

A fresh look at breeding policy has seen Longhorn genetics introduced to the dairy enterprise at Newcastle University Farms. **Hannah Park** reports.

## Longhorn genetics used to breed beef from a dairy herd

**A**t a crossroads with breeding policy and keen to review the challenge of finding a viable market for dairy bull calves, Newcastle University Farms dairy manager Gareth Hancock decided to approach potential buyers to consider what the best direction was.

It was while fleshing out the options with a group of local farmers, who were initially looking at the potential of pooling black and white bull calves to sell, that calf supply chain company Buitelaar Group's Longhorn scheme was raised.

Launched in the last 12 months, the scheme offers a premium for registered Longhorn-sired dairy-bred calves and is currently supplied by 65 farms from across Great Britain.

Mr Hancock says: "We were in

discussions with other local farmers and potential buyers to see if there was a value in combining dairy bull calves for a supplier.

"During discussions, Buitelaar put forward that it was looking to source high health status Longhorn calves from dairy units in the UK.

"We considered the options and concluded that introducing Longhorn genetics would allow us to produce a beef animal from our dairy herd that we knew there would be a market for, at an increased value to us as a dairy farm."

"For me, breed was not a contentious issue and it was more about producing a product which was of more value to us, that we knew there was a market for."

After discussion, the decision was taken to artificially inseminate all 300 milking cows with Longhorn semen.

Semen is sourced from each of the two Longhorn sires available through Genus ABS, with six Longhorn sires in total available for AI currently.

### Synchronisation

Replacements will come from heifers and, with the herd looking to push numbers to 350 head, 160 have been inseminated to black and white dairy bulls so far using sexed semen on a synchronisation programme. Three Longhorn bulls have also been bought, to use as sweepers on the heifers.

This breeding policy is liable to change though, Mr Hancock explains, and the herd will likely move to a situation in which replacements will be bred from top performers.

Mr Hancock explains that the timing of this new policy has coincided with a two-year restructuring programme. This will see the existing two year-round calving Holstein Friesian herds consolidated into one, spring and autumn block calving herd.

Service dates have therefore been tightened up, but has meant there was opportunity for some flexibility around serving which Mr Hancock says mitigated some risk in what could be viewed as a high-risk approach.

**Carreg-Superman, is one of six Longhorn AI sires currently available.**





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The farm is working with Genus to gather figures via calving surveys.

Mr Hancock says: "There are few available AI sires and figures out there at the moment so there is some uncertainty, but as a university farm, we want to be experimental with some of our decisions and put ourselves in a position to be able to provide information that can help other commercial farms make decisions.

### Surveys

"I also wanted to be able to get enough calving surveys done to be able to compare viability meaningfully against when the whole herd was served to black and white bulls and to do that, we needed a big selection of animals to compare."

Mr Hancock says he is confident the calves will be able to achieve Buitelaar's scheme standards of 50kg or above at 14 to 41 days old, but regardless says he is happy that an animal of value is being produced, specifically in comparison to the value of a dairy-bred bull calf.

"What we have tried to do differently is speak to the supply chain before making those breeding decisions - instead of going ahead with what we think is the right thing to do and approaching industry with a product for them to sell."

### THE BUITELAAR LONGHORN SCHEME

The scheme's point of difference, the ability to sell a story and consistent meat quality were crucial to generating marketing opportunities for beef in the future.

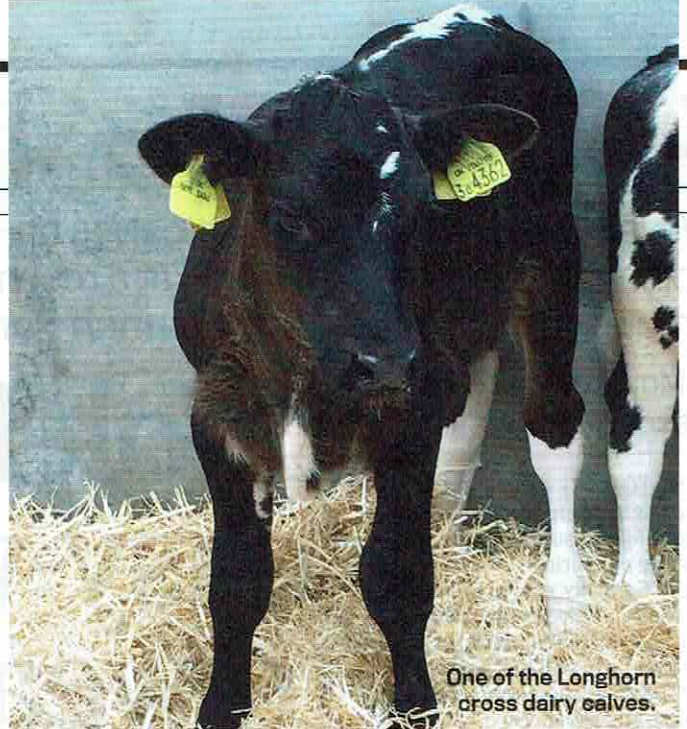
Hugh Pocock, business development manager at Buitelaar Group, says: "We know people are eating less meat, but when they do they are increasingly looking for that 'special' product.

"They want to know where it has come from and a guaranteed high health and welfare status and with people increasingly looking for a story, the Longhorn can deliver that with its distinctive markings and historic heritage. Quality is also crucial, and taste tests have proven Longhorn beef is up there."

Mr Pocock says that Buitelaar is initially looking to market the Longhorn sired animals into high-end food service and into export markets initially, but as volume of supply increased, this could extend and supermarkets could be among avenues which might be considered.

### WHAT DOES THE SCHEME LOOK LIKE?

- Calves taken by Buitelaar at 50kg or above at 14-41 days old
- Price paid in-line with weekly published AHDB native average market price, topped up with guaranteed bonus
- Only registered Longhorn sires accepted. Buitelaar is working with pedigree breeders and artificial insemination companies to source sires - there are currently six AI sires in collection and available to use
- Calving surveys are now underway
- 65 farms across GB now supplying the scheme



One of the Longhorn cross dairy calves.

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