



MEADOW QUALITY

LIVESTOCK TRADING SINCE 1975

Dairy bred steers, what is achievable?

For many years the Black & White bull calf was the bye-product of the dairy industry that no one wanted. At certain points in time dairy farmers struggled with the prospect of shooting these calves soon after birth, but with a backlash from the public and milk contracts specifying that this would become a non-compliance issue, the challenge was transferred to the beef industry. But how were they to handle these calves and make money? Yes, compared to a beef-bred animal they looked relatively cheap to purchase, but economically should these animals be grown on and sold for veal at under 12 months? Kept entire and sold as young bulls at 1-2 years of age or put to grass and killed between 2 and 3 years of age? and with lower kill-out percentages was it something that beef processors would ultimately want to buy?

A route that some Producers went for was a more precision based beef steer system that involved specialist skills to create a value for all along the supply chain. Buying quality calves is something that Meadow Quality have been synonymous with for over 40 years. Building up strong working relationships with hundreds of Dairy farmers across England and Wales has been integral in this, and being 100% farmer owned, the ethos of the company was to provide a joined-up approach in both its thinking and delivery. Buying black and white bull calves in quantities was not the difficult bit, once dairy units had been convinced there was a market for keeping fit and healthy Black & White bull calves to 3 weeks of age, however working with, and developing a network of specialist calf rearing units was the next important path in the establishment of the chain.

Calf rearing with volumes of young calves is a skill that many have tried, but only those with the dedication and management skills have been able to turn into a business that works and succeeds. In the case of the Black & White bull calves, adherence to the use of high quality milk powder and feed, following strict veterinary protocols, the castration and disbudding of the calf at the correct time during its time on the unit, have all got to be factored in to output a baby calf that arrives (with a batch of often unknown herd-mates) on day 1, weighing around 55-60kg, and leaves around 12 weeks later weighing between 130 and 140kgs.

With a fit and healthy reared Black and White steer calf to work with, the challenge then is what feeding system to adopt to get the optimal return for the grower-finisher. The route chosen by John Bell of Berryfields Farms Limited at Daventry in Northamptonshire was to feed a ration that he has developed over many years through his Berrystock Feeds business, where the aim was to achieve a 600Kg live-weight finish in 12 months or less on these Black & White steers from his unit. Cattle that could be farmed in volumes that would grow on and finish, with a consistent meat quality that processors wanted to buy, and utilising all the economies of scale available so that the cattle came out as young as possible and in significant quantities was all part of the plan.

By fulfilling the criteria and benchmarks that John set himself, he is now able to repeat the system on a very regular basis and is currently finishing around 2,500 Black & White steers annually, with a desire to see this number continue to grow over the coming years.

The latest batch of cattle that went through the system have achieved some of the best results that John has seen so far in 2017. However, allowing the enterprise to rest on its laurels is not part of the plan. Analysis of the data that this quantity of cattle produce, does allow for continual ongoing improvements that should continue to deliver high quality British Beef, farmed



to high welfare standards with full traceability, all from the humble Black & White bull calf and its very chequered beginnings.

21 Steers Killed 21st June 2017	Days
Average calf age at purchase	22
Average days on Rearing Unit	79
Days on Finisher unit	307
Average age at Kill	408
Grades Achieved	
-O4L	10
O+4H	4
O+4L	4
-O4H	2
-O3	1
Kill Out %	51.55%
Average Cold Weight	313.46Kg