

# Moving with the Times to Maximise Margins



*Farm manager Graeme Sinclair, left, and John Baker-Cresswell boosted margins by switching to Hereford bulls and producing Certified Hereford Beef.*

By Rodney Magowan, Press & PR Agency

**“BEFORE the farm went organic it was quite easy some years not to make a profit, but now losing money is almost impossible.”**

How John Baker-Cresswell of Cresswell Farms near Belford in Northumberland wryly answers the question “Why go organic?”

With 2,200 acres, a mixture of owned and rented land successfully build up over three generations, this progressive farm business runs from Bamburgh, overlooking the Farne Islands, inland across the A1 Great North Road to the picturesque village of Belford.

“By the new millennium staying in mainstream agriculture seemed to entail producing ever more at greater cost, but for minimal return even in a good year,” John recalled.

“Hence the decision was taken to make management changes that would improve income without heavy investment as further rented land had recently been bought. Ever since my Grandfather returned from the Royal Navy to farm 365 acres around Cresswell the family has been building the business. That, of course, meant borrowing to buy more land so generating a reasonable return is always absolutely essential.

“Joining the Countryside Stewardship Scheme in 2001 and then the Higher Level Environmental Stewardship Scheme allowed us to undertake work we really wanted to do on the farm and helped generate some extra income. Then we took the major and very logical decision to continue down this greener route to become organic from

2005 onwards with 1700 acres included so far,” John Baker-Cresswell explained.

“Five years later we are producing higher value beef, lamb and cereals at less cost to leave higher margins, which more than off setting any reduction in output. A reduction that has proved to be a lot less than many supposed.

“As part of our drive to protect profits we looked at alternatives for our beef enterprise based on a suckler herd of over a 100 crossbred continental cows put back to continental bulls. As everyone knows returns from this type of enterprise have long been woeful or indeed non-existent!

“Several breeds were offering quality assured beef schemes with a useful bonus, but the Hereford Society had by far the best in my opinion. A scheme involving leading processors serving an under supplied market for Certified Hereford Beef.”

Today Cresswell Farms manager Graeme Sinclair puts only pedigree Hereford bulls to 107 mainly Simmental and Limousin crossbred cows

Each year batches of three to five week old crossbred heifer calves are brought up from Cheshire dairy farms and bucket reared by Graeme.

“Only the best are kept as suckler herd replacements with those without the correct

## Familiar Name?

If the surname Baker-Cresswell sounds familiar then turn to the history books of WWII for an answer. John Baker-Cresswell's grandfather, Capt AJ Baker-Cresswell DSO RN, whilst in command of the destroyer HMS Bulldog made a decision that helped shortened the war against Nazi Germany.

When the U-boat U-110 was brought to the surface by depth charges following a mid Atlantic attack on merchant shipping this quick thinking officer opted to board rather than sink the crippled U-Boat. As a result an Enigma Cipher Machine was recovered before the sub eventually sank under tow.

This enabled the team at Bletchley Park to break Nazi codes so countless lives were saved thanks to an officer, who returned to farm at Bamburgh on leaving the Royal Navy in 1955.

size, shape and, of course, temperament instead finished for beef. Heifers go to the bull by 18 months and if not in calf on time to join the herd, ideally around 26 months of age, are quickly finished and away to the meat plant.

"By putting our continental crossbred cows to the right type of Hereford we are getting higher value animals that finish fast off grass to give a more rapid and profitable turnover.

"Instead of feeding two tonne of home-grown organic barley worth £200 a tonne to finish continental sired beef cattle we are finishing Herefords on half a tonne thus saving £300 a head! "

Graeme is also delighted with the Killing Out % from Hereford sired steers and heifers, animals that are a pleasure to work with.

"30 years ago when I came to this farm there were 18 staff, but today with a larger acreage there are only four of us. So switching to Hereford bulls has reduced our workload dramatically by giving us not only quiet beef cattle that come to stand around you in the field, but minimal calving problems.

"I cannot recall when last a suckler cow needed help calving and only the occasional heifer requires assistance. A major change from when we were putting continental bulls back to the continental crossbred cows."

However it is on the bottom line of the farm accounts where moving up to Herefords has had the most impact according to John Baker-Cresswell and Graeme Sinclair.

"Our land includes 900 acres down to cereals, an increasing proportion of it organic and sold at a premium. For example organic barley fetches £200 a tonne to Coastal Grains, the local co-op my father Charles helped found," John Baker-Cresswell noted.

"Most of the organic cereals handled by Coastal Grains sells on to mills in Scotland manufacturing organic pig and poultry compound feeds.

"Arable production is our major enterprise and rural development funding has been drawn down by Border Crop Management, the group of 15 large scale growers of which I am a member, to fund essential training organised through Lantra.

"So using 1.5 tonnes less of our own organic grain when finishing a Hereford sired beef animal rather than a three quarter bred continental really does impact on farm income. Equally important on a farm exposed to cold winds off the North Sea and where a quarter of the acreage lies inside the Less Favoured Area Herefords really are both brilliant converters of grass into beef and a traditional British breed able to thrive in practically all weathers.

"Hereford sired stock not only consume less grain and silage, but seem to need less of every other input including labour. Nowadays our beef cattle are away months earlier, easing cash flow and reducing the pressure on housing accommodation.

"UK farming cannot easily compete with nations such as Brazil, the Argentine and Uruguay when it comes to producing huge volumes of beef at low cost. However, I am

convinced we cannot be beaten when it comes to producing quality beef for niche markets returning a premium price."

As farm manager Graeme Sinclair finds a slightly older Hereford with experience suits best bulls up to four years old have been purchased from Robert Wilson at nearby Kelso and H B Allman & Son of Dunblane, each bull being run on for a further four years with excellent results.

Impressed by the results at Cresswell Farms a neighbour has also now switched to Hereford instead of Simmental bulls and another local suckler herd owner is using Herefords to produce crossbred suckler cows put back to a Limousin bull.

## Wild Cattle Trustee

THOUGH one of the most innovative farmers in the north east John Baker-Cresswell clearly has an interest in our agricultural past and serves as a trustee of the Chillingham Wild Cattle Association.

Nearby Chillingham Park has been home for over 700 years to the only remaining herd of this ancient breed of cattle that once roamed the forests of Britain.

Visits to the Chillingham Herd are possible year round, see website [www.chillinghamwildcattle.com](http://www.chillinghamwildcattle.com) for details.

Asked about any drawbacks to Herefords Graeme urged pedigree breeders to keep working towards producing bulls with both size and shape including that vital better backend.



John Baker-Cresswell is convinced that when it comes to producing quality beef for niche markets British farmers have nothing to fear from overseas competition.

## Ref; 2 Cresswell Farms

2nd Sept 2010 - 21 Hereford Assured Steers £19,653.21

| Cat             | Description | Grade | Number    | Weight          | P.P.Kg       | Value £          |
|-----------------|-------------|-------|-----------|-----------------|--------------|------------------|
| S               | Steers      | O+3   | 2         | 622.30          | 2.900        | 1,804.67         |
| S               | Steers      | O+3+  | 1         | 328.10          | 2.900        | 951.49           |
| S               | Steers      | O+4   | 7         | 2166.60         | 2.900        | 6,283.13         |
| S               | Steers      | O+4+  | 1         | 310.40          | 2.700        | 838.08           |
| S               | Steers      | O+4-  | 4         | 1233.20         | 2.900        | 3,576.28         |
| S               | Steers      | R+4-  | 1         | 360.50          | 3.100        | 1,117.55         |
| S               | Steers      | R-3+  | 1         | 348.50          | 3.000        | 1,045.50         |
| S               | Steers      | R-4-  | 3         | 946.90          | 3.000        | 2,840.70         |
| S               | Steers      | R4    | 1         | 398.60          | 3.000        | 1,195.80         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>    |             |       | <b>21</b> | <b>6,715.00</b> |              | <b>19,653.21</b> |
| <b>Averages</b> |             |       |           | <b>319.77</b>   | <b>2.924</b> | <b>935.87</b>    |

“We could have opted for other native breeders when moving away from continental bulls, but the Hereford has proved a winner with us and our customers in the Certified Hereford Beef Scheme.”

Having boosted returns by joining the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, going organic and upgrading to produce Hereford beef the Cresswell Farms team are likewise striving to add value to their lambs.

Though ewe numbers drifted back from 3000 to 1250 on joining the Environmental Stewardship Scheme profits have been improved further by making greater use of better Texel and Primera tups put to mules. This has generated higher returns from a specialist outlet seeking 20kg high specification carcasses.

Apart from John Baker-Cresswell and Graeme Sinclair the farm has two other full time staff, Gareth and Gary, plus two excellent local ladies who help at lambing every year.

A batch of 60 ewes lamb from 20 Feb with the main flock of 950 starting on March 23 and the remainder lambing outdoors from 16 April.

“We have now lambed up to 400 outdoors this past two years with great results in an area where cold rather than the low annual rainfall of just 24 inches can be a problem,” Graeme explained.

“Indeed comparing batches of indoor lambers with those lambing outdoors, scanned at 182% and 183% respectively, we have found minimal difference in the number of lambs sold per 100 ewes. The big difference is in the lower inputs

needed for outdoor lambers, not least labour and bedding straw.”

Ask what action would be taken if bad weather hit the North East just as outdoor lambing loomed Graeme said moving sheep indoors is simply not an option. Instead extra shelter would and could be provided at very short notice using big straw bales.

As John Baker-Cresswell commented, “Those who live and work in our large cities tend to view farming as a never changing way of life with minimal levels of stress. The reality is that farming is very far from being a stress free profession and British agriculture both as an industry and here at individual farm level adapts to change faster than most other parts of society.

“We are lucky enough to live and work in one of the most attractive parts of the British Isles, but one where farming and tourism are the only major industries. That means this farm business based on cereals, beef and lamb production must generate a reasonable return from each enterprise as there are few of the options those farming on the urban fringe might consider.

“Thus moving with the times by, for example, changing to Hereford bulls and supplying Certified Hereford Beef was essential and very successful for this farm business.”

Looking ahead John Baker-Cresswell is planning to re-invest profits now generated by the beef enterprise in additional cattle housing, an investment largely made possible by producing Certified Hereford Beef.