

Steep hill country no challenge for Red Devons

The following article reported by Victoria Rutherford and published by Country-Wide in Heartland Beef, May 2007 is reproduced with the kind permission of the above.

When your first crop of calves come out looking like peas in a pod, you know you are onto a good thing. Mangamahu farmers Leslie and Jill Kellick say this was the sign Red Devon fitted into their 750ha hill-country operation as maternal rather than terminal sires.

They originally ventured into the Red Devon as they felt the smaller size of the breed would complement the mating of first-calving heifers.

The first crop of calves on Tokorangi Farm were a real success. The calves came out looking uniform and

predominately like the Red Devon, which Leslie says is a sign of purity. Although they were one of the first breeds brought into New Zealand, preference for the farming of other breeds has meant they have escaped tampering and remain true to the original type.

After the success of calving they decided to take the influence of the Red Devon further.

"We went to them full-bore. The whole commercial herd is mated to them for one cycle then it is followed up with the Angus."

Tokorangi is a name synonymous with the Angus Breed in New Zealand. Leslie's father Reid ran a successful stud operation off the property, so Leslie is no stranger to the importance of genetics in a cattle herd. He and his brother Greg brought the property off his father in 1991, and Greg took the stud with him to Taupo while Leslie and Jill concentrated on the home farm.

The 1980s saw a move away from some of the more traditional aspects of the Angus breed with the influx of American genetics. Leslie says the move away from the original attributes saw him lose interest in the breed he had grown up with.

While they still run a 'pocket' of 35 stud cows on the property, they were keen to investigate what other breeds had to offer.

Time spent overseas in Europe shearing had introduced Leslie to the Saler breed.

"When I took over I introduced the Saler breed in, but I found the mix quite stropy."

By this stage they had bred $\frac{3}{4}$ Saler and $\frac{1}{4}$ Angus cows, but temperament became an issue so they pulled the mix back to 50:50

The South Devon breed was brought in to quieten cattle down, which it did successfully. However, they found the offspring slow maturing. "We found that not as many were finishing by winter and we were selling more store."



■ Animal temperament is important to both Jill and Leslie Kellick, who run their Mangamahu property together.

Enter the Red Devon, which Leslie stresses is an entirely different breed to the South Devon. They had the temperament needed on the property as well being earlier



■ Their first Red Devon calf crop came out "like peas in a pod" which convinced the Kellicks to change to a maternal Red Devon sire.

maturing. The smaller cattle (550kg cow average compared with the 600kg Angus) were also easier on the fragile sandy hill country soils.

They 'flourished' on the marginal hill country, where Leslie felt the South Devon had been limited by the amount and quality of feed.

"If you can feed and winter (the South Devon) well, they are fantastic, but these hills aren't as good as other hill country around. Compared with places like Gisborne, it doesn't rate."

Temperament a vital part

The property has an annual rainfall of 1250mm and ranges from 46-366m a.s.l. Three-quarters of the farm is steep hill country, and the 132ha of flats, which lie along the banks of the Whangaehu River, are used mostly for lamb and cattle finishing.

The sandy soils are good in winter with their free-draining properties, but the easterly/westerly facing country is prone to drying-off in the summer. They have experienced some tough times on the property, with the scars from the 2004 floods still visible over much of the hill country's upper reaches. The mud from the recent lahar lines the banks of the Whangaehu, but according to Leslie, it was no-where near the magnitude of 2004, or carried the acidity of the 1995-96 Ruapehu eruptions.

Despite this, Leslie says they have a good climate. However, the environment the cattle are brought up in is still very important to them when selecting a sire.

He has recently bought his Red Devon bulls from Te Maewa Stud, near Pahiatua. The property, owned by Graeme Dyke, is subject to strong winds and an exposed climate.



■ Leslie Kellick says the Red Devon cattle have outperformed other breeds on the steep, easily-erodible hills near Mangamahu.

When they visited the property in September they saw all the stock in their natural environment, including the bulls that were at the time behind a wire. Seeing how the stock handled that environment assured Leslie the cattle would slot into their country easily.

"It was good to see the cattle exactly as they are. They were being farmed in a commercial sense without a lot of gloss, and they carried that on to our property."

The faster growth and early maturing of the Red Devon has meant they are able to get stock off the farm before a second winter.

"The faster growth is really beneficial with the weaners. They are not going to kill at massive weights, but they are big enough."

But what really stands out is the temperament of the breed. Having been used to Angus bulls fighting amongst themselves, he was amazed to see how laid-back they were.

"They mix in with the others and don't seem to fight like the Angus. They came back from the cows very quiet."

The Kellicks are also enjoying the change away from farming bull beef. Up until two years ago they farmed bulls on the property, but Leslie says they had an ongoing problem with the bulls firing up with every whiff of the cow herd.

"I feel you really need a specific bull farm. They were shorting out fences and wrecking gates.

"Even the Frisians were getting upset, and when they don't eat, they go downhill quickly."

Jill says it got to the point where she wasn't keen to get in the yards with them. Leslie and Jill run the farm by themselves and can't afford to get hurt, so they reviewed their stock policy and moved to farming steers and heifers for the markets.

"It was a management decision. We run it together with no labour and we want a laid-back lifestyle with no injuries."

Their daughter Lucy came back to help on the farm four eight months but has now gone to do vet nursing. The couple's other daughter Kate is doing an automotive engineering course in Palmerston North.

Leslie is confident about the future of the Red Devon on their property. He says he has seen enough from the cattle to know they have done the right thing.

"The Red Devons work well in the environment and I believe they are going to do it for us."



■ Leslie Kellick has been impressed with how quiet the Red Devon bulls are.