

Beef Cattle Factsheet

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Social Structures:

Cattle (commonly referred to as cows) were first domesticated around 10,500 years ago and are descendants of a large bovine called an aurochs, now extinct. Cattle form strong relationships in their respective herds with a strict social hierarchy of dominance. Dominance is usually determined by age and sex, with older males more likely to be dominant. Challenges to dominance are usually dismissed with non-aggressive behaviour such as lunging, but cattle will also engage in mock fights where individuals will test each other's strength by pushing their head up against another's. Subordinate individuals will also lick more dominant animals as a gesture of respect. After a gestation period of 9 months, a calf will stay with its mother until weaning at 8-11 months of age. A mother and calf will choose to graze together in companionship for at least 4-5 years after birth. Cattle are capable of experiencing a broad array of emotions and studies show that cows will suffer from 'low moods' after periods of stress - such as the process of removing a calf from its mother. Cattle are also very gregarious and interested in exploring their natural surroundings.

Natural Behaviours:

Cattle behave in ways that indicate a strong degree of intelligence and awareness; they are able to build and repair relationships between individuals as well as experience a depth and breadth of emotions. Many enjoy exploring their natural environment and will go and investigate any new addition to their territory. Cattle spend the majority of their days grazing on fodder such as grass. Cattle feed by grasping clumps of grass with their rough textured tongues. Instead of teeth on their upper jaws, they have a special hardened gum called a dental pad which helps them keep a grip on the slippery stems of grass. When they're not grazing, cows are chewing the cud and digesting their fibrous food. Did you know that cattle have 4 stomachs specifically for digesting large amounts of grass? Other natural behaviours include vocalising, browsing hedgerows, rolling, play fighting, licking and chasing their herd mates. Each behaviour is linked to the individual cow's position in the social hierarchy with most behaving respectfully towards more dominant members of the herd.

Goodhearted Cattle Care:

At Goodheart we are home to a herd of cattle comprising typical beef and dairy breeds such as Angus, Dexter and Jersey cattle. Our cattle are kept outdoors on grassy pastures for the majority of the year, moving inside to our cosy barn during the colder, wetter Winter months. We visually health check our cattle twice a day, every day as well as undertaking a more thorough health check every 6 weeks.



Goodhearted welcomed a young Hereford X steer called Rufus to the sanctuary in 2020. Rufus was being reared for beef on a farm but fortunately formed a strong friendship with a young man named Ashwin. Ashwin arranged for Rufus to spend the rest of his life at Goodheart in safety.



Goodhearted Cattle Care:

It is clear that our cattle are individuals with unique personalities and relationships within the herd and we are sure to maintain these relationships wherever possible. We give our cattle enrichment in the form of activity balls, grooming sessions and introducing them to new environments whenever we can.

Cattle in UK Agriculture:

Beef cattle in the UK are kept in two farming systems:

- 'Extensive' grazing-based systems
- 'Intensive' indoor systems

In an extensive grazing-based system, cattle are kept outdoors and reared on grass for the majority of the year and usually brought into housing for the Winter months.

In an intensive indoor system, cattle are kept in housing for their entire lives and are entirely dependent on humans to provide for their basic needs such as food, shelter and water on a daily basis.

There are three main types of beef production in the UK:

- Suckled calf production - where calves are reared by their mothers until weaning age at around 6-8 months and then moved on for fattening before slaughter
- Finishing systems - where cattle are fed a specific diet to get them ready for slaughter weight
- Store production - where young cattle are grown quite slowly using home-grown crops

Beef and dairy cattle lead very different lives. Beef cattle are generally slaughtered after around 18 months in Europe, but they can live up to around five years when reared extensively. In the UK it is common for beef cattle to be reared on grass for the majority of their lives, but are routinely brought indoors during the Winter months or into feedlots just for fattening prior to slaughter. Extensive grazing is uncommon across Europe. Instead, many cattle are reared indoors and fattened on a high

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Beef cattle in UK Agriculture continued:

grain diet. They are housed on slatted floors in crowded conditions which increases the risk of disease transmission and cases of aggression. Fighting between individuals can lead to severe injury and lameness if left unmanaged.



In 2020 there were around 900 million cattle farmed around the world, down from around 1 billion cattle in 2014. India has the largest population of cattle (including water buffalo), followed by Brazil and USA which in total represent around 65% of the world's cattle population.

The world's largest producer of beef is based in Brazil, where farming systems have been widely criticized and attributed to the illegal practice of mass deforestation of the Amazon rainforest as well as inhumane living conditions for workers.

Beef production in America is particularly intensive in places such as Texas, where there are almost 100 beef feedlots, each holding an average of around 26,000 cattle. There are around 2.6 million cattle in Texas alone. These intensive systems significantly increase atmospheric levels of faecal dust and the resulting odours, both of which can be attributed to respiratory and cardiovascular disease in humans.

Welfare Concerns:

Animal welfare is based on three main components (below) and when these become compromised, that can have a direct impact on the quality of that animal's life.

- Physical wellbeing
- Mental wellbeing
- Natural living

Even in the UK where beef cattle are typically reared outdoors for most of their lives, cattle are still at risk of suffering. Although most UK beef cattle are housed outdoors for the majority of the time, they are still brought in to housing during winter or may even be reared entirely indoors.

Housing concerns:

- Cattle may be tethered whilst in winter housing
- Poor housing conditions can lead to respiratory problems, particularly in young cattle, due to unclean or lack of bedding.
- Lack of space and poor lighting
- Fully slatted floors (allowing waste to drop through) can be uncomfortable for cattle.

Diet:

According to RSPCA concerns, some beef cattle may not have access to high fibre foods which may result in metabolic disease.

Selective breeding:

Some beef breeds are now being selectively bred to be extremely muscular. This can lead to complications during breeding due to very large calves and the mother's narrow birth canal; many calves may have to be birthed via caesarean.



At Goodheart, we are home to a number of different beef cattle breeds including Hereford crosses, Angus crosses, Dexters, and one Blonde d'Aquitaine (left) named Blondie. Traditional beef breeds are much stockier than traditional dairy breeds, with a distinctive muscular appearance.



In Austria (2018), around 80% of all dairy cows were tethered, severely restricting their movement.

The limousin breed is extremely muscular, which may cause breeding and birthing issues



Calves may be disbudded (horns removed) without any pain relief. This causes pain and distress to the calf.

Additional concerns:

- Cows that are kept out for the winter months may not be checked regularly enough to catch health concerns in the early stages
- Sometimes pain relief is not provided during surgical procedures
- Electric cattle prods are still permitted to be used, indicating poor management and housing systems in place.

What can you do to help?

If you are concerned by anything that you have read in this factsheet, you may be wondering what you can do to help. The only way that you can be sure that you are not contributing to the exploitation of cattle in agriculture is by cutting out all animal products from your lifestyle. You can also encourage farmers to improve their standards of animal welfare by never purchasing intensively farmed meat, especially from other countries where the animals may have been subjected to long distance transportation and varying standards of care.



Check out our sources:



- [1] <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/cows/#:~:text=Beef%20cattle%20are%20often%20reared,diet%20across%20most%20of%20Europe>
- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2020/mar/07/more-cows-than-people-americas-beef-capital-of-the-world-in-pictures>
- [3] <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/beef/keyissues>
- [4] <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/08/its-medieval-why-some-cows-are-still-living-most-of-their-lives-tied-up>
- [5] <https://science.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494935/9042554/RSPCA+welfare+Beef+Cattle+February+2020.pdf/e29acbd-cf39f-2852-831b-48b6f296d4b6?t=1583410390866>