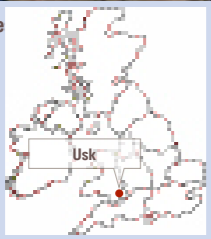




Robert and Stephen Jones

Breeding polled cattle has taken some of the stress and hassle out of dairy herd management, without compromising herd performance.



Number of cows:	270
Number polled:	40%
Average yield:	8,500 litres
Classified cattle:	108VG 29EX

Breeding polled milkers – without genetic compromise – is possible

Born horn-free

It's one of the most disliked jobs on a dairy unit, but dehorning could be a thing of the past for many herds with the increasing availability of top-quality polled sires. We spoke to a leading polled breeder to find out more.

text Rachael Porter

The smell, the mess, the time and the stress. And no doubt there are many more reasons why producers hate dehorning calves. But for Robert and Stephen Jones it's a distant memory. Based near Usk, in Monmouthshire in south Wales, the brothers run a 270-cow herd. Their family has been breeding polled cattle for more than 40 years. "My father started it all. He had a Friesian

herd back then and decided to use polled bulls," explains Robert. "So it's grown from there and, since we can see the benefits of breeding naturally polled cattle, we've continued down that route. Today the herd is predominantly Holstein – 40% of which are naturally polled. The brothers are also milking some Brown Swiss, instigated by Stephen's interest in the breed, and they are looking into

taking the polled route with these cattle. "We've made a start, but it's just not so easy to get your hands on a polled Brown Swiss bull," says Robert. He is adamant that polled breeding is the way to go though. "Predominantly for ease of management. "Speak to any vet or producer and they'll say that disbudding or dehorning calves is one of the most difficult and unpleasant

Less stress: naturally polled calves are easy to pick out in a pen when mixed with those that have been dehorned



Temperament benefits: Robert says that polled cattle are quieter than their 'horned' counterparts

jobs on the farm. And it's no picnic for the calves either."

He says that it's easy to spot the polled calves in a pen when mixed with de-horned calves: "They're noticeably bigger and stronger. I think de-horning really stresses the calf and results in a considerable growth check."

Robert thinks that these calves also grow into quieter cattle, possibly due to them being less stressed as young calves. But also possibly due to genetics. "No one knows, but that's certainly been my experience while managing both polled and de-horned cattle side by side."

Polled benefits

Quieter cattle, of course, tend to function better within the herd. Lower stress levels means better fertility, productivity and, of course, profitability. And it seems that he's not the only producer who's taken with polled breeding.

Interest in the UK is growing, but it's in Europe – specifically Germany – where it's really taken off. This may be due to the fact that there is talk of banning the practice of de-horning. "But it's also perhaps because the penny has dropped over there and word is getting round that you don't have to breed animals with horn and you can save a lot of time and hassle when rearing heifers," says Robert.

He's sold a bull to Germany and says that interest in France, Ireland and the UK is increasing. Some of the polled cattle in the Jones' pedigree Hollysprings Polled Holstein herd, which comprises 108VG and 29EX classified cattle and is currently averaging 8,500 litres at 3.8% butterfat and 3.25% protein, were bought in. The brothers also carry out

ET work in order to ensure that they're using the best bloodlines.

Cow families include Dellia, Tandy, Breeze, Rae and Tina. "Tandy is the best family, in my view, and we also have some polled Dellia cattle, which are also impressive. I think Rae is the most famous cow family that we have in the herd – we bought in some embryos," explains Robert.

"We have embryos available from the two Perk Rae granddaughters, one by Monreal, a Man-O-Man son, and one by Hickorymea Talbot P, who is polled. And semen is available from Hollysprings Polled Rainbow, their homozygous polled brother. His semen has been exported to Ireland, Germany and France."

Homozygous is the key word in polled breeding. If a sire is 'homozygous polled' that means that all his calves will be polled.

Swift progress

"Some polled bulls are heterozygous – that means that there's a 50:50 chance that offspring will be polled, so progress towards breeding a polled herd is therefore much slower," says Robert. He adds that the attraction for many breeders of using a homozygous polled bull is that they know progress towards producing polled heifers will be swift. "It can be quick and it's possible to make that change in just one generation. And it's a genetic trait that stays too. If a resulting heifer was crossed with a conventional bull, the chances are that the offspring would still be polled."

Robert and Stephen keep 20 breeding bulls, some of which are sold to breeders or into AI. They also sell semen

from their own bulls. Demand has been growing for the past two years or so. There have never been many polled breeders in the UK – perhaps just eight herds, according to Robert.

"But, particularly during the past 12 months or so, some of the UK's most well-known herds have been showing an interest and using polled sires."

What's helping is that these sires are comparable with conventional 'horned' bulls in terms of their other type and production traits. "Polled sires can compete – the figures are now available to prove it.

"Thinking was, a few years ago, that polled cattle were genetically inferior. But that opinion has changed now, thanks to a few good bulls. US-sire Aggravation Lawn Boy is a good example."

There are several polled Holstein bulls available from Avoncroft. These include InSire red polled bull Fasma Asterix P, who has been used on the Jones' herd.

So, would Robert like to see a ban on de-horning in the UK? "No, we need freedom of choice and access to 'horned' bloodlines. I certainly don't think people should be forced to do it. I do, however, think that we'll see a growing number of herds giving it a go and more polled bulls will become available."

He says that a few years ago it was difficult to find top-quality polled genetics. "There were probably just two or three good sires that were available. But now we're looking at between 20 and 30 polled bulls. That's a lot of progress and, again, it is a reflection of increased demand for polled sires.

"The key is to have top quality genetics and be polled. That's what we strive for."