

WILD BOAR FARMING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Abstract: The European Wild boar (*Sus scrofa scrofa*) has not existed in the wild in the UK for 300 years, even then it was confined to estates; it seems that the truly free living animal became extinct in the mediaeval period. Until 12 years ago the Wild boar in the UK was present only in zoos. However since 1981 there has been a steady increase in entrepreneurs establishing Wild boar farms for meat, these have usually been a secondary enterprise to other forms of farming including deer farming. The initial stock for Wild boar farming arose from zoos and was therefore very limited. In September 1989 the British Wild boar Association (BWBA) was founded to promote the commercial development, welfare and understanding of husbanded Wild boar in the UK, involving a system of registration of purebred animals. Guidelines for the welfare of farmed Wild boar have been produced by the Farm Animal Welfare Council in collaboration with BWBA. The guidelines offer advice on general principles of management of farmed Wild boar having regard for their behavioural needs; an essential welfare principle is that Wild boar should be farmed as extensively as possible. Other sections in the Guidelines are concerned with specific aspects such as handling, introduction of new stock, stocking rates, accommodation, fencing, feed and water, field slaughter and the use of dart guns. During the last six years Wild boar farming has expanded due to imports of purebred animals from Denmark and Sweden. There are currently about 35 members of BWBA including 25 farmers, about 65% of which have registered herds. Herds size ranges from less than 5 animals to over 60. The diet consists of commercial pig food plus vegetable supplements and usually one litter averaging 5 young is produced per sow per year, overall this leads to the production of around 1500 purebred carcasses a year for the exclusive meat market in the UK. There is considerable scope for research not yet undertaken to optimize husbandry methods, production and meat quality and to explore the potential of Wild boar in breeding programmes with domestic pigs to produce specialist pork products.

Keywords: Wild boar, *Sus scrofa*, Suidae, Husbandry, Purebreeding, Europe.

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1. Introduction

By contrast with most European countries, the European Wild boar (*Sus scrofa scrofa*) has not existed in the wild in the UK for 700 years. The last record of free-living Wild boar, is the dozen animals ordered to be killed by Henry III in the Forest of Dean for a friend (Rackham, 1993). Before this time after the Norman Conquest in 1066, William I instigated the formation of royal estates so that the large game deer and Wild boar were readily available for hunting. After the extinction of free-living Wild boar in the 13th century, the animal existed only in the royal parks until hunted to extinction in the 17th century. A major factor from the 13th century onwards which led to the demise of the Wild boar, was the loss of woodland to agriculture so that today less than 8% of Britain's land area is covered by trees. The absence of Wild boar in Britain for over 300 years except for a few in zoos, has resulted in the British public being unfamiliar with the animal and the merits of its meat. However just over a decade ago this situation began to change when a few people with experience of hunting and eating Wild boar in Continental

Europe, started to farm the animal in Britain thereby introducing an alternative agricultural enterprise to the country and an opportunity to study a genetically wild animal in a husbanded environment. The aims of this communication are to provide an overview of the progress of Wild boar farming in the UK.

2. Aspects of Wild boar farming

2.1. Legislation

In 1984 the Dangerous Wild Animals Act (DWAA) was amended to include Wild boar. This meant that anyone wishing to keep Wild boar outside a zoo had to be granted a licence under the DWAA. The licence is issued with the approval of the environmental health office of the local authority following an inspection (involving a veterinary surgeon) of the site and payment of a fee around £100. Conditions of the licence are that the animals must be contained by adequate fencing and that they are husbanded with due regard for their welfare. If an animal escapes, it is entering the wild which is illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, and therefore it must be culled or preferably sedated

with a dart gun for return to the owner. All other legislation dealing with husbandry, health, transport, slaughter and meat hygiene is the same as for the domestic pig.

2.2. The role of the British Wild boar Association (BWBA)

Before dealing with the progress of Wild boar farming in the UK, it is appropriate to outline the role of this Association in promoting Wild boar farming. In 1989 BWBA was formed following an awareness by the author that a representative organisation for all interested in Wild boar in Britain was needed particularly to address some of the problems which had arisen with farming the animal. The primary aims of the Association are: (a) to encourage the commercial development, welfare and understanding of husbanded Wild boar in Britain, (b) to operate a registration scheme for purebred Wild boar (BWBA members only entitled to register) in order to promote the pure breeding and marketing of Wild boar and (c) to organize meetings, publications and other activities to promote the Association and Wild boar in Britain. With reference to the first aim, animal welfare is a highly topical and emotional issue in the UK particularly in relation to farming a wild animal where there is most concern about restricting an animals natural behaviours.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries & Food (MAFF), have approached BWBA to produce guidelines for the welfare of farmed Wild boar. Probably the most important aim of BWBA is the second dealing with the pure-breeding and marketing of Wild boar. A major concern is the crossing of wild boars with domestic sows (usually rare breeds like the Tamworth) to increase litter size and growth rates of progeny, and selling the meat at a premium as "Wild boar". Those familiar with the distinctive qualities of the meat from purebred Wild boar were the first to realize that the hybrid product was often indistinguishable from pork, this was soon followed by a similar response from uninformed consumers. This together with the importation of inferior Australian feral pig meat was blighting the UK Wild boar market. Individual BWBA members expressed their concern about these matters to MAFF which has subsequently with trading standards officers, given their support to identifying sources of misrepresented Wild boar meat. The registration scheme adopted by BWBA and supported by the majority of its

members, is making a significant contribution to the propagation of purebred Wild boar since the Association only promotes producers of purebred animals. Eligibility for registration depends on the origin of the animal and phenotypic characteristics conforming to a typical Wild boar as seen on a herd inspection. Only breeding animals are registered. BWBA's third aim of publicity and promotion has led to the presence of Wild boar at major agricultural shows and articles in newspapers and magazines, radio and television have also provided good coverage of the farmed animal. In 1992-93 of the 36 BWBA members, 25 were farmers with about 65% holding registered stock involving 2-60 sows (Fig. 1). However it is likely that there maybe a further 15 Wild boar farmers who are not members of BWBA.

3. Types of farm

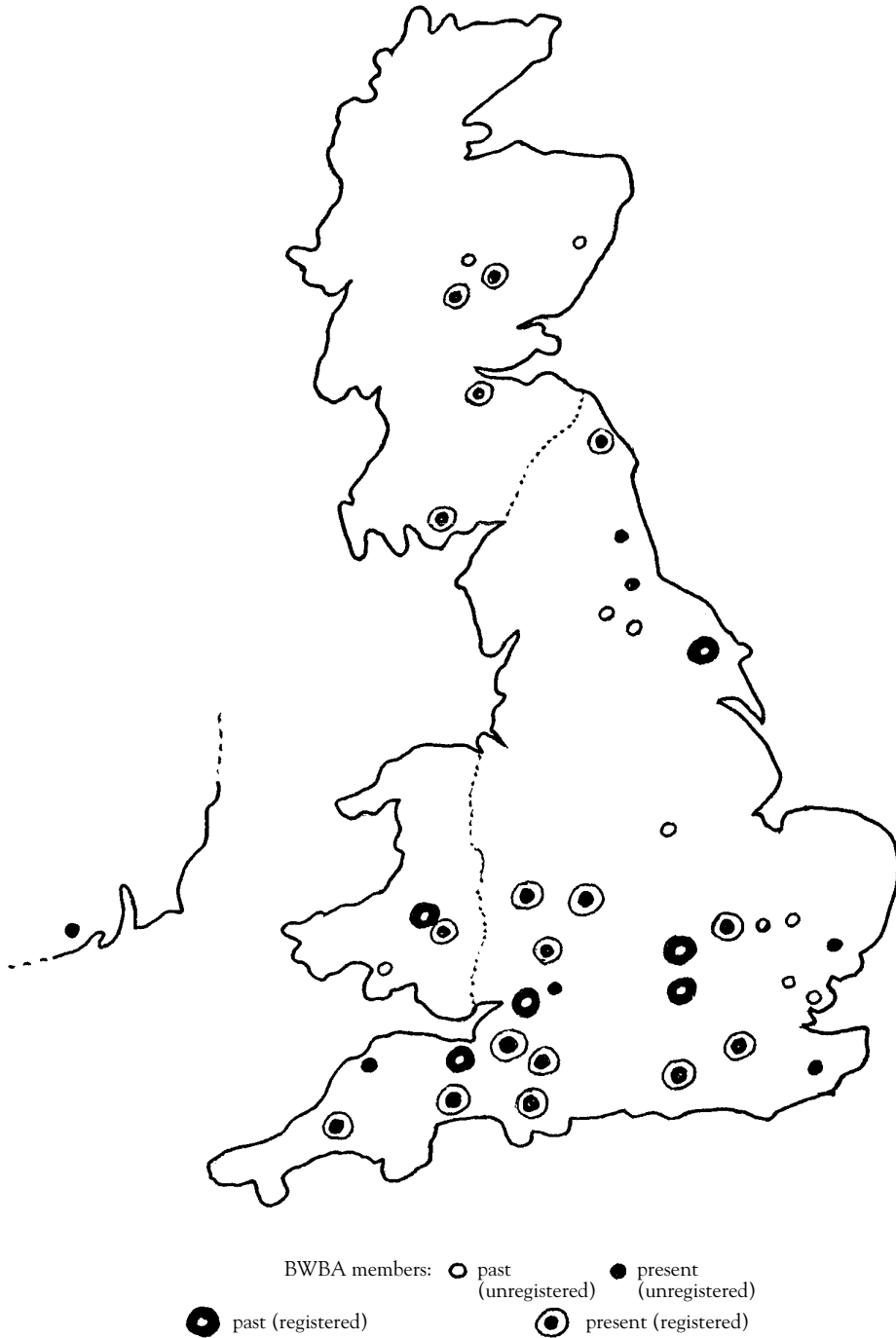
The first Wild boar farm was started in 1981 with surplus animals from London Zoo. Farms a decade ago consisted of mixed semi-intensive/extensive systems (Booth *et al.*, 1988). The breeding males were often confined to high security pens whereas sows were housed either in a straw covered pen or allowed the greater freedom of a paddock with an ark. As today, the use of woodland was a minor occurrence with pastureland predominating. Now extensive systems are the norm with large paddocks (over 1 hectare each) for a family herd *i.e.* a boar with up to 10 sows, dry sows and weaner/growers, rotated to new paddocks after 1 year.

4. Stock

With the awareness that distinctive Wild boar meat only arises from purebred animals, the small number of zoo animals available were insufficient to expand the industry. From about 1987, wild boars were imported first from estates in Denmark where the animals were of German origin, and secondly from an estate in Sweden where the animals were large and of East European origin. Denmark, Sweden and Britain have a similar high health status for pigs, a factor important to the importation of Wild boar or pigs from continental Europe to the UK.

5. Feed

Most Wild boar farms feed a combination of commercial food and forage vegetables. Where extensive pastureland prevails, the need for commercial cereal based food is minimal



Past: no longer BWBA members. — Present: BWBA members in 1992-1993. — Registered: purebred breeding stock registered with BWBA — Unregistered: stock not registered with BWBA.

Figure 1 - Distribution of wild boar farms in the UK.

except for lactating sows. Due to the relatively high numbers of animals being farmed per unit area of land, any woodland involved only supplies supplements of a variety of natural food sources. Creep feed is not usually given but the few farmers trying for 2 litters a year and therefore weaning at 8-10 weeks sometimes provide a "creep boost".

6. Production

The majority of Wild boar farmers seem content with the one litter averaging 5 young per sow per year normally produced in the spring. This allows for a maximum "weaning off" period between 12-16 weeks, evolved in nature to provide healthy, strong growers by the onset of winter. It has yet to be demonstrated whether the constant availability of food and other comforts in the farmed environment, supports the production of 2 litters a year more readily than in the wild.

7. Slaughter

Animals destined for slaughter are mostly surplus males which reach a slaughter weight of 50 kg upwards from 12 months of age. However some of the animals of East European origin reach slaughter weight at 9-10 months of age. As wild boars do not exist in the wild in the UK they are classified as pig for meat production purposes and therefore they have been routinely slaughtered in abattoirs. It is now realized that this is often a hazardous procedure with welfare deficits for animals and handlers. Shooting on the farm, a common practice with farmed deer, is considered the most desirable slaughter method for farmed Wild boar and this has been approved by MAFF that provided the carcasses to be subsequently dealt with according to approved CEE regulations.

8. Marketing

As few Wild boar farmers have facilities for butchering the meat under approved CEE regulations, they are happy to sell whole carcasses for £ 4 - £ 6 / kg to chefs in hotels, restaurants and to local butchers. Those with butchering facilities are often also deer farmers and therefore provide cuts of meat and products for wholesale, farm shop or other retail outlets. Prices for Wild boar and farmed deer are comparable being up to one third above carcass prices for the prime cuts of saddle and haunch. Although some supermarkets have shown an interest in selling Wild boar meat, the current production of only 1,500-2,000 animals from

300 registered sows would be insufficient to allow for an increase in breeding herds, maintain supplies to regular customers and supply supermarkets particularly when the latter will only offer a minimum price for carcasses.

9. Conclusions and the future

With Wild boar farming being a new alternative agricultural enterprise in the UK, there is considerable scope and need for establishing appropriate regulations with regard to husbandry, slaughter and marketing of farmed Wild boar and meat. Such requirements must involve the legal, agricultural, marketing, veterinary and scientific professions to provide appropriate information as a basis for a forward thinking Wild boar industry and related industries. The following summarizes some of the wide ranging topics needing attention in relation to Wild boar farming: (a) finalization of a code of practice for husbandry, (b) morphometric or other objective data required as a possible practical means of identifying a purebred Wild boar, (c) quality control of meat production, *i.e.* selective breeding/husbandry/carcass evaluation - to what extent can we, or should we apply modern technologies of farm animal production to Wild boar farming, (d) continued education of the public about Wild boar, (e) value of Wild boar to woodland ecology *i.e.* removal of excess plants such as bracken and rhododendrons, animal pests and increasing soil fertility, (f) possible benefit of Wild boar genes for pork production (*i.e.* hardiness, meat quality as currently produced in the 'wild blue', a Wild boar cross outdoor domestic sow) and (g) the value of an increased understanding of the genetics, physiology and behaviour of Wild boar not only for our appreciation of this splendid animal but also of its cousin the domestic pig.

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