



Farmer John Brigg with one of his pedigree herd on the family farm in Lighthorne.

Longhorns may look like fierce throwbacks to the wild cattle that roamed early Britain, but they produce quality beef - and thanks to Warwickshire farmers John and Joshua Brigg, they have a great future. Tony Lennox reports.

**T**ake a walk up the steep ridge that separates Wellesbourne from Moreton Morrell and you'll come across a hillside scene that hasn't changed for centuries.

Peacefully grazing the grassy slopes will be a herd of 30 or more English Longhorns.

They're big but graceful, with magnificent horns, their coats a mottled dusty brown and cream. Among the herd in the spring, you'll see a handful of beefy young calves, strutting around proudly.

"We look for young bulls with what we call 'presence'," says 75 year old Warwickshire farmer, and Longhorn expert, John Brigg. "It's easy to see, but not so easy to explain."

John has loved Longhorns since he was a little lad, wandering home from school past Mr Noakes' farm in

Leamington Hastings.

In those wartime days, the breed was on the verge of dying out entirely. Only a small number of herds existed, and one belonged to Farmer Noakes.

“If you want to save a rare breed, start eating it”

When young John grew up, and took over Bishops Gorse Farm in Lighthorne, more than 40 years ago, he made the trip back to Leamington Hastings, and bought a fine young bull called Hill Lion, returning a little later to bring home Olive, Oonagh, Oakapple and Orchid – four young heifers,

They became the basis of the Gorse Herd which is now the country's oldest Longhorn herd. And, in many ways,

due to the work of John Brigg and his son Joshua, the Longhorn is once again firmly established in Britain.

"When we first came here to Lighthorne we had commercial cattle – Hereford cross, but I remember as a small boy being fascinated by Mr Noakes' Longhorns," says John.

"There's no connection between English Longhorns and Texas Longhorns, though many people think there is. The Texas breed is descended from Spanish cattle brought to America centuries ago. Actually the Texas Longhorns are about half the size of our breed. And if you study pictures, the differences are obvious. All they have in common is, well, long horns.

"An American gentleman came over here with the intention of buying some English cattle not so long ago, and he was astonished at the size of the English Longhorn. He was amazed at how

**Below:** The Brindle Beauty - a legendary prize Longhorn cow, sold at auction in 1791 at Little Rollright, Warwickshire, for the staggering price of 260 guineas, equivalent to around £30,000 in today's money.



much beefier they were.”

The beef from the Brigg's herd is sold to a specialist from Ross on Wye, who sells it on to some of the country's finest restaurants. Indeed, the internationally famous experimental chef Heston Blumenthal rates Longhorn beef as the very best there is.

“One of our bullocks was used when Heston wanted to cook the perfect Porterhouse steak. The beef is renowned for its eating quality.”

So John and Joshua must eat a lot of Longhorn beef?

Rather

sheepishly, John says: “Er, not really. The girls wouldn't hear of it.”

The girls, John's wife Veronica and daughter Belinda, who both work with the farm's cattle and sheep, refuse to eat their own animals.

“They're not vegetarians or anything,” says John. “They just can't bear the thought of eating something

which has been reared by them. We get our meat from the village butcher, and very good it is too.”

So, does the family ever buy their meat from a supermarket?

“Never,” says Joshua. “Housewives want their meat to be pink. I sometimes think that barely ten minutes passes between the animal arriving at the abattoir gates and being wrapped in cellophane for a supermarket. If you want beef with flavour, meat that hasn't aged properly doesn't work.

“Modern beef cattle, like the Charolais, are bred to grow quickly, to put on weight fast and produce lean meat. Our herd lives for longer. When they're finally slaughtered the meat is left to hang for a while. It won't look like the stuff on the supermarket shelves, but it'll taste better.”

The Longhorn breed was developed in the 1700s, to feed the growing populations of England's industrial cities. “Working men needed plenty of fat

in their diets, and the Longhorn beef provided that. People think that lean meat is best, but it's the fat that provides the flavour,” says John. That's not to say that

Longhorns don't produce lean beef cuts too. They are a versatile breed, long-lived and robust.

The Longhorn breed, together with many other original British cattle, sheep and pigs, began to die out as the country turned to fast-growing, leaner breeds to provide meat to a booming population in the middle of the 20th Century.

But fashions are changing. Many people now want to know that their food is locally sourced, carefully raised and well looked-after. The older breeds are coming back into favour, mainly because they taste better.

Joshua followed in his father's footsteps while still a boy, buying a few Longhorn heifers of his own when he left school. He is a firm believer in the motto of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust – “If you want to save a rare breed, start eating it!”

John became the Secretary of the Longhorn Cattle Society at a low point

## FACT BOX

The Longhorn Cattle Society, which looks after the interests of the breed, is based in Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire.

If you want to taste Longhorn beef, the Society has a list of outlets on its website;

[www.longhorncattlesociety.com](http://www.longhorncattlesociety.com)

The Rare Breeds Survival Trust is to revive its sale and show at Stoneleigh this autumn. The event, on September 30 and October 1, will include rare breeds of sheep, pigs and cattle.

In the mean time, if you want to get up close to a Longhorn, the Society is attending the Staffordshire County Show in Bingley Hall, Stafford on June 1 and 2.

in the breed's history.

In 1972, following the deaths of two stalwart Longhorn farmers and breeders, John called a crisis meeting of remaining breeders at the Royal Show in Stoneleigh. With their support he brought the Herd Book up to date. The expansion of the breed can really be said to date from this period.

It was also necessary to get the Society on to a firm financial footing. In 1878 the subscription was a guinea (one pound and a shilling) - and by 1972 it had dropped 5p to just £1.

Today Longhorn cattle are becoming a more common sight in England's countryside - largely thanks to John and Joshua Brigg, and dedicated breeders like them across the country. Indeed there may soon come a day when Longhorns are no longer classed as a rare breed.

And though they may look fierce, they are, say John and Joshua, remarkably passive. And because they're a primitive breed, they don't suffer the problems of modern breeds when it comes to calving. “We don't have calving trouble. They just get on with it,” says Joshua.

And that's just what the Briggs' are doing - getting on with a real success story in the heart of the Warwickshire countryside. ■