



► Ken Howie serves Aberdeen-Angus beef in his restaurant at Deeside Activity Park.

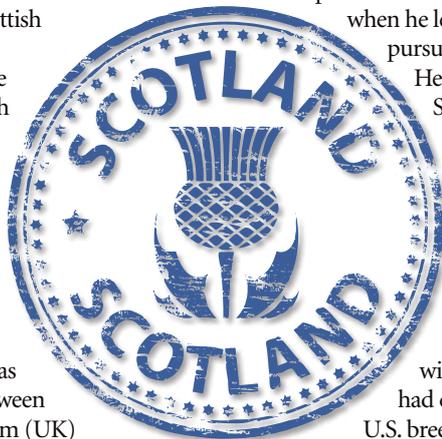
ANGUS PRODUCTION WITH A TWIST OF SCOTCH

Opportunities exist for growth and collaboration for U.S., Scottish breeders.

Story & photos by **Barb Baylor Anderson**, field editor

Pride in the Aberdeen-Angus breed is woven into the tartan cloth of northeast Scotland; from a life-size bronze sculpture of an Angus bull that commemorates the breed's beginnings in the 1820s, to a farm sign marking the breed's founding herd in Aberdeenshire. While U.S. breeders in the 21st century may not take the same production paths as Scottish breeders, despite their common roots, there are opportunities for growth and collaboration.

"Angus is now an international breed as never before, with breeders happy to source the best genetics wherever they can find them. A cross-fertilization of ideas through closer links between U.S. and United Kingdom (UK)



breeders would be beneficial to both," says Eddie Gillanders, who served as editor of the *Aberdeen-Angus Review* — the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society's official journal — for 42 years. He started in the position in 1966.

Gillanders' first job after leaving school was in the Society's herd book department. He was press officer and assistant secretary when he left in the early 1970s to pursue a career in journalism.

He continued to edit the Society's magazine on a freelance basis, and had regular contact with the American Angus Association's Keith Evans, Lloyd Miller, Dick Spader and John Crouch.

"In my early days with the Society, we had close contact with U.S. breeders. We enjoyed a

thriving trade in Aberdeen-Angus bulls to buyers such as Lee and Lester Leachman from Ankony Angus. Clint Thomson from Illinois attended the Perth bull sales on a regular basis. I was there in 1963 when the bull, Lindertis

Evulse, was sold to Black Watch Farms, New York, for 60,000 guineas (around \$2 million in today's U.S. dollars), which is still a record for an Angus bull in the UK," Gillanders says. "Sadly, he was infertile. That proved a watershed in our business with the U.S., as performance took over from the showing as criteria for selection."

While he says commercial demand dictates



Eddie Gillanders

the type of Angus produced in each country today, he sees areas of mutual interest — performance records, DNA and genomics, and promotion.

Gillanders was involved in the UK's pilot performance-recording scheme at the same time the American Angus Association launched Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®) and bull performance testing.

“British breeders have been slower to adopt technologies,” he says. “It is only since we took up the BreedPlan recording system from Australia a few years ago they have started paying proper attention to estimated breeding values (EBVs), particularly in relation to maternal traits.”

Technologies are gaining support. For example, the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society has developed a program to gather DNA samples on every pedigreed animal. The goal is to create a database of parentage, track genetics and recessive genes, and provide a way for retailers to obtain proof of Angus heritage. The Society plans to DNA-swab carcasses at points of slaughter.

As in the United States, expansion has been on the back of the success of the Society's branded beef scheme, which has authenticated Aberdeen-Angus beef. All the major supermarkets in the UK have come on board, such as Marks and Spencer, Costco, Waitrose, Sainsbury's, the Co-op and Tesco, says Gillanders. DNA-swabbing can confirm if a premium can be paid for Angus genetics in the carcass and authenticate pedigrees in the herd book.

The promotion of the brand has increased interest in raising the breed. Gillanders says registrations of pedigreed Angus calves in the UK and Ireland have doubled during the past 10 years to more than 16,000 head. In the 1980s, registrations fell to a low of 3,000-4,000 calves a year. Now the breed is second only to Limousin, after having recently overtaken Charolais in calf numbers sired by commercial-Angus bulls registered with the British Cattle Movement Service.

“North American genetics, more from Canada than the U.S., played a big part in transforming the breed in the UK from small, dumpy animals of the 1950s and 1960s to the larger, stretchier breed we know

today,” says Gillanders. “I don't think we will follow U.S. breeders in taking the breed back smaller, which I understand is the trend in the U.S., although we have to be careful not to get too big either to maintain the breed's big advantage of easy calving and to produce a slaughter [that] meets retailer demands. Steak must be of a size to fit the supermarket pack.”

Concentration on consumers

Ken Howie is sensitive to expanding consumer Angus beef interests. He owns Cairnton Aberdeen Angus and Deeside Activity Park, and welcomes visitors to both locations.

“Our approach is borrowed from the malt whisky industry. For our visitors, it's about offering something good, wholesome and traditional, with a little bit about our own agricultural history. When they go back home, they can find the same product and be a little bit wiser about it,” he says. “The activity park gives us another income stream, and allows us to be a bigger part of the local community. It adds value to our core product, Aberdeen Angus beef.”

Cairnton (www.cairntonaberdeenangus.co.uk) changed the shape of their overall business to incorporate the tourism/leisure market with beef production about 10 years ago when the beef/cattle market was “on the floor.” Deeside Activity Park offers a restaurant and outdoor and team-building activities near Aberdeen, Scotland (www.deesideactivitypark.com).

“We try to educate our park and farm visitors [about beef], but it has to be done very gently. No one wants it rammed down their throat,” he says. “We host school and other group visitors to the farm. We have a number of ‘luxury’ holiday cottages for folks who would like to stay over. They very often ask to see round the cows, or whatever



► Field Editor Barb Baylor Anderson asked the bus to stop for a picture with the original home of the Angus breed.



Ken Howie

might be going on at that time. This allows us to inform them about food production generally. You must enjoy meeting folks.”

On the Angus production front, Howie says they are always in a “unique situation of actively looking for good steers” for the beef side of their business and sold through the farm shop at Deeside Activity Park. They use both Scottish and North American bloodlines. Only the “best of the best” of their males are retained as bulls. Cairnton shows and markets those bulls.

“Many of our cows are daughters or granddaughters of G.V. Jag, a famous Canadian bull with style and character. Fordafourie Paragon and Cardona Pure Punc have had an influence on the herd, while Fordafourie Kiwi, with New Zealand genetics, and Blelark Evergreat, a Stockman 365 grandson out of the Evora family, are main stock bulls,” he says. “Other Evora-bred cattle include Cairnton Everready, Cairnton Excaliber, Cairnton Excocet and Cairnton Evora X37.”



Editor's Note: A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.

See Scotland in 2017

Gillanders encourages U.S. Angus breeders to take time to learn more about the history of the Angus breed and its origins in Scotland. The next World Angus Forum, which is hosted every four years, will be in Scotland in 2017; the first time it has been in the country since 1977.