

WILLIAM MCCOMBIE

CATTLE BREEDER, ABERDEEN ANGUS

Approaching Alford from the east, the visitor is immediately struck by the life-size sculpture of a black bull. He was modelled on 'Jeremy Eric of Bridgefoot', a real Aberdeen Angus bull, by sculptor David Annand in 2001 to celebrate the local home of this world-famous cattle breed.

Beloved of stockmen as far afield as Argentina, Australia and Canada, the Aberdeen Angus was brought to the consciousness of Victorian farmers by one William McCombie of Tillyfour, Tough, near Alford. McCombie's father had been a cattle-breeder, inspiring this university graduate to pass on an academic career and continue the family business, renting his father's farm from the 1820s.



St Cyrus

The first farmer to breed these 'polled' or hornless cattle was Hugh Watson of Keillor, Forfarshire; his breeding cow, 'Old Grannie' produced 29 calves and lived to the age of 35. The number one bull in the breed book, 'Old Jock' was Grannie's first calf.

McCombie saw how he could improve on the Angus, working on producing fatter, stalwart cattle which could cope with the colder, damper climate of Aberdeenshire, instead of wasting time transporting them to England to be fattened. Their family had been at Tillyfour since 1714, so he knew the land's capabilities inside out. McCombie bred the Angus 'doddies' with the Aberdeen 'hummlies', both nicknames meaning hornless beasts, ultimately producing the Aberdeen Angus.

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McCombie was the first Scottish exhibitor at Birmingham's prestigious cattle show. He also wowed the European farmers at the Paris Exposition of 1878. The Aberdeen Angus herd of Tillyfour would win over 500 prizes. The farmer's favourite prize bull, Black Prince, won the Prince Albert Cup of 1866 for the best animal, prompting Queen Victoria herself to invite McCombie and his beast to visit Windsor. Prince Albert, being much interested in agricultural improvement himself, was equally keen to meet this bovine champion. The royal couple made a return visit to Tillyfour in 1867.



Tillyfour Farm Sign

The same year, McCombie would publish *Cattle and Cattle Breeders*, detailing his developmental breed work. The following year, McCombie entered parliament as the first tenant farmer to do so, campaigning hard for the interests of his fellow farmers as Liberal MP for West Aberdeenshire. McCombie himself died in 1880, Tillyfour being sold on to the Beggs, who founded Lochnagar Distillery. Today, the McCombie name is still involved with Aberdeen Angus, William's descendant, Charlie, farmer at Auchincrieve near Huntly has both Angus and Charolais herds, the former being the grandchildren of Black Prince and others from the Tillyfour herd.

William McCombie's grave can be visited today at Tough Kirkyard, near Tillyfour. Agricultural journalist, Eddie Gillanders published a history of the breed from McCombie's herd in 2017, updating the 1958 history. The then president of the Aberdeen Angus Society, Alex Sanger, remarked, 'The skill of generations of breeders throughout the world has taken the Aberdeen-Angus breed to heights never imagined.' Remember McCombie the next time you tuck into a steak!