

# British Native Cattle Breeds on Postage Stamps

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## Introduction

Two years ago, on March 6, 1984, the British Post Office issued 5 special stamps. The 16 pence stamp depicted a Highland cow, and commemorated the centenary of the foundation of the Highland Cattle Society. Some details of this breed, both in Britain and elsewhere, and of the other four breeds depicted in Fig. 1, are given here.

## Highland Breed

The cow which modeled for this stamp was owned by Copas. Bros. of Cookham Dean in Berkshire England, and was painted by the artist Barry Driscoll. The Highland breed has prospered on a reputation as an ideal hill and upland suckler cow. The breed is extremely hardy and in Sweden is the only breed allowed by law to be overwintered. Dystocia is rarely a problem and dams generally prove to be good mothers. The average lifespan of breeding stock exceeds 10 years and many cows are still breeding at 18 years, having born 15 calves. The daily weight gain of steers is low and they mature at about 30 months under natural extensive conditions. Meat quality of such steers is exceptionally good. The Highland cow is commonly the basis of cross breeding programs, usually the Whitebred and Beef Shorthorn/Highland cross. These progeny are then bred to Simmenthal, Hereford, Aberdeen Angus or Charolais bulls to produce cattle averaging 1000 lbs (460 kg) at 22 months.

Highland cattle have been exported to 12 countries including Canada and USA (initially 1883). Even earlier, in the mid nineteenth century, a herd of "Scotch Highlanders" was established in Colorado, and another load to Wyoming was trailed to Powder River County but both eventually ran out. Present U.S. strains are traced to Montana and East Coast importations about 1922. The first Canadian imports of Highland cattle were to Manitoba in 1885 by Glen Lyon-Campbell, and to Alberta in 1898 and 1907. As far as the Society secretary is aware, no embryos have yet been exported. Over 200 cattle and 1000 straws of semen have been exported from the UK in the last 3 years. Total UK registrations are 38,000 and are increasing at about 500 females and 50 males annually. In contrast, the American Scotch Highland Association had 13,470 registrations up to 1977, with 117 bulls and 202 females as additions to their Herdbook that year. Less than half the annual crop of purebred Highland cattle is thought to be registered and current U.K. numbers of purebred stock probably exceed 10,000. Scattered from Devon in the southwest of England to the

Hebrides, their main U.K. base remains the Scottish Highlands and Islands, where rainfall is high, and the grazing is sparse vegetation interrupted by rocky outcrops. The patron of the Society is Her Majesty the Queen. She, like the Queen Mother, is a breeder. Annual sales are held in February and October in Oban and at Stirling, Inverness (all in Scotland), and Stoneleigh (England).

The Herdbook was started at the centenary meeting of the Highland and Agricultural Society's showyard in Edinburgh on July 24, 1884. The Highland Cattle Society committee at that same meeting also considered the origin of the breed, some claiming there never had been an aboriginal breed, others that it was the Chillingham White cattle. Certainly, no breed has retained such uniformity in type over several centuries, the difference within the breed being of two classes, West Highland and the (mainland) Highlander. The West Highland or Kyles is generally found in the Inner and Outer Hebridean Isles. The word Kyles may refer to the ferries or kyles which were crossed to reach the Scottish mainland. The Kyles was normally black, smaller and shaggier than the mainland Highlander. One point is hardly in dispute: the Highland, of all the British breeds, has the grandest and most picturesque head.

## Chillingham Wild White Breed

The Chillingham White bull (20½ P stamp) represents a rare breed which has roamed 300 walled-in acres of Chillingham Park, Northumberland England for at least 700 years. Before that they lived in the forests formerly extending between the North Sea coast and the Clyde estuary. Bulls weigh about 450 kg, cows about 380 kg. Small herds of somewhat similar cattle are found elsewhere. A herd in Cadzow Park, Lanarkshire, Scotland tracing its origins to the twelfth century, has black ears and gray markings on a predominantly white coat. At least twelve herds of wild white cattle became extinct in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. The skull shape and horn base are similar to Aurochs (*Bos primigenius*) and quite distinct from the Roman importation (*Bos longifrons* or Celtic Longhorn). The blood groups of the Chillingham White cattle are, according to investigations by Dr. J. G. Hall of the Animal Breeding Research Organization of Edinburgh, unique among Western European cattle. Their origin is a mystery, but they may be direct descendants of the original wild ox which roamed the British Isles in prehistoric times.

The herd was the private property of the Earls of



A.G. Bradbury, 2 Fairholme Road, Leicester.

Tankerville until 1971, when it was bequeathed to the Chillingham Wild Cattle Association which is supported by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. The herd numbered 35-40 between the two World Wars, but suffered a catastrophic drop due to starvation in the severe winter of 1946-47. Well-meaning advice on feeding these cattle oats and cattle cake did not take into account of the fact that these are not domestic animals. They eat nothing but grass and hay (or straw if no hay was available). A young animal caught and handled by man and then returned to the herd has invariably been killed by the others. The herd was threatened with possible eradication in 1967 when a major foot and mouth disease outbreak spread to within 2 miles. As a result of such threats, a small reserve herd has been established in Scotland to prevent, as far as possible, the loss of this unique breed should a catastrophe strike the Chillingham herd. Currently (1986) the herd comprises 9 bulls, 27 cows, 5 heifer calves and 2 bull calves. No cattle of this breed have ever been exported.

### Hereford Breed

The Hereford herd was recognized as early as 1723 with the purebred stock of the Tomkins family. Benjamin Tomkins "The Elder", born 1714 succeeded to the subsequently legendary cow "Silver" with her calf when his father died. The breed markings were stated in W. Marshall's "Rural Economy of the West of England" (1789) to be "a middle red with a bald face, the last being an esteemed characteristic of the Hereford breed." Three theories are current about the origin of the characteristic coat colour. One suggest the cattle were originally imported from Flanders as red cattle with white faces. A second claims the colour results from crossing White Welsh cattle with red cattle from Hereford-

shire. The last theory is that a bull with a white face was imported from Yorkshire before 1700 to breed native Red Hereford cattle. A "Silver" strain cow owned by George Tomkins, a nephew of Benjamin, was painted by the outstanding artist Wheeler in 1806, showing the importance attached to this breed line. The first exports to the USA were of two pairs of Herefords to the Hon. Henry Clay of Kentucky in 1817. The bull "Sir Isaac" bred by J. G. Cotterell, Garnons was presented to the Massachusetts Society by Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin in 1824. The first export to Australia followed in 1825. By 1838 Herefords had become the predominant cattle breed of many areas of England and Wales, where the first volume of the Herdbook was published in 1846, the second in 1852. A Hereford cow "Dolly Varden" and her bull calf "Success" were sold to T. L. Miller of Illinois in 1872. The next year the New South Wales Agricultural Society in Australia published the first volume of their Herdbook containing 152 Herefords and their produce. The Hereford exhibit at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition created a great impression and contributed much to spread of the breed in the U.S.A. The first volume of the American Hereford Herdbook followed in 1880. Two years later, Thomas Clarke shipped 125 Herefords in one lot to New York. Two books, Macdonald and Sinclair's "History of Hereford Cattle," published 1886 in England and an identical title written by T. L. Miller, U.S.A. and published by T. F. B. Sotham of Chillicote, Missouri testified to the widespread interest in the breed. The first exports to Russia were in 1904. In 1940 a ship carrying Herefords to America was torpedoed and sunk off the Irish coast. Two Herefords swam ashore to Ireland.

In the 1940s, reimportations from North America included the strain now internationally known as the Polled Hereford, which was first developed in U.S.A. about 1893 by the use of

Aberdeen Angus blood. These imports formed the foundation of the polled breed in Great Britain in 1950. In 1955 "Toko Excelsior" the first poll bull to form the Poll Herefords was imported from New Zealand. Recently a secondary category of Polled Herefords has been recognized by the Herdbook. These crosses are of Polled Herefords with both Galloway and Red Angus bulls. While this category is termed "single standard," "double standard" Polled Herefords (i.e. stock from 100% Hereford ancestors) were being developed from 1901 onwards by Warren Gammon of Des Moines, Iowa. With very rapid growth in the 50s and 60s, Polled Herefords now account for about one third of all Herefords.

Herefords have been exported from Great Britain to 55 countries. Limited registration of calves got by artificial insemination was permitted from 1969 onwards. Embryos, both live and frozen, have also been exported. The Herefords are now the most numerous purebred and crossbred cattle worldwide. The approximate number of purebred cattle in Great Britain and Ireland is unknown, but 15,000 calves are registered annually. Many more purebred Herefords are used for crossing purposes. Recently it was estimated that 65% of beef calves sold from the British dairy herds were Hereford-sired. Attempts have been made within the breed to retain the desirable attributes of hardiness, early maturity, prolificacy and efficient food conversion of forage. In the last 8 years performance test station statistics have shown that the 400 day weights of Herefords have increased from 1054 lb (478 kg) to 1158 lb (525 kg), while backfat has been reduced from 0.26-0.17 ins. (6.5-4.4 mm). The world's largest beef cattle registers are those of the American Hereford Association, founded 1881, and the American Polled Hereford Association, both with membership numbers exceeding 20,000.

#### Welsh Black Breed

The Welsh Black bull (28 P stamp) represents the native cattle of Wales known to have existed since pre-Roman times. Nearly 150 years ago Youatt remarked "Great Britain does not afford a more useful animal... the meat is equal to that of the Scotch cattle and some epicures prefer it... they thrive in every situation." The late nineteenth century saw the development of two distinct strains, a smaller compact North Wales or Anglesey type and a bigger and rangier South Wales or Castle Martin type. Separate herd books were maintained until 1904. The Welsh Black Cattle Society was formed in 1873 and during the present century it has been the intermingling of the North and South Wales blood which has done much to improve breed characteristics. The traditional reputation was as a dual purpose breed. This milking quality is nowadays expressed in the excellent suckling qualities of the best stock. The breed has a reputation for hardiness based on centuries of facing the Atlantic wind and rain on the Welsh hillsides. The naturally polled section of the breed is rapidly increasing. The first exports to North America were to the U.S.A. in 1966 and from Nevada to Canada in 1969, followed by direct export to

New York State in 1977. No cattle have yet been reimported from North America, despite considerable breed strength in Canada where these cattle flourish under the harsh climatic conditions. Welsh Blacks have also been exported to New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Spain, West Germany, Jamaica and Uganda. In Britain Welsh Blacks shed the long thick winter coat in spring and it regrows in the autumn. In tropical climates the winter coat is not grown and cattle remain sleek, while in cold Canadian conditions the winter coat is never shed. No embryos have yet been exported from Great Britain. Breed societies have now been formed in the USA, Canada and New Zealand.

The particular qualities of the breed include docility, since cows were traditionally managed by the womenfolk on Welsh farms, longevity and fecundity. The incidence of dystocia, even when crossed with European continental breeds, is low, and in the UK the Welsh Black is being promoted as the ideal breed for an autumn calving single-suckled herd. It is among the fastest growing British breeds, based on growth rate and weight for age.

#### Irish Moiled Breed

The Irish Moiled breed (31 P stamp), though formerly widely distributed, is now largely confined to a few Ulster farms. The term moiled or mael refers to the polled character. It is related to the English Shorthorn and the total population is very small. In 1845 David Low ("Domestic Animals of the British Isles") wrote that "the Polled Irish breed will probably, in a few years, cease to be found." The formation of the Irish Moiled Cattle Society in 1926 had as one aim "retaining the best of that remained of our native Ulster cattle as a patriotic duty." Numbers increased and in 1934 578 cattle were registered. Among some outstanding records the cow "Greyabbey Kate" is worthy of mention. Not milk recorded until 16 years old, she then gave 1940 gallons at 4.3% butterfat for 3 years. The cattle are allegedly descended from cattle brought from Scandinavia by the Vikings. The colour is purplish-roan, with a broad white dorsal stripe, and white ventrally on abdomen, legs and face. With only two active breeders, the Rare Breed Survival Trust is encouraging greater awareness of the precarious state of the Irish Moiled. A Finnish Poll bull "Hakku" imported into Belfast in 1950 was used for crossing with Irish Moiled cows of the Ballydugan herd. A new Herdbook was opened in 1983 with 31 full pedigree cattle (27 female, 4 bulls). In addition there are 14 grade A cattle (7/8 pure), 16 grade B (3/4 pure) and 19 grade C (1/2 bred). Only six full pedigree calves were born and registered in 1983. The breed is dual purpose, with emphasis on milking and mothering ability. The demand, under the milk quota system of the European Community, for more economical milk production, may mean a new future for this breed. Irish Moiled cattle have never been exported to North America or elsewhere. Publicity obtained through appreciation of the breed by seeing its representation in a postage stamp may help to save this breed from extinction.