

ABOUT BORDERS MONITOR FARM

Farm Name	Whitriggs Farm, Denholm, Hawick, TD9 8QR
Meeting Date	Wednesday 28th June 2017
Meeting Number	03 – Trace Elements in Sheep, Grassland Management, AI and Synchronising Cattle & Wintering Options
Next Meeting	Wednesday 9th August 2017

Whitriggs Farm, near Denholm, is run by Robert and Lesley Mitchell and their son Stuart, with support from Stuart's brother, Alistair, during busy periods.

The Mitchells currently farm 442 hectares of mainly semi-permanent and permanent grassland.

Cattle; 140 Shorthorn X and AAX, with all calves not required as replacements finished on the farm.

Sheep; 1000 Lleyn ewes, tupped with Lleyn, Suffolk and Hampshire.

Arable; 28ha of Wheat & Oats fed to cattle.

Borders Monitor Farm management group- Andrew Tullie (chair), Scott Brown, Robert Catlin, Scott Girvan, Andrew Robinson, Megan Mabon, Johnny Williams.

Group Chairman Andrew Tullie welcomed over 50 farmers and trade members to Whitriggs. Andrew reiterated his encouragement for the group to get involved in the project and pass on suggestions to the management group or the facilitators to ensure the group as a whole get as much as they can out of the project. He also introduced the vision for the project which the management group and Mitchell family had come up with; this will be used to help set topics for future meetings and to provide a focus for the project.

“Maintaining a profit in a challenging environment.”

Achieved by:

- Learning as a group
- Dealing with succession
- Being open to change
- Making use of what we have
- Finding alternative incomes
- Benchmarking

KEY MESSAGES

AI in Cattle

- Can be surprisingly cost effective, but work out the costs for yourself with actual figures
- AI gives access to top genetics
- Conception rates can be better than thought
- It is a tool to manage calving pattern and can help late calvers.

Trace elements

- Requirements will differ from farm to farm, speak to your vet before taking action.

Grassland

- Important to be flexible and learn fast!
- Importance of worm surveillance in heavy stocked fields

Wintering Options

- Lots of options, not as simple as shed or no shed!
- Think not only about now, but longer term in the future, what else could change?



FARMERS UPDATE

Lesley gave an update to the group on the work which has been undertaken at Whitriggs since the last meeting which includes calving progress, heifers at 370kg selected to go to the bull, AI update and sheep dosing. On the arable side crops were sprayed in May. Two cuts of silage have now been taken, the main cut at the end of May at Whitriggs and at Denholm hill on 19th June with the clamp looking full. Full details are in Lesley's June 2017 update.

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

One of the plans at Whitriggs is to increase cattle numbers and with it the output of the farm, currently winter housing is the limiting factor with some sheds coming to the end of their useful life. The family are looking for the input of the group as to the opportunities available and the merits of each, the aim of this session was to discuss the options, their pros' and cons' to narrow the options and allow further costings to be done.

Current housing;

- Currently have housing for up to 190 cows at Denholm Hill,
- Calves at Whitriggs 50 (needs replaced) and 65 (needed for sheep from feb)

- Another 100 fat cattle housing at Whitriggs.
- Silage pit at each farm

	Pro	Con
Build Straw bedded shed?	Relatively cheap & adaptable Allows increased stocking Quick to do	Cost – build and straw Depending on cash situation could be paying off through period of falling income
Build Slats or Cubicles	No bedding needed Good for youngstock Ease of slurry handling/storage Health benefits	High initial cost Not as versatile, can't put sheep in Not suitable for organic
Change system e.g. sell stores	Make do with existing buildings Sell steers 1 month after weaning Maximise benefit of health scheme	Change of mind-set required Are the cattle the right type for this market?
Out wintering	Reduce FC, save cash Good for rotation Potential to use woodlands Flexible system, can try then change	Damage to soil structure/drainage Needs backup plan.
Away wintering	No cash tied up Chance to build relationship No need to buy and haul straw	Trust required Change of mind-set

Other options under discussion were, increasing sheep polytunnels to free up shed used for ewe's pre-lambing, convert existing straw shed and looking at investment opportunities to provide best return on capital. The group then voted on the options available with the following result;

Straw bedded shed	6	Further work now needs to be done to investigate changing the management system to save the need for using shed space in winter. Costs can be modelled on different options to indicate the most suitable.
Slats or Cubicles	7	
Change of system	25	
Out wintering	13	
Other Option	14	

The family and management group can now look at more detailed cost and benefits of each option, as well as more detailed economics of increasing cow numbers.

Robert introduced the group to a comparison which is soon to be started at Whitriggs, looking at the effectiveness of trace element use. This will see three batches of 100 lambs given three treatments. The first group will receive an Agrimin Bolus, the second a dose of Smartshot and the third will be a control and receive no trace elements. To assess the effect, the lambs will be weighed every 3-4 weeks to monitor progress. There will also be an economic assessment done on the use of the treatments. During the trial FECs will also be done.

Robert also demonstrated the lamb weighing and combi clamp system with EID reader to help record weights. Simple handling and recording encourage frequent weighing as it is not a big job.

After the discussion at the second meeting a field was split into eight to rotate a group of 40 cows around. After initial success, the grass growth slowed, and cows were moved every second day rather than the anticipated three-day movements. To counter the slow grass growth the group was reduced from 40 to 20 with the remainder grazing some upland grass. By moving round at a faster rate, the grass did not have a chance to re-grow and “the wedge” was lost. There was some slight concern that the cows were losing body condition, however this was countered by the fact the cows were kept on a tight ration to prevent large calves and these were the later calving cows. This will be monitored to try to prevent issues with fertility.

Lessons learnt:

- Rotational grazing is not easy
- There needs to be flexibility to adjust to the differences in the growing season
- Measure grass regularly so that a budget can be done, and issues flagged up early
- Have “too many” paddocks so that there is not a shortage, if grass grows well these can be taken out of the rotation and silage made
- Although there have been issues the area has carried more stock than in previous years
- Even the set stocked fields have run into issues with grass growth slowing.

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