

The rise and rise of the Fisher Herefords



Reg Hutchings with Fisher I Cracker

Watching and responding to market signals has been the driving force behind every enterprise and activity on Reg Hutchings' Fisher Farm in South Mundham, near Chichester, West Sussex. Whether it's been the landscape and market gardening, the contracting business or his herd of Salers, Angus or Herefords, the guiding principle has always remained the same. And it's this keen focus on the market, that has allowed Reg and his wife, Sheila, to grow a small tenanted farm into a thriving 600 acre, commercially successful business.

Today, as Reg completes his term as President of the Society, and enters his 70th year, it's hardly surprising that - as priorities have changed - the farm has contracted, and now totals around 150 acres.

But the one enterprise that has endured while most of the others have been reduced or let go, is the Fisher herd of Herefords which still forms the hub of the business; still thrives as a source of income; and still brings the Hutchings family its greatest business pleasure.

The Fisher herd today represents the culmination of almost 70 years of breeding cattle, which began when Reg's father came to the farm in 1943, and first kept pedigree Ayrshires. A gradual switch to the British Friesian in the 1960s was accompanied by the introduction of the farm's first Hereford stock bull, although it was not until the 1970s that

Reg and his father moved out of dairy production and into the Hereford Breed.

It was a friend who sparked the initial interest, and when Reg was asked - with his renowned and unerring eye for good stock - to help him buy a Hereford bull, his deep enthusiasm for the Breed was ignited.

"I knew the Breed had a beautiful temperament and was easily managed," he says. "We had already given up the dairy, although at that time I was working hard as a contractor, so there wasn't much extra time, but I could see the Breed could have a place on the farm and I was confident it had a good future."

The decision was taken to buy into Herefords in 1973, and a group of 12 yearling heifers from the same friend's herd, laid the Fisher herd's foundations.

From that moment onwards expansion ensued, with high quality stock coming from a variety of sources.

A half share in the bull, Wayland I Hardy, was an important early acquisition, and he not only sired the herd's next generation but also met showring success, including as Junior Champion at the National Poll Show.

A cow from the same herd - Wayland I Susan 8 - together with Warehead Cheerful, were the two most important foundation cows, and these and

Outgoing Society President, Reg Hutchings has been on a journey with the Hereford. Having been involved with the breed in some way since the 1960s; having widened his commercial interests to incorporate other breeds; he now believes the Hereford's time has come, and has committed to the Breed with a conviction. He tells Ann Hardy why.



Group of young bulls

their descendants went on to meet with commercial and showring success.

"We started selling bulls straight away," reflects Reg, recalling in particular a 2,000gns price tag achieved at a Hereford sale in the 1970s, followed by a succession of high prices.

"But by the 1980s, the Hereford was beginning to lose ground to the continentals," he says. "We needed to put some scale into the breed, so, in partnership with other breeders, I imported two bulls from Canada."

These bulls represented a watershed for the herd, with Harvey Anxiety transmitting scale into the cattle, Kilmore Banker fine tuning the quality, and both ensuring the Fisher name was indelibly marked on the Hereford breeder's map.

As the scale and quality of the animals continued to increase, so the herd's reputation grew, with around 45-50 head of breeding cattle generating sales of up to 20 bulls a year. The sale of a bull for 8,000gns and the Inter-Breed championship at the Royal Highland Show were two high-points of the decade.

But with the onset of the 1990s, Reg lost some faith in the Breed which 'went through a phase of being too rangy and leggy', and broadened his search for commercially relevant cattle.

"It wasn't just the Herefords that lost their way, but all Native British Breeds took their eye off the ball, and I just couldn't find what I wanted," he says. "And with less money in the job, we could not justify the expense of going to Canada to acquire new bloodlines."

Instead, he turned to the French Salers Breed, buying the best genetics he could; regularly making top prices; and repeatedly

taking Breed Championships including at the Royal Show and as Champion on five successive occasions at the Balmoral Show – as his eye for stock once again shone through.

Aberdeen Angus were brought into the mix soon after, in response to demand from customers, and by the middle of the decade, the herd comprised around 30 Herefords, a dozen Salers and a handful of Angus.

But the course was set to change again at the beginning of the 2000s, when Reg perceived a tangible change for the better in the Hereford Breed.

"In 2001, I found a very good Hereford bull, which helped to change my mind," he says.

The bull in question was Costhorpe 1 Topgun, and his ensuing success, as sire to many high-priced progeny, began to restore Reg's confidence.

"I was looking for size, with good structure and muscling, as well as free movement and a really good eye muscle area," he says. "They have to be right in certain areas – such as hind leg structure - as if they're not, they won't be right anywhere."

"Many of my customers are dairymen, and they want something big enough to serve a Holstein and with good beefing qualities, but they must have easy calving - which means they mustn't have coarse shoulders."

Topgun clearly fitted the bill and the Fisher herd grew again in numbers and reputation as Reg restored his full commitment to the Breed. Meanwhile, a sale of the Salers in 2005 and the Angus in 2007 allowed for a complete concentration on Hereford bloodlines.

"I went into these Breeds to make money and I came out of them when I started to make more money from Herefords," admits Reg. "I am also more passionate about Herefords, and I can see a future in which more of the quality beef will come from grass and not expensive grain."

"As I've travelled throughout the UK during my term as the Society's President, I've become more and more convinced that the Breed is on the right course. It's been a great pleasure and honour to meet so many breeders and the cattle I have seen have reinforced my confidence. They've had better conformation and muscling than I have ever seen before, and there's no doubt in my mind that this is the Breed to produce the best quality



Young Fisher heifers



Fisher I Cheerful 243



Fisher I Susan V65, mother of Cracker with 7 month old calf at foot

beef, for which there's clearly a growing market."

Today, the Fisher herd – now comprising around 25-30 cows - is at the top of the game, in 2010 taking Championships at every show it attended and keenly sought by both dairy and suckler herds for its conformation and bloodlines. Prices remain high, whether for the 10 or so stock bulls sold off the farm each year – recently reaching 7,000gns for a private sale - or the headline animals which go through the sale ring in Hereford, which last April topped the market at 5,500gns.

A further lucrative outlet for breeding stock has also been forged in France, where a group of the Breed's devotees is developing a market for Hereford bulls in

French dairy herds.

The current stockbull, Fisher I Cracker, encapsulates the full story at Fisher, being a descendant of the foundation cow, Wayland I Susan 8, but sired by a modern Australian bull.

Other bulls from the herd have entered AI, both with Cogent and UK Sire Services, and a Fisher bull is recommended by Blade Farming to father the calves that will go through their Beef Scheme – one of the largest in the country. Meanwhile, many more young bulls are in the pipeline, with this year's crop showing particular promise.

The bloodlines and breeding at Fisher have clearly passed the litmus test, set by Reg

himself, of being completely commercially relevant. And they have passed the test for eating quality with a vengeance, as at Reg and Sheila's son's wedding last year, a 188lb pistol of beef was served to the 180 guests.

"There were a lot of farmers there and I really put my head on the block," admits Reg. "But there wasn't a shred of it left – and I eventually lost count of how many people said it was the best they'd ever tasted".

As an endorsement of his beef, he couldn't have wished for better. And as a vindication of his choice of Breed, the message was unequivocal, and reinforced his belief that the best days of the Hereford are sure to lie ahead.