

We look to England for the history of our cattle:

BRITISH WHITE CATTLE SOCIETY, Britishwhitecattle.co.uk

BRITISH WHITE

The Ultimate Suckler Cow

Breed History

The modern day breed of cattle known as British Whites can claim links with the ancient indigenous wild white cattle of Great Britain, notably from the Park at Whalley Abbey, Lancashire which was bought by Richard Assheton in 1553.

HISTORY OF THE BRITISH WHITE CATTLE

PREHISTORY

In prehistoric times, and even into late Saxon and early Norman times, more than half of England was one vast forest, which in the north flanked the mountain ranges, making them inaccessible and wild. Travel and herding were dangerous in those days because of packs of wolves, wild-boars, forest bulls, and stags and in the deep forests and mountains there were also bears.

We can look to the fossil record for more information about their origins. European cattle fossil species are principally *Bos urus* (or *Bos primigenius*), a colossal ox with enormous horns; or *Bos longifrons*, a small Celtic short-horned ox that was domesticated by the time of the Romans. The *Bos urus* was found in the wild state in prehistoric times, and was contemporaneous with man of the Palaeolithic or older Stone Age. In the fluvial deposits of the Thames and in other places, the remains of the two have been found together. The Rev. Samuel Banks, Rector of Cottenham, possessed a fine skull of the Urus, found in Cottenham Fen, the fractured bone of which showing that it was destroyed by a human weapon. Others have been found from the Bronze Age. The *Bos urus* was thought to have been domesticated on the continent, especially in North Germany, where large cattle were known, but not in Britain.

Various authorities held that the wild white cattle of Great Britain clearly are traced to the *Bos primigenius* or *Urus*, by descent through wild and domestic cattle. John Storer thought that the color of the *Urus* was white. British White cattle likely came from the aboriginal wild breed of the British forests, later tamed by the Celts. The ancient Druid and Celtic cultures of Britain reveal the customs related to the milk white cow of ancient times that is the ancestor of the British White breed. Polled (hornless), horned, tame, and wild cattle are all mentioned in ancient literature by the Celts and Druid ritual, before written history and literature.



The Wild Cattle of Chillingham by Edwin Landseer

THE ROMANS, ANGLES, AND SAXONS

At the time of the Roman invasion the cattle in the Roman areas were the Celtic shorthorn type (*Bos longifrons*) with dark shaggy fur, and they were numerous and domesticated. The white cattle were living wild in the forests. In the 2nd century AD the Romans built Hadrian's Wall as a barrier between Roman Britain and the northern highland areas to protect their interests. The wall also protected wildlife on the other side and was the southern boundary of the Caledonian Forest, from which many of the white cattle were found.

The Roman army left in 410 AD, and the Britons called on Teutonic tribes for protection from raids from the Picts and the Scots. Then from 449 to 660 the Angles and Saxons from northern Germany, the protectors, became the conquerors. Everything Roman, Christian, or Celtic was driven away. A larger race of cattle was brought with the Anglo Saxons along with their families, possibly including domesticated *Bos Urus* or their descendants. The result was a revolution in farming, language, and political system. The basis of our more valuable cattle breeds was established.

EARLY BRITISH HISTORY OF WILD CATTLE

Early mention of white cattle is available. In plates of British coins figured by Camden in "Britannia", volume i.p.lxv. , a coin of Cunobelin, fig.13, has on the reverse a wild bull. In Saxon times the legend of the slaughter of the wild cow by Guy Earl of Warwick was said to have taken place in the days of King Athelstan, A.D. 925-941, and appears in Ritson's and

Percy's literature, entered on the Stationers' books in 1591. In the Welsh laws of Howell Dha, which date from about A.D. 940, cattle with red ears are mentioned.

In the forest laws of King Canute, A.D. 1014-1035, wild cattle are described: "There are also a great number of cattle which, although they live within the limits of the forest, and are subject to the charge and care of the middle sort of men, or Regardors, nevertheless cannot at all be reputed beasts of the forest as wild horses, bubali (buffaloe or wild bulls), wild cows, and the like." Early written references to white cattle with red or black points are found in the Venedotian Code of Laws in the tenth or eleventh century, The Custom of Knightlow Cross, before 1066, and other sources.

Leafstan, abbot in the time of Edward the Confessor improved the roads through the forest, "for at that time there abounded throughout the whole of Ciltria spacious woods, thick and large, the habitation of numerous and various beasts, wolves, boars, forest bulls (tauri sylvestres), and stags.

Fitz- Stephen wrote of wild bulls in the forest in 1174, describing "an immense forest, woody ranges, hiding-places of wild beasts, of stage, of fallow deer, of boards, and of forest bulls," and he employs the same term (tauri sylvestres) to designate the wild cattle to which he refers.

A cream colored cow is associated with St. Luke, with a figure of the cow carved into the tower of Durham Cathedral about 1300. Gifts of white cattle were made by the Cambrian Princes to the Kings of England and Maud de Breos made satisfaction to King John with gifts of 400 cows and a bull, all white with red ears.

Hector Boece (Boethius) published "Scotorum Historiae, a prina Gentis Origine" in 1526, and stated that in the great Caledonian wood there were white bulls resembling domestic cattle but wild. They were able to hold ground in Scotland in the wild state longer, as civilization spread from the south and wild animals began to be exterminated or driven north to their last strongholds.

The foundations of British cattle are the influence of the original *Bos urus* found in remote wild areas, the Celtic domesticated shorthorn ox, the larger Continental domesticated cattle, and later importations by the Scandinavians.

NATIVE ANIMALS EXTINCT WITHIN HISTORIC TIMES

Native animals that have become extinct in England within historic times include the bear, beaver, reindeer, wild boar, and wolf. Between the tenth and twelfth centuries great forests came almost to the gates of London. In "Descriptio nobilissimae civitatis Londoniae", written by Fitz-Stephen, a monk of Canterbury in 1174, it is stated that north of the city were open meadows and beyond these was a great forest with stag, hind, wild-boar, and bull. The immense range of mountains and hills with vast forests and wastes was favorable for aboriginal wild animals. The major hunting method was to drive the game into ambush with dogs and horns within the reach of the waiting archers.

THE NORMAN INVASION

William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066, bringing England under new interpretation of Forest Law and establishing for his pleasure twenty-one Forests, kept as parks by the new Norman nobility. Successive kings were great preservers of wild animals but at length came the repeal of the forest laws with the signing of the Charter of the Forests by John at the same time as the Magna Charta. Following this the wild animals were not tolerated and their habitat was destroyed and they were killed when found. Civilization advanced and forests were cut down, mosses were drained, and moorlands cultivated until some animals became extinct.

Hadrian's Wall also continued to be a protective boundary. The feudal and ecclesiastical establishments took care in selecting and preserving game and cattle within the walled parks. For example, in 1635 Sir William Brereton wrote that he had seen wild bulls and kine, all white, in the park preserved by the Bishop of Durham. The house of Nevill has for 650 years borne as its crest Britain's white wild bull.

THE WILD WHITE CATTLE HERDS DEVELOP IN THE PARKS

The herds can be traced from the parks at Whalley Abbey, Gunton Hall, and Somerford Park, and others from 1553 to 1875. Both horned and polled types were found in numerous herds in England, Wales, and Scotland. Twenty-two licenses to enclose are still preserved and provide clues to the history of the private herds of wild white cattle. Six herds remained in 1880. Of the twenty-two parks, seven had cattle that were known to be polled, three were known to be horned, and the rest are not known.

The polled herds included **Ardrossan Castle, Ayrshire**, introduced by Alexander, tenth Earl of Eglington; **Cadzow Castle, Lanarkshire**, the seat of the Duke of Hamilton and part of the Caledonian Forest; **Gisburne Park, Yorkshire**, the seat of Lord Ribblesdale and part of the Gisburne Forest and near Bowland and Blackburnshire forests; and **Middleton Park, Lancashire**, the ancient seat of the Asshetons and part of the great forest of Bowland. **Whalley Abbey, Lancashire**, had a park that was originally part of the Forest of Rowland. There were family connections between Middleton, Whalley, and Gisburne, and some Gisburne cattle were said to have been drawn from Whalley Abbey, after its dissolution by Henry VIII, by the power of music described by Playford in "Brief Introduction to the Skill of Music", 1655 **Wollaton Park, Nottinghamshire**, belonged to the family of Willoughby, Baron Middleton, and was part of the Sherwood Forest.

Parks with polled and horned cattle included **Somerford Park, Cheshire**, property of Sir Charles Shakerley, in what was once Maxwell Forest. The Shakerly family originated from a place of the same name close to Middleton (from which come the Norfolk herds), also close to Lyme and Chartley, both homes of ancient horned herds. Indeed, horned animals were not uncommon in the Somerford herd and have had considerable influence in the White Park (horned) breed. See Volume XII The Park Cattle Society's Herd Book.

Between 1875 and 1918 general exchanges of bulls took place so that the blood from all the founding herds was commingled. There was an awareness that the outstanding and unique qualities of "Park Cattle" could best be conserved by the gathering of breeders. In January 1918 the Park Cattle Society was formed "with the object of keeping records of Park Cattle, wild and

tame, of developing and popularizing their great commercial qualities as well as keeping up and developing scientific interest in this most ancient race”.

The first Volume of the Park Cattle Society’s Herd Book was published in 1919 and the constitution and rules of the Society remain materially unaltered to the present day. In Volume III (1922) the first breed standard was published in which it is stated “Park Cattle shall be large and massive, dual-purpose cattle of symmetrical appearance”, and “length of legs-medium in proportion to the size of the animal the legs should be such as to avoid any semblance to an appearance of “shortness” or “longness” in leg length.”

In 1946 the two forms of Park Cattle, Horned and Polled decided to split and administer their own affairs. Until that time horned and polled cattle were considered the same breed and were interbred as desired. It should not be surprising to still find some variety of black or red points and horned and polled within these breeds.

DUAL PURPOSE QUALITIES

“Great notice is taken in the early herd books of the milking qualities of the cattle. Most of the polled herds were at that time commercially milked and detailed records are given of both herd and individual performance, often with notable successes in competition with other breeds. The earliest mention (Vol IV) is of the success of Messrs. Buxton and Birkbeck in winning the Norfolk milk recording Society’s small herds competition with an average yield of 10.616 lbs. per cow for five park (polled) cattle in competition with all other breeds.” The ability to milk heavily is one of the qualities which sets our breed apart.

Sources for this article:

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The Park Cattle Society Herd Book. Volume I-XIV. Published 1919-1944. Volume III includes the breed standard. In 1928 a grade up register was started. In 1946 horned and polled interests split into the British White Cattle Society and the White Park Cattle Society.