

## AGM AOB discussion note:

Over the summer your Longhorn council has been appraising aspects of **[a] The Breed's Roles and Uses and [b] How These are Promoted**. Within this remit an obvious consideration is registration numbers in relation to the breed population and how this relates to Society finances.

The whole appraisal is a somewhat "woolly" topic and no firm conclusions were necessarily anticipated but is certainly a necessary exercise and one that it is felt should be open to the membership at the AGM. Rational discussion is healthy and it is hoped that National Beef Association Chief Executive, Neil Shand, will be present to answer any queries with respect to national policies and comparison with the situation in other breeds. Neil will be giving a light-hearted but informative talk on "The Beef Industry" at the AGM dinner on Saturday evening.

Topics that we considered included:

**Roles/uses of the breed; registration numbers; bull registrations; Pasture For Life; horns, breed promotion** [event stands, magazine, advertising, press articles; social media] **Sales** [health criteria, on-line sales, collective sales, supported unregulated sales] **Trustees** [Council make-up; meeting type [live vs Zoom] and timing [daytime/evening]

**Given the number of breeding females now within the breed we are inevitably driven towards a more commercial attitude, not least by:**

**[1] The number of people now seeing the Longhorn's commercial attributes, in particular as a commercial suckler cow and also as a quality meat producer with enough volume to now focus on a speciality market. And of course not forgetting the breed's burgeoning use on dairy cows.**

**[2] The number of animals now exceeding what can be driven solely by the "looks and amenity" market.**

**It is fortunate that we have already addressed the question of horns and, whilst for many horns are an integral part of the breed's attraction, they can - and do - detract from the breed's attributes commercially.**

**More and more slaughterhouses are refusing horned animals over a set width. If we are serious about promoting Longhorn Beef then we do need to push towards at least disbudding of steers.**

**With the progress being made as an easy calving, lively and active product out of dairy cows more hornless bulls will be needed. We do seem to have reached a lull in the demand for bulls in the Buitelaar Scheme but this may be simply because most dairymen use A.I. and many of those using a bull have been supplied? Or has the presence of horns slowed take up?**

**The background notes below attempt to set out where we are and how we got there!**

### **The Future for the Longhorn Breed Roles - Uses - Promotion - Society Policy Background**

It has been noted elsewhere that over the past 200 years the fortunes and popularity of the Longhorn has reflected its appearance in front of the public, such as attendance at agricultural shows, and the affluence of the landed gentry. Hard times followed the rise of the Shorthorn and the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws in the nineteenth century and surrounding two World Wars during the first half of the 20th Century.

The Longhorn has always been renowned for its aesthetic appeal and its docility. Its appearance from 1850 at earlier Royal Shows probably saved it at the time but by 1949 following the Second World War the herd book had lapsed and only a handful of breeders remained. A new herdbook was drawn up and in 1963, when the Royal Show settled at Stoneleigh, Longhorn classes were introduced. The death in 1972 of Ted Walters, who had been Secretary since 1932 prompted the election of John Brigg as Secretary, tasked with bringing the herdbook up to date. By 1972 there were 15 breeders, half of whom were actively showing. However between 1972 and 1975 the deaths of the owners of 6 of these herds [Watling, Hill, Grendon, Longdon, Fradley, Livingstone] gave rise to the formation of a Committee/Council; there was a breeding population of around 100 females and the Hill dispersal in 1973 had seen a further 7 new herds formed including Rousham.

1975 saw Clive Roads replace John Brigg as Secretary and John take over as Chairman. In 1976 the new RBST Show and Sale at Stoneleigh and the dispersal of Simon Gilbey's Essex herd saw 5 new breeders including Raby, Harford and Croc Mhor on the Isle of Coll. In 1978 there were 3 dispersal sales [Winthill, Grendon, Eyebrook] involving 55 females and pulling in 22 new breeders including Michael Rosenberg, Betty Weiner and Peter Close. By now there was over 200 breeding females and the breed was about to take off. Over the next 40 years the number of females would almost treble every decade until we appear to have plateaued around 10,000 - 12,000 since membership and registration fees were raised in 2014.

### **Registrations**

As the rise in numbers has apparently levelled off the number of registrations has fallen away although it may be that more are being crossed or just not registered.. At the turn of the century with about 2000 breeding females probably about 75% of the c. 1000 heifer calves were being registered. Ten years later it was perhaps 50% as we crept towards 2000 annual registrations. And now with breeding females well over 10,000 we are finding heifer registrations stuck around 1200 [25% -30% of c. 4-5000 born]

There may be several reasons for this but the Society depends upon Registrations, Memberships and Transfers for the bulk of its funding. We need to address this urgently in the immediate future. Not least is the need to promote the breed for ALL of its attributes and not just as a pretty looks niche market beef producer.

A major appeal of the Longhorn will always relate to its appearance and temperament - and for many this attraction includes the horns. But the Longhorn has so much more than its appeal in the pretty looks "garden furniture" niche market.

### **Taste and Texture**

Many breeds claim to have superior eating qualities but we have to believe that the Longhorn is exceptional and falls into a pool with the best. Perhaps we should be commissioning some work along Australian lines on eatability and on marbling qualities. Within a small breed numerically there is always going to be a limit upon how far we can push the purebred animal in the mainstream market but this does give scope for a "something special" niche market promotion whether that be in a shop front or as "boxed beef" or "freezer packs"

### **Purity of breeding.**

Whilst many of our members may see this as a major marketing point I do not feel the general customer gives this much thought - but if it works in some circumstances that is great! Embrace it!

### **Longhorn sired beef**

Several of the mainstream breeds have embraced this aspect as their main promotion. The highly successful Aberdeen Angus Quality Beef Scheme has almost sealed the breed in with a name for the best quality but it does not relate to the purebred animal and as such is an effective promotion for the sale of bulls that can sire production animals eligible for the label. Morrisons have a similar Beef Shorthorn promotion and in conjunction with Buitelaar market "Heritage Beef" from Britain's native breeds. Again it is understood that this is largely native sired out of dairy cows. Our own Buitelaar scheme has certainly been a success but I'm not entirely clear whether Buitelaar see this as just part of their Heritage Beef Scheme or whether once it grows more legs they will launch it as something extra special - one would like to think so, given the endorsement we seem to be receiving from producers!

**However the Longhorn has far more attributes than just as a beef product whether that be pure or crossbred. There are now enough purebred females to cater for a potential demand for purebred commercial sucklers suitable for crossing with either native or continental breeds. Equally there is now a demand for Longhorn bulls to breed crossbred sucklers out of either native or continental lines.**

### **The Longhorn as a purebred commercial suckler cow**

First and foremost, in my mind, is the large pelvis tilted at the best angle for easy calving. This does mean a slope on the plates which displeases some but a live calf from an easily managed cow is paramount. Low wide pin bones set deep below a level tail head provides a triangular rear view that epitomises easy calving. Some breeds have selected for both easy calving and a "square" hindquarter. The result is a conflict between a tailhead squashed between the pin bones and one that looks more like a ski slope!

The thick skin of the Longhorn affords it the hardiness to live outside if the welfare of the grassland permits. As a relatively "feed responsive" milker with generally a good yield of fairly high butterfat milk means that as a suckler they can usually achieve a balance of not laying down too much fat in summer on grass and not milking off their back in autumn/winter to the extent of jeopardising conception rates.

### **Promotion**

There are a number of herds crossing purebred Longhorn cows commercially. Some photographs from these situations could set things going. If we can build up a demand for bulling heifers at Society Sales where health protocols are applied - as do the likes of the Shorthorns and Salers - then we could hopefully see a rise in registrations

### **The Longhorn as a Suckler Dam Sire**

It was as one of these that a Longhorn bull first appeared at Fishwick in 1976 to cross onto Welsh Black females in order to "Breed A Better Suckler". They were a great success and a Simmental bull was then introduced to cross onto the Longhorn x Welsh Black..... another success. Even more successful has been the use of a Longhorn bull on Simmental cows. The Sutherlands, at Sibmister on the Pentland Firth near Thurso, bought two bulls at the First Fishwick Bull Sale in 2015 One in a Million for 4,000gns and Oligarch for 3,800gns and now run 450 Longhorn x Simmental and Longhorn x Angus cows.

On a different tack we now have more extensive producers crossing the Longhorn onto Highlands and Highland crosses on the Isle of Mull, just landward of the original home of the Croc Mhor Longhorn herd on the Isle of Coll.

There must be considerable mileage in getting a stack of photos from these and similar situations - the Barclays at Harestone are reputed to be running Longhorn cross cows acquired from Graham Willey and being put to Charolais bulls.

**There is so much that can be done to promote the breed more widely but much of it falls into "chicken and egg" situations. There is a need to attempt to co-ordinate promotion with availability - and availability needs to be co-ordinated with sales in the case of breeding animals in order to drive registrations. The same applies to marketing beef - it must be readily available if there is going to be a push. Buitelaar are probably well aware of this but we do need to keep working with them to our mutual benefit!**

**Peter Close, Chairman, Longhorn Cattle Society**