

# Hereford bulls are the mainstay of dairy heifer rearing business



When Surrey-based tenant farmer, Ian McCubbine, was forced to give up dairy farming in 2005, his attention had to quickly focus on a suitable alternative enterprise. As a second generation cattle farmer who – together with his parents, Mac and Mary - had developed the Merrylands herd of pedigree Holstein Friesians to achieve high levels of performance, he had not only accrued a lifetime's expertise in the cattle business which he felt he should not let go, but he also needed to maintain at least the same level of income as his family had enjoyed from milk production.

The sale of the herd itself was the single most important event which led to a new direction, and when the dispersal took place from Taunton market in Somerset, there was a heavy demand for the Merrylands stock.

"We sold everything except bulling heifers and anything younger, and had an excellent reception for the stock," says Ian. "But the following year I had many phone calls from buyers, who were asking for more stock, and I quickly realised we were running out."

It was at this point that he appreciated the extent of the demand for replacement dairy heifers and decided that rearing and selling in-calf heifers would become the main focus of the business.

"The industry was changing; there were a lot of 300 plus-head herds that were interested in producing milk but less interested in rearing heifers, and being able to buy quality stock precisely when they wanted it, was very important to their business," he says. "If heifers were well-grown, well-bred and in calf to an easy calving bull, then there was clearly an excellent demand."

The business began to be built on purchased dairy calves from a 'good network of local people' as well as high health herd dispersals, which would be protected on arrival from a broad cross-section of disease, ranging from pneumonia and

IBR to bluetongue and ringworm. These would be reared on the farm; bred to the stock bull at 18 or 19 months; be ready to calve at around two and a half and sold around six weeks before calving.

Hereford bulls were Ian's most natural choice of service sire, as he and his family had worked with the breed for 35 years and had learnt of their qualities through personal experience.

"We'd always believed that the Hereford bull on the first calf heifer was the perfect choice as the one thing above all that you want from the heifer is an easy calving, and you also want to know that the calf will get up and live," he says.

A 50-head suckler herd – based largely on Holstein x Hereford or Holstein x Simmental females - forms an important second string to the McCubbines' business, and here too, the Hereford has proved to be the ideal crossing sire.

"We had been down the Belgian Blue, Charolais and Simmental routes in the past, but you had to be there at calving to make sure the calf survived," says Ian.

"You may get a good price for these animals, but if one out of eight calves dies, that's the joy gone from the job. And if you lose one in 20 heifers at calving, then that's all of your profit gone too," he says.

With the added benefit of the Herefords' good temperament – particularly important with three daughters, aged 13, 16 and 19, as well as 80 year olds in his family still working on the farm – he says he's happy to stick with the breed.

"Because my parents and uncle work on the farm, we must have a temperament you can depend on, and while we may like the look of the Limousin, we haven't all got six-foot fences and armour plating!" he says.

Selecting his Hereford bulls from Harry Hewlett's



Ian McCubbine,

**For 35 years, Hereford bulls have been integral to the McCubbine family's highly commercial farming business. But while the business has been forced to change over the years, the breed has stayed emphatically the same. Ann Hardy visited the family's farm in Surrey to find out why.**

## Broadlands Farm fact file

Today's enterprises developed after a former dairy unit was forced out of milk production under the Agricultural Act, 1947.

The pedigree Holstein Friesian herd had to be dispersed to make way for development.

The farm today comprises around 450 acres, only 40 of which are owned, and much of which is grass keep.

A core of farm buildings, which can easily house over 200 adult cattle, is located on the owned part of the farm.

Two main enterprises are rearing dairy heifer replacements and a 50-head suckler herd.

Both suckler cows and replacement dairy heifers are bred to a Hereford bull.

Two further enterprises are sales of silage and hay and contracting.

Ian McCubbine, who runs the farm with his parents, takes over the chairmanship of Surrey NFU in January 2011.

alone, and in winter they'll have received silage and a 14 per cent protein cake.

"I'm disappointed if we don't top the market from time to time," says Ian, looking towards a 500kg half Hereford (out of a Holstein x Simmental dam), which is his highest hope for his latest entry.

Today, the McCubbine family's Broadlands Farm in Smallfields in Surry is ticking over smoothly with its two main cattle rearing businesses, which it operates alongside sales of hay and silage as well as a contracting business.

Each enterprise dovetails neatly with another, with the sucklers calving in



neighbouring Ruckmans herd, he says the personal relationship plays the most important part in this choice.

"There's a lot of loyalty in this industry and I believe in sticking with someone you know and trust," says Ian. "We can select the bulls we want from a wide choice of bloodlines and Harry will always guarantee them – although they've always been excellent from the word go.

"We want length, width, good feet and that general sparkle in the eye, although we don't consider Estimated Breeding Values as we trust Harry's judgement and breeding completely," he says.

"Temperament has always been excellent and we're not worried about inbreeding as Harry's records of what we have had in the past are meticulous, and there are many family lines to choose from.

"We always have the bulls tested for fertility on arrival and every summer, and keep a close eye on their general health."

Personal relationships are equally important to Ian when it comes to selling, and stores from the suckler herd – which



are either half, three quarters or seven eighths Hereford and always have at least one eighth Holstein blood – sell locally at Hailsham market.

"I am one of very few vendors who still goes into the ring to show the cattle," says Ian, "as I believe that's my guarantee that I will stand by my own stock."

Store cattle are sold 'straight off their mothers' at eight to 10 months - in summer coming straight off pasture

either spring or autumn; hay and silage occupying the summer months and contracting generally fitting around the farm's own operations.

"Our head tractor driver and I do a lot for a local arable and dairy unit, so we're still using our previous skills," says Ian. "We managed to keep on everyone who worked with the dairy although we completely changed the business, which I think we did without even knowing."



Ian and his parents are clearly versatile, adaptable and business-savvy farmers who will see and take opportunities as they arise, live off their wits and continue to grow their enterprise in the sometimes difficult environment close to the Greater London urban fringe. Their farmed area is now back up to 450 acres – having declined to 300 acres when the dairy unit went – and the new hub of the farm comprises a range of cattle buildings within a 40 acre area owned by the family.

And asked whether their new businesses make as much money as the dairy herd they replaced, Ian says: “Of course they do – we wouldn’t be able to survive if they didn’t.”

