

One hundred and twenty-five years after the formation of the Aberdeen Angus Cattle Society, the breed continues to enjoy a reputation for quality among consumers that other breeds can only dream of. **Jack Watkins** talks to a southern breeder about the continuing potential for expansion

WITH JUST a 14% share of the national herd and demand continuing to grow, Aberdeen Angus cattle represent a great chance to tap into the UK beef market at the top, says breeder and NFU council member Angus Stovold.

"They are so economic and easy to run, compared with Continental breeds," he says. "They need less food and are easy-care cattle ideal for post-CAP reform, where cost will become a major factor."

And their high consumer recognition has led some of the big supermarkets to use the breed as a cornerstone of their red meat strategy, one of the real home-grown beef success stories of the post-BSE years.

Based on the light, sandy soils of the Surrey Hills at Shackleford near Godalming, in an area that was once called the Southern Highlands and was a popular resort for well-to-do Londoners, Mr Stovold's 160-cow pedigree herd is one of the largest of the breed in the UK, and certainly the biggest south of the Humber.

TRICKY TO OVERCOME

The Rosemead herd was established by his grandfather in 1936 – the family has farmed in the area for centuries – and the beef is sold at point of sale or through local butchers within a 10-mile radius. A small amount goes through Dovecote Park processors into Waitrose outlets.

Yet despite a long-standing local reputation, the public perception of what constitutes a desirable beef-producing region can be tricky to overcome, he says. "I still come across people who have been trying to buy quality beef over the internet from West Country or Scottish outlets when it is right here on their doorstep."

Mr Stovold started working in

125 years on, the public still has a taste for Angus



Left and below:
Angus Stovold with some
of his cattle.



partnership with his father about 15 years ago, assuming control of the day-to-day running of the farm within the past five years. Spread over several units, 570ha (1400 acres) are farmed overall, most of it down to grass, although 120ha (300 acres) are under arable production for home-grown forage. Outdoor pigs are also reared.

Much of the land is in the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, and while the easy-draining soils permit overwintering of cattle, these are mostly finished indoors.

A decision to change the herd structure in the early 1990s proved critical to the growth of the business. "We had a small, purebred Angus herd of about 60, which were used as replacements or sold on as stores to Scotland, but the rest were crossed with a Charolais bull. It was profitable, but I felt the Angus product was so good we should finish them on farm and link up with butchers to sell the meat as a premium product," he says.

"Over the five years before the BSE crisis, we increased herd size so we could pull off an animal of consistent quality every week of the year if the butcher wanted one. As we had always produced our own feed, we were unaffected by BSE, so were in a strong market position."

Average weight for finished steers is 360kg deadweight, and heifers can reach 320kg deadweight. Both are finished at 20-24 months. "People say Angus heifers get too fat when they try to finish them. The point is not to feed them like a Continental animal, so reduce feed," he advises.

"We feed steers and heifers

similarly. You can start giving them a bit of creep near weaning time, but don't overdo it. You want them to grow a frame, so don't start putting the food in too soon." After a six-month period out at grass, they are brought inside for finishing on a mix of maize and silage. "The costs are half of what you need for most cattle," he says.

The easy-care, grass-fed, suckler cow systems that Angus lend themselves to are, of course, factors they have in common with most other native breeds. But with the Aberdeen Angus Cattle Society celebrating its 125th anniversary this year, its success in securing – and maintaining – supermarket outlets has led to a booming market for pedigree bulls.

BRAND RECOGNITION

What the supermarkets have latched on to is the inbuilt brand recognition of the Angus among consumers. It's a point that many may dispute, yet the breed name has a resonance beyond the beef industry that sets a benchmark for others to emulate.

Ron McHattie, chief executive of the society, says the breed can compete with Continental competitors at every level, but with lower production costs and a guaranteed premium market. The Angus's medium size is also in its favour. ■

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