



Hereford

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National Herd of the Year trophy returning to Wales

This year, judges up and down the country visited herds within regional associations and Hereford clubs to determine which of their members had the best herd.

It's an opportunity for breeders to not only showcase their breeding stock but also their systems, farmland, and plans for future changes. Those lucky enough to be spotted as the associations top pick are then brought forward to partake in the national herd of the year competition.

Judging the national herd competition is no mean feat, setting aside personal commitments to travel the width and breadth of the United Kingdom to assess nine herds. Invited by the Hereford Cattle Society council to take on the mantle was husband and wife team Davie and Kate Dickinson. Not known as a couple to shy away from a challenge, they happily accepted and were excited to see what was on offer from fellow breeders.

Davie Dickinson began his farming career by breaking away from the traditions of his family to pursue his own passion. He started as a shepherd, adding shearer and then sheep scanner to his CV. His skills were not only in demand in the UK but also New Zealand, allowing him 13 years of travelling from country to country. Here started his love and appreciation for the



breed having seen large herds of Herefords on his travels.

Having been born into the farming life, Kate Dickinson continued her links within agriculture working from MAFF, DEFRA and the Poultry Club of Great Britain and currently for the British Free Range Producers Association as the membership and event manager. It was during her time as an inspector for MAFF, that she headed up the drive of a small holding, selected for an inspection, to meet its occupant, Davie Dickinson. The premise of a romantic comedy, Kate reprimanded Davie as he had written his movement records in pencil. The pair must have made a lasting impression from this meeting as few months later they met again, this time in a local nightclub and have been together since.

Both determined to continue ahead in farming, wanting to secure a plot of land to expand their enterprise, they applied for farming tenancies.

After multiple unsuccessful attempts the two took the leap purchasing land of their own.

Chattlehope House was 400 acres of bare hill ground when they first purchased it 17 years ago. Since then, the couple have improved its infrastructure with the addition of buildings, including cattle housing and a muck store along with a family home which they now share with their 15-year-old daughter, Nina. Set 1,000 feet above sea level at the top of the Pennines in Northumberland close to the Scottish border, the farm is completely off grid.

The farm is ring fenced with forestry which prevents nose-to-nose contact with neighbouring farms but enhances the local insect population. Sitting above the snow line the farm often lies white for several weeks at a time. They have a higher-than-average rainfall, the ground is clay over peat and there is a peat bog on the farm. Despite all these challenges the family and

their pedigree Hereford herd are thriving. At the annual awards dinner, Kate gave insight into their farm, and its challenges, finishing with the statement. "It may not be the easiest or the best farm in the land, but it is ours." As she finished the sentence, she was met with applause from the room, in support and understanding. A moment that felt profound.

Kate put great emphasis on Chattlehope in her presentation as it has set the foundation for their judging criteria and gave the audience which included those whose herds, they visited context to their decision. Davie and Kate both decided before heading out that they were looking for a consistent herd with naturally fleshing cows, producing quality calves. They would take into consideration farm types. Expecting variation from farm to farm, they wanted insight into how the land was being managed to suit the unique needs and ecosystem of each, as well as any environmental sustainability initiatives being undertaken with particular focus on management of grassland and improvements. All of this alongside a long list of questions surrounding herd husbandry spanning insemination to health schemes.

As Kate concluded with what she described as the 'Winning formula' she moved ahead reviewing the nine herds she'd visited with Davie and later due to illness, without Davie. Touching on areas of interest from each, showcasing animals within the presentation on screen.

Thanking all families and herd owners for hosting the Dickinsons on their judging journey. The top three winners were announced.

In third place, with a herd that showed exceptional consistency and confirmation throughout especially considering the size of the herd, Messrs Kemp of Auckvale Herefords in County Durham.

The second-place position was awarded to Laura and Phillip Vincent, Pulham Herefords again producing a herd which had great cow consistency, condition and conformation and with breeding prize winning young stock.

Area Winners

Scottish Hereford Breeders association winners
– I Wilkinson

South of England Hereford Breeders Association
– Messrs Myers

Midlands & East Anglia Hereford Breeders Association – PRJ & LR Vincent

Traditional Hereford Breeders Club – P Holloway
Southwestern Hereford Association – JD Moorhouse

Wales Hereford Club – TG, EI & EN Thorne

Hereford Cattle Breeders Association – EL Lewis & Son

Northern Ireland Hereford Breeders Association
– A Shaw

North of England Hereford Breeders Association
– W & R Kemp & Sons



As the applause died down, the room of more than 120 heads sat quiet, awaiting the final decision and announcement from Kate. The winners of the National Herd Competition for the second time in a row, hailing from Pembrokeshire in Wales, with 45 Polled and British polled cows within their herd were the Thorne family, Studdolph Herefords from Wales.

Images

1. Taking first place Non Thorne, for TG, EI & EN Thorne, Studdolph Herefords.
2. Laura and Phillip Vincent, Pulham Herefords.
3. Messrs Kemp of Auckvale Herefords in County Durham.
4. Judges Davie and Kate Dickinson with David Smyth, Hereford Cattle Society President.
5. A delighted Non Thorne.

Paramount position for Thorne's herd



The Thorne family from Studdolph Hall took the 2023 Herd of the Year trophy home to Pembrokeshire for the third time. George, Ionwy and Non offer insight into their system and what led them to their success.

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The walls of the farmhouse kitchen at Studdolph Hall are adorned with Herefords – an assortment of paintings, prints and photographs that leave absolutely no room to doubt the breed of cattle grazing in the fields beyond the farmyard.

Heads down as they munch away on the late autumn pasture, the cows and their offspring set the bar high on condition, consistency and conformation, the traits most sought after by competition judge Kate Dickinson on the hunt for her winning herd earlier that season.

"I came with a list of objectives that a herd needed, once they ticked all the boxes, at a secondary level, I wanted to see the potential passed through to their youngstock too," she says.

Maintaining the condition that caught her eye in the Studdolph herd of Poll and British polled cows primarily comes down to grassland management and grazing, with the Thornes prioritising fresh calvers with the best feed.

The permanent pasture on the 69-hectare (170-acre) all-grass farm, and an abundance of it thanks to Pembrokeshire's temperate climate, is a good match for the breed.

"This is good land for the Hereford, they are really spoilt here," says George. "We keep the groups rotating around the fields because like all cattle they like a move, a bit of fresh bite."



Photos: Chrissie Long,
Countrygirl Media

Grouping the cattle during the April to November grazing period also helps support condition. Male and female calves are initially run as one group with their dams, until the young animals are four months old, at which point the bulls and heifers are separated into suckling groups for feeding and management purposes.

The groups are evenly split because from year to year there is without fail a consistent ratio of 50:50 males and females. "Incredibly it always seems to work out that way, we use a range of AI sires, stock bulls and sexed semen



but always end up with roughly even numbers of bulls and heifers," says Non.

Grouping allows creep feeding to be adjusted according to sex; the heifers are supplementary fed some coarse mix and locally-sourced rolled barley but it is the bulls that get the lion's share. "We don't want the heifers getting over-fat," Non explains.

Weaning is at housing, cows and calves separated in stages because of limitations with housing availability. During that process, cows and their progeny are mixed again every two days for a week or so, with the suckling helping to dry



up milk flow and maintain udder health in the cows. A diet of hay helps too.

If the weather allows, the cows are sometimes turned out to grass again after weaning before winter housing on silage.

All male calves are kept entire to accelerate the finishing period in animals that don't make the grade for breeding. These are sold at 16 months, mostly supplied to ABP.

Breeding animals are marketed at 13-14 months. Dairy farms had historically accounted for the majority of sales but that market has now shifted somewhat to suckler herds.

"As breeding technology has developed and is used more widely in the dairy industry we are providing less bulls to the dairyman but we do still have a lot of dairy

farmers who buy from us, and quite a few have been coming back to us for years," says Ionwy.

Calving in two blocks, in the spring and autumn, ensures there is a good supply of breeding stock available when buyers need them.

To get calves off to a good start, every animal is fed two litres of powdered colostrum within two hours of birth, irrespective of whether they have suckled.

Achieving the two other 'Cs' on Kate Dickinson's list – consistency and conformation – is chiefly down to breeding, and years of it, more than seven decades in fact.

The herd was established in 1946 by George's father Walter under three inclusive prefixes – the Studdolph horned herd, the Ashdale British Polled herd and the Glenvale poll herd.

He grew the herd to 80 cows and, at that number, it was one of the largest horned herds in the UK. In 1979 he made the decision to disperse the Herefords as a changing attitude to beef production, due to the popularity of continental breeds, coupled with a diminished demand for the smaller horned Hereford meant a change in focus was required.

Anxious to keep the bloodlines going and the Studdolph prefix alive, George bought a cow and an in-calf heifer from that sale.

The cow was in-calf to a British Polled bull which in turn established the successful Queen family in the new generation herd. The herd grew with the purchase of poll females



from the Dendor, Costhorpe, Mandalay and Lowesmoor herds and now numbers 45 cows.

Once the last of the original Studdolph horned females died out, George and Ionwy gifted the herd to Non, along with a Christmas gift of two females they had purchased from the Dendor herd.

The consistency in the calves the herd has since produced was described by the competition judge as the best she saw across the nine farms visited.

The stock bull that produced the uniform bunch of calves Kate saw is Alderville 1 Dover purchased at the spring society sale in 2022.

George and Non had pre-selected six possibilities from the sale catalogue, based on figures and breeding, but they discounted some at the sale because the bulls didn't measure up to their preferences on colour and appearance.

"There is no point in buying a bull with the best figures if you don't like the look of it," Non suggests.

Alderville 1 Dover did catch her eye and he has lived up to expectation.

"He has given us some really nice calves, and he has a gorgeous temperament," she says.

Importantly for her, he hadn't been over-fed concentrates ahead of the sale. "Animals are sometimes stuffed to the hilt but they just melt when they are put to work."

The Thornes run a closed herd and put the superb conformation of the animals largely down to that, together with years of breeding and a strict approach to culling the bottom 10%.

They focus on breeding for good udders, a great top line and a placid temperament. Size, length and type are important too.

"Selecting on feet and milk is important because if an animal can't walk there isn't much hope and if they haven't got enough milk you might as well forget it!" laughs Non. "A cow needs to be able to produce lots of milk to give her calf the best chance."

Heifers are calved as two and a half year olds to produce a bigger framed animal. AI is used for that first pregnancy, with ease of calving a priority when selecting sires.

Non's enthusiasm, drive and passion for the Hereford saw the Thornes return to the sale ring in 2018 after a 40 year absence from selling females at a public auction.



As well as the enjoyment she gets from that experience, it has widened the pool of potential buyers. "Because of where we are located, in south west Wales, prospective buyers don't just call in because they happen to be passing by, we have to take the stock to the people."

Non loves the process of preparing the animals for sale. "Watching a calf being born, then seeing it develop to the point of sale, nothing quite beats that."

George does pull her leg about the preparation now involved in getting an animal show and sale ring ready. "He reminds me that when he went to the sales at Perth and Edinburgh he did so with just a brush and a bucket while I have a car full of cans and cosmetics!"



Looking to the future, the Thornes have no doubt that the popularity of the Hereford will only increase as the emphasis on food sustainability grows. Unlike Continental breeds, the Hereford doesn't rely on concentrates to perform, George points out.

"The Hereford is easy and cheap to keep and will fatten off grass but the Continentals need so much feed. They might achieve higher prices at sale but it costs a lot more to get them there."

Judging nine herds in nine days is no mean feat.

Kate Dickinson travelled the length and breadth of the UK looking for her top herd, a job made all the more tricky by the exceptional quality of the stock she was presented with on each of those nine farms.

"Every farm I visited clearly love and think so much of their animals," she says.

So what gave the Studdolph herd the edge?

"They were really nice strong, big cows, with a good frame and good length to them as well," says Kate.

"They had great udders, I didn't see a bad udder, and the cows were nicely marked."

Cow condition was also a stand out feature.

"I like to see cows in really peak condition and they were outstanding going into autumn," says Kate.

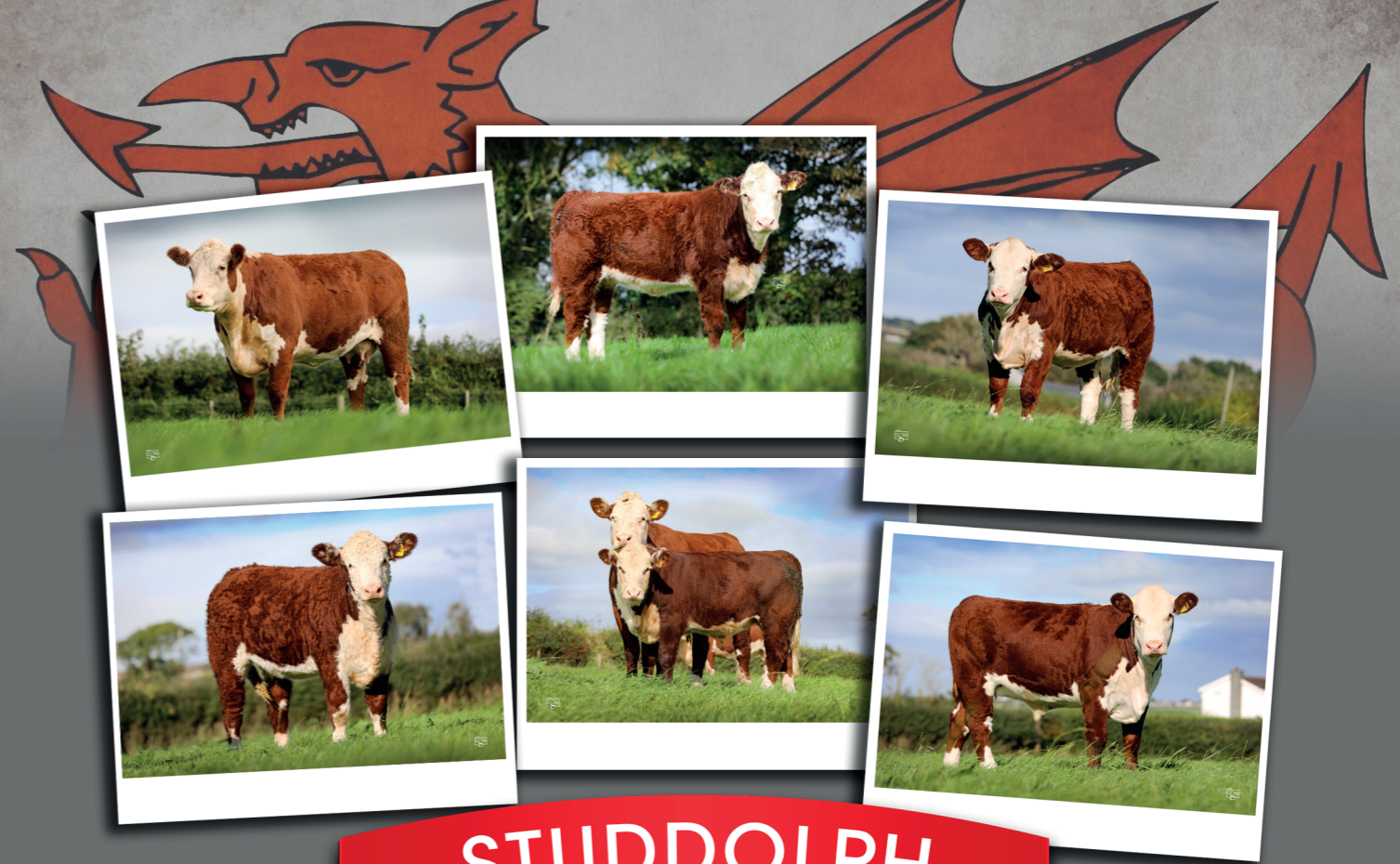
"Some were outside, coming towards the end of the good grass, but they were not overly fat and that is down to the grassland management."

It wasn't only the cows that scored highly but the youngstock too.

Kate was taken by the 'very feminine' looking females in the calf lines.

"The youngstock also had great length but a lot of meat, that meat coming right down to their legs, back and into their loin. Even the yearlings were naturally carrying a lot of flesh."

"That is important because at the end of the day the Hereford is ultimate a beef animal going into the food chain."



STUDDOLPH
Herefords

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National Herd of the Year 2023



@ Studdolph Herefords

TG, EI & EN THORNE

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A huge thank you to all our customers, both at Society sales and off farm.
We wish you all the best with your stock.