

NORTH
EAST NOW



Adelle Stripe
*Rebel's Last
Field Day*

NEW WRITING
NORTH

Travelling through the landscape of Northern England, you are likely to spot the familiar white-headed indigenous breed of the Hereford cow grazing in pastures and paddocks. Known for its docile nature, adaptability and longevity, the cattle are fed on a grass diet; their marbled beef is high in omega-3 and rich in flavour. As the source of the 'roast beef of Olde England', for over 250 years the breed has been recognised for its hardiness and, even in the fridge, has a longer shelf life than most cereal-fed cattle.

One of the most successful herds in the country, Moralee Herefords, is based at the Old Potato Farm in Mickley, by the banks of the River Tyne, 15 miles west of Newcastle. Founded in 2011 by husband-and-wife team Tom and Di Harrison, these are Herefords with a global reputation. The pedigrees comprise 100 heifers, cows, and prize-winning bulls, including one of the largest in the country, and are indicative of the breed's resurgence in recent times. There is even an Ambridge herd on BBC Radio 4's long-running countryside soap, *The Archers*, proving its enduring significance.

Born in 2018 and weighing in at over 1,550kg, Moralee's aptly titled prize bull, Rebel Kicks, has received numerous accolades including Polled Bull of the Year, Breed Champion and Supreme Champion at prestigious agricultural shows across England, Wales and beyond. This muscular, regal beast was crowned Champion Bull of Europe in 2021, and took third place in the Bull of the World competition. Even King Charles is a fan.

It is fair to say Rebel is one of the most sought-after Herefords in the country. He has his own website in America where his semen straws are sold for artificial insemination retailing at £80 a shot. In farming terms, he is a homegrown rockstar of epic proportions. And it's not just the bulls who are attracting attention. At an elite sale in Shrewsbury last December, one of Moralee's heifers, Katy Perry, only seven months old, sold for a UK record-breaking 11,000 guineas (around £11,500).

Rebel spends his days grazing by the railway tracks, on grassland once occupied by historic coal washing plants. The Moralee herd are outwintered in pit heaps on silage. Formerly a mining landscape containing a drift of cannon coal used for shipping, and a spot of fool's gold, it has been restored to its original pre-industrial habitat with help from the government's countryside stewardship scheme, where grants are provided to improve biodiversity of wildlife; water and air quality; and natural flood management.

Each year, the Harrisons plant a seed mix of herbal leys weighted with legumes and herb-rich swards. The resulting growth of chicory, black medick, lucerne, plantain, yarrow, clover and creeping red fescue provides habitat for pollinators, farmland birds and invertebrates. It is also the perfect blend for Herefords, the lightness of grass and flowers being preferable to the usual heavy silage, which contains too much protein for the

breed to digest. This is the traditional method. Not only is it ideal fodder for cattle, the meadows that are now flourishing are not dissimilar to those the legendary 18th century local engraver and printmaker Thomas Bewick walked through as a young man, whilst observing wildlife for his landmark book, *A History of British Birds* (1797). “We’ve certainly seen a huge increase in wildlife because of it,” Tom says. “A lot of smaller birds, finches and wrens that you wouldn’t normally see. On the back of that, we have a few more red kites. The balance is back.”

In preparation for the annual Northumberland County Show, Rebel spent this very wet week of May inside the barn, resting on a bed of woodchip supplied by a nearby tree surgeon. His coat was clipped, and his feet trimmed in advance of the big day, which is his ultimate outing in the agricultural show ring. After an extended pause on events due to Covid restrictions, this is his chance to make a determined entry, a grand finale of sorts. “We kept looking at him through winter and thought, should we? One last show?” Di laughs. “He has a huge character, a gentle giant. He’s a big softie who shows off in the ring.”

Formerly an accountant (although, like Tom, from a farming background), Di now spends 12 hours a day working with the herd, yet before every show she is sure to get her hair and nails done. “Image is important to me,” she explains. “When we go in the show ring I want to look as good as the cattle. Ironed and pressed.” Today at the showground, Di is making the finishing touches to Rebel’s tail with a curry comb before he walks into the ring to be judged. There is a sense of anticipation in the air. “The shows are an addiction,” admits Di.

As Rebel is led into the ring by Tom, crowds gather behind the barriers, cameras click and a hush descends. A film crew is here with Matt Baker, who is showing a Moralee cow later in the day as part of his forthcoming television series, *Travels with Mum and Dad*. Clearly the centre of attention, the bull’s rich, luxuriant deep russet coat shines in the blazing sunlight. There is a round of applause as he takes first place in the Senior Bull Class, then Hereford Supreme Champion, and Native Interbreed Champion, too. Considering it is his swansong, at six years of age Rebel proves his credentials to the home crowd, which erupts as he is crowned overall Supreme Champion.

Attracting over 30,000 visitors, the show at Bywell is an example of how resilient farming culture is in the region. Although the weather is sunny, the ground is a quagmire; the recent torrential rain combined with tractors and heavyweight machinery carves up the soil to such an extent it resembles a bull’s liver plough. Add to that mass footfall, with some unfortunates wearing flip-flops and sandals, and conditions quickly deteriorate. Nevertheless, there is plenty to occupy the senses: competitions from heavy horses and showjumping, to staff-dressing, sheep shearing and chivalry knights. There are brass bands, beekeepers,

a rifle range, dog shows, Cumberland wrestling and even a DJ playing disco classics from a concrete mixing section.

Although there are numerous commercial stalls, it is not on the scale of the Great Yorkshire Show in Harrogate – and is all the better for it. Here, the atmosphere is far more relaxed, yet still there are areas where bantam hens can be spotted, alpacas can be stroked, cavies and rabbits compete, and giant Aldabra tortoises slowly edge through the grass. This is the place for fanciers of Toggenburgs, Tamworths, Texels, Charollais Gimmers, British Blues and Longhorns. There's even a shortcrust competition, where sly cakes, sausage rolls and corned beef pies battle it out with tea loaf and flapjack makers. If that isn't enough, dyed eggs, marmalade, double-knit yarns and damson gin all have entries, with participants eagerly eyeing the red rosettes from afar. They are all keen to win their category, or even the coveted 'Best in Show'. Here at Northumberland County Show, competition is king.

Assisted by family and friends, the Harrisons have spent the past 24 hours preparing their cattle. Decked out in white coats, shirts and ties, they confidently lead Herefords into the ring by show stick and halter. In comparison to times past, there are numerous women and girls showing today. It's not only about winning, of course. This is an opportunity for farmers to meet and trade. In a profession that is often isolating, agricultural shows also offer a chance to socialise. Events like these have significant benefits and immense cultural importance. They are the place where the farming and food sector can promote their industries, encouraging urban populations to visit and connect with local rural communities. There is a powerful sense of cohesion.

Tom and Di first met through Young Farmers, which has a strong presence at the show. "The countryside's dating agency," Di remarks. "He was 19, I was 23-ish. His sister is the same age as me, and we were friends. We were meant to get married in 2001, but Foot-and-mouth disease struck. The first outbreak was ten miles away. We were lucky as we had the Tyne as protection, and a road border around the land. So many of our friends lost cattle. It was devastating. Nobody saw each other for months. It was like Covid for farmers."

Together, the Harrisons have built up their business, which is a shining example of how exports, embryos, artificial insemination and direct sales to customers via a boxed beef scheme can be profitable. They are in the enviable position of being independent, owning their land, and determining their price for beef, which is sold as roasting joints, sirloin, rump, ribeye and minced braising steak in 10 or 15 kilo boxes. Tom says, "The price is £15 a kilo overall for a mixed box. It might seem a lot for the mince, but it's cheap for the sirloin, so it all levels out. Input costs have gone through the roof. The butcher's put his prices up, the price of boxes has gone up, the vacuum packing, electricity... It was always said over

the years that farmers, we're professional gamblers. Basically, the whole of farming is buying everything at retail cost and selling it at wholesale."

Moralee's is undoubtedly premium product, yet they are able to dictate a price, unlike farmers who have to sell to supermarkets or in the open market. But there is extreme pressure on commercial producers who are dependent on skyrocketing feed and fertiliser costs, unlike British breeds who graze on grass. Tom believes that Herefords are still to have their moment of public recognition. "Aberdeen Angus are our biggest competition," he states. "They are an absolute machine that will never turn around. Why are they doing so well? The day Burger King made the Angus Flame Burger. We can't compete against that."

Down the road at Hexham Livestock Market, the majority of cattle are from Limousin suckler herds, a popular continental whose status Di aims to challenge by showing Rebel today. "I want to let them know what one can look like," she says. "And let them see the size of him. Quite often people see our cattle, and they're like, 'Oh, I never knew Herefords could look like that,' as they have this idea of them being smaller and narrower. We breed for width. And they calve so easily."

In many respects, Moralee, who have a distinctive brand and presence online, are outliers. Not only do they have a small-scale operation, but they have embraced the international market – looking beyond local trading to expand their business. Tom works part time as a contractor, spending the rest of his week working with the herd alongside his father, Arnold, who has lived in the area since 1971. It is a labour of love, but has an immense reward in seeing the results of their dedication flourishing in far-flung countries. Rebel is the sire of numerous calves being born every week around the world.

Despite the swampy conditions at Northumberland County Show, Rebel has avoided most of the mud, and as the crowds start to filter from the site, he proudly displays a halter lined with red rosettes, which will be pinned on the wall in Moralee's barn alongside hundreds of others accumulated over the years. They are emblems of persistence and dedication. As for Rebel, his physical prowess and stature remains a powerful symbol of the North East's resilience and its capacity for expansion, using post-industrial landscapes to create a dynamic future grounded in tradition.

Info

<https://www.moraleeherefords.co.uk> >

Adelle Stripe grew up in a farming family and is the bestselling author of three nonfiction books. Her features have appeared in the Yorkshire Post, New Statesman and Caught by the River. She lives in Calderdale, West Yorkshire.

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