

An Oxfordshire farmer who recently established two pedigree beef cattle herds has underlined his commitment with the installation of badger-proof fencing perimeters for protection against TB. **Wendy Short** reports.

Keeping badgers out key for high health status

Bertie Facon is convinced that the £100,000 which has been spent on badger-proof stock fencing will produce a return on investment, as buyers are prepared to pay a premium for the TB-free assurance which comes with sales of his pedigree beef cattle.

Herd health is further protected through membership of the Scotland's Rural College Premium Cattle Health Scheme.

The spring-calving herds of Longhorns and Salers, registered under the Gentons prefix, are kept near Banbury on two separate holdings just a few minutes apart, with the 35 Longhorn cows and followers located at the 141-hectare (350-acre) Lessor Farm, where some 60ha (150 acres) of land has been perimeter-fenced since 2016.

Meanwhile, a similar number of Salers females can be found at the 48ha (120-acre) Painters Farm, which

has 32ha (80 acres) surrounded by the badger-proof fencing.

The fencing was installed after consultation with farm stockman Ben Bellew. It followed a TB outbreak at Lessor Farm in 2016.

"The TB outbreak taught us a sharp lesson and there is no way a badger can venture inside the perimeter," says Mr Facon, who was born in France.

Digging

"Tornado wire is used for the main element of the fence, which has a skirt that is pegged to the ground to stop badgers from digging under the barrier.

"An electric wire runs along the mid-section to prevent the badgers from climbing over the top.

"In addition, concrete slabs have been positioned under all the gateways to further prevent access."

The choice came down to whether



The [Longhorn] breed is suitable for someone who is just starting out with cattle

BERTIE FACON

to buy a new tractor or to invest in the badger-proofing, he says.

Mr Facon says: "We both felt the tractor would last for another year or two and that protecting herd health was more important. The farms fall within a six-month TB testing period and we thought it might be difficult to

sell stock without taking radical action."

There are no regrets about the decision and the business has returned a profit since 2020, with embryo and semen sales contributing to one-third of the total turnover. As well as the TB-free assurance, the herds are at risk level 1 for Johnes's disease and BVD and IBR-accredited free.

The Longhorn was chosen for a variety of reasons, he explains.

"The breed is suitable for someone who is just starting out with cattle. It is hardy with a docile temperament and the potential for producing a good commercial beef animal.

"The quality of the breed in general has improved considerably in recent years and its progress has been reflected in its growing popularity."

He admits he benefited from beginner's luck with his first Longhorn purchases in 2006, because one of the small number of cows produced a bull which went on to take the breed society's Bull of the Year Award in 2015.

By Fishwick Lord of the Rings and out of Fishwick Jamaica, Gentons 007 James Bond has put a quality stamp on the Gentons Longhorn herd.

Showing is a vital aspect of marketing and an outing at this year's Great Yorkshire saw junior Longhorn bull Gentons Usher ET win its class and go on to take the reserve male championship, while Gentons Ultra took the red ribbon in its class and stood reserve in the female championship.

Salers cow Cleuchhead Hope 1257 with calf at foot.



Farm facts

- The most recent linear assessment saw 24 animals rated Excellent out of an eligible pool of 32 head
- An average mature Gentons Longhorn cow will weigh 750kg, with a figure of 800kg for the Salers cows
- The farm also runs a flock of 200 North Country Mule ewe lambs
- The business is participating in the pilot Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme and is managing its carbon footprint to become as close to neutral as possible



Bertie Facon has established herds of Longhorn and Salers cattle.

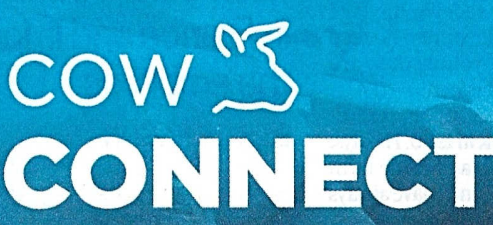
The business sells about half-a-dozen Longhorn breeding bulls annually as yearlings, with a top price of £4,500 to date. Some 20 females are also sold annually, going to private

buyers or through society sales, with prices so far peaking at £3,500.

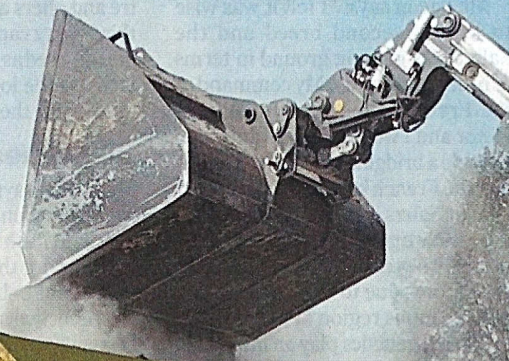
Salers cross cattle were kept in the early stages, but the breed's impressive performance led to the pedigree

herd being established in 2018. The first show outing was this year and the journey was rewarded with a breed championship for the polled female, Gentons Pasha ET.

Foundation females were sourced during a trip to the north of England and Scotland, which resulted in purchases from the Bacardi, Cleuchhead and Cumbrian herds. Numbers have



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34.6

Yield (kg/cow)

0 litres Unsold

22

Time (kg/cow)

0 kg Refused

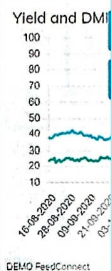
10.3

Cost (ppl)

19.7

MOAF (ppl)

Yield and DM



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LIVESTOCK



Salers youngstock grazing at Painters Farm.

also been increased with French imports.

Primary stock bull Murphy is a son of the noted Halley and caught Mr Bellew's eye while he was scrutinising cattle lines during a trip to the French Concours National Salers show in Aurillac. The bull was purchased for Gentons after taking the overall breed championship at the event.

Mr Facon says: "I felt it was wise to have a second breed and the Salers was gaining ground in terms of breed popularity. My command of the French language was another factor and I would like to think I can provide a bridge between the English and the French breed societies.

"The Salers is very easy-calving and the cows are good mothers with plenty of milk. They can also withstand harsh conditions, due to their origins in a mountainous region of France.

"Polled genetics play an important role in the Salers herd and they go back to Canadian and Scottish bloodlines. The idea is to develop the polled trait alongside the main horned part of the herd. Polling will not be the sole factor in breeding decisions,

because we do not want to compromise on shape."

Mr Bellew is credited with maintaining a high standard of livestock husbandry and for the success of the breeding programme, which exports embryos and semen to countries including New Zealand, Australia, the USA, Holland and Ireland.

The farm has its own embryo centre and offers a total isolation unit for third-party cattle. Danish Reds were initially used as recipients, but the plan is to use the lower end of the Salers females for the purpose in the future.

Bloodlines

Mr Facon says: "One of the routes we have taken to expand the bloodlines is to flush Salers cattle in France and import the embryos. This has turned out to be a simpler and more cost-effective system compared with bringing over live animals.

"The key to success with embryo transfer is to minimise stress and cows are put through the crush very quietly a number of times without taking any action, so they become used to the procedure. The area must also be kept

cool, as retention rates will suffer if the ambient temperature is too high."

Heifers of both breeds which are not deemed suitable for breeding are finished at about 24 months and their meat is sold to the local farm shop, while the steers go as 10- to 12-month-old stores.

The average growth rate for the Longhorn heifers is 0.8kg/day, with data yet to be collated on the Salers. The cows receive haylage and minerals while winter-housed on woodchip and youngstock are given access to creep feed.

Mr Facon, a former banking executive, moved to the UK in 1990. He says: "I grew up on a goat and cattle farm in the Southern Alps and I have always wanted to farm in my own right.

"I will be buried in this country; I could never go back. In France, farmers are told what they are permitted to do, but in the UK we are only told what is forbidden. The regulatory system is far less onerous in this country.

"As far as I am aware, a top quality



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cow will produce as much methane as a poor quality animal and there are many commercial reasons why pedigree cattle with the best genetics will remain saleable in the future, especially if they are easy to look after and thrive on a forage diet."

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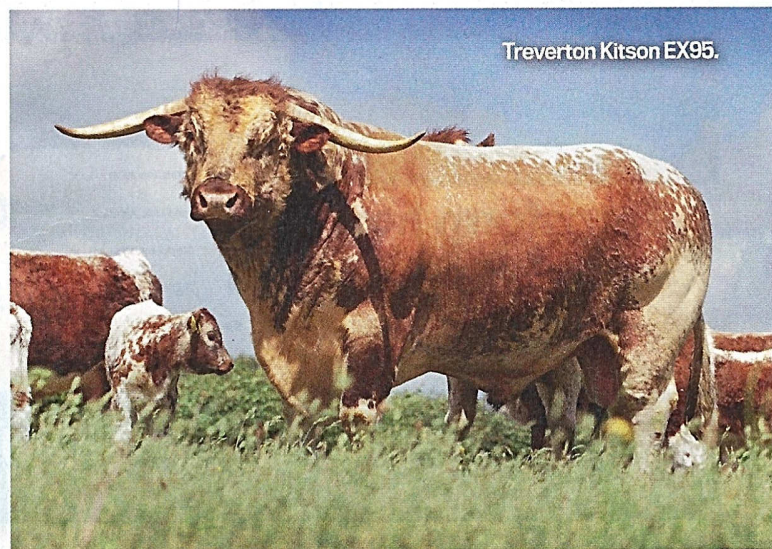
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