



## Ancient Cattle of Wales: a Brief History

Coloured cattle have always been a feature of cattle in Wales. Welsh legend, medieval poetry, market records and testamentary documents from as far back as the 12<sup>th</sup> century refer to an assortment of colour varieties – white, blue, red, brindled, pied and belted – as well as the obligatory black.

Medieval Welsh poetry provides the primary source of evidence, with many references to cattle and their variety of colours. The following 12<sup>th</sup> century verse is quoted by Sir John Rhys in his 'Celtic Folklore: Welsh and Manx' of 1901.

Mu wlfrech, moelfrech, Mu olfrech, gwynfrech, Pedair cae tonn-frech, Yr hen wynebwen, A'r las Geingen, Gyda'r tarw gwyn O lys y Brenin, A'r llo du bach, Sydd ar y bach, Dere dithe, yn iach adre!	Brindled cow, bold freckled, Spotted cow, white speckled; Ye four field sward mottled. The old white-faced, And the grey Geingen With the white bull From the court of the King, And thou little black calf, Suspended on the hook, Come thou also, whole again, home.
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Y pedwar eidion glas, Sydd ar y ma's, Deuweh chwithe Yn iach adre!	Ye four gray oxen, That are on the field, Come you also Whole and well home!
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The wills of the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century farmers and yeoman, archived at the National Library of Wales, also testify to the wide range of colour varieties found within Welsh cattle<sup>1</sup>. As do market records of the same period. Cattle sold at Eglwyswrrw and Newport (Pemsb.) cattle fairs between 1599-1603 register 12 different colour varieties<sup>2</sup>.

These colour varieties are also alluded to in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century folk verse.

Dau ych oedd Silc a Sowin, Un yn goch a'r llall yn felyn. Pan yn aredig yn eu chwys Fe dorrant gwys i'r blewyn.	<i>(Silk and Sowin are two fine oxen, One is red, the other yellow. When in the yoke, a lather of sweat, They plough a dead straight furrow).</i>
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<sup>1</sup> R. J. Collyer, 'Some Welsh Breeds of Cattle in the Nineteenth Century', The Agricultural History Review, (1974).

<sup>2</sup> T. Elias, 'Welsh Farm Animals 1: Cattle', Llanrwst, (2000).

As was the case elsewhere, particular regions in Wales tended to favour particular traits and colours – blue-faced cattle in Montgomeryshire, dun cattle in Lleyn, line-backs in Glamorganshire and so on. Welsh Whites were particularly prized by the ruling classes during the early medieval period. The history of the Dinefwr herd of White Parks/Welsh Whites testify to their royal patronage.<sup>3</sup>

The illustrious Charles Darwin, no less, mentions Welsh Whites in his essay '*The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*' of 1868. Among various other references to Welsh cattle 'breeds' he cites:

In Wales, during the tenth century, some of the cattle are described as being white with red ears. Four hundred cattle thus coloured were sent to King John; and an early record speaks of a hundred cattle with red ears having been demanded as a compensation for some offence, but, if the cattle were of a dark or black colour, 150 were to be presented.

Charles Darwin

With the increased interest in breed development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century agricultural commentators such as W. Youatt describe in detail the plurality of colouration within the Welsh cattle herd.<sup>4</sup> R. J. Collyer's 1974 essay, '*Some Welsh Breeds of Cattle in the Nineteenth Century*' is also a valuable source<sup>5</sup>; as is Twm Elias' excellent '*Welsh Farm Animals 1: Cattle*' (2000).

It seems, however, from these sources, that black was the prevalent colouration in cattle found in Pembrokeshire and in the north western counties of Caernarvonshire and Anglesey. In 1904 these strains of predominantly black cattle were united under the auspices of the Welsh Black Cattle Society and the selective breeding of purely black cattle was promoted.

The establishment of the WBCS left cattle of other colouration in an unofficial backwater. This was exasperated by the Bull Licensing laws of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the 'official' breeds were further promoted in the name of improved quality.

However, some white and belted bulls were kept in isolated regions – notably in Meirionethshire. And it is their progeny, along with coloured 'throwbacks' from within Welsh black herds that has kept coloured Welsh cattle alive and well over the last century.

The value of these coloured cattle to Wales' agricultural and national heritage was identified by Mr Tim Ash and others in the 1970s. Fearful for their demise a small band of enthusiasts decided that action must be taken and in 1981 the Ancient Cattle of Wales society was formed and a herd book established.

The society registers six colour variations of the traditional Welsh type:

- |                |             |
|----------------|-------------|
| - White        | - Belted    |
| - Red          | - Blue      |
| - Smokey/mouse | - Line-back |

Over the intervening years since 1981 interest and numbers – of members and cattle – have steadily increased. Over 30 years on we are, hopefully, witnessing the advent of the ACW renaissance, to which RBST registration would be a boon.

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<sup>3</sup> Recent history of mixed White Park ancestry excepted.

<sup>4</sup> W. Youatt; 'Cattle, their breeds, management and disease', (1834).

<sup>5</sup> R. J. Collyer, *ibid.* (1974).