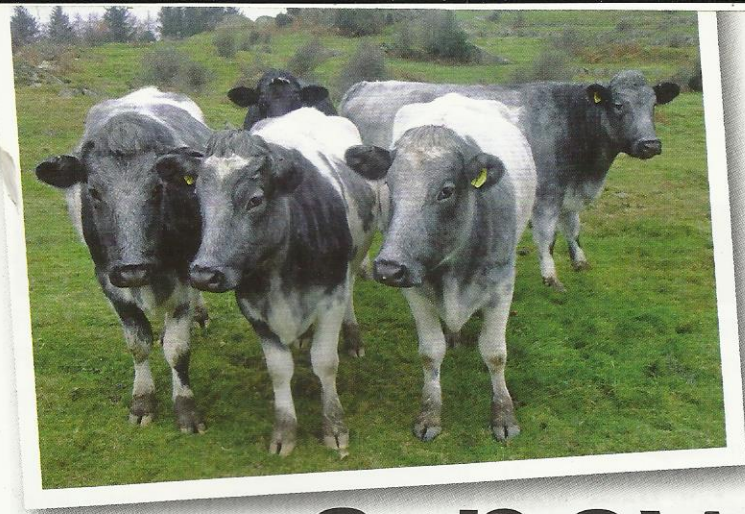


Albion cattle

- a new chapter



The Blue Albion is a breed that has enjoyed a controversial history – correspondence in the Ark during the early days of the RBST would frequently debate whether or not the Blue Albion is in fact a breed in its own right, or a result of crossing to produce the blue colour.

The cattle were thought to originate in Derbyshire and Staffordshire in the early 1900s as a result of crosses between Welsh Black and Whitebred or Dairy Shorthorns, possibly with an admixture of Friesian. The attractive blue colouration is a result of this first cross, and subsequent crosses of blue bull and blue cow will only give a 50% chance of a blue calf (white animals also occur, as do black with white trim). Breeders now accept all colour forms but the original Breed Society, started on 1st January 1921, made blue a breed stipulation, thereby severely limiting their own genepool from the outset.

The herd book was actually started in 1916 by William Clark, and was purchased by the newly formed Breed Society upon its inception. The new breed proved very popular

and 3237 foundation cows were registered following inspection confirming that each was a “really good example of a Blue Shorthorn”. The Ministry of Agriculture accepted the Blue Albion as a breed but the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak of 1923-4, agricultural depression and the difficulties imposed by the strict colour regulations all contributed to the society’s ultimate dissolution in 1966, although the last AGM was in 1940.

Despite this torrid history, several herds have continued to breed, and even show, Blue Albions. Notable amongst these was the Ryleys herd in Cheshire and the Barnacre herd based in Lancashire. Other long-standing herds include the Scoutbeck (Cumbria) and Speckles (Hampshire) herds with links back to the original surviving herds. There are also Albions in Cornwall, Devon, Derbyshire and Leicestershire.

During the 1980s and 1990s Albion breeders Tanya Fox from the Peak District and Sheila Clark of the Dorset Rare Breeds Centre both worked hard to conserve the breed and some new herdbooks were produced at this time. In 2011, Susannah Mannerings, whose Speckles herd was

inherited from her mother, Mrs Dinah Whittingham, contacted RBST to ask whether it would be possible to investigate how to formalise the breed with the intention of eventually bringing it back on the Watchlist (the first RBST Watchlist did include the breed). Natural England were also interested in helping fund research into the breed, as they list the Albion as a Native Breed at Risk, eligible at that time for certain agricultural subsidies.

Susannah has drawn together a wealth of information on the breed, including history and current breeders, and money left in her mother’s will is being used, with the help of RBST and Grassroots Systems Ltd, to create an electronic database for the breed. Work on this has just started, and we would welcome any documents, pedigree data or other information that readers might have to try to piece together more of the breed’s history.

The cattle are thrifty and docile, giving useful amounts of milk (several of the herds in existence today are dairy herds) and make excellent suckler cows. Susannah has found a ready market for Albion bulls on other dairy herds, and the RBST holds five bulls in its gene bank. On a recent visit to the Scoutbeck herd in Cumbria I was delighted to see good strong heifers with decidedly friendly dispositions, overwintering on low fell land near Windermere.

Although there is still much work to do in analysing the existing genetics of the current-day Albions, the future for the breed looks a good deal brighter owing to the hard work of Susannah and others, and I look forward to reporting in future Ark magazines on the Albion’s progress.

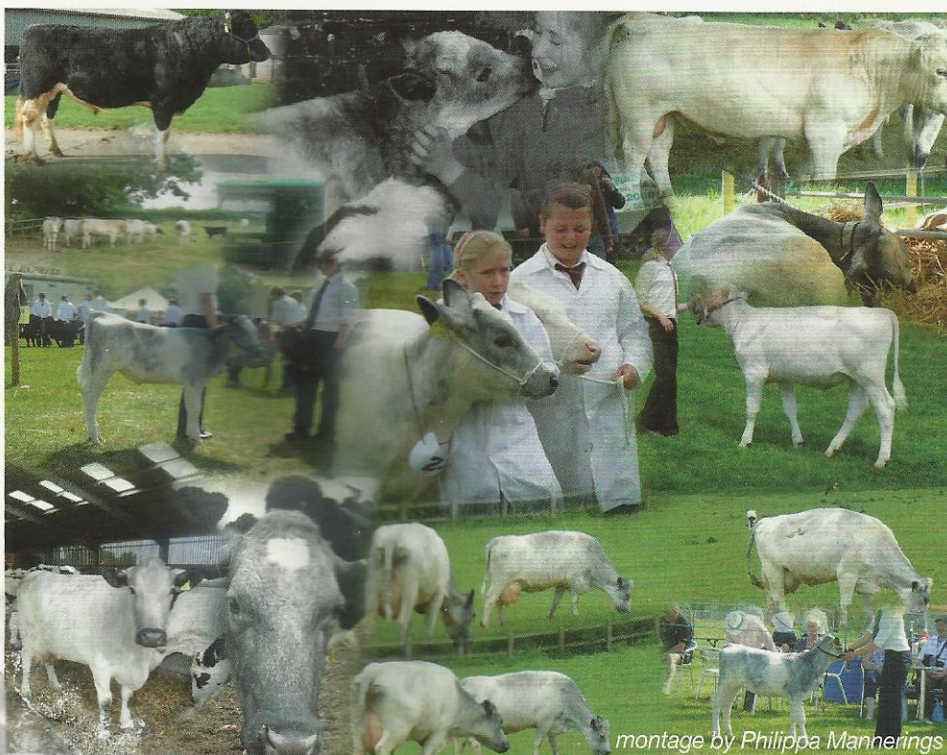
Ruth Dalton, Northern Field Officer

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montage by Philippa Mannerings