

Taking the bull by the horns

Well-known in local agricultural circles, the Stovold family has been farming the land in Surrey for several hundred years. Here, we meet the latest the man to take up the mantle, Angus Stovold

Words by Jane Garrett

SHACKLEFORD FARMER Angus Stovold has just sent a DVD to the Surrey History Centre in Woking containing some achingly nostalgic homemade cine-film footage of life at Cross and Lydling Farms in 1953. The voice-over on the DVD is by his father, Bob, who was 21 when the film was made. The scenes of rick thatching, harvesting, spud digging, ploughing, farm open days, weddings and country fairs, peopled by farm workers from the era of the horse, make for a fantastic and moving archive.

A lost rural idyll? Well, not really. Talking to Angus today, it is clear that his is an upbeat story of farming success – and he is now planning a second DVD recording life on the farm as it is nowadays. “Yes, there has been change,” he says. “But there is also a deep sense of the continuum of agriculture in the hands of our family who have loved this beautiful corner of rural Surrey, south of the Hog’s Back, for

hundreds of years. In 1953, we had 20 farm workers. Now there are just three, but two of those, Alan Boyd and Tony Hancock, are the sons of men featured in the film.”

He’s been researching the farm as part of a local heritage scheme run by Surrey County Agricultural Society – Historic Farmland Landscape of the Surrey Hills – which trains farmers how to study the history of their farms and produce marketing and information material. As a result, the family has produced a leaflet and plans an information board for visitors, because as well as running farm walks, the land is crossed by public footpaths.

However, Angus, now 43, never set out to be a farmer. He trained in environmental health instead and as a young man preferred travelling. He returned to the land in 1989 and in 2000, won first prize for the best Aberdeen Angus herd in the country, beating Scotland, an outstanding

recognition of his achievement. “One of our bulls got first place at the Highland Show last year,” he adds proudly. “We’ve also just been awarded the best Aberdeen Angus herd in the South East.”

Well-known in farming circles, Angus has chaired the Surrey National Farmers Union and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, sells bulls and breeding cows to farmers in the UK and abroad and his beef disappears off the counter in butcher’s shops and Farmers’ Markets like snow in summer. He is passionate that farming has a future in Surrey.

The Stovolds definitely have a past. Deeds show them in Surrey in the 13th century and for 350 years they farmed at Polshott Manor in Elstead. Around 1905, however, Ernest moved to another family farm at Lydling, which passed down through Ernest’s son, Percy, to Bob and Angus, the fourth and fifth generations of Stovolds there.



Angus, his wife Tiggy and children Alex, Harriet and Finn

Percy started the Rosemead herd of Aberdeen Angus at Hurst Farm, Milford (now Secretts), keeping the cattle hidden for two years in what is now the Refectory Restaurant because his father thought them a bad investment. In fact, it was the start of something big. In 1938, they did a tour of British shows and won prizes.

By 1940, Percy was in Cross Farm, next to Lydling. His son, Bob, took over in difficult times and when Angus returned from Africa he found the Grade II listed buildings leaching money. “It wasn’t the same farm it was in the 1953 film,” says Angus. “We had farm managers for the pigs and the cattle, and Cross Farm was falling down. I felt someone needed to grab hold of the farm and take it forward.”

Together, Angus and Bob started to diversify. The indoor pigs moved outside, fertilising the land to avoid the need for chemicals, and Cross Farm got permission for houses in the farmyard. Angus also

decided to concentrate on the pedigree ‘high health’ Aberdeen Angus herd. “I am trying to emulate what my father and grandfather did,” he says. “My goal is to be the best. My father had produced a good base of female cows and it was just a matter of getting the best bulls to get the breeding right.”

It took years to get the breed back to its world class status. Then came BSE. “I remember walking around thinking we are the world leaders in beef production,” says Angus. “We had everything right, and then the day after, everything closed. But as I had always fed the cattle our own feed and could reassure butchers and buyers that we had never had a case, we were able to keep selling.”

“Then, in 1999, we had an opportunity to do Farmer’s Markets. We had a good relationship with Roger Wakeling, the Farncombe butcher, and together we produced meat for the Milford market and sold out within an hour.”

But just as Angus was poised to launch into selling cattle for breeding, Foot and Mouth struck. “It hit us far harder than BSE,” he says. “Nobody wanted to buy cattle and all the Farmer’s Markets stopped.”

Since then, however, the mainstay of the business has been selling breeding stock to organic herds.

“We major strongly in conservation and I joined the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group in 1992. I am particularly keen on encouraging small birds so I started leaving hedges to grow tall and then coppicing them so that birds always had somewhere to nest. The results were startling. Linnets, finches, thrushes, blackbirds, tits and sparrows came back en masse. It was fantastic.”

“Now we have pipistrelle bats, marsh warblers and snipe, as well as sparrowhawks, golden plovers, lapwings, hundreds of skylarks, goldfinches and starlings. We have turned a corner and now I can see a much better future for us.”



Harvesting as it was in the old days



A pastoral idyll down on the farm



Mangle picking in days gone by