

HISTORY OF THE DEXTER BREED

The Dexter originated in the Southwestern region of Ireland where they were originally kept by small landholders and known as the "poor man's cow". Like the Kerry breed, they are descended from the predominately black cattle of the early Celts. The breed virtually disappeared in Ireland but was still maintained as a pure breed in a number of small herds in England and the US.

The frequently heard theory that the Dexter are a comparatively new breed is a complete fallacy as the breed is fully described and mentioned by its proper name, in a report on Irish cattle written in 1845, by Mr David Low.

From this publication it is noted that the breed owes its modern appearance, name and probably qualities to a Mr. Dexter who was agent to Lord Howarden, who came to Ireland in 1750 and made his home in the Tipperary County of Munster. David Low stated that Mr. Dexter had produced his curious breed by selection from the best of the hardy mountain cattle of the area and have succeeded to a very high degree.

At the turn of the 20th century, Dexters became the show cattle of the English gentry. As the 20th century progressed, Dexter numbers declined. In the 1970s, they were designated as rare and endangered. More recently, their attractiveness to small landholders has seen a significant

increase in their numbers globally. As a result, the Dexter is the best example of a domestic cattle breed saved from extinction.

The first registered Dexters were imported into South Africa in 1917 by Mrs Conroy, of Paarl in the Western Cape. R.T. Robinson of Dublin bred these animals and the bull La Mancha Chief was allocated registration No. 1 in the South African Herd Book, while ten females were allocated the first ten numbers in the female section. All the cows were imported in calf and Mr. Robinson registered the first calves, resulting in fifteen females and six bulls with La Mancha prefix, forming the base of Dexter in South Africa.

In 1953, the Dexter Cattle Breeders Society of South Africa was established by 13 foundation members, at Colesberg in the Karoo. They were soon affiliated to the South African Stud Book, responsible for the registration of all Dexters as well as all other breeds of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and horses. Currently, the society has about 65 members that are stud breeders and stud herds vary in size from a few to over 200 animals. More recent trends of Dexter use include the utilization of Dexters as foster mothers for dairy bull calves.

The ease with which Dexters can be transported to the bull, handled with limited facilities and kept on a small holding, make them very popular around all major cities in South Africa.

*Compiled by Tian Botha
[www.dextersa.co.za / www.wikipedia.co.za / et al.]*

