



IMPROVING CATTLE PERFORMANCE

Plans to increase herd size, optimise use of winter feed by weighing cattle regularly and further explore the potential of rotational grazing, are on the cards for 2018 for Shetland's monitor farmers, Kirsty and Aimee Budge.

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Bigton 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.

QMS VIDEO ▶ YouTube f



A video introducing Shetland Monitor Farmers Kirsty and Aimee Budge can be viewed on QMS's facebook page, QMS website and QMS's Moo Tube channel on Youtube.

The sisters, who are the fifth generation of the family to farm the 300-hectare Bigton Farm, have introduced a range of changes to their cattle enterprise as a result of their monitor farm experience so far.

Kirsty and Aimee, supported by their grandfather Jim and mother Helen, run 70 suckler cows which are mostly Salers cross Shorthorns. Heifers go to the Salers bull and then the older cows go to either a Charolais or a Shorthorn bull.

The cattle side of the farm enterprise is an area where the pair felt their performance was strong. However, being a host farm in the current the monitor farm programme has opened the sisters' eyes to the potential to strive for better performance in their cattle herd by improving management efficiency.

Calves born at Bigton in 2016 managed to achieve an average daily liveweight gain of 1kg across the group between weaning and either when they were sold as stores, or finished on farm.

Most of the young stock are sold at a year old as store calves, but this year the family, encouraged by the monitor farm community group, decided to finish around 15 head of cattle.

"Up until this year, our calves have usually been sold at Lerwick auction market at a year old and a target weight of 500kg. However, this summer we finished 15 of our calves, which were sold to our local butcher at an approximate deadweight of 350kg," said Aimee.

The sisters plan to continue to finish a number of their youngstock in the coming year and have also been looking closely at how they monitor and measure the performance of their calves.

"Being part of the monitor farm project has really encouraged us to look much more closely at the financial side of our business and to recognise the importance of measuring and recording accurately," said Kirsty.

"We have always weighed our calves through the winter housing period, but what we haven't been good at is acting on that information," she continued.

However, last winter the girls decided to act on the results of the calf weighing in a bid to make more effective use of their winter feed.

"Last winter we split our calves into three groups. If, when weighing, we discovered there were calves that were underperforming, we shifted them into a small group which meant they had less competition for feed. This seemed to work well and we'll be looking to do the same again this winter," added Kirsty.

The Budges had also been very impressed with the reviews they had read about farmers throughout Scotland introducing rotational grazing.

"We thought being a part of the monitor farm project offered us a perfect opportunity to give rotational grazing a go, with our target being to improve our

grass utilisation. It worked pretty well overall in our first year, despite a few problems with heifers escaping!" said Aimee.

The sisters plan to continue to increase their use of rotational grazing in 2018, and a further priority for the year ahead is improving their herd's Johne's status.

The family grows 24 hectares of barley, making it the farm with the biggest arable area on Shetland. One of their priorities for the year ahead is finding the best varieties of barley to grow in their conditions.

This year, they have grown Propino and Wagon. The barley is propcorned to preserve it and all their barley tonnage is used for winter feed, with any surplus sold to local farmers.

"This harvest our yield averaged 4.5 tonnes per hectare but our aim is to achieve 5 tonnes per hectare, said Kirsty.

"We will be working with AHDB Cereals & Oilseeds next year to run variety trials to help us find the optimal variety for growing in Shetland conditions. We are looking for a variety which gives us the dual benefit of increasing yield and achieving an earlier harvest."

The sisters have also installed a Liftlog 100+ device to weigh the barley as it is harvested and allow them to record the yield more accurately.

The Budges are very much looking forward to moving into the second crucial year as host monitor farmers. However, they both admit that hosting the first meeting, which attracted a huge turnout, was very nerve-wracking!

"We're really looking forward to identifying more solutions to our problem areas on the farm next year, especially with our business group, and hopefully finding more solutions with the community group," said Kirsty.

"Something we both really appreciate is getting suggestions about what we can do to improve each enterprise on the farm."

The sisters have been overwhelmed by the level of support they have had from the farmers and crofters on Shetland.

"We're very grateful for the huge amount of encouragement we've received. People of all ages – even those who have a huge amount of farming experience – have said after the meetings how much they have learned," said Aimee. +



Bigton Farm Facts

70
Shorthorn and Saler cross suckler cows



100%
scanned in-calf, **92%** produced a live calf and **89%** weaned a calf



24
hectares of spring barley produces **108** tonnes

240
Cheviot/ Shetland cross ewes to Suffolk tups



Sell **15** finished cattle to local butchers