Westcountry farm is home for German 'super cows'

EXCLUSIVE
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CATTLE bred by Nazi geneticists can be spotted in Britain for the first time, peacefully wandering around a farm in the Westcountry.

Before the Second World War, Adolf Hitler recruited zoologist brothers Heinz and Lutz Heck to breed back into life the mighty aurochs.

The huge rhino-sized beast features heavily in Teutonic folklore, but had been hunted to extinction in Europe by 1627.

Seen as a symbol of German oppression and efforts to build a master Aryan race, the Heck cattle created at zoos in Berlin and Munich were largely destroyed after the defeat of Nazism in 1945.

But aspects of the experiment survived, and 13 Heck bulls and cows have now been shipped from a nature conservation park in Belgium to sloping acres of field at Broadwoodwidger, near Lifton, on the Devon-Cornwall border.

Farmer and conservationist Derek Gow, who has imported the half-tonne animals, explained that the Nazis wanted to recreate the auroch to evoke the power of the "runes, folklores and legends of the Germanic peoples", and it was used as a propaganda motif.

He said: "Aurochs were wild bulls. Julius Caesar recorded them as being bulls as big as elephants.

"Young men hunted these bulls as preparation for battle and leadership in war, but also to obtain these huge 6ft-wide horns that the bulls had as drinking vessels and war horns. They were huge trophies."

He went on: "Hunting was a very big part of what people like Hermann Goering, who was head of the Luftwaffe, did. He was the hunt Reichsmarshal for the Third Reich, and this was something that was considered very manly to do."

Heinz and Lutz Heck bred their cattle separately, and mixed and matched animals from the Scottish Highlands, Corsica and the French Camargue, as well as Spanish fighting bulls. They were then transported to, among other places, game parks in Schorfheide in Brandenburg, outside Berlin, and the Neander Valley in Dusseldorf.

In July last year, nine Heck cows and four bulls joined the growing population on Upcott Grange Farm in West Devon, which includes beavers, polecats and water voles. The Hecks are half Heinz creations, and half the brainchild of Lutz.

The duplicitous brothers feature in Diane Ackerman's book The Zookeeper's Wife, an account of how a Warsaw zoo director and his young wife hid fugitive Jews and ammunition for the Polish resistance in the empty animal houses.

Mr Gow said: "The auroch was extinct, but domestic descendents – Friesians, Simmentals and everything else – were still kicking around the countryside.

"The two brothers argued that if the one wild animal that spawned all of these had gone, through a process of back-breeding domestic cattle, you could pull the wild genes out and recreate the ancestor."

Extinct cattle were brought back to life by Nazi geneticists

He added: "Between the two wars, there was a thinking that you could selectively breed animals – and indeed people – for Aryan characteristics, for characteristics that were rooted in runes, folklore and legend."

Mr Gow said his Heck cattle, which had been quarantined, were much shorter than the aurochs, but they did retain the muscular build, deep brown complexion and shaggy, coffee-coloured fringe.

Only one of the "hardy, tough breed" was "dangerous" – the others were a bit "nervous and jumpy", having been used to freely roaming without human contact.

As well as reminding people of a little-known story of how Hitler's flirtation with genetic engineering extended beyond humans, their appearance is striking.

Mr Gow said: "They look like the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira. It makes you think of the light of a tallow lamp and these huge bulls on these cave paintings leaping out at you from darkened walls."

As part of a farm diversification project, Mr Gow is to hold wildlife photography and film-making courses featuring the cattle during the summer at Upcott Grange.

The Nazi cattle, which will be allowed to run around the fen and grassland, will be just one of a pack of rare animals available to amateur snappers.

For example, the beavers, one of which remains on the loose after escaping last year ("we still know where he is"), have been extinct in England for hundreds of years.

While supposedly emblematic of Hitler's aspirations for a genetically-engineered super race, the Heck cattle were also a symbol of its decline.



Derek Gow feeding the 13 huge Heck bulls and cows on his farm in West Devon. The cattle, bred from the mighty German auroch, are the only ones in Britain after being imported from Belgium as part of a diversification project involving wildlife photography

● *Visit the Western Morning News online at www.thisiswesternmorningnews.co.uk for an audio interview with Derek Gow about the cattle*

Sailors help foil pirate attacks and free 13 fishermen

WESTCOUNTRY sailors have helped to foil pirate attacks on two merchant vessels off Somalia.

The crew of Royal Fleet Auxiliary Wave Knight also helped to secure the release of 13 Yemeni fishermen who had been held hostage for a week.

The ship is part of a fleet off Sierra Leone almost exclusively crewed by servicemen and women based in Devon and Cornwall. They include Devonport-based HMS Albion, HMS Ocean – the Navy's largest vessel – HMS Argyll, and HMS Enterprise, a survey vessel built in Appledore. RFA Wave Knight, a civilian-manned Royal Navy support ship, thwarted attempts by pirates to take over two tankers in the Gulf of Aden on Saturday.

After receiving a distress call from the Greek-owned Handytankers Magic at about 8am, the ship chased a small pirate skiff back to its "mother ship", a fishing dhow.

The Dutch warship HNLMS De Zeven Provincien arrived on the scene and freed the fishermen, who had been held captive since April 12. Seven suspected pirates aboard the dhow were disarmed, but had to be released because they were not captured in the act of piracy.

Two hours later, RFA Wave Knight received a second distress call, this time from the Norwegian tanker Front Ardennes.

The British ship successfully prevented pirates from boarding the vessel and fired warning shots which caused the attackers to flee.

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