

Autumn 2021

Beef Farmer

Incorporating Cattle Breeder

The premier magazine for the UK beef industry

**British
Cattle
Breeders
conference**

Preview
inside



They do say travel broadens the mind...



By Ian Duncan

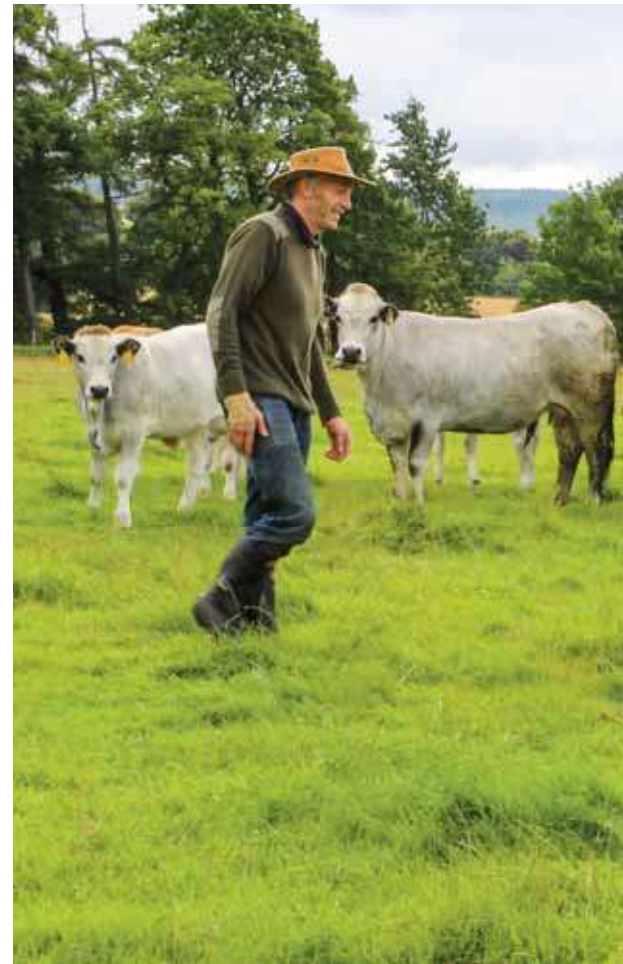
“As the beef industry adapts to processors’ requests for lighter carcasses and climate change requirements demanding lower inputs, Gascons will become more common.

Travel exposes the traveller to new experiences, different languages, food, wine and cultures. From a farming perspective it introduces you to new methods and breeds. While attending the 2019 Sommet de l’Elevage in Clermont Ferrand I first encountered the Gasconne des Pyrénées breed. (better known to us as Gascons).

The Gascons are considered one of the rustic French breeds, those being Aubrac, Gasconne des Pyrénées and Salers. (Salers of Cantal featured in *Beef Farmer* issue Winter 2020-21).

The Gascons are a rustic breed originating from the French side of the Pyrenees mountains. They are of moderate frame size with cows standing circa 1.35 meters (4 feet 4 inches if you prefer) at the withers and weighing 600 to 700 kg. Bulls typically 900 to 1,000kg. Always grey in colour, black hooves and muzzle with bulls of dark colouring over the shoulders and head. Birth weights are between 35 to 40kg. Calves are born light tan changing in colour to grey as they reach 4 to 5 months of age.

They are tolerant to wide fluctuations in temperature typical of the Pyrenees, spending the summer months in the high mountain valleys or “Cirques” often reaching 30°C during the day to below zero at night and are uniquely suited to high altitude and exten-



sive systems but also perform well in intensive feeding systems common in the UK.

Gascons at Sommet 2019

The Gascon show and presentation at the 2019 Sommet de l’Elevage is available at the YouTube link below: www.weloveagri.fr/watch?v=ChIaYnEK

The Pyrenees is a range of mountains





Regular readers of *Beef Farmer* and *Cattle Breeder* will recognise Ian Duncan as a regular contributor to these publications. His visit to the excellent Sommet de l'Élevage held annually in Clermont-Ferrand, France resulted in his acquisition of Gascon cattle.

This issue takes a look at the Gascon breed and we will continue our focus on both indigenous and continental breeds in future issues.

forming the natural and official boundary between France and Spain, comprising 129 distinct mountain summits over 3,000 metres and stretches from the Atlantic in the west to the Mediterranean in the east.

The Pyrenean landscape includes high rugged mountain peaks dropping in height to the more fertile land around the main cities of Toulouse, Lourdes and Pau to the north and Perpignan to the east on the

Mediterranean coast.

Groupe Gasconne Villeneuve-du-Paréage and Test Centre

The Gascons have their own farm and test centre located at Villeneuve-du-Paréage (just south of Toulouse). Each October the centre takes in circa 80 weaned bull calves and comprehensively records their age, weight and their physical dimensions,





height, body length, hip width, chest circumference. During the winter they are performance recorded and those passing the rigorous selection criteria are presented for sale the following March. Selecting Bull calves for the Test Centre: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuuebqibcrQ

Not all bulls pass the rigorous selection criteria demanded of Groupe Gasconne.

It's Online Man!

From the 2020/21 entry 77 bulls arrived at the centre and 45 bulls were presented for sale. Including 16 heifers served by AI to top ranked Gascon bulls.

The sale was conducted online with individual videos for each bull loose in a show ring managed by Group Gascon staff. From these videos it was easy to get a feel of the animal's size, shape and temperament. All bulls are presented with their weights for age and their physical measurements shown on a circular clockface chart which I consider easier to read and a more representative presentation of the animal's characteristics than bar chart EBVs. Points above the circle

represent physical measurements above the breed average, conversely points below the circle show those points below the breed average.

Some may remember Victor Kiam, a dynamic American entrepreneur who liked a brand of electric shaver he received as a gift..."I liked it so much: I bought the Company" ... well the author liked the Gascons so much he bought a young bull named Rosignol and two in calf heifers (AI'd to top ranked bull Passey) from Group Gascon – I will keep readers of this magazine posted as to how the story unfolds – for pedigree breeding and crossing with Black Highland cows.

From the 2021 Group Gascon sale, two bulls and two heifers were destined for Scotland.

Gascons strong presence in Northeast Scotland ...

During research into my Gascon purchases I found that the breed, although currently small numerically in the UK, (600 registered cows in the UK, 18000 cows in France) has already a significant following in the north-

“Typical growth rates comparable to the other Continental breeds reaching 360 to 400 kg carcass in 20 months at U & R Grade.





east of Scotland with two major herds. The Gascons found to be suited to the cooler wet climate often found in northern latitudes ... the Scottish weather!

Gascon Pure breeding ... Ordhill Farm, Elgin (c/o Mr Willie Hendry) specialises in hi-health pedigree breeding with the emphasis on breeding heifers. The males are mostly castrated and finished on farm.

Trend for lighter carcasses.

Typical growth rates comparable to the other Continental breeds reaching 360 to 400 kg carcass in 20 months at U & R Grade.¹ The medium frame size suits finished animals being within the current carcass requirements of 380 to 400 kg required by many processors.

In France, males are frequently left entire and exported to Italy. A higher price is achieved via the famed "Label Rouge" mark for bullocks. The finished castrated males achieve a premium price and supply restaurant demand from Paris to Toulouse.

Double muscling in the breed.



The Myostatin (Mh) gene responsible for double muscling is managed to maintain the traditional characteristics of the breed for easy calving. However, as a beef breed Myostatin is utilised for commercial qualities in the breed. Detailed information at: <http://www.gascon.org.uk/technical-info>

Commercial Beef ... Rait Castle Farm, Nairn (c/o Mr James Beattie)

James Beattie, uses the Gascon cow as a

1. Carcass information from Ordhill Farm, Elgin (c/o Mr Willie Hendry)

Rosignol's Measurement Chart

A tall, long and narrow bull as shown by his chart ... easy calving I hope?

Bred in Mosset, Occitanie, Pyrénées-Orientales, France

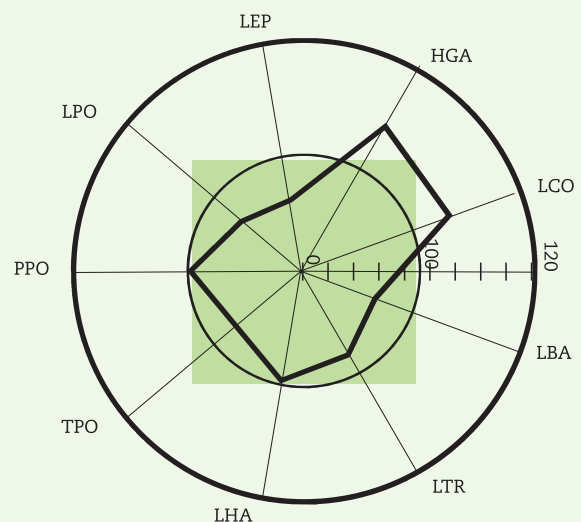
DOB 8 November 2019

Birth weight 37kg

210 days weight 332kg

400 days weight 478kg

Myostatin Test: +/- (no Myostatin gene present)



HGA Height withers
LBA Basin length
LCO Body Length
LEP Shoulder Width

LHA Hip Width
LPO Chest width
LTR Width Trochanters
PPO Chest Depth

TPO Chest Circumference



“A rustic breed, cows frequently outwintered, medium frame size and temperature tolerant with similar growth rates to the other better known French breeds.

mid-sized out wintered easy calving cow for commercial breeding with Charolais and Limousin bulls. Cows calve in the autumn and remain outside all year round and are brought inside two weeks before due date, once calved are then returned outside. A Gascon bull is used to produce female replacements.

Kelpie Dogs

The Beattie's are very international and are also renowned breeders of working Kelpie herding dogs that originate from Australia. The Kelpie's original stock came from the far north, Sutherland. When the Sutherland shepherds moved to Australia in the 1800s, they took their dogs with them which interbred with local herding dogs, the result was the Kelpie.

The Kelpie is also a mythical creature in Scottish folklore that lures those crossing

rivers to their deaths. The Australian Kelpie dog is a strong mid-sized robust herding dog ideally suited to working cattle...ask James, he will tell you all about them!

Sports Stars ...

Gascon cattle have a strong regional affiliation, here paraded before a game at the home of top rugby team Toulouse in the south of France where Gascon beef is served to players, supporters, and guests. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCH6UEvmjNs>

A visit to Sommet de l'Élevage always presents new farming opportunities

My visit to the Sommet in 2019, initially a visit to see something different and have a busman's holiday in France, introduced me to the Gascon breed.

The Gascons' attributes lend themselves to the northern climate. A rustic breed, cows frequently outwintered, medium frame size and temperature tolerant with similar growth rates to the other better known French breeds. They are working successfully for both Ordhill and Rait Castle farm. The Gascons can produce a 400 kg carcass within two years that meets current abattoir requirements for lighter carcasses.

As the beef industry adapts to processors requests for lighter carcasses and climate change requirements demanding lower inputs, Gascons will become more common. ■



A special note of thanks to Pauline Milton, Gascon UK Breed Secretary and breeders James Beattie and Willie Hendry for their help in compiling this article.