



Red Polls prove versatile and make economic sense

Farmers Guardian - 8 March 2012

Starting up a rare breed dairy herd from scratch may be too much of a challenge for some, but for John Butler and owner of Avenue Farms, Michael Jarmon, it is a dream which is paying dividends. Olivia Midgley reports.

They had their heyday in the first half of the last century, but as better performing breeds were introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, the Red Poll lost its appeal.

Red Poll herds in the UK are now few and far between, but several farmers including John Butler, who milks 120-head just outside Milton Keynes, are doing their bit to bring the breed back into the public eye.

Farm manager John Butler, who lives on the farm with his wife and four children, is passionate about the breed and it is not hard to see why.

With their glossy, conker-red coats, Red Polls have good visual appeal, while their gentle temperament means they are easy to handle.

Dual-purpose

John, who trained at Riseholm College in Lincoln, says: "Red Polls are an old dual-purpose breed and very hardy.

"They have massive advantages to other breeds. They rarely have any problems calving, they live long so fewer replacements are needed, they will adapt to single or multiple suckling and will adapt to any terminal sire.

"They also produce excellent quality beef and are easy to deal with. They are very quiet and they will winter out with no problem. All they get to eat is grass silage, maize silage, straw and a protein mix. They don't need anything else, so they are absolutely ideal for a low maintenance, low cost system."

Although John is certainly converted, it was Avenue Farms' owner Michael Jarmon, who set about breeding Red Polls on the Buckinghamshire site.

"I came to work at Avenue Farms in 1993 after answering an advert for a herdsman for black and whites. I'd milked cows on seven different farms in six different counties, with all different set ups, including mixed pedigrees and commercials.

"I'd not been at Avenue Farms long and one day Michael came in and threw this brochure at me.

"He'd seen some Red Polls and that was that. He just wanted one or two to graze as they look good at grass.

When Michael bought the farm in the 1940s, there was already a herd of Red Polls on-site, but over the years, the farm manager replaced them with British Friesans.

When the manager was made redundant in 1989, Michael decided he wanted to see the breed back on his farm.

Auction

So the two went to an auction in Bath and bought a stock bull and a suckler cow with a calf at foot.

"People thought we were mad. We had them for two weeks and Michael said he liked them and he wanted some more. I said if that's the case then we might as well milk them."

The following year, the pair went to Longdendale in Cheshire and bought 10 in-calf heifers from the Cheetham's herd.

The cows calved the following June and John began milking them with Holsteins in 1995.

"We knew nothing about them but we said we wanted cows which gave 5,000 litres or more. We had 10 different families and milked them in the first year."

The farm was soon expanded and a new shed was built to house more cattle.

John now milks around 120 cows and all the milk is sold wholesale to Robert Wiseman Dairies.

They produce around 5,650 litres every other day.

Problems

As the years have gone by, John has encountered problems traditionally associated with the breed.

"We've had a few problems with hard bags, slow milking and low yields and we've had to cull for bad legs," he explains.

"But for us the positives outweigh the negatives. They won't milk like a Holstein, but for those who want cows which last and wear then they are the ones to go for.

"The biggest problem we have is there is such limited stock, so when we're breeding there really isn't much out there to choose from. It's a very small gene pool.

"Our aim is to have a herd which averages 6,000 litres."

Red Polls are extremely hardy creatures and do well on poor soils, such as the thin sands of many parts of East Anglia.

“They are brilliant in more drought-like conditions, so, as drought becomes more common, we may see more people wanting to use them,” adds John.

“We took semen from our stock bull, Castlefield Nooky, in 2004 and we have exported it to southern Ireland, New Zealand, Australia and Kenya. Although it is not unusual for breeders to use semen which is 30 to 35 years old.”

The semen is sold in this country through the Red Poll Society and the export licence means it can be sold anywhere in the world.

The entire milking herd is pure Red Poll, but John also crosses Red Polls with Holstein Friesians and British Blues, which are sold for beef.

“They are very versatile,” he says.

“They get in-calf easily and have no problems with Continentals.

Crosses

“Red Poll crosses used to go for around £180 to £200 years ago. Then BSE came along and passports came in. When some people see an animal has Red Poll cross on its papers it puts them off as they want the continental breeds.

“But now beef prices have gone back up they are making money again.

“Supermarkets have also brought in native meats and that has been a bonus for us.”

The Red Poll Cattle Society, which was formed in 1888, says the fact the breed is protected and promoted by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) helps to ensure its survival.

The society’s secretary Ray Bowler says: “Eating rare breed beef keeps the breed going.

“This may seem a contradiction, but providing a market for the beef also provides the farmer with the incentive to breed more cattle.

“More often than not, farmers of rare breed cattle are passionate about their animals, have very high standards of animal welfare and farm with respect for the environment. Typically, the animals avoid the stress of markets as the farmers deal directly with their customers.”

Watch list

Red Poll cattle were a rare breed for many years and the society was supported by the RBST until the breeding stock exceeded 2,000 in the UK. It then moved to the RBST’s Watch List.

John adds: “Like many things which come in and out of fashion, it’s the same with breeds of cattle.

“They were really popular in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s but then the British Friesians came in and, because they produced more milk, everyone decided they wanted them.

“So the Red Poll went out of fashion, paving the way for the British Friesian.

“Now it’s the Holstein everyone wants.”

John says he is not sure what the future holds for the breed, but he would like to see the national herd expand further.

“We just need to promote the breed and get them into farmers’ minds. Because the gene pool is so small we need to try and expand it so breeders have more choice. They are so easy to keep, they make sound economic sense.”

Red Poll cattle

- The Red Poll is derived from the original cattle of Norfolk and Suffolk
- The colour of the breed is preferably deep red, with white touches only on the tail switch and udder
- On average, the milk contains 4.21 per cent fat and 3.26 per cent protein
- Steers finish at 22-24 months weighing about 550kg (depending on feeding regime), however, many breeders are finishing stock between 17-19 months at about 500kg
- The killing out percentage is about 54 per cent and the meat is of excellent quality in both taste and texture
- Heifers, if calved at around three years, will develop into cows able to withstand the pressures of many years of trouble free production. The mature cow averages 520kg and an adult bull around 1,000kg

Farm facts

- Avenue Farms is owned by Michael Jarmon and his family
- The farm spans around 160 hectares (400 acres)
- The main enterprise is managing Red Poll cattle for milk
- Supply Robert Wiseman dairies
- The farm grows wheat and cereals
- Sheep and pigs are also kept on the site