

Longhorn Cattle Society 2020 AGM – Chairman's Report

It feels a long time since the 2019 AGM. Certainly the freedoms of hosting a large scale social event and the mixing of members from all over the UK, Europe and Australia without a consideration of social distancing, 'rules of six' and where the nearest antibacterial wash is located seems a world away from where we find ourselves this year.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the government's restrictions severely impacted the Society's usual annual programme of events, with restrictions on livestock markets impacting Society sales and the show season being completely decimated following a summer of lockdown and restrictions. Although many will have supported the measures it is hard to have not been disappointed by the lack of opportunity to meet with fellow breeders and friends, showcase our wonderful breed to the industry through agricultural shows and enjoy the social events which we would in a normal Longhorn Cattle Society year.

The Council closely monitored the ever changing guidance and restrictions and looked to adapt to see how we could make the most of the situation and even use it as an opportunity to try new ideas such as the online show and online timed auction. Debbie and I also reviewed the resilience of the Society to operate through events such as a pandemic and what contingency measures we had in place should, for whatever reason, the society Secretary or the Council be unable to carry out their usual duties. We now have in place comprehensive, documented guidance on the various administrative processes involved in the running of the Society to ensure that the Society could continue to function under various circumstances.

As the restrictions due to the pandemic began to be imposed Council were also keen to look at how we could mitigate the impact on our members. We therefore agreed to remove the fees for members advertising cattle for sale through the Society website and introduce a temporary amendment to the bull registration process for members who were struggling to get vets to visit their farms to undertake bull inspections.

A couple of weeks after the 2019 AGM Newark Market hosted what was intended to be the new Premier Society Sale. Although entry numbers were lower than we might have hoped for there were some great quality cattle offered for sale and females sold very well. The bull trade wasn't so good but I think this reflected the time of year rather than the quality on offer. With Newark market now closed the Council will be considering other options for an Autumn Premier Society Sale venue for 2021.

Society sales continued to be a hot topic at Council meetings, in particular, a review of the health testing requirements which were implemented for the 2019 sales. The Council still sees it as a high priority to understand and improve the health status of the national Longhorn herd but it has also reflected on the speed at which the health testing requirements for Society sales were implemented and the impact this may have had on entry numbers to the sales in 2019. We will soon be launching a membership consultation using a herd health questionnaire to understand the membership's views on breed health. We will then use this information to shape our future breed health strategy. I would encourage members to take part in the survey and have their say.

By June any hope of a show season was a distant memory and Council were keen to look at ways to replace the excitement, competition and fun of attending the summer shows and also provide a platform to showcase the breed and the fantastic cattle which our members have. We decided that we would organise a 'virtual show' for 2020.

I thought that the virtual show was a huge success with 14 different exhibitors and over 60 cattle entered. There was a good mix of entries from breeders who regularly show and from those who don't, many of whom were up in the prizes. For me, one of the most pleasing aspects of the show was the junior handler classes. It was great to see the enthusiasm within the junior members – the breed is clearly in safe hands for the future! Well done to all those who participated and congratulation to all the prize winners. Hopefully it has given a few new members the showing bug and the confidence to take their cattle out on the show circuit when it resumes. I am aware that a

small number of members struggled to submit their entries through the 'cloud-lines-shows' system which is a real shame and something we will try and learn from if we run similar events in the future.

With significant uncertainty surrounding livestock sales at markets the Council had to take a decision on what format the autumn sale should take. With the guidance and advice on the sale of pedigree livestock regularly changing throughout the Pandemic a number of successful online auctions had been run by various parts of the industry over the summer. We therefore decided that it would be a good opportunity to trial the Society's first online timed auction. The auction took place between 10th and 13th September. This was a completely new experience for the Society and ended with mixed results. Entries were a low with only 20 lots forward, although this was perhaps to be expected with a new format of sale and in the current situation. A number of the lots were successfully purchased and those which sold achieved good prices, however a number of lots remained unsold which was disappointing. Council would really appreciate feedback from the membership on online sales. I personally feel that there is a place for them in our sale portfolio but we need to understand why more members did not enter cattle for sale, particularly when there were a number of cattle being advertised through the Society website, and what we can do to get more buyers interested. If you have any views on this please get in touch with a Council member or Debbie.

The Longhorn breed continues to improve in quality and popularity and is attracting significant interest from the dairy industry as a beef sire. The newly launched Buitelaar Longhorn scheme has added momentum to this interest. Dairy farmers using Longhorn genetics have given positive feedback on calving ease & calf vigour and finishers are reporting competitive growth and yields when compared against other native sired carcasses.

Finally, I would like to thank all the members of Council for their input and support over the year, Debbie for her continued hard work as Breed Secretary and all the Society members for the great work they do in promoting the fantastic Longhorn breed and taking it forward. Let's hope through 2021 we are able to regain some sense of normality but if not I'm confident that as a Society, like the Longhorn breed, we will continue to adapt and go from strength to strength.

Tom Mills
Chairman of Trustees