LIVESTOCK

An exceptional showing record and a successful international genetics company of the Blackbrook Longhorn story. Chloé Palmer visits the Stanley family to find

A passion for Longhorns pays

Longhorns came to Spring Barrow Lodge Farm, Leicestershire, almost by accident. A dairy herd and arable enterprise were the mainstay of John and Pat Stanley’s farm business in the 1980s but in 1989, Mrs Stanley decided she wanted to establish her own herd.

Something which started as a small venture is now an all-consuming passion and a global business. The dairy herd was sold in 2005 and Blackbrook Longhorns are almost synonymous with the Stanley family.

Mrs Stanley reflects on why she was first attracted by the breed.

“One thing which excited me about the Longhorn was there was much to improve and I could see huge potential for the breed. I like them because they have incredible temperaments and the meat is phenominal,” she says.

Mrs Stanley believes the development of the Longhorn has been held back in the past because of the perception of it as a rare breed fit only for hobby farmers. In contrast, she has always looked critically at her cows and identified those features which she felt needed attention.

Ruthless

“I have been ruthless when selecting for the traits and characteristics I am looking for. Anything which does not live up to our standards goes into the food chain.

“I have spent a lot of time working on a good udder. As a suckler cow, our Longhorns have a neat and tidy udder which the calf can easily hook onto and suck.”

She values balance in every aspect of conformation and appearance saying.

“I want an animal which sits easy on the eye. I look for a good top and bottom line and loin so it makes a perfect block. There should be plenty of width between the pin bones and flesh running down to the hock.

“They must have good legs and feet because excellent locomotion is essential. And we like bonnet horns, but this is only our own preference.”

Mrs Stanley believes the female line is key to producing the right animal and her breeding strategy stems from this.

“Females are everything and our female lines are vital, so this is what we put our energies into. We get our females right and then they breed good bulls,” she says.

“We have several different female lines but we would never be able to breed our type of animal if we were bringing in a new bull every three years. We will buy an exceptional female if we see one, though.

“We might not use bulls from her first generation; instead we wait a few years for the second generation coming through. Young bulls are initially used with small groups of cows because every animal here has to earn its right to a position.”

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PAT STANLEY

Six bulls are currently retained for breeding at Spring Barrow Lodge and of these, three have been used on cows this year. In a recent development to complement the current group, the Stansleyes have purchased semen from a Longhorn bull in Germany.

“This is possibly the first time Longhorn genetics have been brought back from Europe into this country. This bull is our type so we have used the semen on a few cows this time and we are waiting to see

Farm facts

- Spring Barrow Lodge is a mixed farm of 405 hectares (1,000 acres), owned and rented, 344ha (850 acres) arable, 61ha (150 acres) grassland with just over half mown for silage and the remainder grazing land
- The Blackbrook herd of pedigree Longhorns comprises 50 breeding females and followers and six bulls
- Bulls are sold privately each year and females are occasionally for sale
- Frozen semen and embryos are exported worldwide including Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and Europe

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Pat Stanley believes the female line is key to producing the right animal.
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out more.

off

the outcome. It is very exciting,” Mrs Stanley adds.

Mr and Mrs Stanley are more accustomed to exporting Blackbrook Genetics than importing them and the international sale of semen and embryos now forms a significant part of their business.

“For every straw we have sold in the UK, we have sold 20 abroad. There is very little interest in artificial insemination from domestic producers but each year we sell bulls privately,” Mr Stanley says.

The lack of investment in the livestock industry over recent decades has created barriers, according to Mrs Stanley.

She says: “There is now only one UK-based semen collection company which is far from ideal for logistical reasons. We have to comply with the disease testing requirements of each different nation we export to and sometimes a bull might have to undergo several different tests for the same disease which is time consuming and expensive.”

Disease protocols

Strict protocols relating to disease prevention and biosecurity have always been at the core of operations at Spring Barrow Lodge, but the growing global export business has meant this has never been more critical. Any disease outbreak, however minor, would pose a major threat to the business.

“We ask all visitors to come in clean clothes and we provide wellingtons for them. We no longer vaccinate any of our animals and if we were to suffer a disease outbreak on the farm, it could be disastrous for our business,” Mr Stanley says.

The disease threat is also responsible for the lack of appearances by the Blackbrook herd at shows, despite an enviable show record. Mr Stanley reluctantly admits to their run of 152 wins from 168 classes in a seven-year period including five Royal Show championships.

Although their showing days are now over, the recent move towards classification for the Longhorn breed means future generations of Blackbrook Longhorns will still be judged by an independent expert eye.

“Classification has given us

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another tool to use when assessing our animals. It will also give people confidence when purchasing.

“We were delighted when 10 of our young cows were classified as Excellent, seven as Very Good and the rest as Good. It was particularly satisfying because of the group of cows assessed, the one we thought was the best scored the highest,” Mrs Stanley says.

Far from becoming complacent, the quest for continual improvement continues. Mr Stanley says his wife cannot walk into a field of their cows without appraising them and identifying the bottom end of the herd. Females judged as not up to standard are finished for slaughter at between 20 and 24 months.

We only breed from the highest quality animals and retain a few bulls each year for breeding or sale. We have semen from all our top bulls so their genetics are safe.

“Bulls which do not make the grade are either kept entire and then finished inside before they are slaughtered at 15 months and 600kg liveweight, or they are castrated and reared extensively on a mainly grass diet and killed at 30 months,” Mr Stanley says.

**Versatility**

Mrs Stanley points to this versatility in the breed as one of its valuable attributes.

“The Longhorns fit any system and will finish well whether housed and fed a cereal-based diet or fed on grass. The beef from our bulls has incredible marbling and is an outstanding product. The meat from steers and heifers grown from grass also eats extremely well.”

The breeding females are produced on a very low input system, living out for most of the year until they are brought in around Christmas and fed grass silage and straw.

“The challenge with the Longhorns is to prevent them from becoming too fat. So we feed silage and minerals until around a week before calving and then they receive just a kilo of 16 per cent reaper nut to bring the milk on.

“By the beginning of March, there is usually enough grass to turn them out again. The calves only receive creep feed much later in summer if we have an especially dry spell and the grass runs out,” Mr Stanley says.

Mr and Mrs Stanley’s youngest son Joe is responsible for the 344 hectares (850 acres) of arable land across the farm and a rotation of winter wheat and barley with oilseed rape means there is ample straw for the livestock housing, with the manure being returned to the land.

Mr Stanley has developed an additional diversification, linked inextricably with he and his wife’s passion for the Longhorn breed. He says: “It started about 25 years ago as a hobby when I started collecting 19th century paintings of Longhorns and now it has grown into a business. We now specialise in English animal paintings and have converted the old call shed into our gallery.

“We export pictures to order across the world and because we share the passion for our animals, we understand the value of these paintings.”

With such a track record of success between them, it might seem there is little left to accomplish, but Mrs Stanley is clear about her remaining goal.

“It has been a wonderful journey and we will continue to concentrate on producing the animals our customer wants. I would like to put the Longhorn back on its pedestal as the best beef breed in the country.”