

Beef quality cornerstone of extensive beef system



The Hereford breed underpins the life young farmer and commoner, Tom Hordle, is building in the New Forest and the quality of beef he is producing. Gaina Morgan reports.



At 29 years old, Tom Hordle is just one of a small number of young people keeping cattle in the New Forest, Hampshire under commoners' rights which go back to the time of the Norman conquest.

He says it is the Hereford breed which makes his business viable, crossing them as he does with the off-spring of cows purchased as calves from dairy herds. Tom says they tick all the boxes for him in terms of grazing, temperament and quality, flavoursome beef, but critically they also suit the extensive lifestyle in an area heavily used by the public, their cars and their dogs.

The great grandson of commoners, Tom began helping a neighbour with the stock when he was about 10. He became fascinated with the lifestyle, the folklore and the traditions. And it's this, as much as his national diploma in agriculture from Sparsholt College, that has been his education.

After a long time trying, Tom has secured planning permission for a three bedroom house – the £1 million price tag on local houses is unaffordable and land in the area costs £705,000 to £100,000 per hectare (£30,000 to £40,000 per acre). Tom eventually managed to buy 1.6ha (4ac), with more rented, and has built cattle and machinery sheds, as well as a silage and feed store, in an investment worth around £250,000.

His mission to pass on the benefits of a 'beautiful life' in the forest isn't as easy as it sounds. The 45 Hereford cross British Friesian suckler cows have to be temperamentally suited to answering his call, to sticking to a relatively small 'haunt' in the vast forest and to living among people who no longer understand the countryside.

Tom explains: "The Herefords fatten well on the grass and don't need a lot of concentrate, but I mainly use them for their temperament and, as much as anything, the docility of the bulls.

"I do everything on my own, so I don't want trouble. Also I keep the youngsters to 30 months plus before slaughter, so I need animals that I can drive and move about on open access ground among the public. I need cattle I can trust if someone walks past, usually with a dog. It takes a long time to mature the cattle in the forest, because of the nature of the grazing. It's part of my selling point that the cattle are slow-aged and foraging naturally. The Hereford breed lends itself to my system, because they are slower growing and maturing.

"Also they have access to 90,000 acres to graze, an area the size of the Isle of Wight, and I am generally moving them around on horseback. I also need them to come to my call.

"They are a native breed, suited to conservation and are very at home in this environment. They don't mind walking. It's what they would have done years ago. It's also a good marketing tool, because the red and white or black and white Hereford is a very recognisable breed, symbolic of Olde England."

The importance of the commoners to the natural life of the forest means DEFRA makes a headage payment of around £80 for each of the animals they graze. The 'verderers' have regulated the New Forest since Norman times and each of Tom's cattle wears a tag showing its verderer number and his own brand number.

He says: "I have common rights and

can turn my stock out. I have to make a marking payment, but I'm not limited to numbers or to when I can turn them out. It's an annual £24 payment to the verderers (overseeing body of the forest) who manage the common to keep cattle in the forest.

"I've got 17 ponies out with cattle and it's quite a closed economy. It's close knit, everyone helps each other out. We have about 30 drifts every year, where we gather the horses. They are organised events. A lot of these commoners have been here for generations and know the forest inside out."

The cattle and ponies take up a huge amount of time, but Tom also does farm contracting and works three or four days a week on local estates. He formerly worked for the National Trust.

Tom considers EBVs and the class and conformation of the Hereford bulls he selects. However, he is looking for a specific balance of temperament, meat and, because they walk 10 to 12 miles in a day, good feet.

He explains: "I wouldn't pick a bull on figures alone. Good feet and temperament carry more weight for me than EBVs, although they are important. EBVs work very well in a more commercialised set-up, but I'm looking for something to suit my unique system. I want to breed cows that can walk miles in a day and are quiet and will come to my call."

Tom tries to breed his own female replacements. Bought in cattle don't have a natural resistance to redwater, a fatal tickborne disease, unless they have been acclimatised from a very young age. TB testing is also a challenge. Cattle from outside the forest have to be tested and then isolated for 60 days. They are then retested before being released into the open forest.

The herd calves all year round to help with continuity of beef supply. Tom now finishes his cattle, instead of selling them as stores at about nine or 10 months old, producing 'fantastic natural beef' and ecologically benefiting the forest.

Calves are fed on 1.5kg calf creep per day for six months if autumn-born, and for six weeks if spring-born. The cows come in at night in winter and are fed ad-lib silage.

The potential of the meat was spotted by Mark Young, Head Chef at The Bell Inn, following a Channel 4 TV programme. He comes from a farming family, which



Cattle forage on the common

produced pedigree Hereford bulls. This and the passion shared by his mother and extended family for home grown and locally sourced food inspire his work. He was brought up to appreciate the excellence of good food.

The opportunity arose to supply The Bell Inn just as Tom was becoming disillusioned with selling his prized store cattle to conventional systems for finishing. Now they are taken on to 30 months, hung for 40 days and butchered



Mark Young, head chef at The Bell Inn where Tom sends his Hereford beef

in the New Forest before the beef makes its way into the restaurant.

Tom says: "My cattle have the loveliest life in the world in the forest and I lost control of that once they went into any other finishing system. It's quality of life for the animal and my own job satisfaction. I try to offer the animals the best life I can and I feel happier seeing them through from birth to death.

"I love the direct link with the consumer and regularly pop into The Bell Inn. I recently spoke to the monthly supper club held at the hotel to give the back story to his meat with the Hereford breed at the heart of that story."

Farm facts

- ◆ 45 Hereford cross British Friesian suckler cows
- ◆ Supplying The Bell Inn, New Forest
- ◆ Access to 36,422 hectares (90,000 acres) of common
- ◆ Tom also does some farm contracting and works three or four days a week on local estates

Working together

Continuity of supply is an issue, but The Bell Inn, Brook, Hampshire and the local butcher have turned that into an extra point of difference when working with Tom's beef. They stress the seasonality of the product and Tom's New Forest beef has become a sought-after dish.

Social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, is pushed hard to get the story out to the public and to encourage them to buy into it. The menu reflects the provenance, but Mark's imaginative touch means a combination of cheaper and more expensive cuts in one dish keep prices accessible.

He might combine two elements, such as a smaller than average fillet steak, four or five ounces, with a side dish of cottage pie. Another popular dish is

macaroni cheese with local cheese and a pulled beef ragu, topped with brioche breadcrumbs and truffle oil, alongside a pepper, rosemary and fennel crusted sirloin steak.

Mark says: "This isn't about getting the meat for the best price we can, this is about paying what we need to pay for it. For me, everything has gone wrong in the food industry in this country.

"Farmers are getting a really raw deal. Our farmers produce a fantastic product and they're not getting a justifiable amount of money for it.

"So right from the off, I was adamant that we would pay the right price for a product that I felt was unique. It has to be sustainable. Essentially the sirloins cost me about £1 more each than the ones we normally buy."

Tom, in turn, is appreciative of the relationship he enjoys with the hotel and with its customers. They have a deal which pays him what he needs to continue the business, albeit with slim margins. He also sells to The Farmers Butcher, run by Mike and Sarah Alexander at Bramshaw in the New Forest, and has a growing list of private customers.

Farming and Forest walking tours are a new venture, explaining the traditions of commoning and benefits of the grazing for the forest, the cattle and the people who live in and visit the area. Tom is convinced that the natural diet adds to the unique flavour of the beef, with the herd constantly grazing heather in winter and summer, varied grasses and herbs, millennia. Their taste for saplings and leaves up to six feet above ground creates the 'browse line' with its unique views.