

FEATURE

West of Ireland Registered Pedigree Suffolk Sheep Club



FOUNDED in 1971, the West of Ireland Registered Pedigree Suffolk Sheep Breeders Club is celebrating 50 years this year.

The western region has the greatest volume of breeding ewes in the country and closely associated with many flocks over the years has been the Suffolk ram and Suffolk cross-bred ewes.

Western farmers were quick to realise the values of the breed. Their hardiness, prolificacy, rapid growth rates, meat quality and ease of husbandry has made them the most popular finishing breed in the country.

Formed in 1971 to produce and promote quality pedigree stock for the western farmer and beyond, today the club boasts numerous members with many young, vibrant breeders keen to produce the best quality Suffolks possible. Flocks are built using the top genetics available to Irish breeders. The pedigree lines held by all the breeders reflect a huge personal investment to put the west of Ireland club Suffolks at the top of the breeding sales all around Ireland.

Club members are drawn from counties Galway, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon and



Jennings family, Athenry, with their champion ram lamb back in the 1980s.

Longford. Mayo has a very active membership, right across the county, including breeders James Cuffe, Ballina, Nathan and Aaron Durcan, Bonniclon, Michael Hastings, Westport, Charles and Dylan Hughes, Westport, Michael and Marie Jennings, Hollymount, Martin Keane, Belmullet, Teresa and Enda McGeever, Swinford, Richard Noone, Ballina, Brian and Pat McDonnell, Westport, and Flynn O'Donnell, who is based in Belmullet.

Sales are held from early August through to October but private viewings and sales are always welcome by the breeders.

These ram sales are spread throughout the major marts in the west, with many breeders producing breeders' ram lambs

and ewe lambs for south of Ireland premier sales.

The club's premier show and sale is held in Roscommon annually but other sales move around through Mayo, Galway and Sligo, with some members also attending a multi-breed sale - the Big Boy Ram Sale - in Carrick-on-Shannon each year.

Many members take part annually in both the National Suffolk Championships held as part of the NSBA Championships and the South of Ireland Premier Show and Sale, held annually in Blessington. In 2020, club member Kenneth Bailey had the female champion at the southern premier sale.

A number of members also regularly compete in the agricultural show circuit, often bringing home the Supreme



Dylan Hughes, Westport, with stock from his father Charles' Lankhill flock.

Interbreed Champion of the Show with their top quality Suffolks. Mayo breeders have achieved top prices at club sales and continue to play a significant role within the club.

In addition to all this, the club also organises championships, information events, flock visits and support for new members, who are

always welcome.

As well as the local club's anniversary, breeders are also celebrating the Suffolk Sheep Society reaching the incredible milestone of 135 years since its foundation, making it one of the oldest and most established breeds globally.

About the Suffolk breed

THE Suffolk evolved from the mating of Norfolk Horn ewes with Southdown rams in the Bury St Edmunds area. These sheep were known as Southdown Norfolks, or locally as 'Black faces'.

The first recording is in 1797 when in his 'General view of agriculture in the county of Suffolk' Arthur Young stated: "These ought to be called the Suffolk breed, the mutton has superior texture, flavour, quantity and colour of gravy."

The first classes to exhibit Suffolk sheep were at the Suffolk Show in 1859. The first flock book was published in 1887. This contained 46 flocks ranging in size from 50 to 1,100 ewes and averaging 314 ewes. All 46 flocks were in East Anglia and 34 were in Suffolk itself. The oldest was that of E.P. & H.

Frost of West Wratting, established in 1810.

Suffolks developed around the rotational system of farming in East Anglia, grazing on grass or clover in the summer. After weaning the ewes could be put on salt marshes or stubbles. Swedes, turnips or mangels were grazed in the winter in a very labour intensive system with a fresh area fenced off each day.

Lambing was in February or March, outdoors in the fields with a hurdle shelter or in open yards surrounded by hurdles and straw.

The breed expanded rapidly, with the first flock in Ireland established in 1891 by Henry Strevins, and the breed's popularity rapidly spread to every county in Ireland with over 290 registered flocks in Ireland today. It was

subsequently established in 1895 in Scotland and 1901 in Wales.

From the earliest days sheep were exported around the world, to Austria, France, Germany, Switzerland, Russia, North and South America and the colonies.

Originally renowned as a producer of mutton, the breed has developed over the years to match consumer demands. Suffolks are now found throughout the world's sheep producing countries. They are the flag-ship breed in the British Isles and recognised as the leading terminal sire on a variety of ewes to produce top quality prime lamb.

Still the leading domestic terminal sire breed throughout the UK and Ireland, the Suffolk is one of our oldest domestic sheep

breeds and has been in existence since the late 1700s, with the Suffolk Sheep Society formed in 1886. The Suffolk remains No. 1 for growth rate, as proven by numerous independent scientific studies. This ability to grow means that Suffolk lambs are ready for market earlier, resulting in reduced input costs, or can also be taken to heavier carcass weights, if required.

Because the breed has high milk output, hard hooves and wide pelvic dimensions for easy lambing, introducing Suffolk genetics to a commercial ewe flock is an excellent counter to the all too prevalent problems experienced with other breeds with soft and (or) slow growing lambs, or ewes that have unacceptable levels of udder and feet problems.

A half century of excellence

WHEN the West of Ireland Registered Pedigree Suffolk Sheep Breeders Club was established in 1971, Ireland was a very different country to what it is today. Eamonn de Valera was president, Jack Lynch was Taoiseach, Jim Gibbons was Minister for Agriculture and Alan Dukes was Chief Economist with the IFA. Ireland still had not joined the EEC. Many rural farms had no electricity or running water.

The 1970s heralded a new era of opportunity for farming in Ireland. Incomes began to rise in the early parts of the decade in anticipation of Ireland's upcoming membership of the EEC. Agricultural output began to increase, as did productivity, and confidence improved in the farming sector in general.

The foresight of a number of pedigree Suffolk breeders in the west of Ireland at this time led to the establishment of the club and to a legacy which has stood the test of time. As a club, its members account for 25% of the pedigree Suffolk flocks in Ireland today.

The arrival of Suffolk Sheep in Ireland is credited to a Mr. Henry Strevens of Roscommon who is first recorded in VOL V of the Suffolk Sheep Society Flock book in 1891.

In 1971, there were no pedigree breeding sales in the west and breeders had to travel to Ganly's sale in Dublin to sell pedigree sheep.

A group of breeders in the west of Ireland recognised the growing demand for pedigree Suffolk sheep in the area and approached the south of Ireland branch of the Suffolk Sheep Society to ask permission to form a dedicated club in the west of Ireland.

Permission granted, the club was established, holding its first

pedigree sale in Roscommon Mart in 1971. The average price on the day was £44 or €670 in today's money.

As demand for the Suffolk grew in the west, so too did the number of sales the club held, and gradually sales venues were increased to include Athenry, Tuam, Ballina, Headford, with additional sales in Roscommon.

The club has been a leader - in 1990, the first ever sale of recorded and scanned rams took place in Roscommon. By 1991 all breeders were taking part in the then Department of Agriculture Breed Improvement Programme, which focused on leanness and conformation.

One thing always remains consistent - the quality of sheep presented by the club is always first class. This is as a result of two main reasons, firstly, a policy of culling hard stock that it not felt to be up to the correct standard of pedigree breeding, ensuring only the cream of the pedigree crop is offered for sale, and, secondly, members are constantly investing in new bloodlines to further enhance the quality of stock available.

Members constantly strive to improve bloodlines through careful selection of breeding stock to provide the best possible selection of rams to commercial farmers and breeders alike.

The aim is to produce a ram with a great topline, gigot and carcass, who can in turn replicate these assets in its progeny, producing easy fleshing and fast finishing lambs.

The club encourages young breeders to join and are always willing to offer advice to new breeders.

Established breeders strive to aid the Suffolk in achieving its



James Cuffe, Ballina, Roscommon champion 2019.



Marie Jennings, Hollymount, with the top priced ram at the premier sale in 2020.

full potential. They are actively promoting this magnificent breed through shows and sales all over Ireland.

The South of Ireland Branch of the Suffolk Sheep Society, of which the club is a member, has recently been approved to operate a Pedigree Breeding Programme in Ireland which became a necessity as a direct result of Brexit. All club sheep sold are now accompanied by Zootechnical certificates.

The Suffolk ram remains the No. 1 Terminal sire today and demand

has outstripped supply in the west for the past two years with sales clearances reaching 100%.

As a club, members continue to introduce top genetics from Ireland and the UK to their flocks in order to produce top quality breeding rams for the commercial enterprise and breeders alike. They aim to produce rams which will in turn produce a hardy, fast finishing lamb, with great conformity and carcass which can be ready for slaughter off grass within 12 to 14 weeks. This leads to less labour input and feed and leads

to a higher yield for the commercial enterprise.

As a club, they are actively encouraging young breeders into the Suffolk breed as they feel they will be the future of the breed. Old hands are always available to offer help and advice and the club encourages anyone considering getting into breeding Suffolk sheep to get in touch.

You can find contact details of the club on the website at www.westofirelandregisteredpedigreesuffolksheepbreedersclub.com.

50th anniversary year book

TO celebrate 50 years of pedigree Suffolk sheep breeding in the west of Ireland, a special anniversary yearbook has been published.

The magazine contains historical features, up-to-date articles relevant to modern sheep farming today as well as numerous images of club members participating in club and society shows and sales.

It can be downloaded via the club website or if you would like a copy, get in touch with any of the committee or at woisuffolk@hotmail.com and it can be arranged.



Anniversary show and sale

THE West of Ireland Registered Pedigree Suffolk Sheep Breeders Club 50th anniversary premier show and sale is scheduled to take place on Saturday, September 4, at Roscommon Mart.

All sheep are veterinary checked and fully affiliated to the Suffolk Sheep Society. All sheep at club sales are accompanied by Zootechnical certificates.

The sale will feature the largest selection of pedigree Suffolk rams in Connaught.

You can find details on the club Facebook page or website.