Last year’s Society President Marcus Lury could teach many breeders about customer service and marketing. They’ve been cornerstones of his business for almost 50 years. But when Ann Hardy visited him at Castle Farm near Chard in Somerset, she found his ability to breed commercially relevant, honest cattle was a major factor in his enduring success.

At first glance, Marcus Lury could easily give the impression of being a typical West Country farmer who – like so many in the present economic climate – is probably scratching a living from a small herd of suckler cows. But you don’t need to dig very deep to discover that this is far from the truth.

In fact, although a relative newcomer to the industry – having farmed for around 17 years – Marcus is a breeder of cattle of extraordinary calibre and a marketeer par excellence, for both the Hereford breed and his own Oakleaf herd.

But Marcus would never put it like this. “There are plenty of people out there who know far more about breeding Herefords than I ever will,” he says – his modesty genuine. “But they don’t always know about their markets.”

In this comment, he not only pin-points the Achilles heel of large swathes of the farming industry, but he also identifies one of the greatest strengths of his own business enterprise.

Today this enterprise comprises no more than an 80-head suckler herd of Herefords and a flock of Lleyn ewes on 230 acres of difficult land on the margins of Somerset’s Blackdown Hills. Here, he is supported by his wife Valerie, while their son David undertakes much of the operation of the farm.

But it didn’t start like this. For Marcus came to farming after many years of running a successful family engineering business which primarily produced spray nozzles, largely for use in agriculture.

It was through his national and international work with this company – then named Lurmark Ltd and now named Hypro UK - that he became so familiar with the breed. “I saw Herefords all over the world when we were undertaking farm trials for our spray equipment,” he remarks. “And I came to believe that they were a remarkable breed that could cope with anything.”

So, when the time came for the engineering business to be sold, he turned his attentions to the breed and has developed it with fervour and skill to suit his own farm.

“Our farmland grows more weeds than grass,” he admits. “We’re clay over greensand and the landscape constantly reshapes, particularly after dry summers which are invariably followed by torrential rain.”

Although other native breeds were fleetingly considered for the farm, the Hereford unquestionably had the edge. “I wanted to keep sane, gentle cattle and I really wanted something that could live on nothing. I was certain that if I could find the right type, then I would have Herefords.”

The Herefords he found have developed over the past two decades to become a highly sought-after commodity. Year on year, sales of breeding stock have increased and today he admits: “For the first time, we are embarrassed by our shortage of bulls – we simply struggle to keep pace with our customers’ demands.”

Like many in business, he is reluctant to give any figures, but when pushed will reveal: “This year we will sell over £60,000 worth of Hereford cattle.
Oakleaf(H) & Castlewood(P) Herefords

Nanscient Gold
Our “Beef Wagon” - Never beaten when shown
Currently Breed Champion Royal Cornwall

Castlepoll 1 Super Star (P)
The “New Boy on the Block” - Supreme Male Champion, Roscommon, Ireland 2006

Hermitage Vandyke & Sarabande Zodiac complete our outstanding current group of herd sires, whilst Kilmessan Terry & Kilmessan Sam are growing fast in their bid for a “share of the spoils”.

In calf heifers and cows with their calves grazing Somerset’s Blackdown Hills

Breeding Hereford cattle to meet our customers requirements and for today’s market and environment that are easily managed, thrive off grass and prosper in commercial and pedigree herds.

Many, many thanks to all Members for their kindness and hospitality during my 2007 Presidency of the Society and best wishes to you and all our customers for every success in the future.

Marcus & Valerie Lury
Castle Farm, Buckland St. Mary, Nr. Chard, Somerset. TA20 3JX
Tel: 01460 234394  Fax: 01460 234711
Email: marcus@lury.co.uk  Web: www.lury.co.uk

VISITORS ALWAYS WELCOME
and we have orders taking us through to spring [four months away]."

So what does he think they are doing so right? "We produce incredibly honest cattle," says Marcus. "If they can survive and do well here, when they go on to a dairy or suckler farm which produces quality grass they will grow like billy-oh.

"They must never go backwards," he reiterates. "No customer having bought a bull likes to see it deteriorate."

"And if they are structurally sound, true to type, true to their native background and can thrive on grass, they will do well in any situation," he believes.

And what is that type? "Unlike a lot of breeders, I don't believe there should be just one type – but I think there should be just one quality."

Subtle differences of type within this quality are said to suit different markets, and it is in identifying these markets that Marcus above all has excelled.

"Virtually everyone breeding livestock will know more about it than I do," he reiterates, "but I am quite good at ferreting out and discovering where opportunities lie."

And it is this perspicacity and dogged determination which have led him to three different markets for his stock – which are met by three types of Hereford.

First, there's the Holstein herd with big framed animals. "They'll only use a Hereford on the runts really," believes Marcus. "After using dairy AI for breeding replacements, they'll use a continental breed as a first sweeper and a Hereford bull on the rest."

"The middle market is the Friesian type of herd which has had some Holstein influence. Again these tend to use a dairy bull first but thereafter will move straight on to the native breed.

"But our developing market – on which we have done a tremendous amount of work in the last five years and are now reaping the rewards – is the type of herd which has turned to producing milk from grass, might be increasing in numbers to around 500 head, and is reducing the size of its cows, possibly through the use of Jersey on to Holstein/Friesian bloodlines. Often they are not producing their own dairy replacements so they use a native beef breed first," says Marcus. "This type of farmer wants a quality calf from a relatively small animal. These smaller animals when reared are ideal for the local family butcher's requirement for small meat joints."

Marcus's observation that such herds – which often have a tight calving interval – may put 10 Hereford bulls with the cows at one time, gives an indication of the scope of this market.

"One customer has bought 18 bulls from us in the past five years and he hasn't slaughtered one of them yet," says Marcus, clearly suggesting how he achieves 80% repeat business.

"But how long we can continue to have those levels of repeat business depends on our customers’ herds expanding," he observes.

"Our business is about identifying, producing for and attacking a market place, and we have to go out looking for new opportunities and customers each year.

"The days are gone in any industry when you can just produce. You have to identify opportunities and provide the product which suits each opportunity. Some breeders out there haven't attempted to find out where their markets are. When I hear them say that no one comes to see their cattle, I question why on earth they should."

Just as passionate as his belief in marketing is his desire to deliver customer service. "It has to be second to none," insists Marcus, who provides at least two follow-up contacts to his customers each year. "People expect it and they should expect it, and if we find someone who is doing it better, then we will get better."

Within his own system, Marcus targets specific animals to each of the three markets he has identified in the southwest, using a cross-section of bloodlines ranging from the traditional English Hereford to imported and polled bloodlines.

"The bigger and leaner poll epitomises the modern Hereford," says Marcus, "although when we first introduced them to this farm, they couldn't cope in the same way as the horned cattle."

Well-considered breeding choices have since allowed the polled lines to develop at Castle Farm and Marcus now
confidently says: “We are now getting the same daily liveweight gains with the polled as with the horned animals and we are happy that there's nothing in the polled strain that prevents it from doing well – but we have had to breed it for our farm.”

When selecting their all-influential stock bulls, traits Marcus prioritises include ease of calving; quality of milk production; growth rates and a wide muzzle for foraging ability. Temperament, he says, goes without saying in the Hereford breed.

“We don’t believe we need the biggest cattle on earth,” he says. “Although – at around 1000 to 1250 kg - our fully grown stock bulls are as heavy as anyone else’s.

“But I don’t see any point in jacking an animal up on long legs; no one pays for fresh air.

“If you draw a line from behind the neck to the top of the rear legs, you can sell what’s above that line but have to give away what’s below,” he continues.

Using this as a basis for selection, he describes his three new potential stock bulls – one chosen for his exceptional balance; one for being a ‘butcher’s block’ and one for his additional scale – each selected to meet a specific market requirement.

At Castle Farm they will join stock bulls Hermitage Vandyke; Nanscient Gold and Sarabande Zodiac and replace one bull aged 11½, which has just left the farm. And although longevity is a prized commodity for the farm, Marcus’s desire to move his herd forward; to grasp new opportunities and fulfil changing markets creates the need for a regular movement and turnover of stock.

Reiterating the importance of being commercially relevant and producing structurally sound animals with the potential to produce beef, he admits: “Our local butcher wants our cattle but we can’t provide them because we simply don’t have them.

“Of course, not every animal is right for breeding,” he says with honesty. “But we know that growing off grass as they do at a rate of weaning of 1 kg/day for heifers and 1.3 kg/day for bulls, they will always have a place in the commercial market.

“Undoubtedly the Waitrose scheme has been a boon for the breed with dairy farmers knowing there will be a ready market for quality cross-bred calves sired by registered Hereford bulls,” he adds. “Although we don’t sell into it ourselves, we have benefited from the additional demand for registered Hereford bulls.”

And whilst emphasising that no one should be ashamed of producing beef for the commercial market, I rather doubt that Marcus will seriously enter this business.

His reaction to his success is to credit both the Hereford breeders and the attributes of the breed. “In the last 10 years, the Hereford has improved beyond belief,” he says. “It’s light years ahead of other native breeds for its performance on poor ground.”

After a visit to his farm, I somehow feel it is to Marcus himself that the industry’s gratitude should extend. At 67 and after a triple heart bypass – when he could quite naturally and legitimately have settled into a comfortable retirement – he has more vivacity than many half his age. With his zest for life; his out-and-out honesty; his unwavering eye for stock; and a willingness to adapt to changing times, I feel quite certain that anything he touches will continue to exceed everyone’s expectations.