

The Origin and History of Irish Moiled Cattle

The name of the breed comes from the Gaelic word 'maol' meaning hornless. 'Moil' – the anglicised form of the Gaelic word that is used by the Society is given in the English Dialect Dictionary as meaning 'a cow without horns'.

As with all breeds of cattle there has been much speculation about the origin of the Irish Moiled and the influences of imported breeds on its development. Research has shown that the Irish Moiled cattle have a long ancestry in Ireland. Archaeological excavation and ancient Irish literature all point to polled cattle being in Ireland since prehistoric times. It has been suggested that polled cattle were introduced to Ireland by the Norse or the Danes, however it is known from archaeological evidence that polled cattle existed in Ireland long before the Norse and Danish raids.

It was not until the early 1800's with the refinement of selective breeding and the notion of a 'pure' breed that the finer points of the Irish Moiled were discussed. Sir William Wilde claimed that in 1835 Ireland possessed four native breeds; the Longhorn, the Kerry, the 'Old Irish Cow' and the Irish Moiled. In 1845 Professor C. Lowe of Edinburgh University referred to the Irish Moiled as the "Polled Irish Breed, scarcely known to the breeders of England". He described the Irish Moiled as light brown in colour which was found throughout Ireland, the largest numbers being around the Shannon.

The fortunes of the Irish Moiled in the 1800's lay in the hands of individual breeders. One such breeder was Dr P. H. Fox of Athlone who kept a herd of the cattle for nearly 25 years. The colour most prevailing then was red with brown ears and brown nose. Fox praised the Irish Moiled for its milking qualities and the high butterfat content of the milk.

During the early years of the 1900's the main areas where Irish Moiled cattle existed were in the northern parts of Ireland – Tyrone, Armagh, Donegal and Sligo were the counties where the Irish Moiled cattle were most numerous. It was during these early years of the 1900's that the first efforts were made to mould the mixture of polled cattle existing in Ireland into a distinct breed with its own herd book. War interrupted the activities of the pioneer breeders and it was not until 1926 that a successful Society was started in Belfast. The first president was Capt. Herbert Dixon and the first Registrar/Secretary was Capt. J. Gregg. Standards were laid down for registration and a herd book was established. The first animal to be registered was 'Donegal Biddy', a foundation cow 23 years old, owned by John O'Neill of Crumlin Co Antrim.

The aim of the Society was to develop the breed as a hardy dual-purpose animal suitable for the needs of the hill farmers of Ulster. The cattle should be

economical to keep on poor land, give a reasonable supply of milk and be capable, when crossed with a beef producing animal, of producing a good saleable store. It was decided that a lined-backed animal was the colour to be aimed for; red or roan with a white stripe down the back to be the predominant colour pattern for the Irish Moiled.

Irish Moiled cattle appeared in strong classes at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Show in the late 1920's and throughout the 1930's. Also around this time some quite outstanding milk performance records were achieved by individual animals... 'Greyabbey Kate' (born in Sligo), one of the foundation females of the breed's Herd Book, was not milk recorded until she was 16 years of age; she then produced an average yield of 1940 gallons at 4.3% butterfat for 3 years and secured the Caldwell Cup for the best dairy cow in Ulster for her owner Mr D. Barnes of Greyabbey. Incidentally, Kate had 16 calves for Mr Barnes in her 22 year life.

In 1938 a bull premium scheme was established by the Society and good quality Irish Moiled bulls were sent out to various districts throughout the country and were available for use by local farmers. It is quite likely that some of the unregistered stock left by these bulls provided the foundation cows which enabled the Society to continue after the Second World War.

When Capt. Gregg, the main driving force behind the new Society died, and war came, the Society began to decline and it was not until 1948 that Mr A.E.H. Gillespie of Ballyclare got the Society moving again. In 1949 Major G. Percevel-Maxwell of Downpatrick founded the 'Ballydugan' herd and through five animals; 'Ballydugan King, Ballydugan King 3rd, Ballydugan Kat, Ballydugan Mimosa and Ballydugan Kay' the present day Irish Moiled still exist. In 1950 a polled bull called 'Hakku' was imported from Finland. The late Capt. Gregg had reversed the old tale about polled cattle being brought to Ireland by the Vikings and considered that the Scandinavians had taken cattle from Ireland without consent of their owners! According to Capt. Gregg the present day Finnish Polls were the descendants of these stolen cattle and were in fact Irish Moiled cattle. 'Hakku' was put to work at Ballyduggan and left some very good calves, two of his most influential sons being 'Ballydugan Duke', whose off-spring greatly influenced Mr. Swann's Glenbrook herd, and 'Craigantlet George' who went to work in Mr. Nelson's 'Maymore' herd.

In the late 1950's the Society began to decline once again, one reason being the enforcement of the Agricultural Act N. Ireland 1949, stating that only bulls which were bred from a cow with a recorded high milk yield could be licensed. Unfortunately, most of the Irish Moiled breeders were small hill farmers that did not milk record, therefore there was a lack of licensed bulls to keep the breed continuing.

The last Ballydugan cattle were registered in 1962; the herd of Major Maxwell along with other smaller herds were sold and dispersed, the only one established herd remaining being Mr. Nelson's 'Maymore' herd. Fortunately in 1960 a new breeder, David Swann of Dunsilly founded the 'Glenbrook' herd from a bull and two heifers from Mr. J. Cooper's herd and two years later the herd was added to, from

the Ballydugan herd. It is from the 'Glenbrook' herd and the 'Maymore' herd that all the cattle in the new herd book of 1983 derive.

In October 1982 the Society was revived by a few dedicated owners of the 'few' remaining Irish Moiled cattle, Belfast zoo, the National Trust and also encouragement was received from the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. The last surviving 20 females and 2 bulls were checked for purity of bloodlines in the old herd book by Mr Alan Cheese of Liverpool University. By 1984 calves were once again being registered. One of the aims of the Society at this time was to look forward to a great entry of Irish Moiled Cattle showed once again at the Royal Ulster Agricultural Show, Balmoral.

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's Liverpool University continued to be involved in research projects using Irish Moiled cattle and the study of their genetics. Liverpool City Council and Leeds City Council were the first in Great Britain to keep Irish Moiled cattle. Head of Genetics at Liverpool University, Dr Ian Gill, displayed his interest and enthusiasm for the breed and formed a Support Group in Great Britain. This Group, in conjunction with the RBST, led to a rapid expansion of the breed into Great Britain. Several more prominent herds were founded by cattle that were imported from N. Ireland, which still remain to this present day.

During the 1980's the foundation herd book was opened to increase numbers of cattle in the herd book...the society encouraged members to breed from suitable cattle e.g. the Red Poll and Red Lincoln. On 1st January 1989 the foundation herd book was closed but the genetic pool was still small which meant that by 2000 the 'inbreeding' had become high within the breed, which led to poorer fertility and poorer vigour. Fertility of bulls were especially affected by the high inbreeding which meant freezing of bull semen for A.I. use was a problem.

As a result of the BSE crisis in UK cattle in 1996, there was a complete restriction in trading of live cattle between EU countries. There were few pedigree Irish Moiled cattle in the ROI at this time and it meant that interested and enthusiastic breeders could not import Irish Moiled cattle, so the Society decided to reopen, for a limited period, the Foundation Herd Book (only for Republic of Ireland cattle) in order to help increase numbers. Inspection and registration of foundation animals followed and the Society made available AI straws for use on these newly recognized females that amounted to 23. Numbers of Irish Moiled cattle increased only marginally in the ROI until the restriction in trading of live cattle between EU countries was lifted in 2005.

In the early 2000's it was considered opening the Foundation Herd Book once again, this time to deal with the high inbreeding problem within the breed but the idea was rejected. DNA parentage proving was introduced to ensure the integrity of the breed's genetics. Also at this time it was considered bringing in another bull from Finland similar to the Hakku story in 1950, but this idea was also rejected. Fortunately, due to new technology, the Society had already introduced a computerized Herd Book system, named 'Grass Roots' which provided the capability, in a sub program, for an in-depth inbreeding calculation of bulls when crossed with females in a herd and with the help of this computer program the

inbreeding problem in the breed has resolved to acceptable levels. The inbreeding is steadily decreasing year on year.

By 2005 the Irish Moiled's were receiving support from both the ROI and N. Ireland governments as a rare native breed which enabled pedigree Irish Moiled cattle to qualify for a European subsidy payment through the REP's scheme in the Republic of Ireland and the Countryside Management scheme in N. Ireland.

By 2010 Irish Moiled cattle had greatly increased in numbers all over the British Isles but the breed was still listed under the RBST list as 'At risk'. With massive increases in the cost of beef production, the general popularity of native breeds were making a comeback which in turn made the Irish Moiled breed even more popular. As a real contender in the commercial farming world the Irish Moiled Cattle Society realized that their aim should not only be to increase numbers of the breed but to also to focus on improving the quality within the breed. A new detailed breed standard was released in 2011. The introduction of a classification scoring system in 2012 was the method chosen to improve the quality within the breed.

2013 saw competitive Irish Moiled cattle classes back at the RUAS Balmoral show. The breed's presence in the show ring had been missed for some 80 years, however the Society whenever given the opportunity always exhibited cattle on a display stand at the show to promote the breed. In 2014, for the first time in living memory, competitive breed classes were held at Tullamore Show, in the Republic of Ireland. Also in 2014 the Society started to collect data such as 'calving ease' and 'colours' of calves bred by certain bulls on birth notification cards

To be continued.....
