

Rare Breeds



There are many breeds of livestock in Britain. Breeds become rare, either because their characteristics do not suit present-day demands or because their qualities have not yet been realised. When a breed population falls to about 1,000 animals, it is considered rare and endangered by the Trust.



Portland

Why Save Rare Breeds?

Less than a century ago, the British countryside was home to a fascinating variety of interesting breeds of cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, horses and poultry. Animals such as White Park and Beef Shorthorn cattle, Leicester Longwool and Norfolk Horn sheep, Suffolk and Clydesdale horses, Large Black pigs and Bagot goats all helped shape the countryside around us. Many of them have played an important role in the history of the nation and are an important part of our heritage. These breeds are supported by the Trust and have been saved from extinction but others, like the Lincolnshire Curly Coat pig, have not been so lucky.

The Lincolnshire Curly Coat pig



Although rare breeds exist in relatively small populations, they can make a valuable contribution, both to the livestock industry and to quality of life. Some have distinctive characteristics, which have value in protecting the environment, and others have qualities, which make them well suited to less intensive farming methods. Even those, which have no apparent value at present, may well possess characteristics that will be important in the future and they need to be conserved as an insurance against changing circumstances.

Development of Breeds

Livestock farming in Britain is dominated at present by a few breeds. More than 90% of dairy cows are black-and-white Holstein. Suffolk and Texel breeds compete for the sheep flock, and intensive piggeries are filled mainly with Large White and Landrace pigs or their progeny. There are many other breeds that play a minor role, but most of them have changed significantly in recent years. The once popular Hereford cattle have become long-legged, Jacob sheep are bigger and heavier and Welsh pigs are longer and leaner. This is the result of artificial selection or of crossing with imported animals.



There are also an equally large number of rare breeds, which are native to the UK. They have adapted to our climate and are efficient and thrifty. The rarest are Vaynol and Irish Moiled cattle, Castlemilk Moorit and Boreray sheep, Cleveland Bay horse and Eriskay pony and Tamworth and British Lop pigs. Some rare breeds have ancient origins. Soay sheep, White Park cattle, Exmoor ponies and Dorking poultry were all found in Britain in pre-Roman times. New, imported breeds selected for specialist markets superseded these animals.

Hybrid pigs and poultry are bred for intensive systems of production; British Milkshew and Sports Horses achieve remarkably high levels of performance, and Belgian Blue cattle and Beltex sheep possess dysfunctional muscle hypertrophy (double-muscling).

Currently, the market is reacting to pressures stimulated by animal welfare and environmental concerns, and intensive systems of management and extreme levels of production are coming under critical scrutiny. There is a move towards natural systems and more traditional standards of production. Animals of traditional native breeds are likely to benefit from this change. They may yield less or grow more slowly but their products are of higher quality, and they are efficient producers in non-intensive systems. Each breed has its own niche in the market, but in a world of finite resources sustainability must be based on biodiversity where each breed is used within systems to which it is best adapted.

Rare Breeds Survival Trust

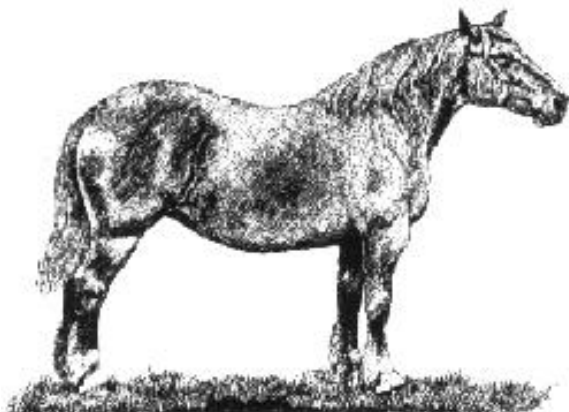
In 1968, the Royal Agricultural Society of England and the Zoological Society of London formed a working party to save endangered breeds of livestock, and in 1973 this became the Rare Breeds Survival Trust.

The Trust relies entirely on membership subscriptions and donations to undertake essential conservation work; no government aid is available. There are no laws in Britain to protect rare breeds of farm livestock and the Trust stands alone in its dedication to conserving our living agricultural heritage.



British Saddleback

Between 1900 and 1973 more than 20 breeds of British farm animals became extinct – their genetic diversity lost forever. The success rate achieved by the Trust is reflected in the fact that since its formation not one rare breed has become extinct. More than 70 rare breeds of cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, poultry and equines are currently supported by the RBST. The numbers of breeding animals for any one of these species can range from only 50 to 3,000.



Suffolk

For further information about the RBST, including a list of approved farms to visit, visit the website, www.rbst.org.uk or contact:

**Rare Breeds Survival Trust,
National Agricultural Centre,
Stoneleigh Park,
Warwickshire CV8 2LG**

Tel: 024 7669 6551

Fax: 024 7669 6706

E-mail: enquiries@rbst.org.uk

Website: www.rbst.org.uk