

FARM PROFILE

Edited by Emily Ashworth – 01772 799 473 – emily.ashworth@agriconnect.com



Selling home-produced meat of the highest quality direct to the consumer has always been at the heart of Tori and Ben Stanley's farming enterprise. **Angela Calvert** speaks to the couple about their business' continued success.

Longhorns at the heart of farm to shop business

When Tori and Ben Stanley started their farming business on just a few rented acres, retailing was the only way to make it pay.

Since then, through sheer hard work and a drive to expand, they have created a much sought-after brand for themselves and their produce is in demand.

Ben says: "We started out by selling home-produced beef and lamb at food fairs, shows and events and a box scheme. We then progressed to farmers markets in London.

"At the peak we were doing four markets in London every Saturday, which although very hard work, was a way of growing the business without any capital, as all we had to do was pay for the pitch."

The couple initially worked from a cutting room on-farm which quickly evolved into a small farm shop as the business grew and local demand increased.

While Ben is from a farming family in Leicestershire, Tori's background is in marketing and she had no previous experience of agriculture before meeting Ben. Although she says this is an advantage as she looks at things from a different perspective and, while it was a steep learning curve, it is a life she has embraced wholeheartedly.

In 2015, the couple, who now have two children – Bertie, six, and Iona, four – took on the tenancy of 162-hectare (400-acre) Park Farm in Melbourne, Derbyshire, which enabled them to increase livestock numbers and develop the business further.

Then, two years later, they also took on a farm shop in nearby Kings

Newton, when previous occupiers retired, renaming it Tori and Ben's Farm Shop.

The two arms of the business work hand in hand with everything produced on-farm, with the exception of some heifers kept as replacements, being sold through the shop.

Central to the business is their herd of Longhorn cattle, which now stands at 60 pedigree Longhorns and 10 Longhorn cross Simmental cross cows.

Tasting

Ben says: "Longhorns work for us at every level, as not only do they produce superb tasting meat with just the right amount of marbling, but they have all the right maternal traits. They are very milky with high butterfat, easy calving with good temperaments and thrive on living out for most of the year."

Farm facts

- 162 hectares (400 acres); 142ha (350 acres) on a long-term Farm Business Tenancy, 20ha (50 acres) owned
- Additional 40ha (100 acres) of grassland and buildings rented
- 121ha (300 acres) in arable rotation of grass/forage rape/wheat/barley

- 40ha (100 acres) of grass in parkland restoration Higher Level Stewardship
- 60 pedigree Longhorn and 10 Longhorn cross Simmental calves
- 300 ewes
- All stock apart from replacement heifers finished and sold through Tori and Ben's Farm Shop



Inside the farm shop.

FARM PROFILE DERBYSHIRE



Melbourne Park Longhorns just weaned after their first calf.

121ha (300 acres) in an arable rotation. This consists of a 12- to 18-month grass ley/forage rape, followed by wheat then barley, with 10ha (25 acres) of maize also grown.

Ben says: "We have replaced oilseed rape with direct drilled grass as a break crop and it is established as soon as the combine leaves the field. Typically, this is grazed with sheep over winter before taking three cuts of silage, being grazed with cattle and then put into first wheat.

"We are constantly reassessing what we do and are not afraid to make changes to the system. On a small mixed farm like this one, you have to be prepared to be flexible and adaptable. It is not an option to do what you have always done.

"We can't afford to buy fertiliser at the price it is now which is £350-£400 per tonne more than we paid last year. It would cost us an extra £50,000 which is just not viable, and it might not be a bad thing as it really focuses the mind on what you are doing.

"We will have to just have to be a bit smarter, farm a bit more extensively, probably grow more grass and increase sheep numbers and get rid of any stock which is underperforming. We also intend to graze the younger cattle for longer behind an electric fence rather than housing them and feeding a TMR.

"Everything we grow, apart from some corn which is sold to pay the rent, is fed back to stock and all the stock is sold through the shop.

"The aim is to produce 300-350kg of meat/ha per year.

"The split is four-fifths beef to one-fifth lamb so the target is 47,000kg of beef and 11,000kg of lamb a year, which should give a return of £1,500/ha gross."



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BEN STANLEY

The butchery is central to the success of the farm shop with the emphasis very much on the provenance of the meat and the story behind it. It continues to go from strength to strength with sales boosted by Covid-19 and the aim is to continue to increase the amount of home-produced meat retailed.

Shopping

Tori says: "We became Covid-19-compliant very quickly, installing screens and making sure people felt safe shopping with us as they really were terrified.

"We also had to become a one-stop shop. Previously, we had mainly focused on meat sales, but we started to stock a wider range of goods, so customers didn't need to go anywhere else.

"We also set up an online order system where they could come and collect from outside the shop and did home deliveries, sometimes up to 40/day, and we had to take on



Longhorn and cross-bred beef cattle in the fattening shed.



Texel cross Mule ewes put to Charollais tups.

extra staff, mainly people who had been furloughed."

Last year they took 900 Christmas orders, way above the usual 350, but this year is up even more at 1,700 and counting.

Tori says: "We started taking orders in October and whereas last year customers were ordering medium sized birds, this year everyone wants a bigger one as they are planning to host a big family Christmas."

About 70 per cent of customer travel up to 20 minutes to the shop and the remainder, up to an hour.

Ben says: "We have some very loyal customers and some who still visit after starting to buy from us when we stood the farmers markets in London.

"It is very rewarding when customers keep returning and tell us just how much they are enjoying our meat."

About 150 Longhorn and Longhorn cross cattle are finished for the shop each year, with some whole carcasses also sold to local butchers.

Target grades are R4L-H with steers at 330kg and heifers at 300kg deadweight and killing out at 55 per cent. They are finished from 18-24 months after having two summers at grass and then come inside and fed a total mixed ration (TMR).

This comprises high protein grass silage and maize plus 8kg per day of homegrown barley.

In addition to their own cattle, the Stanleys buy in a number of Longhorn-sired stores from two other producers to finish for the shop.

Their latest initiative to generate a great volume of consistently uniform cattle to expand sales is to take dairy cross Longhorn calves, produced on two local dairy farms which they have supplied with a Longhorn bull. The first calves are already on the ground and the aim is to have an additional 100-200 calves a year.

The plan is also to introduce a Simmental bull for the older spring calving Longhorn cows.

Ben says: "Pure-bred Longhorns have a daily liveweight gain of 0.9-1kg on good grass, whereas the cross-bred can achieve 1.3kg at grass and 1.6kg inside. This means we can finish them pre-Christmas and avoid the need for autumn calving.

"When selling beef, the main thing is to have consistency. We label everything in the shop exactly what it is, either Longhorn or Longhorn cross, and the same with the breed of lamb.

"We do have real foodies who come to the shop, especially for Longhorn beef, but even the cross-bred beef has superb marbling with real flavour and tenderness."

The farm is also home to 300 ewes, mainly Texel cross Mules which are put to a Charollais ram to produce lambs for the shop, aiming for a U3L carcass at 22-24kg deadweight. There are also small pedigree flocks of Jacobs, Border Leicesters, Texels and Portlands.

Finished

Lambing takes place in early January and April to provide a year-round supply of lamb for the shop. The early lambs are finished intensively and sold at 16 weeks old, with the April lambs finished on turnips and forage with no additional feed.

While meat production is key to the success of the business, pedigree breeding remains important, with the aim of constantly improving genetics using performance recording to identify desired traits.

The pedigree sheep and cattle are also shown, and 2021 successes include taking the Jacob championship at the Great Yorkshire Show with an aged ewe and the inter-breed beef championship at Staffordshire County Show with the Longhorn cow, Melbourne Fizz.

The Stanleys take a proactive approach to animal health, working very closely with their vet, Robert Howard of Derbyshire Farm Vets, on a health policy.

Ben says: "We take a balanced approach of regular monitoring and keep our sourcing circle deliberately small, so we know the health status of our suppliers.

"All incoming stores and dairy calves from these farms are screened for infectious bovine rhinotracheitis [IBR] and bovine viral diarrhoea [BVD] on-farm before their departure. On arrival they are always isolated.

"All replacements entering the suckler herd are screened for BVD,

IBR and leptospirosis and at the annual bTb test we screen about a dozen cows randomly for Johnes.

"Our precautionary method suits our system, especially as all our stock is marketed through the shop and minimises the cost of being a member health scheme. However, in the future if we progressed into selling more breeding stock, health scheme membership would be very important for customer confidence and marketing."

At Park Farm there are 40ha (100 acres) of grass which is in a parkland restoration Higher Level Stewardship scheme, with the remaining



Tori and Ben Stanley



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