

Topic: Cattle breeds for soggy places

Hi All

We're looking for cattle breeds that might be suitable to graze the Avon Valley on the Dorset Hampshire border. Changes to river management mean that the valley is likely to get wetter in the summer (its often flooded in the winter as well) and areas that are currently cut for hay may need to be grazed. Does anyone have any particular recommendations from their experience of breeds that cope particularly well with unimproved wet meadow vegetation, especially the coarser more swamp like veg? (This is of course where nibbler Richard Collingridge very successfully grazes British Whites, but some other ideas would be great too).

Any thoughts much appreciated,

Cheers, Sophie
Sophie Lake

Murray Greys. And don't rule out primitive sheep such as Hebridean.

Cathy Wainwright
Grazing Officer

Dear All,

I find this conversation interesting to say the least. Forty years ago this conversation would not even be taking place because one breed dominated the grazing pastures of Britain, and the rest of the world, whether the river valleys or the uplands of the Marcher counties of England and Wales; the prairies of the Americas, the semi dry pastures of Australia, or the wetter ones of New Zealand the Traditional Hereford grazed them more efficiently and more productively than any other breed. You can compare them against any of the breeds people have mentioned and the others do not match. I know of cattlemen who keep all of the breeds mentioned and some who keep both Traditional Herefords and one of the others, why not ask them which is the more efficient, but I would put money on the answer. They will fatten on these pastures, they will calve and rear young on these pasture, and will at certain times of the year remove everything on site, from nettles and thistles to reeds and sedges.

If you wish to see the evidence then I would suggest you come to the Washlands in Burton-on-Trent, and see for yourselves.

Peter AW Talbot

I keep trad Herefords and Galloways on very wet pasture and the Galloways out-perform the trad Herefords easily.

However, put The Traditional Herefords on pasture as opposed to rubbish (like rushes and reeds) and they are truly unbeatable. Hereford Cathedral was built on the backs of these beasts and I would agree with Peter – they will beat anything on genuine pasture.

If it is a wet hay meadow then I would go for TH if it is a rush pasture with low % grass then I would go with Galloways etc.

Rob.

Hi Sophie,

We use Shetland cows on our wetland sites. Some over winter without any problems on our wetland creation site. On the more sensitive SSSI land they summer graze marsh habitat with good success. As with any breed they will only really go for the rough stuff when the good grass has run out. So either high numbers in a short period of time or leaving them on well into autumn/early winter works well. Their smaller size reduces poaching. We also use Exmoor ponies all year round with good results.

Cheers

Neil Pilcher
Senior Conservation Officer
Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust

Hi Sophie,

We successfully graze Dexter cattle on the Somerset Levels (in an area that annually floods from the river and most fields are also in a splash flooding management area). Their small size (= less soil poaching) and ability to finish on rougher grass, amongst other breed related benefits, means that they suit wetter pastures well. We go for the long legged type of Dexter to avoid any issue with low udders. We still bring the cows of the moor if it floods deeply so they don't get swept into the river! They do need somewhere dry/slightly higher though to lie down of course.

Feel free to ask more.

The Dexter Cattle website is helpful. www.dextercattle.org.uk I think

Good luck.

Gill Ainge
Peppercorn Dexters

Dear Peter

I find your answer very interesting as I am on old red sandstone. Do traditional herefords have a lower requirement for minerals which are present at low quantities such as cobalt and zinc which are in fact barely present at all in old red sandstone?

When I came here (Carmarthenshire) being entirely ignorant of farming, I decided to get the local traditional breed Welsh Black cattle. These are as hardy as any I believe on our native plant pastures- part of I presume of the black cattle of the uplands of Wales and Scotland centuries ago. But I wonder if they have been the best choice- whether they can handle low minerals as well as the traditional Herefords perhaps can as they come from Herefordshire on Old Red Sandstone (is this in fact true?)- the Welsh Blacks are also quite big and heavy.

A lot of conservation grazers prefer Highland cattle because they are lighter, smaller and may have a more splayed hoof- but I suspect also their lack of condition is hidden by their shaggy coats- a grazier who grazes many rhos pasture sites for people does in fact fatten up his highland steers to be fit for market as they are too poor on the rhos pasture alone.

The RBST magazine once published a brief description comparing several traditional breeds, such as Galloways, Highlands and a 3rd breed and found individuals varied in how well they thrived on poor native pasture and the proportion of those thriving was the same in the 3 breeds mentioned. The reason suggested was that no-one is interested in maintaining those traits in general in commercial modern farming nowadays and they suggested one might be best advised to purchase cattle for a native plant grazing project from another that successfully bred cattle that thrived. These traits may derive from the now extinct Aurochs that interbred with the domesticated cattle as they were gradually introduced across Europe. These traits are likely to be in all 'traditional' breeds but of course on modern mineral fertilized grass and forage are no longer relevant.

Yours sincerely Ruth

What's happened to the breed profile handbook? And why hasn't Bill G said anything here?

Suspect that most trad breeds would do the job here, given that most have such a wide range of tolerances. especially if older steers are used and by definition not expected to breed or fatten and simply graze the site year after year. What might be worth consideration is availability and cost of the animals, so maybe Dexters and Shetland might be difficult to obtain? , not sure about trad hereford availability. But red polls and galloway are likely to be very available in terms of numbers if not cost. Red polls and herefords may be easier to handle though. I bet hereford crosses featured there as grazing animals in the past.

If you wanted to do most for a breed , then northern dairy shorthorn

Sam

Hi Sam,

The breed profiles handbook can be downloaded from the website, link below
http://www.grazingadvicepartnership.org.uk/breed_profiles_handbook.html

nibblers@googlegroups.com; on behalf of; Eleanor [eleanorn@grazingadvicepartnership.org.uk]

I should just like to reinforce the fact that what is most important is what vegetation the cattle you want to buy are eating now. Ideally you want stock that are already grazing the type of vegetation that you have on your site. If they are, then their guts and associated bugs are more able to thrive on your site. The most hardy breed, if previously grazed on a 'soft' site are likely to take a check when moved to a conservation site. This is also true for the level of exposure on a site.

Cheers

Julia

It is clear that all our emails also say is that we all have our favourites when it comes to choosing breeds. Commonsense goes towards choosing something traditional/native though.

We have had a number of breeds of cattle over the years and whilst we are Dexter fans now, we also have had Beef Shorthorns. We just found them a little too hungry and heavy for our pastures. Still a fantastic breed though - for the right place.

When we first started looking for a new breed of cattle to bring to our pastures - we spent several years going round the agricultural shows. Talking to the different breeders and showmen gave us the opportunity to compare breeds and find out lots of information on breed traits.

By the way - Dexters are easy to handle and are also very available these days - <http://www.dextercattleforsale.co.uk/>. Cost for pedigree registered stock is rising slowly to a more reasonable rate but still tends to be much lower than many traditional breeds. Non registered pedigree stock also offer a good cheaper alternative.

Good luck!

Gill Ainge,
Peppercorn Dexters

On Devon's culm grassland - which has to be some of the wettest stuff around - Red Devons (Ruby Reds or Devons) are very successful and are the traditional breed for this ground.

Rob Dixon

Lead Adviser, North Devon Team
Cornwall, Devon & Isles of Scilly Team
Natural England

We also use Shetlands on poor quality wet coastal grazing marsh. They outwinter with only a modest amount of supplementary hay fed in a different place every day and they do very well, with little poaching confined to the area of gates and water trough, due to their small size and low stocking density, and this breaks down during the following summer once it dries out. The land is, however, very uneven, being drained (500 years ago) but unimproved saltmarsh and this is what allows us to keep them on it during the winter. I would not like to do this on our wet normal flat pasture fields.

Mike S

"Hereford Cathedral was built on the backs of these beasts"...

Not sure about that. Until the mid 18th century the cattle of the Hereford area were the general southern English type, red with a white switch (similar to the Devon and Sussex). The Hereford cattle breed as we know it was developed from the mid 18th and through the 19th century by crossing these with Shorthorns and perhaps others. What we call "traditional Hereford" is a 19th century type at the oldest.

Hereford Cathedral was mostly built from the 14th to the 16th century.

Richard C

Granted it was really built on the wealth from the river meadows owned by the Church, which were considered very productive at the time. I think the cattle of the time would have been "Hereford" types for the same reasons that Peter mentions. Being a derivative of another type doesn't mean that the local cattle were not of the Hereford type and they certainly must have been the forbears of the Traditional Herefords even if they were subsequently improved with Deven/Sussex bulls, so I feel content in my claim.

Wikipedia is a dangerous thing sometimes.

Rob

Would the native breed for the Avon Valley have been then same - something similar to Devon and Sussex today?

Anyone have any experience of Sussex cattle?

Thanks so much for all the really helpful responses Cheers, Sophie

I have supported a herd of Sussex cattle to conservation graze the Frome Valley grazing marshes, and they are doing very well. Their particular characteristic in native Sussex is that they can tolerate high temperatures with a higher number of sweat glands! They were originally bred in the Eastern part of Sussex which have generally wetter clay vale grasslands than the chalk South Downs of West Sussex. They are, of course very similar to Ruby Red Devons, but perhaps with a higher quality carcass and with less marbling of fat in the meat. There is no native breed of cattle for Dorset, so the nearest would be the Devons or Sussex.

Jo

Jo Shipton
Biodiversity Project Officer
Purbeck Keystone Project

Dear all,

The major problem you all have in stating what Native breeds will do today is not necessarily a reflection of the past. I will illustrate my answer with what I know to be fact with the Hereford. The Hereford today is certainly not the Hereford of our forefathers. The three factors that made the Hereford king of the beef breeds were simple, 1. Longevity 2. Survivability 3. Fodder conversion.

The Hereford did this worldwide off the cheapest of all systems, continuous grazing of pasture three sixty five day a year, year after year. The Hereford was not the best of all breeds in terms of shape and carcass quality, but where it was the leader was in the economic factors of beef production over a long period of time.

I accept that most of the worlds academics can write volumes on why our farming practices have changed to today's industrial farming methods. Science has been a great friend to the farmer, and it has been an even greater enemy. Farming by its nature has to be holistic, rather than reductionist. Who in my early life was warning us of the problems of overeating, or even of eating too much of the "Wrong" things, no-one, but even then the signs were there. The introduction of the intensive grain fed meat factories brought to the market place, consistent and continuous supply of meat, without the vagaries of seasonal supply. The economics of the Supermarket took over from the economics of Nature. Put simply breeds had to adapt or die. Those breeds from Europe that were late maturing and muscle bound suited the grain systems better than the grazers of the UK and they took hold. All of the Native breeds to compete infused genetics from the European breeds to change their characteristic, and in the case of the Hereford, Simmental and Limousin were introduced in to the horned cattle and a further breed, Chinninia into the polled; via the North American continent. Most of the other UK breeds did similar introductions. I believe the Susses used the Limousin, and so did the Devon. The Limousin was also used in the South Devon. The Shorthorn used the Red Holstein, and the Angus has crept some Limousin in as well.

Now forty years later, with the knowledge of hindsight we are starting to see a different scientific model emerging. Fat as such is not unhealthy, what is, is the balances of fat in the diet. The scientific model indicates that factory farmed meat is giving us the wrong balance of fats; but what of the old model, that of grass fed meat, little is heard, but evidence is emerging that it may well be nutritionally of more benefit than grain fed beef, and more accessible than wild oily fish.

The advice I am trying to emphasise is do not assume because breeds are Native that they are the same as they were fifty years ago, most are not, and the adaptations have been absorbed into the mainstream. The Traditional Hereford is the original, and will give those same results, the modern Hereford is certainly not and gives very different results.

Peter AW Talbot

Sussex cattle were used very successfully for a woodland grazing project near us. They seem to get fat on thin air so presumably would produce a good return at minimal input.
Cathy

Cathy Wainwright
Grazing Officer

Richard,

Your analysis of Hereford being derived from the Shorthorn is an interesting one. On what is this based, the fact that Herefords are white faced and the Beef Shorthorn is also white, or do you have some more conclusive evidence that the Hereford is a derivative of the Shorthorn?

I would have concluded that the origins of the Hereford was related to the Devon and the Sussex. I find it more difficult to follow the major input of the Shorthorn. The geography of the south west suggests this certainly the relationship to the Devon. It does not suggest such movements from east to west however. The other problem I would have with the Shorthorn is the fact that most Shorthorns in England at the time were dairy cattle.

There is one other flaw in your argument. If your proposal were to be true and the Hereford is a derivative of the Shorthorn, then the Beef Shorthorn of the 19th century would have had similar characteristics of longevity, survivability, and ease of fattening. None of which follow. The first Royal Show in Oxford in 1839 was attended by the two major players of the time, the Beef Shorthorn and the Hereford. The Beef Shorthorn was taken to the show by sea, canal and cart to display it at its best, the Hereford walked the eighty five miles to the show and still won. The sire of the winning Hereford bull at the time of his conception was a fifteen year old bull who had spent thirteen of those years as a hireling serving between fifteen and thirty cows per season. This and the fact that many of the cows led productive lives into their twenties, would suggest there is either something wrong with the Shorthorn breeders management or the Herefords' constitution is very different from the Shorthorn. A further example is in the survivability in the USA, the Beef Shorthorn grazed on the "Range" left just 50% of the total number starting the winter, at Spring muster; Herefords on the other hand left 95% of start numbers. Further more, the F1 cross of a Hereford and Shorthorn shows a great deal more contrast than similarity of characteristics than being closely related.

Peter AW Talbot
