

LONGHORN

Cattle Society

CALVING YOUR LONGHORNS

GETTING YOUR COWS IN CALF

It may be stating the obvious but to have a calf you need a bull! If you have your own bull then good record keeping will make life easier. Note when the bull goes in with the cows, and if you are using more than one bull, be sure to record which cows go with which bull, and change over times if any. If you are putting your heifers to the bull for the first time, make sure they are old enough and in good enough condition to be served. Whilst Longhorns can calve at two and a half years onwards, it is recommended that you do not bull your heifers until they are over two years of age—indeed some breeders do not bull heifers until they are three. As with most native breeds Longhorns are later maturing and calving early can prevent them from growing on to become large cows in maturity.

If you have bought a cow or heifer in calf, make sure you request the service details including the name and registration number of the bull. Once the bull is running with the cows, you will see that he is 'in love' with a certain cow for anything between 1 and 3 days. He will lie with her, follow her around and make a characteristic growling noise if you walk her away from him. Note this down, and if the cow doesn't return to service in roughly 3 weeks, you should be able to work out her expected calving date for next year. You may not see him mount her at all, some bulls are very private about it. If the cow returns to service regularly, seek veterinary advice as you may have a problem with either the bull or the cow but that is beyond the remit of this article.



If you are using AI then order your semen from the Society in plenty of time—at least two weeks before you think you will need it. If you are able to check your cattle frequently then you can spot when a cow is bulling and be able to call the AI technician out to serve her before she goes off heat. However if you don't feel confident about heat detection, or you want to plan your calving dates you can get your vet to give your cows hormone injections which will mean they come bulling at the same time and the AI can be planned more meticulously. Assuming all the cows take to the first service you will know almost to the day when your cows will calve.

At intervals during the year sit down with your farm diary and make a list of all the cows and the last date you saw them served then use a gestation table to work out what dates you expect the cows to calve (approx 283 days from service). Individual cows vary, and bull calves are often a few days later than heifer calves, but this is not always the case.

Some people have their cows in for the winter and let them calve inside. Make sure the bedding is clean and afterbirths cleared up. Others prefer to calve outside. Even in the snow, a healthy calf will be fine, but it is essential to have somewhere to house the odd cow if there should be a problem.

CALVING

Cows show signs of impending birth differently from each other and it is helpful to jot down notes which will help you in the future. Some cows are always early. Others doesn't 'bag up' much until after the birth but some go around for a week before calving with a tight, bright pink udder.

Towards the end of their gestation make sure you check your cows at least twice a day. Watch for changes in the udder and slackening of the muscles around their back end. If a cow is off by herself away from the others, she may well be in the first stage of labour. Leave her in peace but keep an eye on her. The whole process may take an hour or 4 hours but as long as she is not unduly distressed it is best not to interfere. A water bag will appear and later break and if you see two feet and a nose, you know the calf is presenting correctly. These will appear and retract several times before they are actually pushed right out!



If it seems to be taking too long, a gentle feel with a clean hand may reassure you the calf is the right way round. If you can't feel a face, you must work out if the feet are front or back feet! If they are back feet or you see a tail, you need to assist the birth and quickly.

Unless you have knowledgeable help at hand, call the vet pronto. As a rule Longhorns are easy calvers and most times you will come down in the morning to find a healthy calf suckling!

THE FIRST FEW HOURS

If the calf arrives with you present, rub its face and ears with a towel and immediately dip its navel with high strength iodine. Keep iodine in a jam jar, put the whole navel area in the jar, clasp it to the calf's tummy and shake vigorously. This is to prevent any bugs getting into the blood stream via the open umbilical cord. The cord should shrivel within 24 hours and if it doesn't, it may be a sign of a sickly calf. In doing this be careful of an over protective mother. Most Longhorns are happy for their owners to touch their calf, but there is always the odd one who resents it. Best to have two of you if possible and one can hold the mother off with a stick or food!

Watch to see if the calf suckles. Most will, but the first feeds of colostrum are vital and if there is any doubt at all, the cow should be tied up and the teat put in the calf's mouth, encouraging it to suckle. This is where it pays off if your cattle are well handled and used to having their udders touched. Failing this the cow can be milked and the calf fed by tube, or a feed from another just calved cow by tube, or a feed of a proprietary colostrum mix given. This is unusual but must be planned for. We wouldn't recommend using colostrum from a local dairy farm unless you are fully aware of the health status of the herd as you may inadvertently introduce diseases such as BVD into your herd. Once the calf has had a couple of colostrum feeds it should be strong enough to feed itself. The cow's udder will look full and uncomfortable and at first the calf will only suckle from one teat, but soon it will be stripping all four and the cow will produce just the amount of milk needed for her calf.

Clear up the after-birth if you find it (some cows eat it) as it is a focus for disease and encourages foxes and other animals to scavenge.



THE FIRST FEW DAYS

By law you have 20 days to eartag your calf. Try to do it at around 24 to 48 hours as the calf is easier to catch. If you are able to have three people present - one to catch and hold the calf, one to hold the mother off, and one to tag, castrate and check for extra nipples. Taking off the supernumerary teats is entirely personal choice, but they are disliked in show animals and in some cases the extra ones are so large that a calf gets muddled up. If you do decide to take them off then do it within the first couple of days after birth using a pair of sharp scissors.

THE FIRST FEW WEEKS

You need to notify BCMS of a birth on your holding within 7 days of tagging the calf (up to 27 days) and you need to register heifers and notify males to the Longhorn Cattle Society within three months. Your young calf will thrive well on it's mother's milk, but keep an eye on the cow to make sure she is producing enough milk to support her calf. If she starts to lose a lot of weight, she is 'milking off her back'. In other words she is sacrificing her only body condition in order to produce enough milk for her calf. In this case she will need either supplementary feeding or moving to better pasture.

After three months you should notice the cow bulling again and you can put her to the bull to get her back in calf. You are aiming for a calving interval of 365 days, although this is a guideline and not a necessity.

IN THE FUTURE

So now you have your first crop of Longhorn calves that are looking cute and growing well. But what will happen to them?



Your heifer calves may go into the herd to grow your numbers and start to establish your herd as a herd rather than a collection of cattle. As you get more experienced you will know which type you wish to keep and which ones you think may be suited to another breeder. Bull calves should be kept entire with caution—just because your favourite cow has had a bull calf is not sufficient justification to keep it entire .

After three years consideration will have to be given to replacing your herd sire so he doesn't serve his daughters. Planning ahead is vital to having a herd you can be proud of.

Most of all though, enjoy your cattle breeding!

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