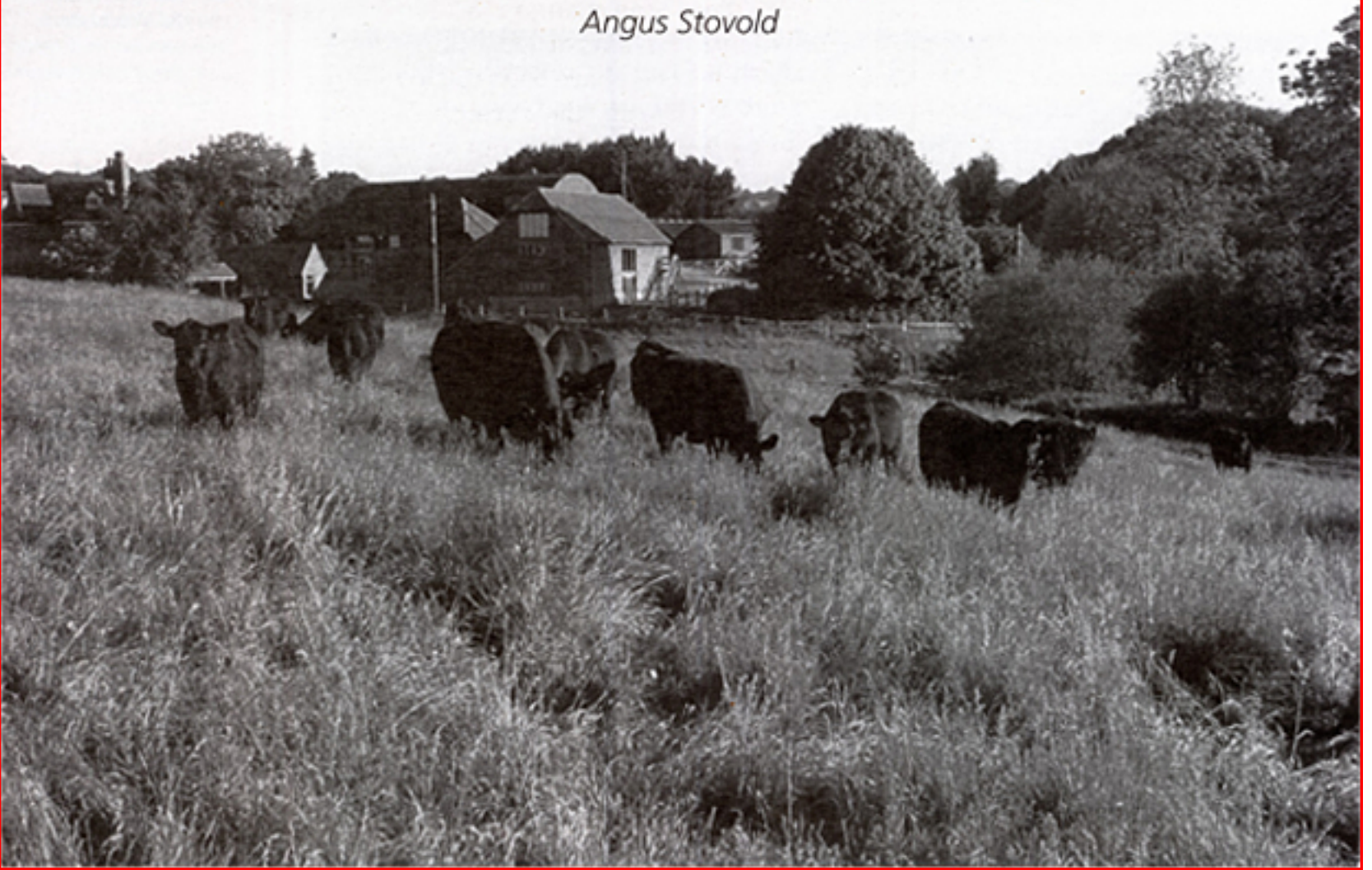


# Feeding the cattle at Lydling Farm

Angus Stovold



AS MANY OF YOU KNOW, Lydling Farm in Shackleford is mainly a livestock farm on grade 3 sandy loam soil. We produce almost all our own food for our extensive herd of Aberdeen Angus and we do this without artificial fertiliser (only using our own farmyard dung) and without spraying any chemicals.

To do this we need white-clover-rich fields to fix nitrogen and so we don't spray or we would lose the clover; however, the weed burden can be a problem so we top (cut) the swath at least twice in the season.

With wet summers the land is at its best, growing throughout the season. But dry summers can be a problem as the grass and clover burn up on this soil, so then we rent extra grazing along the water meadows by the river Wey (most of the grazing is in Higher Level Stewardship) as insurance.

We can keep the cattle outside on this land all year round, but by November and till April we will not have sufficient growth in the grass and clover to feed the herd. This is when we need the fodder we have produced and stored during the summer months. Winter fodder is an age-old problem for farmers, with a host of "new" ideas every year to solve it!

Of the fodder types listed below, our preferred option is Lucerne (see next page).

## **Grass silage**

The main fodder is grass silage either put into clamps or into the black round or square bales you see

everywhere (due mainly to nitrate vulnerable zone ((NVZ)) and farmers not using clamps because they are not approved). In a good year and with heavy artificial fertilizer application you could get three cuts off one field. The quality reduces with every cut and the protein remains around the 12% mark, so farmers will have to buy protein in to balance the cattle ration – cattle need 16% average protein, with milking cows requiring more. If you dry the grass you get hay but the food value is half that of silage.

## **Whole crop**

We could use whole crop which is wheat, barley, oats or peas, cut and silaged when green. It's an expensive crop but good food value, especially peas because they have high protein levels. You will only get one cut per year.

## **Fodder beet**

Quite a number of farmers use fodder beet, or other similar plants and strip graze it in winter, but it can make quite a mess, with run-off problems.

## **Maize**

Maize is extensively used. It's a wonderful food but is expensive to grow and will need added protein as it's only around 10%.

## **Red clover**

We grow Red clover, which needs no inputs, has 18% protein and gives us two cuts a year, and we graze it.

## **Lucerne**

For the last four years we have been growing Lucerne (alfalfa, a legume plant) which is a most wonderful crop; in fact we have put down a further 50 acres of it and now several other local farmers are growing it as well. It's not new – my grandfather grew it and I grew it 15 years ago, but back then it never developed mainly due to my ignorance into the plant's needs!

So why is it so good? Well, as long as you get the PH levels up around 6.5 to 7 once the crop is sown in the spring, you can take two crops in the first year and then three or four every year for five years with no inputs! The silage or hay gives you consistently 22% protein, with a complete diet except for some basic minerals.

You do have to be very disciplined with the crop, cutting it every four to six weeks and letting it flower once in the season. Ours is purely for fodder, so there is absolutely no grazing. Remarkably, it does very well

both in drought (it has very deep roots) and in wet conditions like last year when it out-performed all our other crops. You leave it short during the winter. By the spring the field is bare, but as the earth warms up the change is astounding and you can almost see the plants grow.

I have been told by my local bee man that the honey from the Lucerne is exceptional, although I haven't tried it. I've not had any experience of disease or pest on the crop, but I believe aphids could be a problem although I would always rely on natural predators rather than spray. It's interesting to walk through the crop and see the huge numbers of insects thriving amongst the plants.

When you finally come to plough in the crop you're left with a clean fertile soil. The one other fact worth mentioning is that the cattle will eat it before anything else. So it must be good!