

LONGHORN

Cattle Society

SELECTING LONGHORN BULLS

One of the most important decisions you will make in the lifetime of your herd will be the bulls you use. Your aim should always be to strive to improve on what you already have, so selecting the right bull will mean improvement, but choosing the wrong bull could set your herd back many years as you try to rectify the faults introduced into your herd.

Do you need a bull?

Firstly you need to decide whether keeping a bull is for you or not. If you only have a few cows you may decide that using one of the bulls available via AI scheme is more suited to your system as you can plan your calving date and don't have the added management of a bull. Managing a bull takes planning - unless you want to calve all year round the bull needs to be kept away from the cows other than when you want them served. You have to make sure your heifer calves and young heifers are not exposed to the bull otherwise unwanted pregnancies will result. If you have limited land and/or buildings then keeping a bull may not be practical for you.

First steps

So you've decided you want to keep a stockbull. Firstly look on the Society website or contact the Secretary for any information on bulls that might be for sale. Alternatively go to one of the Society's official sales, or bid on any bulls entered into one of the Society's online sales.

A good way to assess bulls is to go to a show near you that has Longhorn classes. Here you can see a number of bulls and compare them to see which type you feel would be suitable for your herd. It will also give you the opportunity to talk to breeders and get their advice about selecting a bull.

Many bulls are also type classified and given a score by an independent assessor; more information on the type classification scheme can be found on the Society website or from the Secretary.

What age of bull should you buy?

Most bulls are ready to start working on a few cows at two years of age. If you decide to buy a young, unproven bull do not just drop the ramp of the trailer, throw him into a field of cows and tell him to get on with it! Young bulls are inexperienced, so it's best to introduce him to a few cows in his first year, and remember to keep an eye on his body condition. He will still be growing and may need supplementary feed to keep him in good shape and maintain his growth rate so he matures into a full grown bull capable of working for many years.

A more mature bull will be less phased by (and probably highly delighted to see) a large group of cows. A senior bull should be able to serve about 40 cows a year, less if you block calve, but again his body condition must be maintained if you are expecting him to work hard.

What should you look for in a bull.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but your first consideration must be that the bull has the type of conformation that will enhance and improve your herd. If you have cows then your choice of bull can include those that have a tendency to throw larger calves that cows will be able to calve, but heifers may struggle with.

If you have deep bodied cows but you want to improve the hindquarters of their offspring then choose a bull that has a good behind. If you feel your cows are lacking in length or depth then select a bull that can assist with the correction of those faults. Remember you are looking to improve your herd with each subsequent generation, so don't buy a bull just because he's got long eyelashes or a cute name!

You think you've found a bull you like - what now?

You've narrowed your search down to two or three bulls you think you like the look of. The obvious thing to do is visit them on farm (if you are buying them privately). If he's a more mature bull you should ask to see some of his offspring so you can see how his calves are looking when used on his current owner's cows. If he is a young bull then you will take more of a leap of faith as he won't have any calves to see, but you may be able to see his sire, dam or siblings.

Check the health status of the herd the bull is coming from. Do they test for Johne's disease, IBR, BVD and Leptospirosis. Speak to your vet before you buy a new bull so he can advise you regarding testing and vaccination. What TB area are they in?

Any bull has to be healthy in order to work so check that he is physically sound. It goes without saying the fertility is of paramount importance. Size does matter and scrotal circumference is a good indicator of fertility. Bulls over two years old should have a scrotal circumference of at least 30cm.

One of the other important things is locomotion—he needs to have good feet and be able to walk with a natural, free stride. He should have good eyes and not have an over or undershot jaw. All these elements are checked when the bull is registered, but the current owner should have no objection to the animal being inspected by your vet should you wish. Body condition will influence a bull's ability to work—a bull in show condition may need to lose some weight before they are introduced to the cows and this could take four to six weeks so factor this into your mating plans.

Please ask the owner if you can see the bull's pedigree certificate, or check with the office that the bull is registered. If you use an unregistered bull NONE of the offspring will be eligible for pedigree registration.

You've bought a bull - what now?

As with any new introductions to your herd bulls should be isolated for three weeks. This will give time for any test results for the diseases mentioned previously to come back. The isolation facilities should allow the bull to have exercise and be able to familiarise himself with the sights, smells and sounds of his new home, and will give you the chance to get to know him.

Worm the bull when he arrives, and consult your vet regarding sheath washes and antibiotic treatment to prevent the transmission of campylobacter.

Watch the bull for any signs of being off colour during his time in isolation. If he goes off his food, is looking dull or listless or is in respiratory distress then consult your vet immediately.

A bull that is happy to be handled or led on a halter is far easier to manage so make handling a positive experience by rewarding with food. It is recommended that you do not handle a bull alone—no bull, however quiet and amenable he may seem, can be trusted 100%.

Unless the bull needs to lose weight ensure any feeding regime is continued to maintained his body condition.

Your stock bull has sired a bull calf that you're thinking of registering. What should you do?

Just because Freddy the bull has sired your first bull calf out of your favourite cow does not mean he should be registered. Bull registration has to be undertaken applying objective rather than subjective criteria.

Firstly make sure he is birth notified by the time he is three months old. Any bulls not notified are not eligible for registration. Then read the rules on registration in the herd book, paying particular attention to the daily liveweight gain required for registration. The weights are not hard to obtain, but the bull may require feeding in order to make the weight so ensure you weigh him regularly. Once the bull is 365 days old or weighs 431kg you can apply to the office for a registration, and you have up to 800 days. However it is recommended that you ensure your bull is registered before he is used so that his offspring are eligible for registration.

Apply the same criteria to registering a bull which you would to buying a bull. Does he have good conformation? Will he improve the breed? Would you be proud to have him working in someone else's herd? If you are unsure of the answers to any of these questions, or just require a second opinion then ring the office to arrange for a Council member to visit. Registering a bull is a serious undertaking and better to ask before you commit yourself.

