

# DEXTER

## Summary

The Dexter is an ancient native Irish cattle breed, which until as recently as 1876 was considered to be the same breed as the Kerry. Hardy and adaptable to a range of environmental conditions, and producing good quality meat, the Dexter may be well-suited to grazing low quality keep on a range of conservation sites.

**Hardiness** - a hardy and adaptable breed suited to a range of geographical conditions.

- *Maintains condition well* - capable of subsisting on scant fare with minimal supplementary feeding.
- *Can withstand extreme weather* - may be overwintered outside quite happily. Bodies designed to throw off rain and have an adequate coat to keep out the cold.
- *Summer* - coat readily becomes short and fine.
- *Agile* - able to cope with a rough ground and a range of terrain.

**Physical Attributes & Husbandry** - a small, docile and easy to handle breed.

- *Appearance* - wholly red, wholly black or wholly dun are official colours of the Dexter, although it may have small amounts of white on the underside, behind the navel and on the tip of the tail. Horns white with black tips. A short-legged breed, with a short thick neck.
- *Small size* - helps to minimise damage through poaching. Average weight of a cow is 360 kg. Three Dexters are considered the grazing equivalent of two animals of another breed.
- *Handling* – generally docile and easily managed. Tolerant of and adaptable to changes in its management. Can be kept in small or large areas, singly, although not ideal, or in herds. Generally horned, although most are dehorned as calves.
- *Breeding* - short period in season, so it is preferable to run with a bull rather than rely on Artificial Insemination. Cows calve easily and are good mothers. Calves regularly until 14/15 years. Occasionally still-born or aborted 'bulldog' calves are produced.
- *Hooves* - may require trimming if run on soft ground.



Matthew Cates/National Trust

**Grazing Characteristics** - well suited to grazing low quality keep on a range of conservation sites.

- *Grazing* - strongly grass-based and readily consumes a wide range of grasses.
- *Browsing ability* – willing to browse, even when good grazing is available.

**Interaction with the Public** - a very useful breed on nature conservation sites where there is public access.

- *Friendliness* - probably quieter than the Kerry. Docile and generally oblivious to members of the public. The Dexter can be easily approached if it has been 'well-handled'.
- *Reaction to dogs* - tolerates the presence of dogs close by except when its calves are at foot.
- *Public appeal* - even cows feeding calves maintain good condition, thus mitigating against likely animal welfare complainants. Well-proportioned animal giving it a 'cute' appearance.

**Marketability** - a breed which may have good commercial potential.

- *Dual purpose breed* - produces up to 15 litres milk per day and when put on good keep, fattens readily.
- *Meat* - produces fine marbled beef of excellent flavour. Highly prized within the Rare Breed Survival Trusts 'Accredited Butcher Scheme in GB.

## Sites where Dexter cattle are in use & contacts

SITE NAME	HABITAT	DETAILS AVAILABLE	CONTACT
<b>Inkpen Common</b> Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT)	Lowland heathland mosaic. 10.4 ha	Grazier uses (since 1997) 6/7 Dexter steers; these seem to be livelier than cows and are very inquisitive. Appear to be uncertain about dogs and tend to follow visitors who have dogs; this sometimes causes concern. With plenty of coarse grass, especially Purple Moor-grass, they tend not to eat much of the other vegetation – young Birch, Gorse, Brambles. Feel stocking density is too low. Run amicably with New Forest ponies present.	Mike Stabler 01488 668337
<b>Murlough NNR</b> County Down National Trust	Dune & dry heath.		Hugh Thurgate 01396 751467
<b>Anton Lakes</b> Hampshire Test Valley Borough Council	Rough grassland and wet meadows.		Jim Adkins 01264 368811
<b>Belfast Hills</b> County Antrim Belfast Zoo	Acid grassland c.140 ha	Grazing on hill farmland up to 1,100 feet. Dexters browse a lot even when good grazing is available.	John Stronge 02890 776277 02890 774625
<b>Oxford Island NNR</b> County Armagh Craigavon Borough Council	Acid grassland	Dexter's grazed with Irish Moiled cattle. All docile and very easy to handle. Very used to members of the public.	Kieran Cahoon 028 383 43244
<b>Wildmoor Heath</b> Berkshire BBONT	Mosaic of wet and dry heath & valley mire.	Six young mares grazed with Dexter cattle. Primary role to tackle Purple Moor grass dominated areas and birch regrowth. Do take Purple Moor grass but ignore plants such as orchids and Meadow Thistle (which cattle were selecting). By mid winter, had lost some condition and were eating a little heather. Most of them docile and inquisitive. Becoming increasingly easy to handle although some difficult to box	Simon Lee 0118 9303773
<b>Somerton Farm</b> Pembrokeshire	Permanent pasture, including hay fields; marshy wet grassland and unimproved neutral grassland. c. 50+ acres	Small suckler herd of 7 cows, supplemented with a few steers. Steers used on marshy wet and rough grassland areas; cows on best ground. Used for beef only; no milking. 'Virtually' organic. Good breeding bird population; invertebrate and mammal interest. Stock outwintered. Electric fencing used extensively to manage grazing sensitively.	Holly Harries 01646 661 340

## References

- CURRAN PL (1990) "*Kerry and Dexter Cattle and other Ancient Irish Breeds : A history*" RDS Dublin ISBN 0 86027 029 7
- NEAL T (1992) "*The Life and Times of Dexters. A history of the Dexter Breed.*" Carlton Barclay Group ISBN 0 9519878 0 1
- Irish Rare Breeds Directory *A Directory of Rare and Minority Domestic Farm Animals 1995*