

## Loch Katrine Whitebred Shorthorns – January 2014

In 2009 Forestry Commission (Scotland) formed the Katrine Fold of Highland cattle, with young heifers bought in from mostly West coast sources. There are now eighty young cows plus groups of replacements, split into four minifolds. The cattle graze on the catchment area of Lochs Katrine and Arklet, which together provide the water supply for Glasgow. The total area of the catchment is approximately nine thousand hectares of which the cattle presently graze about eighthundred hectares. The land is owned by Scottish Water, and the Forestry Commission have it on a onehundred and fifty year lease, with the aim of establishing new native woodland and improving the upland habitats on a landscape scale. The cattle at Loch Katrine graze a variety of habitat at different times of year, helping us to improve the condition of open grassland, broadleaved woodland, upland heath and areas of raised bog.



Highland cow grazing Molinia grass with Whitebred Shorthorn cross calf at foot

Initially one Highland bull was purchased, with a view to producing homebred heifer replacements. The plan from the start was for 90% of the Highland cows to be crossed with another native breed. The choice of crossing breed was an important one to get right, and several breeds were considered.



Whitebred Shorthorn cows grazing in the summer

The cows work hard at Loch Katrine, grazing low quality forage all year round with very little supplementary feeding and low labour input. This meant that continental bulls were ruled out from the start as they would likely have caused more calving difficulty and produced calves too demanding for small Highland cows in a low input system. The Whitebred Shorthorn breed was selected for a number of reasons, but particularly because they are easy calving, can be outwintered, are quiet and easily handled, and they have a good health record. Perhaps just as importantly, they are known for producing high quality first cross heifers which are in great demand due their milking and mothering ability, their longevity, and fertility.



Highland cow with Whitebred Shorthorn cross bullock calf

In 2010 the first Whitebred Shorthorn bull was purchased to run with a batch of twenty bulling Highland heifers. This bull, Longley Talon who is a son of Blackburn Monty out of a Murtholm Twinkle line, still remains at Katrine and has produced some fantastic first cross calves over the subsequent 3 years. In 2011 more Whitebred cattle arrived, including a small group of yearling heifers, which now form the basis of the Katrine pure Whitebred Shorthorn herd. Presently there are four mature bulls, five young cows, two homebred yearling bulls, and two homebred yearling heifers. The herd is made up of animals from several sources including Longley, Blackburn, Parton, and Barlaes.

The Katrine cattle are in the SAC Premium Cattle Health Scheme, and all animals have tested clear of the four major diseases when purchased. Annual tests have since confirmed the entire herd as High Health with 'accredited free' status. This is a very valuable detail for buyers of the first cross females, especially so for one buyer in 2012 who wanted a group of high health heifers to be used as embryo recipients.



Highland cow with Whitebred Shorthorn cross heifer calf

In 2012 a grazing trial was completed which showed the merits of crossing Highland cows with Whitebred Shorthorn bulls as opposed to breeding pure. Whitebred Shorthorn cross steers were run with pure Highland steers under the same management and feeding regime. On the trial the Whitebred Shorthorn cross steers gained significantly better than the pure Highlands and reached slaughter weights significantly faster and well below the 30 month deadline, whilst also producing a carcass of consistently better grading. The price per kilo for Whitebred cross steers is better too, especially if sold as forward stores. The trial showed that by breeding the Highland cows with Whitebred Shorthorn bulls, instead of Highland, the resulting calf crop would gain an average of 0.15kg more per day between 12months of age and finishing. In addition, any animal that is sired by the Whitebred Shorthorn qualifies for the Morrisons Supermarket 30p/kg premium, making the advantage of crossbreeding with the Whitebred even more distinct.

Highland heifer with first calf at foot



In 2013 this work has been expanded upon, by recording the weights of all cattle at Loch Katrine. This is proving to be an extremely valuable exercise as it will help to inform the selection of both Highland and Whitebred Shorthorn replacements. The 2013 calf crop were weighed at weaning along with the cows,

with the Whitebred Shorthorn cross calves an average of 20% heavier than the pure Highlands at this stage. The highland cows average 445kg and calves are averaging approximately 50% dam weight by weaning, giving a calf/cow weight ratio that few other breeds are able to achieve at 200 days without creep feeding. They will be weighed again at 12 months, which should give more insight into the difference in performance postweaning.

All Highland bulling heifers are now put to a Whitebred Shorthorn bull. This is due in part to the findings above but also due to the ease of calving and the benefits of heifers rearing a first calf with such fantastic hybrid vigour. The docility of the Whitebred Shorthorn breed is outstanding, being very easily handled and a pleasure to work with, a trait which the bulls are passing on to their first cross progeny. The first cross heifers are in demand and attract a premium as a result of their known mothering qualities, making them a popular choice for upland suckler herds. As mentioned above any cattle sired by the Whitebred Shorthorn qualify for Morrisons supermarket 30pence/kg premium over base price, which can increase the value of finished steers by up to £90 per head.

Forestry Commission (Scotland) is committed to the agricultural enterprise at Loch Katrine, and is working to support and promote the two native cattle breeds of Highland and Whitebred Shorthorn. It is very encouraging to see, particularly over the past couple of years, that there is growing interest in the breed. Our project continues to support this by promoting the Whitebred Shorthorn both as an animal well suited to conservation grazing and as a commercially viable breed with much to offer to the future of the UK beef industry. We do this through publishing success stories in the press, providing information at our visitor centres, attending agricultural events, hosting school trips and annual student visits from Scottish Agricultural Colleges.

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