The Island of Jersey is renowned all over the world for its prized breed of cow, nurtured and protected for hundreds of years to produce the beautiful and high-yield beast of today. Jersey Heritage Trust Assistant Curator of Social History Jason Castledine explains what makes the Jersey so special.
WHILE THE DAYS OF agriculture as the dominant force in the economy may have receded, the bovine face of Jersey has continued to form part of the Island’s cultural image. Although the number of dairy farms may have considerably diminished in recent years there are still a number of prominent rural families involved in the industry.

In one sense while some smaller traditional mixed farms with a handful of cattle still do exist, many have evolved into larger units with a more specialised focus in other areas. This has led to a growth in the size of many herds, and while some farmers have diversified it has often been into areas that can work in tandem with keeping cattle.

Although the pastoral scene of a milkmaid seated on a stool, milking a cow by hand into a distinctive Jersey milk can, might be very much a romantic memory from the past, the strong traditions of the Island’s heritage have ensured the continued prominence of the Jersey cow in Jersey’s cultural heritage. From the endearing features of a newborn calf right through to modern methods and technology, it is useful first to turn the clock back, to see how the Jersey and those involved with it over the years arrived at the animal we have today.

Who the original ancestors of the Jersey cow were has been the cause of much speculation. It is generally thought that the domestic animal in existence today developed from the *Bos Primigenius*, or *Auroch*. Initially, early man would have followed the migrating herds during the search for pasture, until the ideas of permanent settlements and animal husbandry came into existence around 6000BC. However, in these early stages the concept of milking had not been thought out and cows were very much regarded only as a source of meat.

The States made one of the first important steps towards the development of the Jersey breed during the 18th century as a response to the dropping prices resulting from the flooding of the cattle market. This was occurring principally because French farmers used Jersey as a stopover point for transporting cattle to England, as this enabled them to avoid taxes on imports. The response of the States came in the form of an Act banning the importation of live cattle into the Island. This law still exists today and is one of the main reasons behind the purity of the Jersey breed.

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The origins of the breed
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The purity of the breed
At the time the ban was introduced, however, the cows in the Island were a mixed range of colours and were not regarded highly by many in the business. The agricultural community’s strong desire to change this situation led to the founding of the Royal Jersey Agricultural and Horticultural Society in 1833. This was subsequently followed by the establishment, in 1866, of the Herd Book as a means of registering all cattle born in the Island. The Herd Book enabled breeders not only to maintain to the purity of the breed, but also to monitor the progress of their beasts and develop herds from the most successful specimens.

For more than 100 years experts would travel around examining animals and awarding cards for commended and highly commended cows. Coupled with this, the Parish and Island Cattle Shows, as well as providing a market window to attract buyers, also enabled farmers to compare their animals and assess good examples from which to breed.

A further stage of the development came as a result of the decline in live exports due to increased shipping costs. To combat this the Jersey Artificial Insemination Centre was established in 1968. This allowed overseas breeders to develop their own herds from known local pedigrees using exported bull semen, and would soon replace exports of live cattle altogether. On a local front it meant that local farmers could make use of known pedigrees to continue to develop their herds in order to increase milk yields, etc.
From milk can to computer

In the past decade the character of the dairy business has changed considerably because of the marked decline in the number of families remaining in dairy farming and the advances made in agricultural technology. This has resulted in herds becoming larger to remain economically viable and breeding programmes focused on producing higher-yielding cows.

The improvements made in technology have enabled many farmers to increase the efficiency of their milking procedures with less reliance on manual labour for milking. To appreciate this transformation it is perhaps worth looking back several decades to the early days of milking by hand.

Changes in this respect have come relatively recently, and there are many older farmers who can still remember hand-milking and the early pre-computerised milking machines. Nonetheless, the aforementioned romanticised image of the milkmaid milking a cow into one of the traditional Jersey milk cans was never common practice. Prior to the advent of computerised technology and milking parlours, farmers would still have milked their herds in the cowsheds before turning the cattle out to graze, and would have performed the second milking back in the sheds in the evening.

The JMMB

A major change for the dairy industry occurred in 1954, when the States facilitated the establishment of the Jersey Milk Marketing Board. This was a farmer’s co-operative, which immediately created its own centralised dairy responsible for collection, control of quality, production and distribution, as well as sales and marketing of all the milk produced in the Island.

Prior to this the Island was served throughout the early 20th century by as many as 30 small private dairies, which between them collected the milk from each of the farms. In the past herds were obviously much smaller, with many farmers keeping only enough cows to provide for the family. The surplus was sold to neighbours, who would often arrive at the farm with their milk jugs.

At the same time, by-products of milk such as butter, were also produced on the farm. For example, the full-fat milk, fresh from the cow, would be poured into the butter churn, and the handle for churning the milk turned continuously until it turned into butter. Depending on the milk and room temperatures, this could take several hours and would often become a social occasion, with people passing the churn round as they chatted.

Farms, like other businesses, have kept up to date with computer technology. In the dairy industry this has led to computerised milking parlours, where each individual cow can be registered as it enters the parlour, and each individual’s feed and milk yields are adjusted accordingly.

This process works through a system whereby each cow wears a transponder around its neck in the form of a collar with a microchip that emits a signal picked up by a receiver on the wall of each stall. Current developments have led to some herds now having the chip inserted into a tag in the ear and the collars being dispensed with.

The herdsman will then attach a milking machine to the udder of the cow, and milking begins. If the cow fails to reach its normal quota an alarm will sound alerting the herdsman to a potential problem with the cow. At the same time the computerised parlour will ensure that each cow receives the required nutrients in its feeding trough. The computer will also store complete profiles of the pedigree and veterinary history of each cow, which assists in the planning of health and breeding programmes.

With the number of people involved in agriculture continually declining, and the increased demands for large herds to cope with the required production levels, the introduction of technology has in many cases enabled the industry to...
remain economically viable with smaller staff levels.

**The world stage**

Adaptability to a wide range of temperatures and conditions has meant that the Jersey can be found all over the world. It is believed that a few Jerseys arrived in America as “ships’ cows” in the 17th century, but regular exports across the Atlantic began in the 1850s, mainly to the eastern part of the United States and Canada. Some would have died en route during rough passages that could take up to six weeks.

There were Jersey herds in at least 13 states in the east and midwest before the late 1860s and the country was the main importer in the early part of the 20th century, with the Jersey being regarded as an inspiration for the developing American dairy industry. With the exports to America flourishing in 1882, the record price at this time was smashed when Mr T S Cooper paid £1,000 for a cow by the name of Khedive’s Primrose.

As the name of breed became increasingly recognised, it was introduced into New Zealand in 1862, Australia in the 1880s/90s and South Africa in 1883. Central and South American countries, including Brazil, also began importing Jerseys around the same time.

In Europe, Denmark imported more than 5,000 head between 1896 and 1909 as it established the famous national Jersey herd on which it relies heavily for its butter production for world markets - as does Australia and New Zealand. In the present day the Jersey has also become a popular breed in countries such as India and Kenya, and in many instances has been bred with indigenous cattle to produce a cross better suited for the environment.

During the Occupation the Jersey cattle population diminished due to the German’s demand for beef. Farmers dreamt up ingenious schemes to ensure that the less-favoured animals went to meet the Germans’ orders. After the Liberation, restrictions on exports were imposed in order to rebuild the herd. Consequently, 1948 became a prime year for export, with 2,041 animals leaving the Island, while 248 bulls and 2,120 heifers were registered. It was evident that, as the Jersey breed spread around the world, an organisation was needed to bring all interested parties together. So in 1951 the World Jersey Cattle Bureau was established. The Bureau set out to promote the welfare and safeguard the interests of the Jersey breed throughout the world, in addition to developing its full potential.

The Jersey cow is, without doubt, one of the supreme dairy cows, as she is docile, adaptable to extreme environments, resistant to disease, able efficiently to convert forage into a high yield of superior milk and to calve easily, even when crossed with the heavy beef breeds.

**What does the future hold?**

“I think it is a very bright future for the Jersey Cow globally” (Derrick Frigot, President of the RJA & HIS, 2005). On a world scale the Jersey breed has proved to be one of the most popular and travelled in this modern era. In the present day, while the Island no longer exports live cattle, the worldwide...
The population of the Jersey cow continues to increase, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where many farmers breed Jerseys with local breeds in order to improve butterfat content and milk production. Even those countries with long-established populations of the breed going back to the peak years of live cattle exports continue to strengthen their Jersey cattle populations. During an interview in 2005, RJA & HS president Derrick Frigot commented on one of the reasons why the Jersey breed continues to do so well in America. He said: “The average American eats far more cheese than they ever did and of course Jerseys make wonderful cheese, especially for fast cheeses, soft cheeses and less-mature cheeses. And the Jersey’s milk is very popular.”

Within the Island, the demands of the commercial marketplace and the disappearance of live exports have left many farmers facing a number of key areas of debate as to which direction the industry should move in order to keep pace with the rest of the world. One of the most hotly debated issues is whether to allow the importation of bull semen as a means of increasing the gene pool, as some feel that the purity and pedigree of the breed has resulted from the very fact that the Island has been closed to external imports.

Certainly these issues must be considered by those connected with this famous bovine ambassador of Jersey. However, one thing that is certain is that the breed continues to hold a major international presence in the dairy farming world, whilst also providing a recurrent image on numerous Island products.

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Key dates relating to the Jersey breed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>The States of Jersey introduce a ban on live cattle imports into the Island.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>The Royal Jersey Agricultural and Horticultural Society is founded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>During this decade regular cattle exports to America begin.</td>
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<td>1866</td>
<td>The Jersey Herd Book is established, providing a way of regularising the breed.</td>
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<td>1919</td>
<td>The bull ‘Sybil’s Gamboge’ is sold for a world record $65,000 and paraded down New York’s Wall Street.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>The World Jersey Cattle Bureau is founded.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>The Jersey Milk Marketing Board, the farmer’s co-operative is created by an Act passed by the States of Jersey.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>The Jersey Milk Marketing Board moves from Don Street to Five Oaks in St Saviour.</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>The Artificial Insemination Centre is set up.</td>
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<td>1974</td>
<td>An outbreak of foot and mouth occurs. Another was to follow in 1981.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>It is estimated that there are 5 to 6 million pure-breed Jersey cows in the world.</td>
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Interesting facts about cows

- Cows have the ability to detect odours as far away as 5 miles.
- On average a cow will eat 95lbs of feed and drink 30 gallons of water.
- Cows will often stand up and lie down an average of 14 times a day.
- The heartbeat of a cow is between 60 and 70 beats a minute.
- A Jersey cow weighs between 700 and 1,000lbs.
- Cows regurgitate their food and chew it again (known as chewing the cud) to help digestion. A cow will spend up to 8 hours a day eating.
- There are 207 bones in a cow’s body.
- Dairy cows can produce 125lbs of saliva a day.
- Twelve or more cows are called a ‘flink’.
- It is possible to lead a cow up the stairs, but not down them because their knees are not able to bend properly.

One of the three-month-old calves at Hamptonne during 2005.