

Presentation to the World Devon Congress, 13th June 2016

Report from the United Kingdom Devon Cattle Breeders Society

Given by Mr James, Williams, DCBS President

Half way through your programme of visits to British herds, now is a good time to take stock. Much of what I say will already have arisen in conversations at different farms that you have already visited. You will go further up the local learning curve still more by the time you have finished the trip in a week's time, with the climax on Friday of over 100 Devons forward for judging at the Royal Three Counties Show. Early June is a wonderful time to see Devon cattle in these islands with full bloom of summer coat set against lush pasture and new greenery. A scene to set anyone's heart beating a little faster but definitely that of a cattle person.

I am going to talk to you under three headings:

1. From where we have travelled in the last 20 years since the Congress was last hosted in Britain.
2. The issues that we are having to grapple with, in an urban dominated world where the producers of food do not always get the respect that they deserve.
3. Our strategic plan for the next five years, and how we will maximise the benefits of the breed that we all cherish.

Our conclusion will be positive but will also contain a healthy dose of realism. At the end of today, and indeed of the two weeks that you are here as our guests, we hope that you will have gained the impression that there is a strong process of thought and application at all ends of the breed, from the top breeders of pedigree cattle to the smallholder with a handful of females.

1. From where have we travelled?

I have three herd books in my hands. In 1956, 60 years ago from now, the herd book ran to 565 pages closely typed. In 2003, the year that I revived the Tregullow herd it was a mere 161 pages. The 2015 book has more than doubled to 372 pages. Still well below the heyday of the 1950s, but a huge

advance. In 2015 registration of pedigree males and females ran for 196 pages, in 2003 this filled a mere 60 pages of the book.

Since the Congress was last here in 1996, the government consulted with agriculture to re-shape policy. The concept of environmental stewardship had come to the fore, with Devons being a favoured native breed for farmers who worked marginal land such as the moors and uplands found in South West Britain. Now concepts like traceability, food miles, marbling, and eating quality were becoming part of the language of farmers looking to re-engage with the consumer. Happily, our breed found itself perfectly placed to exploit these structural changes. We had also passed the point where red meat consumption had been the centre of every health scare, hence this newspaper article!

There were social changes. The decline in the rural labour force meant that it was essential to have animals that were easy to handle, easy to calve, with good temperaments. The latter point especially important for farmers working alone.

So, here are the growth in herd numbers in the last 15 years. Followed by the growth in female registrations of pedigree animals. It is important to emphasise the word 'pedigree'. As my earlier figures showed with the herd book, the influence of "grading up" has fallen away significantly. Having done its job, where necessary, any influence that might have been introduced is typically several generations back. We have also seen the numbers in individual herds increase with valuable economies of scale.

Finally, in this section, we should note how the Devon can adapt to different types of husbandry. Many of us out winter our cattle. On those days when our fickle climate is throwing everything impossibly unpleasant at us, I walk out to see my two year olds contentedly tucked into their silage. By springtime, my steers are oven ready having comfortably endured the worst of the winter.

2. The issues that we face

However we labour under one particular cloud. Bovine tuberculosis, or TB, is prevalent through cattle in the western side of the British Isles. We are all subjected to a rigorous and often distressing testing regime, and good and apparently healthy pedigree animals can be taken away as a reactor to a test, without prior warning of any visible deterioration in their health. The

Government painfully slowly is addressing the problem in wildlife from where the infection is known to originate. We are going in the right direction but this is not going to be sorted out quickly. Nevertheless a majority of Devon herds have remained clear of TB, and it is often thought that it might be more of a problem in dairy cattle. As an optimist I believe that the steps that are now being taken, will mean that at the next World Congress in 2020 we will be able to report that the incidence of TB has fallen. In Ireland when badgers were culled in TB hotspots, the number of cases fell sharply, and stayed down. We hope this is precursor to better news for the U.K.

Aside from this, many of our herds are moving towards high health accreditation. Where in the past this might not always have been considered to be important, today there is a determination that animals that are to be sold for breeding are submitted to the highest levels of scrutiny to exclude endemic bovine afflictions.

Currently the economics of the beef trade are not good. This chart shows how the price for a kilo of beef has hardly moved since the 1990s. Think how much all of our inputs have risen in this period. I will talk some more about our quest to turn Devon beef into a premium product, but most of our members struggle to maintain much leverage over the buyers of their product. Many of us have recognised the opportunity that Red Ruby Devon beef gives us to develop our own retail enterprises, selling a supremely good product to the end customer. In my own experience I can increase my return on an animal by as much as 50%, over the wholesale return. I might of course have some generously price insensitive customers.

Finally in this section we should consider the future of the subsidy regime. In 10 days' time we will know whether we continue to have membership of the European Union. Longer term, whether in or out of Europe, it is likely that our urban dominated and elected governments will find ways to cut back on farm payments to food producers. Our lobbying power is modest. Unlike some of our European neighbours, we don't block motorways or blockade distribution centres. Yes, perhaps we have to stand on our own feet, but with food prices at an almost continuously low ebb, the economics of anything but the largest and most intensive farm will remain challenged.

3. Our strategic plan as we look ahead:

I have talked about our growth and I have talked about the challenges in front of us today. I want to finish my presentation by talking about our intent as a breed society to look ahead not to just tomorrow's opportunities, but to the medium and long-term, for the benefit of the wider membership. Our Five Year Plan is currently "work in progress" and will be before our Council shortly, but in essence its objective is to maximise the opportunities whilst mitigating the inevitable threats. How we do this can be described by 3 strategic strands of work:

- First, we are laying down a genetic archive. Storage of semen at two neutral venues will ensure that we maintain a broad genetic pool of pure bloodlines as an insurance policy against either some unforeseen biological disaster, or the inevitably narrowing of genetics that is an often unintended consequence of pedigree breeding. The Devon Cattle Breeders Society is a charity and one of our principal objectives is to maintain the purity of the breed.
- Secondly, beef from Devon cattle needs to be treated as a premium brand. You pay more or less (sometimes a great deal more) for a decent bottle of wine. Why not when you buy your beef? At the end of the day, our members can produce a product of extraordinary quality. Yet our market and our production is fragmented. We need to find ways of emphasising this quality, its provenance, and indeed its health giving qualities. In the United States the 'pasture fed' movement for meat is of great value. We can do the same here and take advantage of the natural advantages that we have, when many of our herds are able to finish an animal on grass. As well as improving the presentation of our brand, we will look to modern marketing methods including social media, to draw buyers to the Society's website and to those of our members who are linked through. Through Catherine, our breed secretary, we have enjoyed more than our fair share of media exposure in the food, the popular, and the farming press. There is as always a long way to go, but the brand of Red Ruby beef is beginning to have traction among those that buy beef at a fair price. Brand awareness will create the markets that our Devon farmers will need.

- Thirdly, we must ensure that the type of animal that is found across our national herd is of requisite standard. We can improve our benchmarking, so that all breeders and new entrants to Devon cattle understand where we are going. This applies to size, to fleshing, to fat content. While we have breed standards in place that have stood good stead for generations, and will continue to do so, we will develop ways to express these breed standards in quantitative as well as qualitative terms so that breeders have a clear target to aim for. This work will be focused on raising the standard of females in particular. We have to address issues such as performance recording where regrettably our progress is slow. We need to consider how genetic and genomic information can help to improve the type of animal that we produce. This must be easily available at low cost to our members. Our job is to ensure that someone in Britain choosing to rear for the beef market, will have confidence of a high level of certainty that the Devon will meet the exacting standards of the consumers of our product

In conclusion, today we have a strong and a steadily growing national herd. We have Devons possessing both size and breed character. We have newcomers entering the market for Devon cattle. We have commercial farmers who have switched to Devons from other breeds, both native and continental. While judging the herd competition last year I was impressed that breeders, particularly the young, had such an understanding of pedigree. Faults were being ironed out, poor locomotion, bad feet and udders were all being singled out as reasons for cull. The meat trade, specialist butchers, and restaurants are increasingly happy to be associated with the Red Ruby Devon beef Brand.

Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your attention. That is the state of the nation of the British Devons.