

ABOUT BORDERS MONITOR FARM

Farm name	Whitriggs, Denholm, TD9 8QR
Meeting Number	09 - Deer Establishment, Grass Management & Mental Health Awareness
Meeting Date	Wednesday 16th May 2018
Next Meeting	Wednesday 11th July



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.

Management Team; Andrew Tullie (Chair), Robert Catlin, Scott Girvan, Giles Henry, Megan Mabon, Andrew Robinson (Vet) and Jonny Williams

A beautiful, if a little cold, sunny day greeted around 35 farmers and trade to the 9th meeting of the Borders Monitor Farm, marking the half way point in the project. After a tough spring the aim of the meeting was to look at how Whitriggs had fared and share lessons. Also, an opportunity to share plans for the future.

KEY MESSAGES

- Be thorough in research before entering a new venture. Speak to both consultants and practical farmers to get the rounded view
- Consult with lender early if looking to finance a project
- Understand when your grass shortage is likely to occur.
- Don't be scared to ask neighbours, family or friends if they are ok.
- Mental health is just as important as physical health, just because you can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there.
- Make notes from year to year, you will have forgotten your bright idea for next year's lambing by the time it comes around!

AREAS OF DISCUSSION

Lambing 2018

The group discussed the outcomes of the split lambing at Whitriggs, in particular the speed at which they lambed, with 650 coming in four days. The use of teasers may need to be adjusted so that tups go straight in after them rather than waiting a week. Hoggs lambed, but really slow and were a hassle, also made lambing almost 6 weeks long even though tups were only out for a total of 4.



Calving 2018

Similarly, the use of synchronisation had led to a condensed calving period which was appreciated given the weather and hectic lambing.

Deer Enterprise

Deer enterprise now committed to going ahead, with plan to have 300 hinds by 2023. New shed now up and fencing underway. Business plan is in place and delivery of the first hinds should be in July 2018.

Mental Health

Mags Granger from RSABI talked to the group about the importance of mental health, including the reasons farming seemed to have an issue. Things such as remote and lone working, the impact of weather, economics and dealing with death (of livestock) were all highlighted as causes for concern. The key message was that you don't need to say much to make a difference, simply keeping in touch with neighbours, phoning or popping in for a chat can make a difference. RSABI provides financial, practical support and friendship to over 600 individuals and their families across a range of occupations with the common theme of working on the land in Scotland.

Smart Grass

The use of 'SmartGrass' was discussed as it had been used for the first time at Whitriggs. SmartGrass is Gibberellic acid, which is a naturally occurring growth regulator which when applied can stimulate grass growth used in early spring. It is used in New Zealand and is gaining a foothold in the UK, mainly in dairy situations. Regulation is holding back its use due to the narrow windows for application i.e. before 1st May or after 1st October. It will be important to assess the economic benefit of SmartGrass application. SmartGrass can be applied to grass-based pasture of at least one year old by conventional ground boom sprayer, either tractor mounted or quad bikes for small paddocks.

- Graze paddocks early spring to a height of 3–5 cm – apply 20 g/ha SmartGrass within 0–3 days after stock removed – graze or cut for silage 21–28 days after application
- In areas where first silage cut is before 30 April – apply 20 g/ha SmartGrass within 0–3 days after cutting before 1 May – second cut 21–28 days after application

The group then discussed the difficult spring, the group felt that although this year had been particularly bad weather patterns suggest that it was not a freak as springs do seem to be getting colder and wetter.

What have we learnt this year?

- Hard to get and keep good staff.
- You can never have enough housing.
- Everyone suffered, it wasn't personal!
- Benchmark any losses, work out why.
- Synchronise cows to shorten calving, improve genetics.
- Need for good quality and quantity of forage.

What (if anything) do we plan to do to be better prepared for another bad spring?

- More drainage required, it's an investment not a cost.
- Get lambs/calves away earlier to give grass a chance.
- Simplify systems were possible.
- More forage, but how? Collaborate with arable farmers more and better.
- Buy straw earlier, last minute means you are in a weak position.
- More staff to share load, you only need to save a few to make it worth it.
- Condense lambing.
- Leave more grass through winter so there is something there.
- Re-seed regularly to have best grass possible, old grass struggles to give enough growth.
- Make a plan for the worst.

FARMERS UPDATE

At our last meeting one of the topics was whether or not to sell now or finish the store cattle. We decided to go ahead and sell the whole lot at Stirling UA on 21 March with an average of £910/hd

Other Work Carried Out

- Fertiliser, Alzon urea and Triple 15 applied to all early silage and to the wheat.
- Smart grass was sprayed onto 4 fields of grass with 5ha sprayed in each
- One field of wheat that was sown but never managed to get rolled or pre-emed failed with only 10% growth. This field has been sown with Italian rye and red clover mix with combination drill.
- We have also had 3 other fields of new re-seeds 2 of them for the deer. In total 80 acres
- Sold 150 bales of hay
- Poly tunnel resurrected easier than thought only temporary though
- Turnips may have been sown,
- Deer shed has almost been completed and fencing has just started for the deer on Monday
- We had no spring grain to go in as a) the weather was rubbish and b) we had no time to do it.

Timeline

- Dug out shed site for deer
- Bolused cows with Cu, Co, Se, I and vaccinated for Rotovirus
- Lambing here there and here again.
- Also bought a new tractor
- Calving
- Sowing Grass
- Selecting and turning out this year's breeding heifers, 31 kept and 30 for sale. Lots of tips used from the last meetings helped.
- Six artic load of calcium lime has been applied to some reseeds and the new turnip ground at 2t/acre.

FACTS & FIGURES DISCUSSED

Lambing Losses

	Dead, or in dead ewe	Died in Shed	Died Outside	Losses, scan to end
Whitriggs	72	86	34	12% (was 9% in '17)
Denholmhill	14	15	3	12%

Increase bought in feeding per ewe 2.5t of Megastart buckets, 2.5tn of protected soya, eight Optilics buckets and three ton of feeding which came to £5.60 per ewe.

Calving & AI Progress

- Started with two abortions, one being a set of twins. Tested but no reason found. Then we had a set of living twins and have now had another two sets.
- Cows came down from DH on the 18th and due to start on the 24th but 10% calved before due date. Calving so far has went well and really fast. By day 16 we reached the 66% mark.
- Nine pure heifers to calf at 3yr old, five calved to AI, three calved to bull in 2nd cycle and one still to calf in 3rd
- Cows which calved after week six last year were synchronised. Aim being to bring them forward into the 1st weeks of calving,
- Eight out of 23 held to AI, one cow has actually come forward seven weeks
- And we are waiting the rest from the bull. But all were scanned in calf and only had one turn at bull.
- One cow died with peritonitis but vet unable to discover the reason for symptoms.

OPPORTUNITIES/CHALLENGES

- Change of tack with teasers
- Steep learning curve once deer arrive, need to ensure attention to detail in other areas doesn't suffer

ACTIONS FOR NEXT MEETING

- Update on growth of calves born to AI to benchmark performance vs own bulls.
- If possible measure quality of SmartGrass treated grass.

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