

NEW ERA FOR 'HERITAGE' BREEDS



'It's time to go native.'

A recent cover of Country Life fascinated me. I'll be honest, it's usually the magazine's property pages I flick to first (for what, I hasten to add, is very much 'lottery' house shopping), but this grabbed my attention.

My mind boggled at what the glossy might be about to urge me to do, but the explanation – 'How you can save a rare breed' – and the accompanying artwork soon made it apparent.

It was a eulogy to the meat produced by our native and rare breeds and a rallying call to support these animals, many of which have been lost or remain under threat.

This is, of course, very much the territory of the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST), a charity that recently published its 2019/2020 'Watchlist', giving the latest insight into the fortunes of such threatened animals.

If the latest Watchlist was a school report, it's fair to say the summary might be: 'A good year, but could still do better'. It suggested breeds and breeders are "generally proving resilient in the face of economic challenges", with numbers of many cattle, sheep and pigs stable or increasing over the last five years.

"It really does look like many of our breeds are facing a brighter future," it said. But it warned there were exceptions and that there is "no room for complacency".

The historical context certainly makes for alarming reading. Between 1900 and 1970, 26 of the UK's native breeds of livestock went extinct. Shortly afterwards, in 1973, the RBST was formed to arrest this loss.

Scholars of history will recall 1973 was also the

date of a major change in agriculture, with the arrival of the Common Agricultural Policy – which, according to the RBST, "has not served our native breeds well".

Almost 50 years on, we find ourselves at another policy crossroads and, consequently, a moment when the fortunes of such livestock is again at a turning point.

Michael Gove's Agriculture Bill, and promised "green Brexit" could reset the compass on how agriculture is supported, fundamentally changing the economics of production.

Some previously profitable enterprises will go into the red and vice versa. Some farmers will choose to change; others will have no choice but to change. Very few – if any – will be able to carry on doing what they've always done indefinitely, simply because they've always done it.

In this new world, enterprises which have a strong environmental component are set to move increasingly centre stage.

Even putting aside the desirability of not letting breeds disappear as an end in itself (after all, once they're gone, they're gone for good – unless you believe Jurassic Park, of course), animals such as the traditional British White, the Lincoln Longwool and the Large Black have compelling characteristics.

They can often prosper on low-input, low-cost systems, thrive in varied conditions and, in an era when consumers are hungry for provenance, traceability and taste, their meat can command premium prices. They offer, to use the jargon, a marketing USP.

I always enjoy seeing the beautiful Sussex cattle, with their distinctive rich red-brown coats, outside our office. Kept on an entirely grass-fed system, these

hardy beasts are great at converting grass into meat which is famous for its marbling and flavour.

Often photogenic, our rare and native breeds can also provide a great 'shop front' for rural businesses which welcome the public. If you run a tourism venture, the mere presence of a herd of Highlands or Belted Galloways can add a whole new dimension to your offering.

Currently under Countryside stewardship there are (not insubstantial) payments available for cattle grazing and native breeds at risk. Hopefully the new ELMS (more details please, Mr Gove) will sufficiently reward and incentivise those who keep such animals, recognising the range of benefits they bring.

But let's not get too misty-eyed. They won't be the salvation of the thousands of farmers who are looking at a projected income graph which slopes grimly downwards in the face of falling BPS payments over the next decade. And for those who do choose to keep them, they won't represent an easy option. Like any enterprise these days, it'll need to be run professionally and efficiently to make money.

Good luck to the RBST, though, and to all the farmers who keep these beautiful, important animals. There are opportunities out there.

Whether you'll be able to earn enough money from them to ever buy one of the lovely houses in Country Life is, of course, another matter.

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