The Hereford breed has taken Alec and Mark Grey by surprise at Symonds Hall Farm near Wotton-under-Edge in Gloucestershire, where its performance has outstripped that of any other breed they have ever tried.

Farming beef and dairy on land that rises to 800 feet above sea level on the Cotswold Edge, they have found the Hereford to be the ideal complement to their large-framed herd of Holstein Friesians and to produce better results – both in terms of physical and financial performance – than any continental breed.

“We’ve used a variety of other breeds on the dairy cows including Blues, Charolais and Limousins, but it’s the Hereford’s fleshing ability off grass where it outstrips them all,” says Alec.

“This is particularly the case in our valley, parts of which are unimproved pasture in Higher Level Stewardship (HLS), where we’ve found them to be easy to out-winter, cheap to rear and to thrive on grass.”

But choosing the right type of Hereford he feels has been key to this performance and Alec and Mark are emphatic that a ‘growthy’ type of bull that has a lot of length has routinely produced the best performance of any breed under their system.

“Yes, we think it’s remarkable,” admit the father-and-son team. “But we have the figures to prove it and the Hereford crosses we have here have out-performed everything we’ve tried.”

The Hereford enterprise at Symonds Hall is partly an offshoot of the 200 head dairy herd where around 40 head will be put in calf to a Hereford bull, while numbers for rearing are made up to around 120/year by bought-in calves.

Admitting the calves they have bred usually make heavier weights than those they buy in, Alec believes this stems in part from their choice of Hereford bloodlines as well as their care in rearing.

Firmly believing in using AI in preference to a stockbull, they select high performance bloodlines of a calibre they feel would be hard to acquire.

“Most AI companies have some pretty good Hereford bulls as they have specialists buying them,” says Mark, who also remarks that inseminations are easy to undertake on the farm where the dairy is set up for the process and activity monitors for heat detection are in routine use.

“It’s true that we originally thought the Hereford would not work on the Holstein type of cow but if you really research your bulls it’s surprising what you can get from them.”

Furthermore, they say that by breeding the robust kind of Holstein Friesian – who is not too tall but has plenty of body strength and depth – the resulting cross-bred progeny have the right sort of frame to produce a good beef carcase.

“They complement each other,” says Mark. “The Holsteins used to be taller and frailer but what’s good for the dairy herd now is a robust kind of cow that will look after herself, and she also forms the right foundation for beef production.”

The proof of the pudding is in the gradings in relation to rearing systems and rearing times, and when the three are considered together, the figures look impressive.

Selling to Dovecote Park where a premium above the market price is paid for the Hereford cross steer, Alec says it is far more than this price advantage that gives them the financial edge.

“The key is that they hardly need any concentrate feeding and they finish two months younger than most of the continental breeds we have had,” he says.

“This means you can put them through the system quicker, they’ll spend far less time in sheds, and on average, they’ll finish at 22 months.”

At this age, the typical carcase deadweight is 340kg and the best exceed 380kg, with 40-50 percent grading R and a similar percentage hitting the O+ grade.
“We’re not trying to get E and U grades,” adds Alec. “Out of a Holstein Friesian, you won’t get more than an R.

“And we have to tolerate some variation because the calves we buy in are from a range of different sources.”

Referring to his most recent grading sheets, he says, “We sold a batch of seven in November and had six Rs and one O+, with fat covers of 3 and 4.”

The system operated by the Greys is based around the dairy herd’s year-round calving which is complemented by calf purchases which also take place throughout the year.

Rearing begins in hutches for the first two to three weeks when milk is fed twice a day and concentrates and water are also offered from the outset.

Milk is fed warm, and reduced to a specialist once-a-day product from around two weeks until 10 weeks of age.

The weaner pellet is replaced with a coarse mix at around this time when forage is also introduced.

At around five to six months, the steers will go on to a total mixed ration in winter, or be put out to grass from March onwards and supplemented with around 0.5kg/day of rolled wheat or barley.

Remaining on this regime until eight or nine months, they may also winter on stubble turnips and silage in ring feeders on the free-draining Cotswold Brash soils.

During the last month to six weeks of their rearing, the steers will ideally remain outside but have their cereal intake stepped up to 3kg/day or come indoors to be finished on a TMR of grass and maize silage with caustic treated wheat.

Hereford heifers are reared slightly differently, as these will be kept to calve on the farm at 24 months, and sold to private buyers some two weeks after calving.

“They’re too valuable to go to slaughter,” remarks Alec.

In fact, the whole Hereford enterprise has an immeasurable value to Symonds Hall Farm where it provides far more than a means of getting the dairy cows in calf. Grazing the Cotswold uplands and perfectly maintaining the HLS land which also accommodates a commercial pheasant shoot, the cattle dovetail with every enterprise across the Greys’ 1,200 acres, offering environmental, ecological and landscape benefits it would be hard to match with any other breed.

“The key thing for us is to get our cows in calf,” says Alec. “But if they hold to a Hereford, that’s all the better.”

Breeding policy at Symonds Hall Farm

- A Hereford AI sire is used across the bottom end of the dairy herd.
- If the cow doesn’t hold to the first or second service, a high fertility mix of three breeds is used as a last resort.
- A Hereford sweeper bull has also recently been bought from the Free Town herd.
- This follows particular success with the AI sire, Free Town Baron.
- Hereford x Holstein Friesian steers are reared for sale to Dovecote Park.
- Hereford x Holstein Friesian heifers are calved to a continental bull before being sold as suckler cows.