

# Meet the farmer on a mission to revive the Gloucester breed

Insights07 Mar 2016 by [Alistair Driver](#)

There might be only 700 Gloucester cattle in the country but they are definitely not a rare breed, says Clifford Freeman. Alistair Driver finds out how his drive to revive one of Britain's oldest beef breeds is based on taste, traceability and, he hopes, commercial sense.

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One farmer and his mission to revive one of Britain's oldest breeds! #Farming #history

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Gloucester cattle were all the rage in the 18th century. Hailed as strikingly beautiful, the multi-purpose breed, renowned for its milk and beef and 'for providing strong, draught oxen', was popular across the country.

But things started to go downhill as Gloucesters struggled to compete with the bigger breeds of the agricultural revolution.

By the early 20th century, numbers had seriously dwindled and, although dedicated breeders tried to keep going, the last herd of Gloucesters, at Wick Court Farm, Arlingham, was sold in 1972.

That was it for one of the nation's earliest breeds. Or so it appeared.

Fast forward 44 years to a farm a few miles north of Gloucester and it is clear reports of the breed's death have been greatly exaggerated.

The revival, started by a defiant few, including Eric Freeman who bought 33 cattle from the Arlingham dispersal, is gathering pace.

Having been taken off the Rare Breed Survival Trust's 'critical list', a handful of Gloucestershire farmers are now on a mission to take the animal to the next level.

They include Eric's son, Clifford Freeman, whose Noent herd at Everes's Farm, Redmarley, has grown tenfold in recent years and is now home to 230 out of the 700 Gloucesters remaining in the country. And he is clear – he is not in it for the sentiment.

Clifford, who is married to Helen with two children, says: "In the past, people have seen it as a hobby. But we talk about producing Gloucesters with a purpose. This is our strapline."

While Gloucesters will never compete with modern breeds on productivity, Clifford's philosophy is all about producing high quality meat and marketing it on its unique taste and local heritage, backed by a Gloucester-bred logo.

**Critical**

It has already been a long road, but when we met at the farm a few weeks ago, the project was reaching a critical stage.

It all started when Clifford took on the remaining 20 cattle from his dad's herd about eight years ago.

He had just sold the family poultry business he built up to 400,000 broilers a week, having come to the realisation it was not for him.

Clifford says: "I had been involved with father's farm since I was seven and he kept the old traditional breeds. I remember making butter as a kid and hanging bacon on the wall.

"The poultry industry was brutal and a lot of it went against the grain for me. It was fast, modern and intensive and I was glad to get out."

Clifford admits he found himself with 'money in the bank but not much to do'.

"Dad had 20 Gloucester cattle, so he said I could have them."

His next step was to become a partner in a business in Taunton, cooking meat for the food service sector and retailers, which he believed helped change the shape of the business.

He also bought a hotel out of receivership on the Isles of Scilly, alongside a holiday letting agency and a commercial laundry.

It was when he decided to supply the hotel with beef, along with lamb from his flock of 400 Ryelands, which highlighted the potential of his Gloucester cattle.



### **The Gloucester Breed**

- Dating back to the 13th century, it is one of the oldest breeds in Britain
- Its popularity peaked in the 18th century, namely across Britain and in the 'New England colonies of North America'
- Bred for beef and milk, which is used to make single and double Gloucester cheese
- Declined in 19th century, culminating in the break-up of the dominant Badminton and Duke of Beaufort's herd, after ill-fated attempts to cross it with the British Friesian
- In 1919, 130 animals remained in 14 herds, but this reduced to 70 animals registered by about 20 breeders in 1973
- A 200-year high of 700 females were registered in 2000, but bovine TB and the foot-and-mouth outbreak
- the same year put a brake on the breed's growth

- Today's numbers are again in excess of 700 and the breed is used commercially for beef and cheese

## **Enjoying**

"It has been great seeing people eating and enjoying our meat. It is how real meat should taste. Some of the older generation just say, 'Wow, we haven't tasted meat like this for ages'," explains Clifford.

"It really spurred us into thinking there must be a market for this stuff."

The herd, built gradually by diligent breeding, is spread over 180 hectares (450 acres) across his farm, 83-year-old Eric's farm at Tainton, and a third unit at Apperley, which is owned by his friend and business partner, Matthew Rymer.

"One of the first things we did was DNA test everything to get profiles, including tenderness.

"It meant in the early days we stripped out a lot of stuff we didn't want and we managed to put the right bulls on the right cows.

"We started to classify last year, because we only want to breed pure from the best Gloucesters – VG and Excellent."

They favour winter calving and virtually all stock, minus a few bucket-reared calves, are pasture-reared.

"We don't finish on concentrate at all. In winter, steers are on hay and cows are on silage, all produced from our ground."

When asked what makes Gloucesters so attractive, Clifford is quick to answer.

"They are docile, easy calving with a level lactation and they make a great cross. They are friendly, easy and look good."

But the operation still faces multiple challenges.



The farm owns six of the breed's 20 remaining bulls and, with only a handful of bloodlines available, building breed numbers and maintaining diversity is a fine balance.

Then there are the badgers and buttercups. Bovine TB is a constant threat to the breed and one of the motivations for spreading the precious cattle across three holdings was to spread the risk.

The Redmarley farm is in the county's badger cull area, which appears to be reducing this risk, says Clifford.

Much of the land across the holdings is under Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreements, which can make life difficult.

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## **Issue**



“The main issue is buttercups on the flood plains because you can’t spray them. In my opinion, buttercups have no place on a productive farm.”

But the biggest challenge is making the Gloucesters pay. This includes producing the volume of meat required to satisfy demand and extracting sufficient value from animals which could never match the conformation of their modern counterparts, which is where taste and locality come in.

“They are slow maturing, but the meat’s marbling is great. It is not coarse. It is just good, distinctive meat.”

Clifford has an arrangement with Gloucester Rugby Club to sell burgers to supporters on match days and he also supplies local service stations for their premium brands.

Starting around now, this will be the first year of cross-breeding, with commercial bulls put on females classified below VG, in a move to step up the volumes of meat produced from the herd.

“We are trying to get numbers up and although we don’t get the weights, we are getting the same value.”

To reinforce the notion of traceable, high quality, local beef, Clifford has teamed up with Matthew on two projects.

The Gloucester Born Beef logo is designed to be carried on beef born, reared, slaughtered and butchered in the county. It already appears on beef sold at Gloucester Rugby Club and the aim is to get others in the county to sign up.

## **Health**

The pair are working on a bigger traceability project, driven in part by Clifford’s experience at the hotel, where he has received pork which has clearly had its health marks removed and, in one case, beef labelled as Cornish which, on further scrutiny, had been slaughtered in Stockton on Tees.

“In many cases it is legal but it is not right,” says Clifford.

Last month they set up the Happerley Passport scheme, which aims to connect consumers to local farms via a website using traceability codes. “We are not saying everything has to be British or local, but we believe consumers should be given the knowledge to make an informed choice.”

With the platform set, the next 12 months will be crucial for the business and its drive to assert a place for the Gloucester breed.

“It has taken a frustratingly long time to get to this stage, but really we have only just started, in terms of the commercial side,” says Clifford.

## **Numbers**

“We want to do more than break even. Getting the numbers right is going to be the biggest problem but I can’t see why it isn’t going to work.

“I have taken on failed businesses and turned them round. As far as I am concerned, Gloucester cattle are a failing business and it might be my biggest ever challenge, but this is one which has to succeed.

“There might be a bit of pain for a while, but we are so close to getting it right.”

And, in case you ever meet Clifford, don’t call Gloucesters ‘rare’. He says: “My biggest issue is the word ‘rare’. The breed has always been defined as rare, but once you call something this it stays rare, in my opinion, because people say there has to be a reason.

“We never call them rare. Our mission is to build numbers by making them work and compete commercially.”

