THE BELTED GALLOWAY CATTLE SOCIETY

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BELTED GALLOWAY CATTLE SOCIETY OF U.K. & EIRE

WORLD CONFERENCE REPORT 2016

It is a pleasure to welcome so many of our colleagues from around the world to this conference here on our home territory. Much preparation has gone into the organisation of the event and it is gratifying to see that so many have made the journey to visit the home of these special breeds.

The Belted Galloway Society continues to be in good heart, with a flourishing membership and a steadily increasing level of interest in the breeds. The Society registers mainly Belted Galloways but also handles registration of White Galloways. Together with our colleagues in the Galloway Cattle Society and the Riggit Galloway Society we deal with the registration of pedigrees and the promotion of the Galloway family of breeds.

The numbers of Belted Galloways being registered has remained at a similar level for several years now, typically 1,100 females and 100 bulls per year entering the herd book. Of course, there are a considerable number of non-pedigree Belties in the country, but it is difficult to estimate the numbers. The most important thing is that the breed is once again at a healthy level and has been removed from the rare breeds watchlist following the foot and mouth disaster in 2001.

The interesting thing is that we experience a constant stream of enquiries from breeders wishing to join the Society and register cattle, although the numbers of registrations remains fairly static. This would indicate that our membership is made up mainly of small farmers, or "lifestyle farmers". While this is good for the breed in terms of numbers it means that, at least for the moment, there are relatively few farms which keep Belted Galloways on a commercial scale.

However, there are signs that the market in the U.K. is changing. Consumers are becoming more discerning about the meat they buy, not only in terms of the quality of the beef, but also its provenance. This means they are interested not only in where their beef was produced, but also what type of farming system produced it and, not least, whether the beef came from a traditional home breed or a fast-growing over-lean Continental breed.

There are large areas of less productive marginal grassland and moorland in Britain and Ireland, particularly in the hills, and modern commercial cattle cannot survive the climate and relatively poor quality grazing. This is where hardy traditional breeds like the Beltie and the White Galloway come in. Their slow growth pattern allows them to thrive on a low plane of nutrition and produces tender, succulent and tasty beef which is in great demand from high quality butchers. Only our old established traditional breeds are in a position to capitalise on this market, and this is where the Society is positioning itself.

In the U.K. several cattle health issues are rearing their ugly heads, and breed societies are playing their part in encouraging breeders to adopt preventative measures to slow down and eventually eradicate these scourges. After great success in the latter part of the 20th century the battle against Bovine Tuberculosis is raging once more, and the south of England is particularly badly affected. Several of our members have experienced reactors to T.B., which results in costly and inconvenient shutdowns and testing regimes. It also affects the trade in breeding cattle, as farmers from non-affected areas are obviously reluctant to source animals from affected regions, and this has been reflected in the Society's official sales. Our two northern sales are not affected by the T.B. situation, but our south west England sale suffers from the reluctance of breeders from the north to buy from that region. An intense debate is underway with the Government over the best strategy to deal with the problem, but opinions are diverging and a solution hard to come by.

The Society has taken steps to encourage members to address another pernicious cattle disease, Bovine Viral Diahorrea. This disease in highly infectious and results in loss of production and abortions. In addition some animals may appear healthy but still carry the disease and will spread it. These Persistently Infected cattle really ought to be slaughtered, but some breeders understandably are reluctant to dispose of an otherwise healthy looking animal. An eradication programme has been rolled out in Scotland, however this has yet to be taken up in other parts of the U.K. and Ireland. The Society was not willing to impose stringent BVD standards on the entire membership, but has chosen a more persuasive route by insisting that all animals entered for official Society sales are vaccinated against the disease and tested before sale. In this way the breeders at the top of the pyramid will hopefully set an example to the rest to the membership with a view to encouraging a voluntary uptake of preventative measures.

The White Galloway breed in Britain is very much a minority one, with only 66 females and 7 bulls registered by the Society last year, but there is no doubting its qualities of hardiness and its ability to convert poor quality grazing into high quality beef. White Galloway breeders report a better milking ability compared to other Galloway breeds, with resulting improved growth rates of calves, and this was demonstrated to great effect when the Society's Chairman, Tim Oliver, hosted a visit to his farm to see what is probably the largest herd of White Galloways in the country. Members came away commenting on how the White cattle looked so much better than the Belted variety, even thought they were kept on the same ground under the same conditions. As with many minority breeds, the challenge is persuading breeders of the benefits of these excellent cattle in order to prevent the gene pool shrinking to too low a level. The Society has been very interested in the research carried out into the breeding of White Galloways and its influence on markings, and has adopted its breed standards to take account of this and to make it more attractive for breeders to register their White Galloways.

To conclude, the Belted Galloway Society remains in good health, with a thriving membership and plenty of challenges in front of it. We look forward to reporting on progress in two years' time.