

The Ayrshire Breed

Typical Mature Ayrshire Female (15 years old)



Typical Mature Ayrshire Male



The Ayrshire breed has its roots in the Northern region of the Scottish county of Ayrshire, a part of Scotland that has a moist temperate climate due to its position on the Atlantic coast, with showery, windy days being common.

The breed's origins owe much to the Viking invasion of Scotland, which saw Scandinavian blood mixed with the native small black cattle called Kylo's, an ancestry they share with the Highland breed. Up to the start of nineteenth century, the breed colour was predominantly black, but due to an infusion of outside blood when the landlords of north Ayrshire brought a small number, around ten, of Durham/ Holderness red and white cattle up from Northumberland to help their tenants improve their herds, and through time the prevailing colour became brown and white.

A particularly outstanding strain of the breed was developed in the area of North Ayrshire called Dunlop, which owed their development to the skill of the breeders in that part, and were famed for their ability to convert wet low value grass into quality milk suitable for manufacturing into a cheese named Dunlop cheddar. As their fame spread, the Dunlop breed as it was then called, spread all over Ayrshire and then all over Scotland and through time they acquired the name of Ayrshire cattle.

Due to North Ayrshire's proximity to the busy international port of Glasgow, Ayrshire cows were the obvious choice to provide milk onboard ship, which helped spread the breed's virtues all over the world.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, large numbers were exported to Canada, the USA, Finland and in particular Sweden, where they were used to improve the native Swedish cattle resulting in the SRB breed. Many also were taken by Scottish immigrants to Australia, New Zealand and to Southern Africa where their tolerance to extreme heat and their adaptability was a major factor.

The Ayrshire Cattle Society was formed in 1877 with the first Herd Book being published in 1878, all of which helped identify the superior strains that existed within the breed. Further improvement was driven once more by the landlords and breeders when they initiated a class called the heifer derby at the Ayr County show.

The idea was that the breeder had to pick out the yearling female calf with the most potential and then enter it for the derby class which would be held two years later when the animal would be in milk.

It was designed to make breeders think about the structure and the potential of their animals and it became very popular with over 170 being entered in the first Derby.

A great step forward for the breed was the introduction in 1903 by the Ayrshire Agricultural Association of individual cow Milk Recording, which allowed breeders to identify superior strains within the population.

It would be true to say that the introduction of Tuberculin testing in the 1920's and the breed's relative freedom from the disease, provided a great boost for the breed and saw Ayrshire's spread all over the UK.

The war years of the 1940's saw a huge expansion of the breed fuelled by its high conversion rate and its ability to produce large amount of milk compared to its smaller body weight.

The 1970's saw a huge reversal of that expansion as the North American Holstein with its fast growth rate and high milk yields became the breed of choice for most dairy farmers and old fashioned values like longevity, fertility and healthiness combined with strong constitutions were swept aside in the pursuit of short term gain.

Today the modern Ayrshire is making a making a come back as dairymen realise that low input costs are just as important as high output. Their longevity and inherent hardiness leading to lower need of medicines and veterinary assistance, has made her the cow of choice for today's welfare conscious consumers and for grassland dairy farmers where their low maintenance costs and ability to graze in all kinds of weather is a big benefit.

Breed numbers of mature cows in the UK is around 26,000 with an average yield of 6944kgs milk 4.11% bf 3.22% prt in 305 days with body weight of mature cows of around 650kgs.

The Breed Society operates a computerised registration system with a choice of internet or telephone input. Numbers registered is around 7000 per annum. It also has a type classification scheme and a cattle breeding company called Cattle Services Ayr which progeny tests young sires of the future and markets them world wide.

<http://www.ayrshirescs.org>