

Salers shine in Tasmanian herd

At a glance

- ◆ Downham family, Ouse, Tasmania
- ◆ Infusing Saler genetics into Poll Hereford herd
- ◆ Steers consistently top annual Bothwell weaner sale



By MURRAY ARNEL

ALTHOUGH he says he appreciates other breeds, Tasmanian beef producer Greg Downham has had a love of red-and-white cattle ever since inheriting a mob of Herefords from his father about 40 years ago.

Since then, the Ouse producer has aimed to improve the quality of his cattle while retaining a mainly red-and-white herd.

Mr Downham and his wife Tanya have tried a number of breed combinations with varied amounts of success, but since introducing a Salers bull in 1993 they think they've found what they'd been looking for.

Mr Downham said although the money side was important to their overall business success, they had bred their cattle for personal satisfaction to see what they could achieve.

And since introducing the Salers, they have come to consider them the most compatible with the Poll Hereford, helping them to produce the sort of cattle they are trying to breed.

The Downhams said Salers gave them a better, meatier frame, better feet and udders, ease of calving, high-quality milk and a good, thick, well-nourished dark skin.

After the first-cross, the Poll Hereford-type females are mated to the Salers bull, while Salers-type crosses are joined to Poll Hereford bulls.

Purebred bulls are always used.

While Mr Downham admitted he was "not much on weights", he said the cross had added an extra 40-50 kilograms a head to his annual calf drop, with this year's best pen at the annual Bothwell sale in April tipping the scales at 459kg liveweight.

While he had never worried much about frame score of his breeders, in recent years he had taken more notice selecting replacement bulls with a score mostly of seven or better.

Sourcing suitable Poll Hereford bulls hasn't been a problem, with bulls bought from different



■ Perennial market-toppers at the annual Bothwell, Tasmania, weaner sale are the noted Salers-Poll Hereford steers, sold on account Glenvale. Topping the market again in April, Glenvale's 11-month-old steers, weighing 459 kilograms, sold for \$1130 a head. Representing Glenvale at Bothwell were Tanya, Greg, James and Sarah Downham, Ouse, Tasmania.

■ **RIGHT:** The Downham family's Salers-Poll Hereford steers have opened the Bothwell weaner sale for the past eight years.



Tasmanian studs and at times from the Wodonga Hereford national show and sale.

However, obtaining a quality Salers bull hasn't been quite as easy, with the Downhams' main success gained at Malcolm Randall's Murrabah Salers, Fish Creek and Finley, NSW.

Mr Downham said using Salers had added to the longevity of his breeding females, with a number of cows still calving at up to 15 years of age.

Cows are planned to start calving from the start of May each year, which makes each drop of calves about nine to 11 months old when sold at Bothwell – defying the assumption of some people who see the well-grown calves at Bothwell and argue that the annual draft must be older than that.

Mr Downham said while most cattle breeders might not agree, they preferred to leave their bulls with

their cows for a longer mating period.

"Some will say it can mess with a herd's fertility but the greater spread of their calving period tends to suit both us as a family and our property as well," he said.

With the larger frame size of the herd and the greater growth rates of the Salers-Poll Hereford calves, Mr Downham said the cattle hadn't required any supplementary feeding other than the normal amount, which was dispensed during a "tight pinch".

While the Downhams' choice of breeds is a personal thing, the family is happy with the positive feedback they have gained from the different buyers of their weaners over the years.

Several prominent finishers from Tasmania's north-west are repeat buyers and a few mainlanders have claimed the odd pen, including domestic processor Hardwick dur-

ing one of the better finishing seasons.

The Downhams are, of course, happy with their recent sale result, again topping the Bothwell sale this year as they had done for the past decade.

And, when benchmarked against other major weaner sales held each year both in Tasmania and on the mainland, they have come out somewhere near the top of the tree.

This is demonstrated by their best price this year of \$1130 a head for a yard of 15 sold at Bothwell.

Their original property, Glenvale, at Ouse, north-west of Hobart, started with a returned soldier settlement block of 1335 hectares; they have now expanded to 1620ha.

The property is undulating to

hilly, with breeding country receiving about 825 millimetres of rain on average each year.

Originally a wool and beef property running about 300 breeding cows plus replacements, it also supports a 5000-head self-replacing Merino flock.

Stock numbers have varied in the past 10 years due to drought.

And because of improved lamb prices, wether numbers have been cut and extra ewes joined for prime lambs.

Silage is made for winter feeding. In 2002, the Downhams bought a 300ha Derwent Valley property, Sunbury, at Bushy Park where they now live.

Stock are run across both farms, with Sunbury being principally a relief block and used mainly to produce their silage needs.