

Beef Innovator of the Year Award

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE, BIRMINGHAM
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A keen focus on developing their core market has enabled Ben and Tori Stanley to maximise margins and expand their business. **Farmers Guardian** finds out more.

Ben and Tori Stanley have a shared enthusiasm and passion for livestock which, when combined, makes one productive powerhouse.

While Ben's parents founded one of the most famous herds of Longhorn cattle in the world, he has grown up in farming and now farms with wife Tori in Derbyshire.

Together they have built their own pedigree herd and flock almost from scratch and regularly advocate they want to create the world's best beef.

Their determined and detailed approach helped them stand out from the crowd and win last year's Beef Innovator of the Year Award at the British Farming Awards, co-organised by *Farmers Guardian*.

Tori and Ben Stanley at last year's British Farming Awards.



It has been a mixture of experiences and learned practice which has got them to where they are today, beginning with a Nuffield Scholarship, which gave Ben the confidence he needed to start farming in his own right.

Ben says: "I met other Nuffield Scholars who had taken on a tenancy and made their own way and it made me realise I could do it too."

After securing their first tenancy at Woodhouse Farm, Diseworth, Derby, in 2010, they have progressed onto the Melbourne Hall estate, taking their ever-evolving beef business with them.

Focus

Initially, Tori worked full-time as area marketing manager for BMW, providing a secure income so they could continue farming, but has since left to focus on the business.

Ben says: "I believe in investing in appreciating assets, rather than depreciating ones, so I have never bought big shiny kit."

He decided growing sheep numbers would be the best route to consolidating his position, even though his passion lay in his Longhorn herd.

Sheep enabled Ben to prove he needed a tenancy to prospective landlords, even though it took almost 20 tenancy proposals before they were finally successful.

Their luck changed when an unlikely opportunity arose.

Ben says: "I first met Lady Ralph Kerr [owner of the estate]

when I was asked to look after her flock of Portland sheep.

"It turned out the flock was related to Portland sheep I owned when I was 12 years old."

Lord and Lady Ralph Kerr's Park Farm, Melbourne, Derby, became vacant about the same time as Ben was renegotiating the tenancy on Woodhead Farm. He and Tori heard they had secured both tenancies on the same day.

Ben says: "I was once advised you should never give up land once you have it and we decided to sign both tenancy agreements."

"Although Park Farm came with 400 acres, there were no facilities, so holding onto Woodhouse Farm meant we could continue to make use of the infrastructure there."

Maintaining both farms also allowed Ben to implement a high health system by moving to a closed breeding herd at Park Farm, using Woodhouse Farm for finishing cattle and bought-in stores.

Ben chooses to buy-in mainly Longhorn stores from producers he knows to supplement the production of home-bred animals.

He has opted to cross some of his own Longhorn cows to a Limousin bull to increase turnover after discovering it gave a 30 per cent increase in liveweight gain.

Marbling

He says: "Consequently, the meat is perhaps a little more tender, but it does not have the marbling of pure Longhorn meat."

Increasing the size of the pedigree Longhorn herd is top of Ben's agenda, but he will not sacrifice quality for quantity.

"Every time we have some spare money, we use it to invest in the breeding herd. Next year, we hope to put 60 cows to the bull."

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We are farmers first and foremost and this is our mindset behind everything we do
BEN STANLEY

Longhorns are central to Ben and Tori's brand, which has developed since they began selling their own meat at farmers' markets six years ago.

Selling at London each week, plus another few local marts, is still part of what they do, but circumstances changed when Lord and Lady Ralph Kerr agreed for the couple to take on the lease of a small retail unit in the village of Melbourne.

Tori says: "The shop opened over two years ago and this gave us the opportunity to take the butchery away from the farm and put it in a retail setting."

"We have not had to risk taking on a high street rent and it ties in well with the values of Melbourne Estate."

They now sell 150 beef carcasses through the shop, farmers' markets and other local farm shops. Pedigree Longhorn cattle kill out at 330kg deadweight at either a R4L or R4H.

About 300 lambs are finished and sold direct to customers each year through their outlets.

Ben is delighted with the move,

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Tori and Ben Stanley's business comprises Park Farm, Melbourne, and Woodhouse Farm, Diseworth.

Farm facts

- The Stanleys have been farming since 1807
- Ben and Tori's farm business comprises Park Farm, Melbourne and Woodhouse Farm, Diseworth
- Cattle include their herd of Longhorn cattle and flocks of Jacob, Portland and Texel sheep
- Pedigree and commercial flocks
- Run a butchery at Melbourne Hall Centre
- Attend regular farmers' markets

to advice from nutritionists, vets and grassland specialists and we made significant changes as a result."

The tenancy at Park Farm includes 121 hectares (300 acres) of arable land, and although this is not where Ben's expertise lies, he views it as another opportunity.

"We have found people who will work with us and they have listened to what we want. Their support has enabled us to fund the growing crop in the first year."

Ben views arable as working hand-in-hand with livestock and the enterprises complement each other.

He says: "I am a passionate believer in working a mixed farming system and this is partly behind our decision to go into pigs."

"Pig manure will help us increase organic matter levels and the phosphate and potash status of soils, which are very low."

Planning for the long-term is evident in all the decisions made at Park Farm. The arrival of Ben and Tori's first child Herbert two years ago has added to the incentive to build solid foundations for the future.

Ben says: "We are farmers first and foremost and this is our mindset behind everything we do here. We have a tenancy here and we hope we can demonstrate how the farm is improving the land, so they will look favourably on the next generation."

Winning the Beef Innovator of the Year Award last year has helped boost the couple's confidence in what they do and has confirmed their holistic approach to their animals is working.

Ben says: "It is absolutely wonderful to win and it was a wonderful night. After dinner speaker Sally Gunnel kicked things off with her wonderful talk getting an extra bit out of everything you do and this is what we try to do."

"We always like to keep improving the business and moving forward."

because it means he now employs two full-time butchers and can focus on the farming business.

With pedigree and commercial sheep flocks, plus an arable enterprise and a new pig 'bed and breakfast' venture, this would seem to be an essential move.

Sheep are still a significant feature on-farm and the Blackbrook pedigree flock, founded by Tori, clearly shows Jacobs as the family's favoured breed.

Showing

Tori has shown her Jacob sheep successfully and the flock won the overall points championship at this year's England breed show and sale in Worcester, achieving an average

price of 400gns for gimmer shearlings.

Tori says: "Showing is a big part of our lives and we see it as a great opportunity to promote what we do."

"When our Jacob, Blackbrook Frankel, won the inter-breed championship at Hope Show, in the heart of sheep country, we were thrilled. It is about being the best we can be."

Ben decided to switch from a mainly three-quarter-bred Texel for the commercial flock to a flock containing predominantly North Country Mules.

He says: "Texel lambs produce a fantastic U grade carcass, but we found the growth was not there and ewes are not as prolific or milky."

Mules achieve a lambing percentage of 185-200 and they are no trouble."

Producing the right animal for the retail outlet is key to the Stanley family's success and Ben believes this has 'sharpened up' his eye and influenced how he finishes cattle and sheep.

Ben says: "Everything we rear we see on a hook. Trough-reared lambs do not set up like grass-fed lambs, so we finish as many as we can from pasture."

Cattle are kept at grass for as long as possible, not least because 'Longhorns are a nightmare to house', according to Ben, for obvious reasons.

Considerations

He says: "These considerations mean we think hard about how we can extend our grazing period."

"Once housed, we feed a mixed ration of grass silage, home-grown rolled barley and a 34 per cent protein blend with straw added for scratch factor."

Nutrition is something Ben has paid closer attention to since he was selected as one of the pilot farms for a Sainsbury's research initiative assessing the eating quality of superior Aberdeen-Angus genetics.

"The support from Sainsbury's has made us better farmers. We had access

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WE are looking for a beef farmer who is not afraid to embrace sound advice and research, coupled with their own experience, to successfully innovate within their business.

Our Beef Innovator of the Year Award will recognise farmers who are making the most of opportunities presented to them,

whether this is through identifying a new market opportunity or breed, changing feed and husbandry protocols to achieve a different outcome, or looking objectively at breeding decisions.

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