

# The Durham Ox



The River Skerne was once famed for the monstrous mountains of beef that were bred in its Brightwater fields.



Main image: The Durham Ox, originally known as the Ketton Ox, was a supersize superstar of its day

Right: Charles and Robert Colling, of Ketton and Barmpton, whose farms on the banks of the Skerne excelled in producing great mountains of beef

**The Durham Ox, the White Heifer that Travelled and Comet** – to agriculture what Trevor Francis is to football – became national celebrities more than 200 years ago, touring the country and entertaining the crowds with their gargantuan size. Not only did their fans pay to see them, but they named pubs and hotels after them, and the Durham Ox even has a small village in Australia named after it.

These giant cattle were a product of times that were changing fast, thanks to the urbanisation and turnipisation. As more Britons became town-dwellers, the countryside had to provide more food. It was helped in the middle of the 18th Century by the arrival of the turnip which meant cattle, which had been slaughtered at Martin-mas (November 11) because of a lack of winter feed, could be kept in large numbers to keep growing. Then farmers started breeding to refine their beasts. They wanted hefty animals, full of meat and tallow (fat) to make candles.

In 1779, Christopher Hill, of Blackwell, on the southern outskirts of Darlington, slaughtered a six-year-old Blackwell Ox.

It weighed 152 stone (935kg) and caused a sensation – it was the first ox to have its picture painted and distributed as a souvenir print in the manner that a popstar hands out signed photos to their fans.

After the Blackwell Ox, farmers in Piercebridge, Barningham, Sedgfield and Archdeacon Newton started improving the native Teeswater short-horn cattle, but the Colling brothers of Ketton led the field.

Their family had farmed the Skerne valley to the north of Darlington for generations. Robert, born in 1749, farmed at Barmpton, and Charles, born in 1750, farmed at Ketton Hall. They bought the best local beasts and interbred them, and after about 15 years of experimentation, the Ketton Ox was born in March 1796. Because of its enormity, when it was first exhibited on Darlington market in 1799, it caused a great stir.

In May, 1801, it was sold for £250 to John Day, of Rotherham. He was a showman farmer, who saw the 214 stone (1,360kg) monster as a lucrative freakshow. He renamed it the Durham Ox, and it started a six-year tour which took it the length and breadth of the country.



*When the Durham Ox died in 1807.*

Two The ox's carriage was pulled by four or six horses, depending on the state of the road. It spent most of 1802 stalling in London where takings in a day were £97, and, in the early winter of 1803, it had a homecoming in south Durham – Darlington for one night only, followed by a quick stop in Ketton, a further break in Ferryhill before a 12-night extravaganza in Newcastle.

The Durham Ox wasn't the biggest beast of its day, but it had a buzz about it, created by the publicist Mr Day. The ox was a good looking, well-natured thing – "my wife who rode with him in the carriage found him harmless as a fawn and familiar as a lapdog", wrote Mr Day in his memoirs – which was surprisingly agile for one so large.

Merchandise, such as prints, china plates and scale models, were produced of it as Mr Day milked his ox, and many of the communities that it visited were so impressed that they named a pub after it. From Coundon to Warwick, you can still sip a pint in the Durham Ox.

In the goldfields of Victoria, in Australia, there is a hamlet called Durham Ox which is centred around a pub of the same name. The pub was opened in 1848 by prospectors from Derbyshire who were big fans of the ox from the Ketton outback.

The end for the Durham Ox began on February 19, 1807. Having travelled more than 3,000 miles in six years, it arrived for a gig in Oxford. As it manoeuvred its bulk out of its carriage, it slipped, dislocating a hip. After eight weeks, it showed no sign of recovery. It was in pain and Mr Day to his credit called in the butchers – three of them – to slaughter it.

Despite having lost weight during its two months of ill health, the monster weighed 271 stone (1,724kg) when it died.



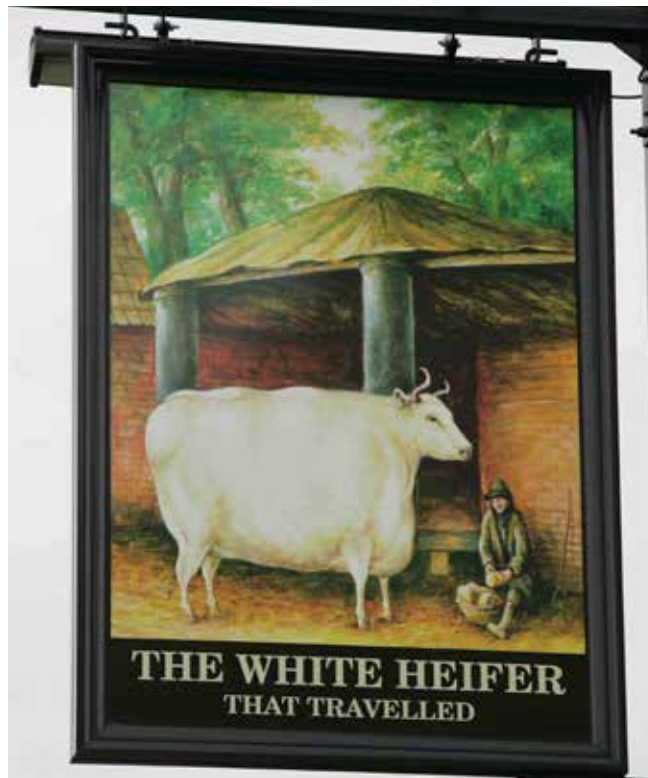
Top: The Durham Ox hotel in Durham Ox, Victoria, Australia

The next supersize superstar produced at Ketton was the Durham Ox's half-sister, the White Heifer. Born in 1896, at the age of four, it weighed 164 stone (1,043kg), and Robert Colling sold it to the Three Kings Hotel, in Piccadilly, London, where it was exhibited as "the greatest wonder in the world of the kind".



Left: A souvenir plate showing the Durham Ox that its fans bought

Below: The pub sign of the White Heifer That Travelled in Darlington, showing the White Heifer and a turnip-slicer



Because it journeyed from Ketton to the capital, it was known as "the White Heifer that travelled" and it lived until at least 1811 when an artist painted it standing in front of a man slicing delicious-looking turnips – this image is on the pub which bears its name that opened in West Park, Darlington, in 2006.

Such was the Colling brothers' fame that King George III leased one of their bulls for three years to improve his herd in Windsor, but their biggest success was Comet, born in 1804.

"He had a fine masculine head, broad and deep chest, shoulders well laid back, crops and loins good, hind quarters, long, straight and well-packed, thighs thick, breast full and well let-down, with nice straight hocks and hind legs, " enthused Charles Colling. "He had fair sized horns, ears straight and hairy, and a grandeur of style and carriage that baffled description."

Because of the Collings' in-breeding programme, Comet had the same father and grandfather – a bull called Favourite, who was mated with its mother and its own daughter born by its own mother. A cow called Phoenix was both of Comet's grandmothers.

At the age of 60, Charles, 60, retired from farming in 1810, and his sale of animals at Ketton Hall attracted crowds from all over the North. Comet was the star attraction and was sold for £1,000 – the first £1,000 ox, making him the Alf Common (the first £1,000 footballer and former Cockerton landlord) or Trevor Francis (the first £1,000,000 footballer) of cattle – although Sir Henry Vane Tempest rode up minutes after the hammer had come down and offered the new owners £1,600 cash. They refused.

Charles made £7,115 17s by selling his 47 animals. "Well, we've beaten all England in prices and have no shorthorns left,"



Comet was the first £1,000 beast – as big a landmark in agricultural sales as the first million pound footballer was in sporting circles

his wife Mary said, sadly, and they retired to Monkend Hall, in Croft-on-Tees. He died there on January 16, 1836, aged 85, and the pub just over the river in Hurworth Place is still called the Comet.

Comet's new owners were a syndicate made up of Colonel Trotter and Messrs Wetherall, Wright and Charge. They kept Comet at Cleasby for stud. It died in 1815 and was buried in a field – Comet's Garth – in the village with a chestnut planted over it. On February 3, 1865, the tree was chopped down and Comet was disinterred. A 2ft 1in rib was sent to California for the Americans to marvel at; another was despatched to the Shorthorn Society in Warwickshire, and most of its ginormous remains ended up in Darlington museum.

After Charles Colling sold up, brother Robert continued farming at Barmpton until his death in 1820. He was nicknamed "the Prince of the Skerne" and would have been famed for his work with sheep if his cattle hadn't been so big. In his last years, in two sales – with prices affected by post-Napoleonic Wars depression – he sold 105 animals for more than £10,000.

There was once big money to be made in breeding big animals on the Brightwater banks.

# Sitting on the summit of Lancashire

As he sat on the summit of Lancashire's Pendle Hill in 1652, pioneering Quaker preacher **George Fox** had a vision of a 'great people to be gathered' to him.

Two hundred years later, his prophecy was strangely fulfilled when Quaker industrialists became leading lights in Britain's manufacturing revolution. Among these were famous names like Abraham Darby, George Cadbury and Joseph Rowntree. This Quaker network combined hard headed-business sense with a deep-seated sense of compassion for the legions of people they employed.

Always a city to hide its many lights under a bushel, Leeds can lay claim its own less celebrated Quaker captain of industry, John Fowler. Born into a prosperous family, Fowler tried to follow in his father's footsteps as a corn merchant. However,

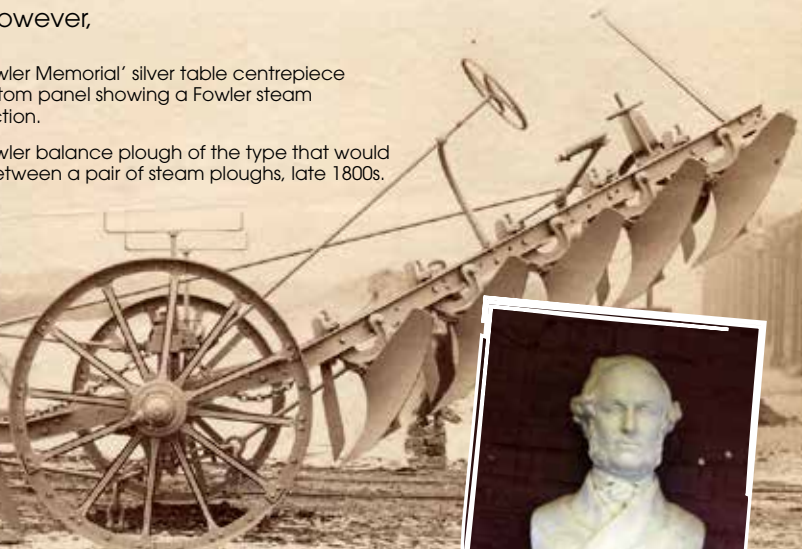
John quickly realised that his interests lay in the field of engineering. Fowler joined the Middlesbrough firm Gilkes, Wilson & Company. Here he received a grounding in engineering from a firm who supplied over 100 locomotives to the Stockton & Darlington Railway.

In an early eureka moment John travelled to Ireland in 1849 with a group of fellow Quakers to observe the devastating effects of the Great Famine. Between 1845 and 1849 a severe potato blight – worsened by British economic policies – resulted in an estimated 1 million people starving and a further 1 million emigrating from Ireland.



Left: The 'Fowler Memorial' silver table centrepiece with the bottom panel showing a Fowler steam plough in action.

Below: A Fowler balance plough of the type that would be pulled between a pair of steam ploughs, late 1800s.



Appalled by his findings, Fowler drew on his agricultural background and his growing engineering expertise to seek technological solutions to the problems he had witnessed.

Following a short-lived partnership with yet another Quaker, Albert Fry, Fowler succeeded in harnessing steam power, initially for draining poor and boggy farmland. Encouraged by this early success Fowler looked for ways to apply steam power to ploughing. In 1858 he won the Royal Agricultural Society's £500 prize for his 10 horse power portable ploughing engine, in Fowler's words 'a steam cultivator that shall... be an economic substitute for the plough and the spade'. At this stage, Fowler relied on others to manufacture his ideas. In this case, most of the engine was produced by Ransomes of Ipswich and Robert Stephenson of Newcastle upon Tyne.

With bulging order books, Fowler set up his own works in Leeds in 1860. This location – imaginatively dubbed the 'Steam Plough Works' – became the centre of production of steam ploughs, stationary engines, steamrollers, locomotives and crawler tractors until final closure in 1974. As well as equipping British farming and construction, the name Fowler was carried across the globe. Fowler ploughing engines cultivated cotton on previously infertile land in Egypt and the Sudan.

In his personal life, John maintained strong Quaker and North East connections, marrying Joseph Pease's daughter Elizabeth in 1857. Ironically, John met his end in 1864, aged just 38, as a result of following doctor's orders. Energetic horse riding had been prescribed to help combat the stress of running his growing business empire. He died of tetanus poisoning following a fall from his horse while out hunting and he was buried in Skinnergate graveyard in Darlington.



A completed Fowler steam ploughing engine fresh off the production line, around 1900.

Below: Post war advertising leaflet for the Fowler Mark VF Diesel Tractor.

Fowler diesel industrial locomotive built for the British Motor Corporation. 'Does what it says on the tin'.

