Bill Morrow makes no bones about why he keeps a small herd of suckler cows as a sideline to his business. “I am there to make money,” he declares, “and I’ve never made a loss on it in my entire life.”

It comes as little surprise that this professional accountant has done his sums, but he pays equally close attention to the choice of his breed of cattle.

Bill inherited most of the 80 acres he farms at Portadown in South Armagh but had no desire to continue with his family’s milking herd, preferring instead to pursue his accountancy career.

“But I’ve always kept some cattle,” he says, “and when I introduced my new bride to them back in the 1970s, the herd was basically Limousin cross.

“It didn’t take long for her to notice that when they came to the crush they were normally three deep; and when we went to the top of the field, the cows ran out at the bottom.

“That was the Limousin for you – I’d call it an ‘off-strain of reindeer’ – and I began to realise that it wouldn’t be long before someone was injured or killed.”

And so Bill’s search for an alternative breed began. “I thought about Blondes because of their conformation, but they turned out to be idiots; the Angus we had would kill you when calving and eventually we arrived at the conclusion that we would purchase some cross-bred Simmentals.

“But the Simmental bull turned out to be a brute – and his calves were too big and so was his body and he was no fit at all for our heifers.”

This was the point at which the Hereford came in. “It started with Barney,” says Bill. “He was a beautiful, docile, polled Hereford bull and that was the start of our herd.

“He obviously relished the company of the Simmentals, producing a calving percentage of 110 (we had two sets of twins) and his progeny were docile and a pleasure to keep. As for Barney himself, he was sat on, pandered to, and moved around by my daughter with a yellow bucket.”

The Hereford-Simmental formula has continued to this day, with cow numbers now up to 40 (mostly Hereford x Simmental) and new Hereford bloodlines brought in through the bull.

“Our bull selection is normally made through contact with Robert Wilson from Kelso, who presents his stock to a friend of mine who runs a 900 suckler herd near Cornhill on the Tweed. He selects the bull and to date he has not disappointed me.

“Our present herd sire is Romany 1 Dan, known as Dan the Man, who was placed first at the Carlisle Show and is a son of 2007 Hereford Bull of the Year, Crickley 1 Figurehead.”

Every three years, Bill also buys in a few pure Simmental females.

Describing the resulting Hereford-Simmental cross as the ‘king of the lowland suckler herd’, he
values in particular their docility, and the fact that the breeds complement each other so well.

“The growth of the Simmental complements the massive pelvic opening and easy calving of the Hereford; and the Hereford’s easy fleshing and early maturity complements the Simmental’s late maturity and its ability to keep on growing.

“The Hereford shortens the production cycle, and all males are away to the factory at 16 months at the most. They will normally grade R and we have the occasional U.”

For this, Bill receives a premium price, not just for their grading but because they go into Foyle Meats Certified Hereford Scheme. At an extra 12p/kg on the R grades, this equates to an additional £50 for the animal.

“This is really worth having,” says Bill. “Especially if you also have lower production costs.”

The system Bill operates is streamlined and efficient - based on tight calving in February and March with a reasonable sized calf ready for the grass in April to May. Cows have ‘a lick of meal’ daily and calves receive creep from July onwards. After weaning in November, they receive meal three times daily to appetite, at a maximum 12 lbs per day for bulls and 6 lbs per day for heifers. With all bulls finishing ‘from the house’ before the end of June, heifers go out to grass and finish before winter, continuing to supplement their grazing with meal and organic seed barley straw.

And so Bill appears to have found both his perfect formula for success in commercial beef production and the perfect breeds to meet his needs.

“And now, when I come home from work,” he says, “the same animals are in the field as I left there in the morning!”