

Farming Connect Management Exchange Program Report

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Country: U.K.

Topic: Looking at the viability of beef boxes

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1. Background

I went to see two different farming systems where they produce Red Ruby Devon beef and sell the majority of their product directly to the customer through meat boxes. I wanted to see how they did this successfully as I have a herd of Red Devon cattle and am hoping to start up a beef box business.

We are a farming family in Wales with a suckler herd of Red Devons and a separate commercial herd. We farm 400 acres of grassland and hill and also run 750 sheep. I am very interested in becoming more sustainable in the way we farm and with my meat boxes I would like to produce grass finished beef, but it is a challenge as at the moment we buy in concentrates to bring the young stock on over winter.

I was very interested to see how the Northmoor Meat Company finishes their Ruby Red Devon cattle off grass, and wanted to see if this would be something that we could do on our farm. I also wanted to find out more about the profitability of doing this as with the Red Devons one has to keep them longer to finish them, where as the commercial herd of Charolais crosses are very saleable as stores at 14 months old. The Floreys have a good business model and have been breeding their herd for a long time creating a really strong genetic line. My aim with this visit was to see how one builds a brand as strong as the Northmoor Meat Company and to find out whether it was a profitable way of farming. I like the way that they sell the story of their farming and use social media to promote their brand. I was also interested in how they priced their beef and what was the most successful way of selling the boxes. As a farm more used to selling commercial cattle as stores, it was important to me to find out whether selling the traditional breed Ruby Red Devons as beef boxes could compete financially with the store trade. I could sell a good Charolais cross store at 18 months for about £1200. I would need to have a mark-up reflective of the extra time and costs taken if I take a Red Ruby to finish at between 24 and 30 months.

I was also very interested in seeing the Trenowin herd of Ruby Red Devon cattle in Cornwall as they started a successful farm shop to sell their high quality beef and found that the demand was good. Their herd is well known in the Red Devon world as they breed large cattle and win prizes for their stunning cattle. I would really like to breed my own cattle to a standard like these. My aim from this visit was to find out more about how they have bred their herd, how they finished their beef, how they priced their product and the profitability of a farm shop.

2. Itinerary

Day 1: drive to Oxford to the Northmoor Meat Company and meet with Fiona and James Florey. Have a tour round their farm and see how they produce their high quality premium product beef boxes. Drive to Yeoville to stay the night.

Key learning outcomes and knowledge gained: We had a very informative tour round the Floreys farm where they calve about 80 cows a year and sell the majority of their finished beef through beef boxes. They wean the calves at about 7 months and do not feed them any concentrates throughout their life. They castrate the calves at birth and because the bulls are polled (a conscious choice) the majority of their calves are also polled. The weaned calves are fed silage ad lib and are housed in spacious sheds over winter. Calving is mostly in the summer. The stock go out to grass in the summer and they do a rotational grazing system.

The bullocks are finished under 30 months and go to a local abattoir. They find that for beef boxes they do not have to be overly fat. The meat is 28 day aged and the Floreys have the use of a neighbouring cold storage room where the butcher delivers the meat back in order for it to be vacuum packed and labelled by themselves. They have considered cutting it up themselves but the butcher they use does a very good job and it is important that the meat looks really good. The meat boxes are bespoke so customers can choose the cuts that they want and then the Floreys make up the boxes themselves. There is also the option of choosing a small, medium or large pre-picked box and then adding extras to it. They run the risk of people choosing a small quantity of meat but then them having to still pay the postage and packing on top of that, but this happens very rarely. The orders of the meat boxes come through to an app which has a list of stock available which is updated after each order. A lot of the customers are repeat customers although there is always new business through the website, and they ship all over the UK. Boxes are pre-ordered by the customers and it is important to explain that meat boxes will not arrive in next day delivery as they will be sent when the animal is ready which can be a couple of weeks. Packaging used is Woolcool which has a good record of keeping things cold, and the delivery company used was DHL which was also good although they recommended having a delivery booked at the start of the working week. The Red Devon bullocks made average £2500 gross before expenses. They aimed to make an additional £500 per animal to add value to what it would be worth selling it through the market.

This visit confirmed that I need to add value to my beef product if I am going to market the beef boxes successfully and with the additional costs of slaughter, butchering, packaging and marketing the beef, there needs to be at least a £500 markup on the market value of the finished animal. A website is vital for widening the customers one can reach. There is not much of a market for Red Ruby Devon stores but a good niche market for grass finished traditional beef. It is still debatable whether there is an advantage in the taste of entirely grass finished beef over beef that has been finished using a bit of concentrate.

Day 2: Drive to Penzance and meet with Bridget and Steve Clamp to see the Higher Trenowin herd and see how they have made a farm shop business thrive, and then move into beef boxes.

Key learning outcomes and knowledge gained:

We were given a very good tour round Trenowin farm and shown how they winter calve their herd of 60 cows. They feed their cattle on silage that is made on the farm, and about 4 weeks after calving when their milk can drop off they strip graze the cows and calves on kale for a few hours a day. The bulls are castrated when they are older by a vet as they breed bulls for breeding purposes. Their cattle are not polled nor do they select the bulls they use because of being non polled as they think it decreases the potential gene pool from which they can pick a new bull. The calves are weaned at about 7 months and given a bit of concentrates to keep them going. They also get given concentrates when they are being finished. This herd is relatively young having only been started about 12 years ago and they have made great progress in that time with a very strong line.

The farm shop was successful but they had had a farming accident a couple of years ago and had decided to scale back a bit and do beef boxes instead. There was a good set up with a cutting room and large fridge to hang the beef. The finished animals go to the abattoir at about 24-30 months and are brought back to the farm to hang. They employ a butcher to come and cut the animal up after approximately 28 days, and the meat is vacuum packed and labelled. The majority of the meat is sold as beef boxes via their website, word of mouth and also an email list that goes round to previous customers. Their website was done by a friend for minimal expense. Any surplus is frozen and can be bought when the shop is opened once a month.

This visit made me think about the advantages in having my own cutting room and a refrigerator big enough to hang the meat in. I like the idea of being in control of the cutting process so that I ensure that all the cuts make it back to me and also so that I can have my own specialised cuts available rather than just generically butchering each beast. However, at the moment as I am just starting out beef boxes I think it will be simpler for me to just have the meat back ready vacuum packed. It is also much easier with health and safety rules if the meat comes vacuum packed, but home butchering is definitely something to keep in mind for the future.

Day 3: Drive home to Wales

3. Next Steps

- After much thought I have decided to invest in a website to sell the beef boxes as the successful Northmoor Meat Company recommended that this was the best way to reach more customers. I have found someone local to work with and we are going to make a website with an online shop in the next couple of months ready to market my finished bullocks in the summer.
- I am going to convert an old stable into a room where I can put a commercial fridge and have a food hygiene certified area to pack my boxes. I have drawn up some plans for converting the stable.
- I was really impressed with the set up at the Northmoor Meat company and would like to think about finishing my beef sometime in the future on grass. I think that the consumer is becoming increasingly conscious of what animals are fed on but our farm system at the moment is not set up in order to grow enough grass or make good

enough quality silage to not require the young stock to have some concentrates over the winter. I am interested in rotational grazing and am putting the infrastructure into the farm in order to implement it, such as getting the fencing better and thinking about water availability.

- I have enrolled on the Master Grass course so that I can learn more on how to use rotational grazing on our farm.
- I have looked into growing a field of kale next winter to put the calved cows on. Milk supply can be a bit tricky with Red Devons and I really like this method of increasing it as the calf becomes more demanding.

My key findings with regard to my business are that I think beef boxes could suit our farming and traditional breed Red Ruby Devons, and can be a profitable and rewarding way to add value to our quality product. I am looking forward to progressing my business this year with my first animals finishing in the summer, and I have a much clearer vision of how to market my beef boxes. It is all about selling my farming story through the website, Instagram and Facebook and telling the British Public how we are producing something great!

4. Key messages to the industry

1. In order to produce slow grown beef farmers need to be incentivised as it does take longer and cost more than simply selling animals as stores. There needs to be grants available so that farmers are able to use techniques such as rotational grazing, and their end product of quality beef needs to be recognised as being added value.
2. We need to let the public know the differences between British and imported beef. The farms that we went to demonstrated high animal welfare standards and low food miles. The lives of British cattle and American cattle in particular are incomparable, both in their welfare and their impact on the environment. If people saw how the cattle on these two farms we visited were produced they would maybe be encouraged that beef does not have to be intensively farmed and it can be done in harmony with the environment.
3. The general public needs to understand better what they are choosing to buy, whether it is slow grown traditional breed beef or faster finished continental breed beef. There should be an understood premium attached to the traditional slow grown beef and the public should understand the difference between grass fed and pasture fed beef because it is all very confusing. Pasture fed beef (where the animal has been only fed grass all it's life) should really be more of a gold standard than the much talked about organic beef.
4. There needs to be a movement towards quality not quantity meat eating and we need to counteract the rising vegetarian and vegan movement. There is a lot of

misinformation about the way in which British beef is produced and British cattle take the blame repeatedly for global warming while people conveniently forget all the other factors at play. The farms that we visited are great example of excellent environmental policies and traditional farming methods coming together to create a quality end beef product.

5. Farmers need to interact more with the public to promote the great British farming. Small farms need to sell their farming story so that farming is not demonised as the major contributor to global warming and the public can see all the good farmers do to look after the landscape and environment, and the passion that goes into each product. Food security is increasingly important and we need the British public to support home grown food.
6. I also think that the industry needs to be aware of the huge potential to attract women from a non-farming background into the agricultural sector. As a woman from a non-farming background I can say that becoming a farmer was one of the best decision I have ever made, but feeling truly fulfilled in my career came once I found my own little niche on the farm with traditional breed cattle and meat boxes. I am so excited to move onto the next part of my farming journey when I start selling my product!