

EXPERIENCE BRINGS CONFIDENCE AND CHANGE

A young Ayrshire farmer is intent on driving his business forward by constantly challenging himself, with the back-up and support of his monitor farm community group.



For more information visit www.monitorfarms.co.uk

John Howie (27) farms 170 hectares at Girtridge Farm, near Dundonald, in partnership with his mum Margaret and sister, Mary. Having studied accounts and finance at Strathclyde University, John came back to the farm with an understanding of figures, but was less confident about the application of new farm management techniques.

He was very keen, therefore, to be one of the nine monitor farms established in 2016 as part of the joint initiative by Quality Meat Scotland and AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds.

He has embraced the project wholeheartedly and, one year in, has been delighted with the results of some of the changes he has made so far, thanks to suggestions put forward by local farmers who have attended meetings on the farm.

John said: "Being part of the monitor farm process is challenging but rewarding. It pushes me to make changes happen but has also given me the confidence to see them through."

Enterprises at Girtridge include 28 hectares of spring barley, but after some number crunching which showed a potential increase in gross margin of £133 per hectare due to an expected increase in yield, he has decided to sow one field in winter barley. John said: "Sowing in the autumn also spreads the workload at lambing time, especially now we have increased the sheep numbers."

John has invested in the genetics of his breeding flock and bought 70 Aberfield cross gimmers from Peter Eccles, Lothians monitor farmer, as well as 80 mule and Texel cross gimmers from Ayr Market to add to his existing mule flock, so he has 241 to lamb this year. He has used two Abermax rams over the gimmers and plans to compare results with the rest of the ewes, which were put to Suffolk and Texel cross Beltex rams.

Girtridge Farm is one of nine monitor farms that have been established across Scotland as part of the Monitor Farm Programme managed jointly by QMS and AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds and funded by the Scottish Government.

As a direct result of advice at one of the monitor farm meetings, John now records and monitors faecal egg counts as a tool for deciding when to treat for worms. Consequently, lambs were only dosed for worms once last summer and ewes didn't get wormed at all, and only needed a single treatment for fluke. Reducing the amount of anthelmintics required has significantly reduced costs, including labour.

All lambs at Girtridge are finished off grass and receive no hard feeding. The ewes, which lamb indoors, are fed second-cut, baled silage and 100g per day of high pro soya per lamb carried for their final month of pregnancy.

He has been able to increase his sheep numbers thanks to a very successful first attempt at rotational grazing. He said: "We split a 12-hectare field into 10 paddocks, and grazed 120 ewes and 208 lambs on it from June to the end of August and ewes right through until October. The investment in electric fencing worked out at only 3p per ewe per day and we used no nitrogen fertiliser, just some lime in the spring."

John is hopeful that by extending the rotational grazing area and focusing on making 11+ ME silage, as well as introducing stubble turnips after winter barley, he can get sheep numbers up to around 500 in the future; this is something he could not have dreamed of before becoming a monitor farmer.

He has made similar improvements to his cattle enterprise. A small herd of nine suckler cows are the subject of much debate at the moment, and John is currently working out gross margins to make a decision on whether to expand the herd or stop this enterprise in the future.

Around 220 cattle were finished at Girtridge last year, mostly heifers bought at Ayr market at around 15 months and sold at over two-years-old. However, John said: "Our sheds hold 250 cattle and our machinery costs are quite high, so it makes sense to fill the shed and spread our fixed costs. We aim to finish 300 cattle this year, rising to 400 next year."

John was disappointed with the silage he made this year. With an ME of 10.2, it is fed ad-lib in a Total Mixed Ration along with home-grown barley, soya and minerals – with the aim of a 1.3kg/day growth rate.

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He has made great inroads into the growth rates by using rotational grazing in the summer and he would like to make better quality silage, which would cheapen the winter ration and allow the heifers to reach their target deadweight of 350kg in a shorter time.

During the summer of 2017, John rotationally grazed 70 heifers on 16 hectares (representing a stocking rate of 2.99 livestock units per hectare), with no supplementary feeding, and achieved a daily growth rate of 1.2kg. The cost of grazing was only 10p per head per day not including reseeding. John said: "On another area we setstocked at 1.89 livestock units per hectare, gaining only 0.52kg/day, so we will definitely be investing in more electric fence wire."

The community group persuaded John to invest in weigh scales so he can monitor his cattle, and he believes this to be a big advantage as it enables him to select cattle on both finish and weight before sending them off to Stoddart's at Ayr or Highland Meats at Saltcoats. He said: "We are lucky to have a local market and two local abattoirs on our doorstep."

John is optimistic about the future as he enters the second year of the current monitor farm project: "During the first year of being a monitor farm we have really had our eyes opened at the true potential of our farm," he commented.

"The main focus for the remaining two years will be to maximise every acre in terms of efficiency and profitability. With the innovative ideas from our community group we are confident that we will have a booming rural business."

IMPROVEMENTS MADE AT GIRTRIDGE TO DATE

- SUCCESSFUL INTRODUCTION OF ROTATIONAL GRAZING SYSTEM
- VACCINATION STRATEGY ESTABLISHED FOR IBR
- FEC TESTING IN EWES RESULTS IN REDUCTION OF ANTHELMINTIC USE AND COST SAVINGS
- INVESTMENT IN CATTLE HANDLING SYSTEM
- BUILDING DESIGN REVIEW WITH IMPROVED VENTILATION

