

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE WHEATLANDS HERD

Longhorns are the central tenet to the future farming ambitions of one Derbyshire-based farming family who have recently taken on a tenancy on Chatsworth Estate.



For Tom Mills, the move to full time farming follows a period of farming alongside his parents who had the tenancy previously. "My family have been farming locally for four generations, having been at Bubnell Cliff Farm since 1987 and prior to that as tenants on another Chatsworth farm on the other side of the village.

"My parents milked here for more than 20 years, going out of dairying in 2011 and transitioning to rearing bought-in calves to forward stores. In the meantime, I had purchased a pair of Milton bred Longhorn cows in 2006 when I graduated from Loughborough University with a degree in civil engineering.

"With a career outside of farming I wanted to keep a connection to the farm and a small 'hobby' herd of Longhorns was my way of doing that," explains Tom.

"I balanced an increasing herd with a full-time career and a young family, but in the last two to three years it became apparent that if I was going to farm successfully, I needed to farm full-time and commit to it as a business."

In his own words, Tom says his wife Jo, who works as a lawyer and is not from a farming background, took a bit of convincing that giving up his job to become a full-time farmer was more than just a mid-life blip! A business plan was put together based around the Longhorn herd and adding value to their produce and put to the Chatsworth Estate with a view to taking on the tenancy of the farm.

"Chatsworth were supportive of the plan and in March 2022 my mother and father retired and we started a new 20 year tenancy here at Bubnell Cliff Farm.



"Our plan was focussed on three key areas. The first of these is direct retail of top quality, sustainable, high welfare Longhorn beef. Allied to that is the sale of breeding stock and the third leg is an on-farm diversification in the form of a camping barn," says Tom.

The plan is to retain more income from boxed beef sales in-house with an on-farm butchery.

Beef sales are the founding principle of the business for Tom, currently using one beast a month, he aims for a target 350-380kg carcass weight at an R4L grade.

"We slaughter at a local abattoir in Chesterfield, with carcasses hung and processed at a local farm shop which cuts, packs and labels the beef for us. Sales have built steadily, predominantly through social media and word of mouth, with sales from each animal grossing £2500-£2600."

Tom says that after £600/head of direct costs involved with slaughter, processing, packaging and delivery this is still leaving a reasonable margin over the finished trade, although this differential has reduced as commercial prime prices have risen.

"We've been reluctant to increase prices due to the cost-of-living crisis, so have been looking at

other ways of increasing margin. One area we have explored with success is using older cows for beef boxes. These animals have a lower commercial value than prime steers and heifers which have been commanding premiums through the live market in recent times.

"So far, we've slaughtered one eight-year-old cow and a four-year-old too. After maturing for five weeks the prime cuts have been marketed as specials through a local pub we supply, the Blind Bull at Little Hucklow, with the remainder sold as 'winter warmer' and 'family essentials' boxes."

Adding value to these older animals is proving worthwhile, with recent primestock sales through Bakewell Market having hit 280p/kg for Longhorn steers, some 20p/kg in excess of other native breeds sold on the same day.

"Looking ahead the plan is to try and retain more of the income from boxed beef sales in-house by developing an on-farm butchery with the aim of processing about 50 of our own cattle a year," he adds.





Looking at the second part of the long-term business plan Tom says the desire to increase breeding stock sales can now be realised as herd numbers are at a stage where surplus females can be offered for sale. "We assess the females based on both their physical qualities and the cow family they come from. Linear classification is also proving a useful tool, with 23 of the current herd classified Excellent and a further 27 classified Very Good."

Tom says current herd size means up to 10 heifers a year will be retained, 5-10 will be put through the beef box enterprise, with the remainder offered for sale as breeding stock if there is sufficient demand, with a further 5-6 bull calves kept entire as potential breeding bulls to sell.



"Heifer sales are good and demand for bulls has been increasing in recent years, with a notable demand from commercial beef and dairy farmers. Importantly, to help maximise these sales we disbud about half the bull calves each year which has been a factor for many of the commercial customers," explains Tom.

Breeding lines in the herd have expanded since the initial purchases, with females sourced from the Blackbrook, Wellhead and Gorse herds and more recent additions from the Tanfield dispersal as well as others from Fishwick and Melbourne Park. "The herd now numbers 70 cows, with more than 200 head of Longhorns on the farm at any one point," adds Tom.

"Without a doubt one of the best investments we made was purchasing Blackbrook Axiom as a two-year-old bull from John and Pat Stanley. Now classified EX95, he is the joint highest classified bull in the breed and has left an outstanding legacy of breeding females in the herd.

"Adding to the sire line-up is Southfield Nitro, an EX93 classified bull that I first spotted at the Great Yorkshire Show in 2014 when he was a junior bull. He was put up for sale by David and Angela Blockley a few years after that, but it wasn't the right time for us to buy him.

"However, last year I spotted him for sale on SellMyLivestock and moved quickly to secure him. His first calves are on the ground here and are looking tremendous. Hopefully, he'll have a huge impact on the herd over the next few years," he adds.

Much like their business plan, Tom farms in a regime of thirds too, with the 300-acre ring-fenced farm managed in three distinct blocks.

The first of these is a block of productive ryegrass leys which are used to produce a single cut of silage in early June, with this grassland then grazed by about 35 cows and followers from July through to housing.

"Our second block is the main grazing area, with this now being about half and half between standard leys and herbal leys. These herbal leys are grazed on a 4-5 week rotation and have proven to be highly productive and drought resistant which was extremely beneficial during the dry summer of 2022.

"The final third of the farm is largely made up of semi-improved grassland dale with successional areas of scrub and woodland valleys. This land has recently been entered into a higher tier countryside stewardship agreement, targeted at woodland pasture creation," adds Tom.

"The environmental aspect of farming is important to me and we're trying to do what we can to improve the farmed environment while also building a sustainable business.

"One part of this which is perhaps often overlooked is reducing reliance on bought-in feed and our aim is to only use feed where necessary. Historically we have creep fed calves from an early age. However, we now only introduce creep for a few weeks ahead of weaning to try and avoid a check in calves at that stage.

"When we were creep feeding from a younger age, I found the cows were becoming lazy and started carrying too much condition. There is no point paying to keep the cow and then paying to feed its calf too!"

Tom says this stricter approach to feeding is also playing a big part in replacement selection too, enabling him to see which cows make a good job of their calves without losing too much condition themselves. "Those are the females we want to keep in the herd and retain heifers from.

"Once weaned, calves are housed for their first winter and are fed ad-lib silage with 1-2kg of concentrate offered too. This keeps them growing steadily over the winter without getting fat and means they go on to grow a frame in their second summer at grass," he explains.

Linear classification is a useful tool, with 23 of the current herd classified Excellent.

The aim then is to finish heifers off grass at 25-28 months, with retained heifers bulled to calve down at three years old. "A small number of the steers will finish off grass, but most do require some concentrate too and while we try to do as much as we can off grass, we don't want to compromise the end product.

"There is no point keeping the animal for more than two years to then sacrifice quality. So, to ensure we achieve the finish we want a little concentrate is fed alongside grass and/or silage. This is particularly important when grass quality declines later in the summer," he adds.

Looking to the future the next generation of Mills family farmers are in full preparation with daughters Evie who is six and Emilia who is two, both keen on farming activities. Evie already has her own orphaned heifer calf which she has trained and exhibited at Hope Show, so will no doubt prove to be a budding young handler in years to come.



Some of the Longhorn steers from the Wheatlands herd.