

The Shetland

The Shetland female



It is most likely that this breed originated, like many others, from captured and domesticated South Asian Aurochs, though the wide-travelling Vikings could have introduced other blood around a thousand years ago. The breed then developed in isolation over hundreds of years on the Shetland Isles. The harsh environment of the Islands produced a small, hardy and thrifty cow which is able to turn poor forage into excellent beef and milk with healthy properties. Until more recent years the cow was essential to the lives of the Islands' crofting families and at the beginning of the 19th century, an estimated 15,000 pure bred cattle were kept on their native islands. At this time Shetlands were classed as a dairy breed. As transport became easier and the subsistence economy of the Islands improved, the crofters became less dependent on their cattle and, halfway through that century, the Government encouraged the Islanders to cross them with larger beef breeds. Pure bred numbers started the decline from which they have never fully recovered. Following the second World War, Government subsidies were denied to them unless they were (again) crossbred and this was a serious threat to the very existence of the breed until it became classed as dual purpose in the 1950's. The Rare Breeds Survival Trust

The Shetland male



categorised the Shetland as critically endangered in 1981 when 75 pure bred cows and 30 bulls were identified.

Numbers have since improved to around 800 breeding females, with 180 pure bred calves registered each year, most of them now from the UK mainland. As one of the breed's strengths is its ability to produce a large crossbred calf from low input, it continues to be used for this but many are now to be found on conservation grazing sites and, due to its sound temperament, it is increasingly popular as a smallholder's cow and in a multi-suckling herd. The pure Shetland's meat is highly prized and its longevity, easy calving and ability to tighten calving patterns make it an attractive all-rounder.

The cattle are predominantly black and white with about 10% red and white, but some of the old colours such as dun, grey and brindled are returning in small numbers. The cows are small to medium sized, 350kg to 500kg, with the bulls somewhat heavier. There is a range of shapes indicating the diversity of the breed but they are deep bodied on short legs with fine bone. They have distinctive horns, short but curving inwards and slightly upwards, "Viking" style. They are not susceptible to any particular health issues.

More information at:

www.shetlandcattle.org.uk

www.schbs.co.uk