Titsey, Goldstone Poll Duke 4, Goldstone Regent 4, Elbridge Endeavour 3 and Chapel Poll Admiral. Although he is a firm believer that polled stock is the way forward, Mr

Peters also believes that selecting on a single trait is a mistake as many of the best Sussex bulls are still horned. He is also of the opinion that it pays to spend money for the best – a recent purchase was 6,000gns. Most are bought at two and sold at six when they still have residual value.

## Finished

The aim is to see 100 animals a year leaving the farm as finished cattle with the rest being kept as replacements or sold as breeding stock. They are finished at 18-24 months, aiming for a 320-350kg U4 carcass killing out around 57 per cent.

Mr Peters is aware they will have greater fat covering than that required by the supermarket trade, but he says butchers in this part of the world want it and know how to butcher Sussex.

Bullocks are taken to slaughter at Tottingworth Farm, a small family-owned abattoir at Heathfield, chosen for their attention to detail. The Outwood Butchers, a local



In recent years there has been a great deal of breed development

BILL PETERS

## Titsey Estate facts

- In 1984, a strip of land across the farm was purchased for the construction of the M25, including a sizeable plot to build Clacket Lane Services near Junction 5. Just one of the many events in the long history of an estate first recorded in 1534
- In 1979, Titsey was established

as a private charitable trust for the public good and soon after public access was granted

- Pitchfont, the home farm of the estate is 141 hectares (350 acres) of permanent grass and a further 121ha (300 acres) of arable, mainly milling wheat, feed barley and maize

WORLD LEADERS  
IN BOLLUS  
TECHNOLOGY

## SPRING TURNOUT with AGRIMIN'S ALL-TRACE®

10%  
CASH  
BACK

AGRIMIN LTD. | [www.agrimin.co.uk](http://www.agrimin.co.uk)  
 Tel: +44 (0) 1652 689046  
 Email: [info@agrimin.co.uk](mailto:info@agrimin.co.uk)

OFFER from 8th February  
to 31st May 2021.  
Offer card available on  
our website.

# BEEF



This year the Titsey herd was judged as overall champion in the annual Sussex Cattle Society herd competition.

PICTURES: SIMON FORD

independent, had not considered selling Sussex beef before Mr Peters knocked at their door, but now they take a bullock every fortnight.

In addition, Steve Conisbee, of F. Conisbee and Son, believed to be the second oldest butcher in the country, also takes some to

supplement his own home-bred Sussex.

He says: "The Sussex gives depth of flavour, consistently marbling well, and is a good converter of grass and forage. I find the animals never cut as fat as they look; you have to ignore the fat deposits at the tailhead and brisket.

"If they were an Angus cross looking that fat, they would be overfat but that is not the case for the Sussex."

#### Home-grown

There is also a popular pub on the Titsey Estate which only sells home-grown beef and any spares go through the fat ring at Hailsham market, where they are currently being sold in excess of £2/kg.

This year the Titsey herd was judged by Aberdeen-Angus breeder Angus Stovold as the overall champion in the annual Sussex Cattle Society herd competition.



The Sussex gives depth of flavour, consistently marbling well and is a good converter of grass and forage

STEVE CONISBEE

He says: "I made Titsey the champion above the small and intermediate herd winners, because all the cows were a type with good structure, feet and udders. And the system works. Finished stock and bulls are sold locally and they demonstrate that the Sussex breed can be successfully farmed commercially."

## Film & Film Wrapping

# Advanced balewrapping solutions



# SILOTITE 1800 BALETITE

Improved silage quality



Denser bales



Increase ease of working



Optimised recycling



Professional range



www.silotite.com



### The Sussex Cattle Society

- The first official recording of Sussex calves is dated 1840 and the Sussex Cattle Society was established in 1878
- Today there are more than 2,500 breeding cows registered and while most of the 162 herds are in the south-east of the UK, they are found from Cornwall to Northumberland
- As the numbers of registered herds grow, the society is always looking at ways to improve the breed from a commercial point of view at the same time as recognising the importance

of maintaining a register of traditional lines

- The Sussex Cattle Society is the first to offer its members free access to all of Signet's Bee Breeder recording services.

Easy online data entry from breeders will be used to assess the performance of the cow and bulls and will be useful to highlight the best traits of the Sussex breed. For example, weighing cows at weaning time will highlight the efficiency of the Sussex as a suckler cow designed to thrive on low input forage