

Lydling Farm near Godalming in Surrey is headquarters of the prize winning Rosemead herd of extensively grazed Aberdeen Angus cattle.

# WONDER CROP HELPS FARMS TO SURVIVE DROUGHT

With all his land on a very sandy loam, Angus Stovold has always farmed for drought. "I am used to having no grass, so I am not too worried," said Mr Stovold, who keeps prize winning pedigree Aberdeen Angus cattle for breeding at Lydling Farm and Field Place Farm near Godalming in Surrey.

Farming for drought means that water meadows are taken for grazing, and lucerne is grown for feed. "We are extensive just for this scenario," said Mr Stovold. "We have big water tanks so that the cattle don't get crowded when it is very dry." Each field has a 600 litre mains fed tank. "In the summer, when the cattle come to drink, the water doesn't

run out, so they don't panic. In the winter, if they ice over, there is still enough water underneath for about a week before you need to start worrying."

Without rain in April, May and June, the farms can sometimes end up with no grass. "We always have to be one step ahead of the weather. The current drought is prolonged and it is not good, but

14



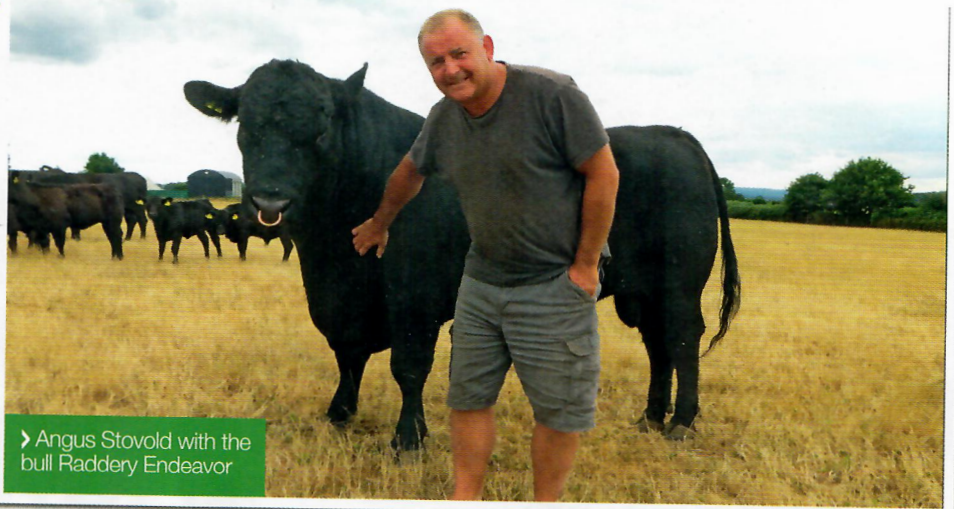
► The bull Eastern Grays Jack is on the water meadows with this group of yearling heifers who have been put in calf



we are coping with it well."

Towards the end of July, Mr Stovold had not had to buy in any feed, and was still on last year's forage. "Even after a long spring, we still have feed from last year, which is pretty good. Normally only dairy farmers look that far ahead, but we have kept the forage going pretty well." This year's silage has not been touched, which Mr Stovold thinks will be a blessing later on when stocks are short.

Forage is made from lucerne, which Mr Stovold says is a wonderful crop. "You put it in the ground in May, and as long as the pH is right, there is a bit of fertility, the tilth is good and the ground is clean, you can leave it for five years. It doesn't need any inputs – except perhaps for a bit of potash once in year two – and it grows like a weed. There are five years of growth, and we cut it four times from the second year. This year, we cut it at the beginning of July, and a few weeks later it is back up to three feet." With deep roots, lucerne does not need any water during a drought: even in wet years, the crop thrives.



➤ Angus Stovold with the bull Raddery Endeavor

Mr Stovold is currently growing about 60 acres of lucerne, which will feed the cattle through any dry period. "You have to be very disciplined with the crop – it must be cut every six weeks or before," said Mr Stovold. "You can either put it in a silage pit or a round bale. We put the first cuts

in a pit because protein levels are high." Protein levels decline as cuts are taken, and the last cut in October tends to be buffer fed to cows with spring calves before they are weaned. "This keeps the milk levels up and cow and calf benefit from the really good forage."







**All the cattle in the Rosemead herd are pedigree Aberdeen Angus used for breeding. Angus Stovold's main trade is selling pedigree bulls to dairy farmers in the South East.**

At least 70 bulls are sold each year, with the higher quality ones going to commercial farms and a few going to pedigree herds. Some bulls are exported, and one went to Holland recently.

If any of the bulls are bad tempered, or their testicles or walking are not right - or they are just poor animals - they will go into the killing pen, and there are two butchers who will take the finished animals.

"We have a high standard for sale, and your reputation depends on it too much to have aggressive animals," Mr Stovold said. "So anything with a poor temperament will just be killed." Good temperament is a feature of the Rosemead herd, and Mr Stovold wants to preserve it. When he goes into a contract to sell an animal, Mr Stovold prefers his customers to put the bull in with some other cattle rather than leaving it on its own. "I hate it when you take them into a yard and there is nothing else there except a pen. We keep our cattle in groups of 10, so it is quite a shock for the poor things to go from that to a pen. It's always the bull that gets the blame, but they are characters on their own and they need company."

With the females, select customers come in and buy the high pedigree ones or they go abroad for breeding: this year, females were sold to France and Spain. "The trouble is we are trying to be careful not to go into our replacement stock all the time," Mr Stovold said. "But occasionally someone comes and wants to spend money, so you tend to go into your replacements a bit. But that is a good problem to have, really."

Some of the bulls are collected for international semen sales, and last year hundreds of embryos were sold to Australia. "Their cattle market is really buoyant at the moment, and they saw a market for some animals in China. Our cattle are

## HUNDREDS OF EMBRYOS SOLD TO AUSTRALIA

a bit bigger than theirs, and they wanted to put some size in their cattle as well as breeding a better temperament." Now, Mr Stovold is working on an order for embryos from France.

But Mr Stovold said the process of obtaining the embryos - known as multiple ovulation embryo transfer (MOET) - was very hit and miss. Cows have to be sent to the Midlands for embryo collection because the process cannot be done on farm for selling abroad.

Under MOET, the donor cows have fertility treatment to produce as many eggs as possible. The cow is inseminated after showing a standing heat and her embryos are flushed from the uterus a week later before being transferred into recipient females, or frozen in liquid nitrogen for future transfer. But Mr Stovold said the cows can become too hot - especially in the current heatwave - and the eggs are unlikely to survive.

In future, he will try in vitro fertilisation (IVF) because less semen is required and

16



➤ A group at last year's Aberdeen Angus summer national show: Angus Stovold is third from the left



➤ Rosemead King Samson was overall champion at the Aberdeen Angus summer national show last year



there is a better success rate in fertilising the eggs outside the donor cow using laboratory techniques. "The process can be done artificially rather than letting nature do it," Mr Stovold said. Instead of sending his cattle to the Midlands, he hopes to persuade the veterinary department at Surrey University to carry out the IVF at Lydling Farm. "As with humans, IVF is still a fairly inexact science in cattle – but it can only get better. If Surrey University came here, we would build a little isolation unit so that other cattle could have the treatment as well."

Another exciting development is genomic selection. The technology has been around for a while, but Mr Stovold does not think it is sufficiently robust yet. For £250 to £300, a farmer can already send a hair or some other sample from a cow to a laboratory which can examine the DNA sequence and forecast – for example – that the animal will be easy calving with good growth rates and feed conversion. "I don't think the results are there yet to support the claims," Mr Stovold said. "Back in 2000, we did trials of the technology with American companies, and it didn't work. By 2007/8 when we started looking at results, it became clear that they were trying to match them with our existing data." Irish scientists are trying to improve the technology, but Mr Stovold said something usable is still years away.

All Mr Stovold's animals are DNA tested. Whenever an animal is tagged, it breaks off a bit of DNA from the ear which is collected in a tiny tube and sent to a laboratory for sire verification to prove it is an Aberdeen Angus. Many hundreds of thousands of these DNA samples have been collected in this way by Wetherbys Scientific. "The Aberdeen Angus Society is reaching the point now where it is going to ask everyone for verification that every bull produced is an Aberdeen Angus. Wherever a bull is used, the DNA could be sequenced to show that a particular bull was used on a particular cow. In future this could allow Marks and Spencer or Waitrose to prove that a piece of beef in a pack is from a British herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle rather than anywhere else."



**Caisley**  
EARTAG LIMITED

## Geno Tissue Sampling Tags & System

- Genetic & genomic testing
- Disease control & management
- Provenance & traceability

### One action tag and sampling

Available as Ministry Approved or Management



Tel: 01765 530296 [www.caisleytags.co.uk](http://www.caisleytags.co.uk)

**Farm & Country**  
SUPPLIES



## No fly zone.

Contact us for further information  
on our Fly Product Range



Free delivery service  
available.

We are also able to offer  
advice on wormers  
01420 83254.

The Old Dairy, Selborne Road, Alton, Hampshire GU34 3HL

T: 01420 83254 E: [sales@fcsupplies.com](mailto:sales@fcsupplies.com) W: [www.fcsupplies.com](http://www.fcsupplies.com)

17

## K'ARCHER

- Sales, Service & Hire of Quality Karcher Cleaning Equipment including: Pressure Washers, Dry Steamers, Sweepers, Vacuum Cleaners & Scrubber Driers
- Fully Stocked Mobile Engineers with Full Manufacturer Training
- The whole of the South East covered
- Over 45 years trading



Tel: **0800 212 328**

[www.pressureclean.co.uk](http://www.pressureclean.co.uk)



## Farm Waste Recycling Experts

Providing waste solutions to Agriculture, Horticulture & Equestrian

Collection & Recycling of...

All types of Farm Plastics  
Redundant Agri chemicals

Waste Tyres  
Cardboard

Workshop Wastes

Veterinary Waste

Waste Oil

Waste Tyres

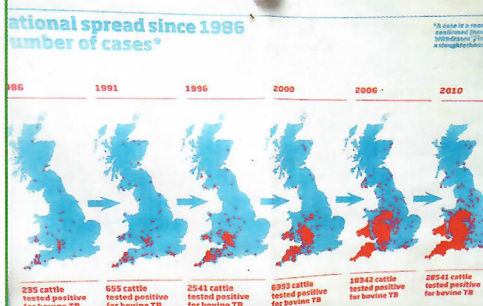
Tel 01264 736733  
[ian.kitson@kitsonrecycling.co.uk](mailto:ian.kitson@kitsonrecycling.co.uk)  
[www.kitsonrecycling.co.uk](http://www.kitsonrecycling.co.uk)





➤ These tags break off a bit of DNA from an animal's ear which is collected in tiny tubes and sent to a laboratory for sire verification

18



➤ On his office wall, Angus Stovold keeps this old DEFRA map showing the dramatic spread eastwards of bovine TB to remind him about the perils of disease



## HERD BUILT UP SINCE FOOT AND MOUTH IN 2001

**With between 400 and 450 pedigree Aberdeen Angus cattle, the Rosemead herd is the largest in England and the third largest in Britain.**

Angus Stovold and his stock manager Tom Beadle are trying to increase the herd's size, but the number of sales make that difficult. "We have to keep ticking along with the sales, so it is a struggle to bring enough cattle forward to increase the herd." The herd has been building up since the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak, which almost finished the business off. "We didn't have the disease but we were running 220 cows over a large area with no pedigree sales or anything. We had seven farms at that point, and trying to keep the cattle without allowing them to be moved between the different farms proved extremely difficult." The 2001 outbreak and the later one in 2007 cost Mr Stovold a fortune. "It was tricky to see three generations of work going down the drain."

Today, disease prevention is at the front of Mr Stovold's mind all the time: he keeps a DEFRA map on his wall showing the dramatic spread of bovine TB eastwards. The cattle are constantly tested for disease to make sure they haven't got anything. "If we go to a show, we are so anal about putting an animal in isolation, keeping it clean and doing all the biosecurity properly – just so that if we do pick up

something, we can contain it. Most of the time here, an animal is in isolation for something."

This attitude to disease makes Mr Stovold trusted by his customers. When South East Farmer visited, 17 heifers were waiting to go from Lydling Farm to replace some which belonged to a customer in Germany. These were slaughtered on three farms after infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR) was found in one imported animal which Mr Stovold assumes came from the UK. "They blamed the transporter for bringing IBR in," Mr Stovold said. "That transporter went to three different farms. And even though just one suspect case of IBR was found, they killed every single animal on those three farms."

Ironically, Mr Stovold said that cattle in the South East are relatively free of disease. "Trading outside this area carries a higher risk of bringing diseases into your herd. Interestingly, Scotland has often been the worst for exporting disease such as Johnes's disease and IBR. Several times in my lifetime, people have gone up there, spent huge amounts of money on what they think are superb cattle, brought them down and the disease burden was so high that within five years they were out of business because they couldn't cope." Robust testing and isolation management can reduce the risks.



# GOOD NUMBERS OF BUGS AND BIRDS

All the farming at Lydling and Field Place Farms is done with the environment in mind. None of the grass fields are sprayed and no artificial fertilisers are used.

"We only use glyphosate where we are putting lucerne in to create a clean soil," Mr Stovold said. "But it isn't used again for another five years, and nor are any other sprays." Farmyard manure is used and crops are rotated. "I think we have good numbers of birds and bugs," Mr Stovold added.

Some of the land is in entry and higher level stewardship, but Mr Stovold doesn't like the schemes.

He has found, for example, that trimming hedges on a three year rotation - rather than every two years - does not work. This is supposed to ensure that thick nesting cover is available somewhere on the farms every year, and to boost the berry crop and populations of overwintering insects. "Three years is far too long," he said. "It should be two years. The hedge grows out and may produce good fruit in the second year. Then in the third year you have to knock the hedge back to where it was in the first year. But the amount of damage you do is horrendous. It would be much better to leave it the first year and cut it on the second year."

In future, Mr Stovold said, rather than have blanket prescriptions for conservation on farms, it would be preferable to have a scheme which caters for each farm's needs. "Perhaps we need to concentrate our efforts on areas which have been growing continuous wheat for the last 30 years and there is very little wildlife. If that land was put into a rotation, you could have fantastic crops and fantastic wildlife."

➤ Lucerne has deep roots and has kept on growing during the drought



[www.afwiltshire.com](http://www.afwiltshire.com)  
 01483 200516
























The Agricultural Centre, Alfold Road,  
Dunsfold, Surrey GU8 4NP



THE  
ABERDEEN-ANGUS  
CATTLE SOCIETY

What are you looking at?



You're looking at a premium of  
18 - 40 pence per kilo

*Choose Aberdeen-Angus.  
More than just a breed, it's a brand.*

Pedigree House, 6 King's Place, Perth PH2 8AD  
Tel: 01738 622477

[www.aberdeen-angus.co.uk](http://www.aberdeen-angus.co.uk) 