



WHEN CATTLE WERE FIRST BRED FOR DOMESTIC PURPOSES FROM THE WILD AUROCHS OF PRE-HISTORIC EUROPE, THERE WAS NO WAY THAT THE TRIBESPEOPLE WHO SET OUT TO TAME THEM COULD HAVE FORESEEN THE DIVERSITY OF BREEDS THEY WOULD UNLOCK.



HORNED DEXTER CATTLE HAVE RETAINED THE HARDY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE IRISH HILL CATTLE THEY WERE BRED FROM IN THE 1700S

From the long-horned and rugged highland cattle of Scotland to the famous black Angus and the ubiquitous Friesian, we're used to seeing all manner of colours and quirks among modern stock.

The Dexter, however, is a little special. Compact and diminutive of stature, these cattle are enjoying a renaissance of popularity — not just because of the

unique nature and visual appeal of their breed, but also because of the quality of their milk and meat.

The Dexter name is ancient Greek for 'fortunate' or 'skilled' — as in the term dextrous. Certainly, the originator of the breed, a Mr Dexter of Tipperary, Ireland, proved both lucky and skilled when he turned his hand to developing the perfect cattle beast for

smallholdings on rugged land. This historic figure in rural animal husbandry was no idle experimenter, even if history has overlooked his first name. He had been tasked in the late 1700s to produce an ideal cattle breed for the farms of the central Irish county.

Mr Dexter bred from a beast of small stature but abundant productivity — so much so that despite



THE SHORT-LEGGED DEXTER MAY BE SMALL ON STATURE, BUT THESE PLACID AND PRODUCTIVE ANIMALS ARE BIG ON PERSONALITY

their small size the Dexter is known to give up to ten litres of milk per day. So it was that a varied skein of bloodlines, all from hill cattle valued in the distant past for their tractability, small size, resilience and productivity came together. Co-incidentally, Dexter's breeding project preserved some of the genetics of cattle which had roamed Ireland since the stone age, and possibly since the retreat of the great glaciers.

The Dexter breed was introduced to England in 1882, and by 1886 they were proudly displayed at agricultural shows.

The popularity of the breed saw the establishment of a Dexter breeders' society in England at a time when the

Empire was taking a keen interest in the agricultural development of her colonies. It was not long before the Dexter arrived in New Zealand. In 1904 a small herd was established but soon dwindled away. It would be a further 70 years or more before the Dexter was re-established here.

Sure footed, coloured black, red or brown, the Dexter is a cattle beast with charisma. Their short stature — usually 1/3 of a metre shorter than the common Friesian. Some boast short curving horns, while others are 'polled' — naturally without horns. The easy-to-manage attitude of the breed is appreciated by new fans of the Dexter to this day.

In the year 2000 the

two existing New Zealand groups for Dexter breeders and farmers came together to form a single entity — the Dexter Cattle Society of New Zealand.

Needless to say, they are avid advocates of the breed, with a growing roll-call of members all across the country. As of this year the DCSNZ herd registry numbered over 1600, a healthy increase and a great pool of stock from which to breed. There is a big focus among DCSNZ members to promote Dexters, set and maintain breed standards, and ensure a healthy and vibrant bloodline going forward.

Talking to other societies of a similar structure around the world not only helps



POPULAR AS A SHOW BREED FOR OVER 150 YEARS, THE DEXTER IS A GREAT CHOICE FOR YOUNG FARMERS, AS THEY ARE COMPACT, DOCILE AND EASY TO RAISE

preserve the Dexter here, it also shares information with those who want to see the breed thrive in its native British Isles. Part of that mission involves holding open

days when the public can get up close with Dexter cattle and talk shop with those who own and farm them.

Just such an event is set to happen this October in

Canterbury, and it's a great opportunity to get educated, ask questions, and find out about a cattle breed that's short on stature but long on productivity and personality.