

BEN AND TORI STANLEY

Melbourne Park Longhorns

When passion for a breed is so intense that one side of a large cattle shed wall is painted with the words “Welcome to Longhorn country” there is no doubting the commitment, dedication and confidence that Ben and Tori Stanley have for the Longhorn breed.

That passion and commitment has grown significantly since moving to the 520-acre Park Farm some seven years ago, but prior to that, Ben and Tori admit the business has grown from humble beginnings.

The couple were renting a small 10-acre property, which then grew to 100 acres, some of which they still rent now. They had a larger focus on sheep production along with running three Simmental cross Longhorn cows; two of which are still in the breeding herd today, while at the same time Ben was buying Longhorn steers from Rousham Estate, Oxfordshire.

“Initially farming on a large scale wasn’t a priority for us, we wanted to start from a retail end and work back to be able to generate as much from each animal as possible,” comments Ben who undertook a Nuffield Scholarship looking at meat quality.

“We were doing four farmers markets in London every weekend - Notting Hill, Highgate, West Hampstead and Hampstead Heath. We did this for eight years, travelling down from Derbyshire and while it was

certainly hard work we learnt a lot about customer relationships and producing a luxury product in high demand,” adds Tori.

Having purchased three pedigree Longhorn heifers from various dispersals, the Melbourne Park herd began to grow. No strangers to the breed, Ben’s parents Pat and John Stanley own the noted Blackbrook herd and while Ben is incredibly proud of his Longhorn roots and his parent’s success within the breed, his intention has always been to forge his and Tori’s own path, particularly when it comes to selecting dam lines.

“Our original intention wasn’t to go in running a breeding herd as we were more market focussed rather than breeding focussed, but when we moved to Park Farm on a 25-year tenancy, the opportunity was too good not to take. Equally, the growth of the suckler enterprise meant we could produce a consistent, luxury beef product by having more control from start to finish which ultimately meant we could sell the story from start to finish,” says Ben.



Tori and Ben Stanley reflecting on the family’s win at The Great Yorkshire Show.

Blackbrook sires have been used selectively over the years. In fact, their son Bertie was gifted Blackbrook Trapper by Pat and John as a christening present - a bull that really shaped the future for the herd.

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Ben and Tori then purchased a whole herd from Suffolk and within this came Blackbrook Touchstone, another foundation stock getter. “Over the years we have tightened up cow quality in terms of improving udder strength and producing a more consistent frame shape.

“From buying in stores, which we still need to do to meet demand, we have learnt that the rangier ones work far better as they need that compensatory growth in getting finish on the frame at the right time. The Longhorn works perfectly for us, producing excellent flavoured beef and slower maturing, finishing at 24-30 months of age. It is hugely rewarding to see the progression of the herd over the years and it makes us proud to see what we have achieved so far,” adds Ben.

While the showing element of running a pedigree livestock business isn’t a huge priority, the family do take part in local shows and have had great success, including most recently celebrating a breed championship at The Great Yorkshire Show

this year, as well as having notched up various breed and interbreed championship wins at local shows. Former Longhorn Cattle Society breed ambassadors, the couple have also won the Cow of the Year title in 2019 and Bull of the Year in 2022.

“While it’s good to compare our stock amongst other progressive herds, we actually attend shows for our children. Bertie and Iona get a lot of enjoyment from it, which is greatly aided by the docile nature of the breed. And as Tori admits, the show news provides great social media content for keeping their ever-growing meat customers in touch with farm activities.

Alongside the Longhorns, the family run a commercial sheep flock of 250 Texel Mules, as well as a successful flock of Jacob sheep, a growing flock of Texels and a recently established Border Leicester flock.

The 80-cow Melbourne Park herd is all spring calving with the aim of rotating arable with grass. Some 70 acres of new grass is grown a year with the highest protein content. The couple prefer to keep the cows out for as long as possible, but due to the land type, winter housing must be available.





The majority of the herd calve in February having been on grass silage and straw for the winter and are then out unless the weather has other ideas, with cows managed as a number of satellite herds to maintain the consistency of the product. "Ideally I would like to run an autumn calving crossbred herd also to meet demand, but our current housing situation will not allow for that," adds Ben.

One of the hotly discussed topics of the Longhorn breed is disbudding and Ben admits he has a head versus heart mentality. "The practicalities sometimes outweigh the characteristics of the breed, but ultimately stocking density and space control are the decision makers," admits Ben. Youngstock are weaned at 280-320kg, with bulls having been steered and going on to be fed maize grass silage and barley.

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The crossbred cattle are finished in under 24 months with two summers at grass and then transitioned to home grown barley. During the last few months, a simple TMR ration is fed. Ben is adamant that while the Longhorn is a high-end quality, native product, it still requires a finishing period on concentrates to enhance the meat-eating quality through the carcass being balanced with fat distribution, coupled with the leanness of the meat. "Weanlings are fed less than 1kg of barley a day and when hitting the finishing period, 8kg of rolled barley is fed to just create that finish we are looking for. We have dropped purchased protein from the diet as our customers do not want soya. Although we haven't seen any difference in performance, we certainly have on savings," comments Ben.

Not only are Ben and Tori passionate about the breed, they are thoroughly animated when it comes to overall meat quality and meat-eating experience. "Those that are marketing Longhorn beef need to pool together and produce markers for the breed in terms of production efficiency and meat-eating

quality, perhaps by working with chefs to better market the message and ultimately grow the numbers within the breed. There is so much more to a Longhorn than a rare breed parkland animal," says Ben.

Ben and Tori are focussed on putting foundations down for their family, for their herd and for their growing butchery and farm shop, but above that they are all about telling the truth about their beef production by working closely with their talented butchery team at the butchery and farm shop in Melbourne.

"In 2017 the local farm shop became available as the couple running it decided to retire. At the time we were running from a unit in the village and had bought a refrigerated display, so this seemed the next logical step and we took the shop on in the October," explains Tori.

The shop now requires 150 bodies of beef a year to meet the demand with the couple supplying wholesale, restaurants, racetracks, sports tracks, other butchers' shops, farm shops, cafes, street food and of course the trade from the general public. As part of the available products, Pockington pork and chicken are sold alongside the deli counter, lamb, veg, milk, and bread with a host of other regional products.

On top of show success, the couple have been recognised as Beef Innovators of the Year in 2016 and have been listed in the Daily Telegraph in their Top 20 farm shop listings. Even The Daily Mail recently quoted Tori and Ben's Farm Shop as "one of Britain's most flourishing farm shops" and there is no doubt as to their desire to provide high-end quality, honest beef for their customers, which has led to their business trebling in strength all while allowing their pledge to keep investing in the environment and producing sustainable meat to continue.

