



At 60 pedigree cows plus followers, it is now one of the larger Longhorn herds in the country.



Tom Mills puts his impressive Longhorn herd at the centre of his strategy for the future.

Longhorn cattle are taking centre stage in the future direction of the beef business being run by Tom Mills and his family, with the farm's position in the Peak District also playing its part. **Chloe Palmer** reports.

Iconic breed taking on modern-day farming challenges

Ahead of the seismic changes soon to affect the agricultural sector, Tom Mills is evaluating the resilience of his family farm. Like many who farm in the uplands, he perceives the reduction of the Basic Payment Scheme as a huge challenge but he has ambitious plans.

Nestled into the Peak District hills not far from Chatsworth, Bubnell Cliff Farm enjoys a picturesque aspect from every angle. Mr Mills hopes this outlook will form part of the future success of the farm, along with the impressive pedigree Longhorn herd which takes centre stage in his strategy for the future.

He says: "We have to look at the farm as a business and how we can make it work with a new focus. I am really passionate about the environment and this works well with the

direct retail of our Longhorn beef because people are buying the story."

Mr Mills is perhaps a little unusual as, alongside the farm, he has a career working as an operations director in the water and environmental sector.

He says: "In my teens I did not see myself farming, although I always loved living on the farm, and Mum and Dad were keen I had a back-up plan besides farming. But now we are living very close to the farm and I am becoming more and more involved."

Mr Mills' father, Chris, has farmed at Bubnell Cliff Farm as a tenant of the Chatsworth Estate since 1987 and until 2011, it was a dairy farm. After the milk cows went, his father reared calves which he bought-in and also had a small suckler herd.

Since Mr Mills bought his first Longhorn cow and calf in 2006, the numbers of Longhorns have grown steadily.



I am really passionate about the environment and this works well with the direct retail of our Longhorn beef because people are buying the story

TOM MILLS

Mr Mills adds: "I bought-in more animals and also increased our own home-bred cows by using artificial insemination initially, which has given

us a broad genetic base within our herd.

"At 60 pedigree cows plus followers, we are now one of the larger Longhorn herds in the country and we register all our pedigree animals under the Wheatlands prefix. I am aiming for 70 breeding females and a total of 250-head in the herd."

Mr Mills' investment in high quality genetics is now paying dividends and the purchase in 2019 of Blackbrook Axiom, currently the highest classified (EX95) Longhorn bull in the country marked a major step for the herd.

Stamp

"Axiom has made a real stamp on our herd and we now have 40 heifers from him. A big part of our business will be selling pedigree animals moving forwards and next year we plan to start selling batches of females," Mr Mills says.

When it comes to the cows, Mr Mills adds he is looking for an animal with a level top line, which is deep bodied with a parallel lower line.

He says: "She will have a good length through the loin as this is where all the more expensive cuts come from."

"I look for a shapely rump and the shoulders should not be too coarse. She needs a roomy pelvis as this creates a large birth canal as easy calving is key and something the Longhorn is renowned for. We only typically intervene with one or two calvings in a year, just to give a little pull."

Mr Mills believes the dual purpose origins of the breed partly account for the milkiness of the breed, especially on low input grass-based systems.

"Until now, many people viewed the Longhorn principally as a conservation grazing animal but they now realise the breed can compete and



Farm facts

■ Bubnell Cliff Farm is an all-grass farm which extends to 123 hectares (307 acres) and is situated in the Peak District National Park

■ The Wheatlands pedigree herd of Longhorns currently numbers 60 breeding cows plus followers, totalling 133-head

■ Tom Mills' father, Chris, keeps about 16 commercial sucklers and followers and up to 100 calves which are reared and sold as strong stores at 18 months through Bakewell market

■ To date, all Longhorn females have been retained within the herd

■ Steers are either retailed through the farm's box scheme or sold finished to specialist outlets

■ A small number of bulls are sold privately either to local dairy farmers or to pedigree Longhorn herds

■ Longhorns for the box scheme are slaughtered in Chesterfield and butchered, vacuum packed and labelled at a local farmshop. The beef is then sold in 10kg boxes of mixed cuts retailing at £125 per box

PICTURES: JOHN EVESON

out-perform other beef breeds when converting forage to meat and as a maternal animal.

"We only start giving the calves creep at the end of September at a rate of about 2kg/day until weaning.

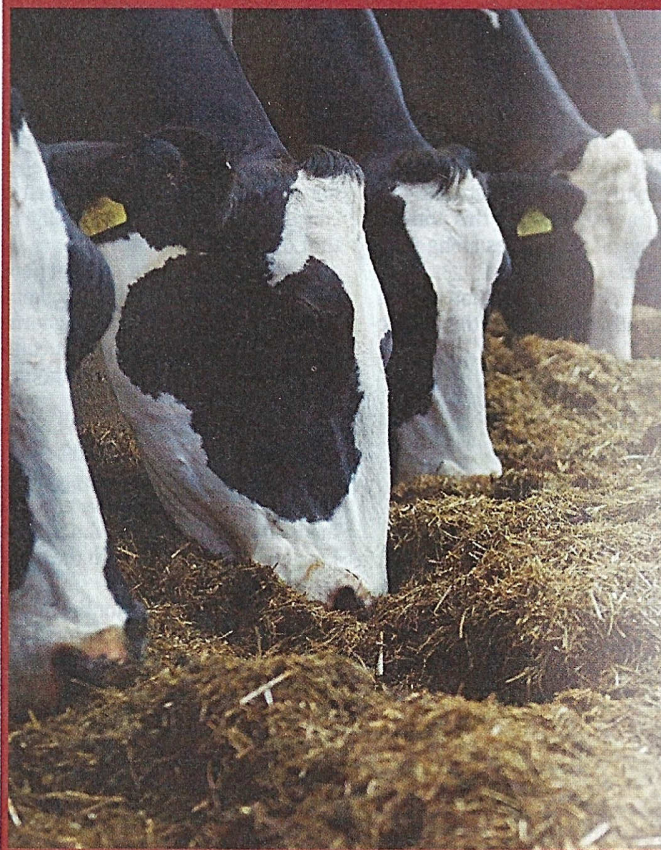
We then keep them on this through the winter with ad lib silage; the heifers will never see concentrate feed again after their first winter.

"We aim to turn the youngstock out in March or early April if we can

because we get a little early bite here and some of the older animals will go out as soon after this as possible."

He adds that steers are housed in their second winter and fed ad lib grass silage only and then are turned out

MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY BITE



With the cost of bought-in feed rising, every bite counts when it comes to milk production and profitability.

Actisaf® Sc 47 live yeast is scientifically proven to support rumen function and drive feed efficiency in even the highest performing cows.

Research has shown that feeding Actisaf at 10 grams per cow per day delivers up to **5.9% more energy corrected milk** from the same amount of feed - without affecting cow health, fertility or body condition.

Adding **Actisaf® live yeast** to your dairy ration can **return up to 8x your investment** and improving feed efficiency is key to delivering improved environmental sustainability.

Can you afford not to use Actisaf this winter?

Learn more at
www.yeastolutions.co.uk
or call us at **028 9334 3900**

ActiSaf Sc 47



Easy calving is key and something the Longhorn is renowned for.



Five-year-old stock bull Blackbrook Axiom.



Heifers never see concentrate feed again after their first winter.

again in March or April in the third season.

"We try to finish them off grass but this can be challenging later in the season, so we feed a small amount of 14 per cent concentrate when required.

"We are looking for an animal with a good fat covering so we can hang them for four weeks to give us the flavour and texture we are looking for."

Animals are slaughtered at about 28 months and between 650kg and 700kg liveweight, aiming for a deadweight of between 380kg and 400kg and an R4L carcass.

Mr Mills says: "We aim to only house the Longhorns for about four months each year as they do not like coming inside and need a good space for feeding."

Feeding

Mr Mills acknowledges he would like to rear his animals purely off grass but 'not at the expense of a well-finished animal'. He points to the role of feeding in achieving the prized marbling in Longhorn beef.

"Longhorns lay down intramuscular fat alongside subcutaneous fat and it is this which gives the marbling appearance. In contrast, other breeds generally lay down subcutaneous fat first.

"It is harder to obtain marbling in grass-fed animals, especially younger ones. I think, if we can improve the nutritional content of our swards this will help and so we are now establishing and restoring diverse leys across the farm wherever possible," Mr Mills adds.

Adopting a more biodiverse grassland sward across the farm is just one of the measures Mr Mills is implementing to increase the ecological value of the farm. Accessing funding from the new Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) scheme will allow Mr Mills to create 450 metres (1,475 feet) of new hedgerow this winter, as well as planting trees along relic hedge lines.

"We are seeking to replicate the old field boundaries to restore the historic

landscape of the farm, as well as providing shelter and creating some stockproof boundaries. This will help us to be able to graze more of the farm eventually, as previously much of this land was mown.

"We have also used FiPL funding to establish herbal leys and although with previous herbal leys we had quite a bit of weed, we are learning to manage this. Most recently we over-sowed a new ryegrass ley which struggled to establish in the dry spring and it has already germinated and is looking good.

"We find we need to allow a five- to six-week period each spring before grazing to allow the herbs to flower. We hope the increased clover and other legumes in the sward will allow us to use even less fertiliser," Mr Mills says.

Evidencing the farm's environmental credentials is a vital part of the marketing strategy for their growing boxed meat scheme, adds Mr Mills.

"Our consumer base is mainly local and people choose to live here often because they enjoy being in an ecologically diverse area. People see our farming methods are in tune with nature and our beef is produced in a more sustainable way than meat from many other outlets."

Business plan

Currently Mr Mills is selling one animal per month through the box scheme, but his business plan sets a target of one animal a week within two years.

"My day job has given me the freedom to build up the retail side gradually and prove it is a viable business. We have plans to build an on-farm butchery and this will enable us to expand our offering to the hospitality trade as well as the boxed meat," Mr Mills says.

And in his role as chair of the Longhorn Cattle Society, Mr Mills is keen to concentrate on raising the profile of the Longhorn.

"I want to increase engagement with the next generation of Longhorn breeders and demonstrate Longhorns can form the cornerstone of a commercial beef enterprise, competing with other native breeds."

Mr Mills admits the horns are a sticking point for some would-be producers, but he points to the steers in his herd which he de-horns, arguing this is an option for those who like the Longhorn but struggle with the practical issue of horns.

Mr Mills is optimistic for the future of both the breed and the business.

He says: "The Longhorn is an iconic breed ideally placed to take on the challenges and opportunities of farming in the 21st century. Its rise in popularity with both pedigree breeders, commercial beef farmers and as a beef sire in the dairy industry is demonstrating its fantastic versatility."