

**Guernsey is a treasure. It is a special place, its countryside, its farmland fields, cows and wildlife, so argues Andrew Casebow, States Agriculture and Environment Adviser.**

# Treasure Island

**I must whisper this** so islanders do not hear! In many parts of the world where Guernsey cattle were once one of the predominant breeds of dairy cows, the breed has reduced in numbers so much that it is endangered, if not now classed as a rare breed.

Here in Guernsey, home of the breed, we have 10% of the entire worldwide population of registered pedigree cattle. Most Guernsey cattle are now in North America, whilst there are small populations remaining in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and in England.

## **Guernsey Cattle**

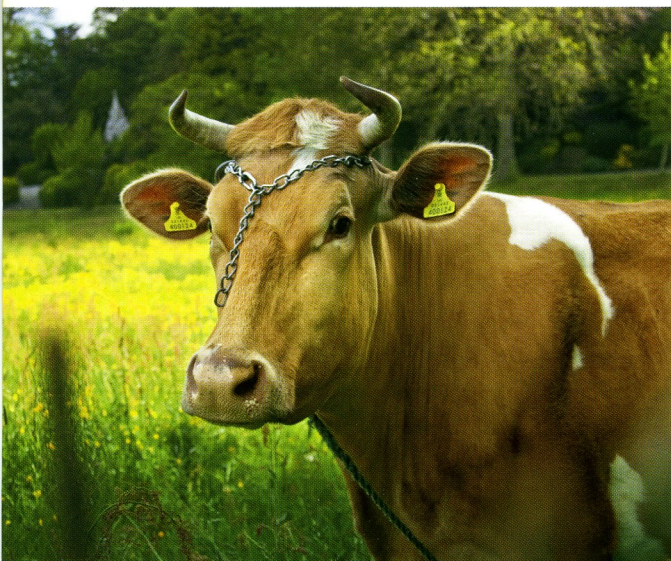
Guernsey cows have characteristics that set them apart from all other breeds, which is why in the 19th and 20th Century they were the 'cow of choice' for many wealthy landowners and their families. The cows are renowned for their gentle, placid nature and rich creamy milk with its very distinctive taste.

Guernsey milk has an exceptionally high carotene content and a type of protein called A2 casein, that is also present in goats' milk and even in human milk. Some people believe that this provides a level of protection against a number of human health conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes and even autism.


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## **Prestigious**

In Guernsey, the Guernsey breed has remained pure for centuries as legislation passed early in the 19th Century banned the importation of other breeds of cattle into the island. Even animals that were sent to England to compete in prestigious cattle shows could not return to the island. The law is still enforced and, as a consequence, all cattle in the islands are of the Guernsey breed and bred within Guernsey, Sark, Alderney or Herm. One consequence of the ban on the importation of cattle has been that the islands remain free of the many cattle diseases that have swept through Europe over the past century, including TB that is now rife in South West England.







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### Biodiversity

The island cattle are now a pool of high quality genetic biodiversity that could be incredibly important in future years, but it must be maintained. They are only very distantly related to other breeds of cattle. Some of the world's major breeds of dairy cattle, that have been bred to produce huge volumes of milk, are very closely related to each other.

Whilst their numbers may be calculated in their millions, the breed as a whole may be genetically related to only six family lines. This is why some commercial milk producers are starting to cross-breed different breeds of cattle so as to overcome inherited problems, such as infertility.

### The fields, earth banks and hedges

Guernsey farmland is divided into tiny fields by ancient earth banks and hedges. The banks that surround each field are truly historical features that predated most of the enclosures in England. Each of the fields, banks and hedges that can be seen today were clearly shown in the 1787 Duke of Richmond map of Guernsey, but what is often not realised is that many of them were already centuries old when the map was drawn.

The small fields and wildflower-covered banks and hedges are very similar to 'bocage', a French term for this type of landscape that refers to a terrain of mixed pasture with tortuous side roads and lanes bounded on all sides by banks. This type of country has been largely swept away in France (and in England) as small fields were amalgamated into large open country.

### Glorious

But in glorious Guernsey, the earth banks have been largely retained over the years, thanks mainly to the fragmented land ownership (with different landowners owning almost every other field) and by States' policies that have sought to protect them.

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Hedges and earth banks are also particularly valuable as the vegetation on them often represents some of the last remaining vestiges of traditional dry grassland with its wild flowers that are indigenous to Guernsey. They have remained as an unbroken link with the past, before modern agriculture became intensive.

### Custodians

Every spring, Guernsey's country lanes are transformed by a profusion of wild flowers that give us an inkling of what the meadows must have been like before the modern plough. Although, as elsewhere, farmers need to be modern and efficient in their management if they are to survive and prosper, in Guernsey they are still seen as custodians of the countryside.

There are now far fewer farmers than there were in the past but this is not a bad thing as many people who would previously have toiled for little reward now have much more fulfilling lives. Just after the wartime Occupation there were 350 dairy farmers in the island, but they were not working on farms as we know them today. ▶



## 'Mixed' farms

In the 1950's many farmers had only two or three dairy cows but they were 'mixed' farms, growing different crops. Many of the dairy cows were tethered in the fields of grass on long ropes, watered and moved around at least twice a day so that they had their fill of fresh grass.

In the winter they were kept in small granite stables where their food and bedding had to be carried in to them and their dung removed by hand. Heavy, back-breaking work. Alongside the dairy cows farmers might have reared beef cattle, grown potatoes and outdoor vegetable crops for self-sufficiency; and grown tomatoes and cucumbers in glasshouses for the export trade. Many also grew fields of flowers – daffodils, narcissi and irises.

## Specialised

Most farmers no longer practice 'mixed' farming. Today, dairy farmers are specialised cattle breeders and milk producers. Their farm buildings and equipment are as modern and as hygienic as you will find anywhere in the world. Some local dairy farmers have diversified into producing farmhouse ice cream, cheeses and locally produced beef, selling mainly to hotels and at local 'farmers markets'.

Under current legislation all milk must be sold to Guernsey Dairy, which is still owned by the States of Guernsey but managed for the benefit of the farmers and people of the island. Alongside fresh milk Guernsey Dairy makes excellent quality cheeses, such as 'Frie d'Or', a local cross between camembert and brie, and mature 'Farmhouse' cheddar cheese that has won many accolades in international dairy competitions. Their extra mature cheese has won a silver medal and the smoked cheese a gold at the 'World Cheese Show'.

## Guernsey Countryside Management Scheme

All dairy farmers in Guernsey are part of the Guernsey Countryside Management Scheme run by the Commerce and Employment Department. Since 2001 each farm has followed its own individual 'Farm Biodiversity Action Plan' that has been regularly revised and improved.

This scheme, which now includes more than 50% of the agricultural land in Guernsey, is designed to improve the management of hedgerows and banks, to encourage farmers to maintain and manage traditional pastures and wildflower meadows without the use of fertilisers or herbicides and in a way that encourages the diversification of wildlife.

The scheme has had real benefits. Jamie Hooper, conservation officer for Guernsey's natural history society, La Societe Guernesiaise, says that "La Societe is really encouraged that all dairy farmers are being helped to manage their farm land with wildlife in mind".

## Diverse

In addition to the two metre-wide field boundary banks, many farmers now provide an extra metre width of 'rough grassland' around each field that is not grazed or cut. This provides an excellent habitat for wildlife including nesting birds, insects and moths, voles and mice. Because the field margins and hedge banks are rich in diverse species compared with the more intensively managed fields, they encourage many species of insects and moths.

Many of these then become prey to birds or foraging bats at night, so maintaining their healthy population. One of the most delightful evening pursuits is to wander the country lanes at night watching out for darting pipistrelle bats and the ghostly presence of barn owls.

## Take a look around. Take pleasure in the wild flowers and wildlife that share our island existence.

It is known that wildlife, such as Guernsey voles and mice live close to the field banks, so the field margins are 'just right'. They also provide dinner for the barn owls and kestrels that have become such a feature of Guernsey's countryside. Indeed many farmers provide nesting boxes for owls and other birds on the farm, through an excellent scheme organised by local conservationist Vic Froome, and this has become a constant source of interest for farmers and for many local families.

In England there is great concern about the loss of farmland species of birds. In his preface to the book 'Silent Summer' by Norman McClean, David Attenborough has written a warning about the loss of small creatures that are the basis of our entire ecosystems. He said that they are disappearing faster than ever and "that loss is transforming our wildlife and countryside".

The Guernsey farm 'Biodiversity Action Plans' are designed to stem that loss and to maintain and encourage wildlife in our countryside. Our traditional meadows, flower-rich hedge banks and field margins all provide the essential biodiversity that is necessary if we are to maintain our wildlife and countryside as a really special place.

## Vulnerable

We don't have some of the cropland birds that are in such decline in England, but our local population of meadow pipits and skylarks has declined, but that might be due as much to disturbance by people, dogs and cats, as intensification of farmland. These birds nest on the ground so they are very vulnerable to a passing hungry cat or boisterous dog.

So whilst you are in Guernsey, take a look around. Try to keep our countryside as rural as possible. Notice the tiny open fields and high earth banks surrounding them. Take pleasure in the wild flowers and wildlife that share our island existence. Treasure Guernsey. ■

