

A Short History of the Jersey Breed

The domestication of cattle started, we are told, around 5000 BC, probably in the regions of Egypt, Palestine and Mesopotamia and over the course of many centuries cattle (*Bos Taurus*) were distributed to most parts of the African, Asian and European Continents. All the modern breeds of cattle have evolved from the sub-species *Bos Taurus* (*Longifrons* or *Indicus*).

The world has altered considerably in the past seven thousand years with changing climate, forestation, urbanisation and most importantly, man evolving from hunter to farmer. Formal breeds of cattle are a very recent phenomenon, only developing in the last few centuries.

There is very little written evidence of the very early development the 'Jersey', however, we know that the Island finally separated from the French mainland in the seventh or eighth century and the prevalent type of cow in north-western France at that time was a small brindle coloured animal. Once isolated, it was likely that the Channel Islanders line-bred or inbred their cattle that could have brought out recessive genes that effected a change in colour and form. Many other breeds developed throughout France and the alpine regions, some bear striking similarities to the Jersey breed, particularly the Parthenaise, the old Morbihan and indeed the Brown Swiss; this could suggest they have evolved from the same ancestry.

So why did the Jersey breed develop as she did? Nobody has the definitive answer but we do know that the Island was made up of thousands of small farmsteads and land was limited, so presumably feed efficiency and low maintenance were essential requirements for cattle that had to compete for the land with other important crops. We also know the island's soil is low in calcium and that is likely to have contributed to the Jersey's smaller frame.

The reputation of the island's cattle as 'fine, docile animals that produce milk with excellent butter making qualities' was noted as early as the beginning of the 1600s and a cattle export trade to England was established, though there seems to be no evidence of the numbers that were shipped from the Island in those formative years. We can readily assume the locals were all too aware of her superiority and it is interesting to note that when George and Suzanna Poingdestre and their family set sail for America in 1657 they took several cows from their old homestead at Swan Farm.

For more than two hundred years cows from the Island crossed the channel from Jersey, Guernsey and Alderney landing in either Weymouth or Southampton. As Alderney is the most northerly island and was the last port of call before returning to England, the cattle on board were listed in the ship's log as "Alderney cattle".

At some stage during the 1700s the French, recognising the valuable trade, deviously began exporting their cattle to Jersey for onward shipment to England to be sold as high value 'Alderneys'; they also avoided trade duties due on French imports and one must deduce that these animals must have resembled Jerseys to some extent. There are several accounts that state as much, but we are told, by at least one commentator of the time, that "the French beasts had malformed udders and watery milk".

The Law and the Cow.

Aware of the danger of losing this prosperous trade The States of Jersey passed the first Act banning the importation of cattle into Jersey in 1763. It forbade "*all persons whatsoever from importing from France any cattle, sheep, hogs, fowls, eggs, meat and any kind of butter or fat, under pain of confiscation of the vessel and cargo to the king*".

Despite these penalties, the trade from France must have continued as on the 8th August 1789 The Law was reinforced because, "*The fraudulent importation of Cows, Heifers, Calves and Bulls from France having become a matter most alarming to the country (France), in that it not only contributes to raise in butchers meat to an exorbitant price, but it also menaces with total ruin one of the most profitable branches of the commerce of this Island with England, the States have judged it necessary to enact....*". This law was far more specific, the penalties for landing cattle illegally were not only to be borne by the master of the ship but all sailors and crew. Bullocks (presumably for early slaughter) were allowed to land, but only in the harbours of St Helier or St Aubin by prior arrangement with the Parish Connétable or in his absence a Centenier.

Cows, heifers, calves and bulls were permitted to enter Jersey from the other Channel Islands but only with an affidavit declaring their place of origin, again produced to the Connétable or Centenier before arrival. Interestingly, all cattle exported from the Island were required to carry a passport with their 'particulars' with proof of their vendor and place of origin. The Master of the Ship was also obliged to declare the number of cattle on each shipment to the Governor prior to departure and that declaration needed counter signing by the English Customs Officer to verify that no additional cattle had been disembarked than that stated on the declaration.

Because of the wars and the unavailability of English bullocks to feed the increasing garrison the 1789 act was laid aside after some time.

On the 18th March 1826 The States passed a new Act to re-enforce the previous law and thus "*preserving the original breed from any foreign admixture and avoiding any fraud which might be practiced by introducing into England French cows as being cows from this Island*". This law contained much of the previous but also outlawed ships carrying French cattle from venturing less than '*two leagues*' from the Islands' coast. Ownership of cattle became a responsibility too; if suspected of owning French cattle, Islanders were bound to prove that the animal, if not native, had '*been introduced from England or some other non-prohibited place*' namely, '*Guernsey, Alderney, Sark or their dependencies*'.

After the signing of the British-French Trade Agreement in 1860 The States were caught up in the desire to encourage new free trade between Great Britain and France, so, while wanting to protect the purity of the Island breed they felt it necessary to change the Cattle Importation Laws and this was done on the 8th September 1864. The new law stated that foreign cattle may be introduced into the Island for consumption or if in transit; however there were strict conditions applied. No foreign animal was allowed to reproduce and all imported animals must arrive in St Helier Harbour only and be branded with the letter F, three inches square; they must also remain in the vicinity of the harbour under the supervision of an appointed agent. Any cattle contravening the prescribed condition were to be confiscated and slaughtered for the use of the General Hospital. Those caught flouting the law were liable to a heavy fine or six months imprisonment. The 1864 law did not ban cattle from the other Islands, but for them, the provisions of the previous law remained. Indeed a good number of Guernsey's were exhibited at the Channel Islands Exhibition in the grounds of Victoria College in 1871.

The Royal Show of 1879 was held at Kilburn and 252 Jerseys were entered, 30 of them came direct from the Jersey. Island bred animals won both Championships. For this great show the precedent was established of allowing animals to leave Jersey for exhibition providing they were returned within 14 days, and, from time to time, for years afterward the committee was called on to give permission for certain animals to go over and compete at the 'Royal' and other leading English shows.

On at least two known occasions cattle of other breeds were known to have been brought into Jersey for experimental crossing with the native breed. Mr. Bevans, in about 1845, introduced some "Durham's", formerly a name for Shorthorns, and crossed them with his Jerseys, but their progeny did not prove successful and they were butchered. Col James Godfray of St Martin too introduced Shorthorns, but the experiment was again a failure and the crossbreds were butchered. Col. Godfray

then tried Ayrshire's, with the same result. The admission of Guernsey cattle was not prohibited, and interchange of some Guernseys and Jerseys formerly took place between the two islands, usually on account of inter-island marriages, but crosses between the breeds never proved satisfactory or advantageous, the yellow colour, pink eyes and buff noses of the Guernseys cropped up in the mixed offspring, and they were always rejected. The honour of the breed seems to have remained intact, one commentator of the late 1880s (John Thornton) wrote "the purity of the Jersey Island cattle is guarded, not by law but by the pride and integrity of the Islanders".

In 1891, the rinderpest or cattle plague epidemic reached Great Britain and the States took immediate action to ban any importation of all livestock, the ban on the importation of cattle has remained since with the exception of a few shipments of beef cattle for the increasingly hungry occupation forces in the Second World War.

The Artificial Insemination of Domestic Animals Law of 1952 was sanctioned to prevent the importation of any genetics that could violate the high pedigree status of the Island cattle. That Act has been amended several times since, notably in 1986 to prevent the importation of Embryos or Ova. With the advancement of veterinary science and testing procedures, the States, in recent years, have relaxed the ban on importing other cloven-foot livestock strictly under licence with the necessary quarantine and bio-security controls.

The Society and the Cow.

The Royal Jersey Agricultural and Horticultural Society began on the 24th August 1833 with the meeting of 'twenty five gentlemen and farmers' chaired by the Lieutenant Governor Major General William Thornton with the aim of forming some structure for Island agriculture. The Society received Royal Patronage from HM King William IV in the first year of its existence and began highly organised cattle shows in St Helier, devising a new 'scale of points' by which to judge cattle.

The cattle export trade had already been well established for many decades and continued to flourish, the prices being achieved increased as the best animals were recognised with Society show prizes (funded by States subsidy until 1841). By the 1840s, the exportation of bulls was of such concern to the Board that if a bull was exported within 'a season' of winning a show prize, the generous prize money had to be forfeited. By the 1850s there were regular shipments to America and within the next decades the first shipments to Australia (1854), New Zealand (1862) and later South Africa (1880) began. Large consignments of cattle travelled to Scandinavian countries around the turn of the 19th-20th centuries and these were the foundation of the very successful Danish Jerseys of today.

The popularity of the Jersey cow was enhanced by the Society's shows, and for well over a century Jersey breeders from overseas came to the Island to buy the best-looking cattle available. In the Society's annual report of 1881 it was observed that prices for cattle had increased with four cows selling for £300 each and other selling for more than £200. A year later, one animal, Khedive's Primrose, sold for the exorbitant price of £1000! Initially the shows were conducted behind closed doors, with each individual entrant being taken into a room before several judges who awarded points accordingly. It was in June 1887, when Queen Victoria's Jubilee was celebrated that judging was done in public for the first time, similar to the method used globally today.

Throughout the history of the Society a number of characters seemed to have made huge contributions to its progress. In the early years Col. J Le Couteur (Secretary and later President) was instrumental in setting up the organisation together with the other founders but by the 1860s C P Le Cornu Esq (later Colonel) would appear to have been the driving force and it was his great enthusiasm and persistence amidst much controversy that finally adopted the principal of a Herd Book; a good number protested that because all the animals in the Island were of the home breed, a Herd Book was unnecessary. It is estimated that there would have been about 12,000 cattle in the Island at that time and annual exports were totalling over 2,000 per annum.

Had it not been for the efforts of C P Le Cornu and his committee it is likely our Island Herd Book would have post dated the American Jersey Herd Book, which started in 1868.

The Jersey Herd Book is the official record of registration for all Jersey cattle born in the Island. As the breed was established in other countries, the same principles of registration were adopted thereby continuing the pedigree status of an exported animal. From 4th April 1866 to 23rd October 1873 only 1441 foundation cattle had been registered, however despite its slow start, the Jersey Herd Book gained ground as it became apparent that international buyers paid better prices for registered animals and additional 'show points' were awarded to registered stock. The Society continued to develop the shows; one of the high points was The Channel Islands Exhibition held in the grounds of Victoria College where over 280 cattle were shown (including Guernsey classes).

In 1893 the 24-hour butter tests were first held. These were initially sponsored by the English Jersey Cattle Society, and were the first kind of official recording of the quantity and quality of milk individual cows produced. They continued until 1912 when yearly milk records were introduced. The method of annual milk recording of dairy cattle today is a sophisticated version of that introduced nearly a century ago.

The importance of recognising superior breeding bulls led to the introduction of progeny classes at the shows in 1901. At that time, a very generous sum of £50 to the winning entry was awarded.

Identification of animals has always been of the utmost importance and until the Second World War this was achieved by an elaborate written description of each individual. Descriptions such as "fawn, whole coloured, tongue and switch black" was very common, but others like "mulberry, broken coloured, switch mixed and tongue black" sounded very colourful. In 1934, attempts were made to introduce the practice of tattooing in the ear of the animal. This failed at that time, and the matter was discussed again in 1939, but the arrival of the German forces again delayed the introduction. However, the German authorities insisted that this was implemented in order to keep strict records of calves for registration and tattooing was implemented on October 1st 1943.

From the early days, "Qualification" of cattle to be entered into the Jersey Herd Book was taken very seriously and although there were alterations to the scheme from time to time, the principal remained until the late 1960's when a new method of "Classification" started which awarded an animal a score out of a maximum of 100. Twenty years later, the present system of assessing each animal's functional traits and creating a linear profile for her and more importantly, an average for bulls daughters, was adopted. This system continues to be refined.

Until the 1950s the export of cattle continued to play an important role in Jersey's agricultural commerce with both high numbers of cattle and in many instances very high prices for individual animals created lucrative opportunities for breeders to develop their farmsteads.

The cattle shows enjoyed their heyday between the two World Wars and since the 1960s the size and number of these events have slowly shrunk; parochial shows and societies are almost a thing of the past. However a hardcore of six or seven farmers continues to exhibit at the present day bringing sixty to eighty entries to the Island shows.

Since the early 1970s virtually all cows in the Island are registered in the Jersey Herd Book as pedigree, milk recorded monthly and type classified at least once. Bulls' progenies are assessed and scored (mostly through the bull proving programme) and the Society was instrumental in introducing Embryo Transfer to perpetuate further breed improvement in the 1980s. Results were mixed and there appears to be little enthusiasm to flush cows at the moment.

In 1983, with fewer than two hundred herds, the Society's council led an initiative to introduce Jersey semen into the Island. A vote of the membership failed to support the proposal by a margin of two to one. The Committee of Agriculture lead by Senator Dick Shenton saw merit in the views of the council and forwarded the proposal for consideration of the States Chamber but the attempt to change the Law failed by the same ratio as the membership vote.

Since 2003 the Society has regained the responsibilities of organising the Milk Recording and the Artificial Insemination services and with the help of government funding these operations remain critical to the breeding programme.

The Society once provided Herd Book services to well over a thousand farms in the Island; today there is currently 3200 milking cows in 33 herds. This in itself presents massive challenges to further the goals of breed development. The Royal Jersey Agricultural and Horticultural Society remains steadfast in its commitment to the protection and development of our native cow and ensure future generations enjoy seeing pedigree Jersey cows grazing and shaping our wonderful countryside.

[This very brief summary of the RJA & HS only covers its activities connected to the Jersey Cow, the society was also very involved in the development of the potato industry and remains totally committed to the promotion of all aspects of Island horticulture]